



The sons of God and the daughters of men

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THE IDENTITY of the sons of God in Genesis 6:2-4 has been disputed by theologians for more than a thousand years. The two main views are:

- 1 That the sons of God were rebellious angels who took human wives and produced giants as offspring. This view has the support of apocryphal writings, and is frequently used by believers in a supernatural devil as evidence for the existence of wicked angels who follow him.
- 2 That the sons of God were the descendants of Seth, and the daughters of men were of the ungodly line of Cain. This view rejects any concept of wicked angels, and has a certain consistency in other directions which we shall look at shortly.

Let us first examine the claims that Genesis 6:2-4 is proof of the existence of fallen angels and Satanic forces.

The case for fallen angels

In his book *The Flood Reconsidered*, Frederick R. Filby presents the case for the sons of God being fallen angels, and makes the following points:

- 1 The expression 'sons of God' (Heb. *bene-halohim*) occurs in Job 1:6 and 2:1, which the Septuagint renders 'angels of God', as also does *Codex Alexandrinus*, one of the three oldest Bible manuscripts.
- 2 The apocryphal book of Enoch, written between 200 and 100 B.C., says: "the angels lusted after the beautiful daughters of the children of men, and took themselves wives and bore giants". Also, the so-called *Testament of Reuben*, written during the same period, says: "the Watchers transformed themselves into men, and the women they took gave birth to giants".
- 3 Both 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude verse 6 speak of

rebellious angels being cast down into hell awaiting judgement.

- 4 Josephus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus all believed the sons of God were fallen angels.

What is our response to this seemingly impressive evidence?

Truth or legend?

One should always be wary of evidence drawn from non-canonical legend, so let us first look at the passage in Genesis before commenting further:

"And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. 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. 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. And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart" (6:1-6).

Four major difficulties with the idea that "the sons of God" here are angels are:

- 1 The very concept of rebelling angels conflicts with Scripture, which states that angels do God's will (Ps. 103:20,21). It is also contrary to the Lord's Prayer, which states: "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10).

- 2 It is highly dubious that spirit beings, such as angels are (Heb. 1:14), would be either inclined towards, or even capable of, committing fleshly acts with humans, not to mention producing hybrid offspring.
- 3 Jesus himself taught that angels "neither marry, nor are given in marriage" (Lk. 20: 35,36).
- 4 In Genesis 6 itself, God neither condemns nor punishes groups of angels, but lays the blame squarely with man himself: "My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh" (v. 3).

Human sons of God

If we consider that "the sons of God" who rejoiced at Creation (Job 38:7) were angels, it would be consistent to conclude that "the sons of God" of chapters 1 and 2 were also angels. This, however, does not preclude "the sons of God" in Genesis 6 being men, since there is strong Scriptural evidence for men being addressed as this, the following being but a few examples: Exodus 4:22; Isaiah 43:6; Hosea 1:10; Luke 20:36; John 1:12; 2 Corinthians 6:18; and 1 John 3:2.

Adding weight to the view that "the sons of God" of Genesis 6 were the Sethites is the marginal alternative to the AV rendering of 4:26, which relates that, in the days of Enos, "men began to call themselves by the name of the LORD". Some commentators believe this is another way of saying that, from that time forward, true believers became known as 'sons of God'.

Daughters of men

There is a passage in John 8 that seems to support the view that "the sons of God" of Genesis 6 were Sethites, and "the daughters of men" were the descendants of Cain. The passage reads: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it" (v. 44).

The only "murderer" and "liar", in that order, at "the beginning" was Cain. He was also a *diabolos* (devil) in that he was opposed to Abel, and also to God. If Jesus considered those Jews who sought to kill him to be Cain-like in their ways, then it would be correct to speak of Cain as their "father", the *diabolos*, the very antithesis of the Sethite "sons of God". John speaks simi-

larly in his first epistle: "For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous" (3:11,12).

Believers in a supernatural devil would argue that the "wicked one" who influenced Cain to murder his brother was Satan, a fallen angel. Yet Scripture never says this. The only enemy it speaks of is a serpent, defined as a "beast" (Gen. 3:1), which caused the downfall of Adam and Eve. Cain's life was far from righteous; it followed the serpent's lie, which led to Adam's sin, and the sentence that brought death upon all mankind. The apostles obviously considered Cain to be the true human "father" of evil in that it was a way of life he actively pursued. Jude refers to him in a similar way when speaking of wicked men: "Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core" (v. 11).

Apocryphal writings

The term 'Apocrypha' means 'hidden'. It was a name given to those Jewish writings not considered by rabbis to be inspired by God. In fact, they were concealed from general scrutiny because many of them were known to contain legend and heresy.

The book of Enoch, referred to by Filby (see above), is thought to have been the work of many different writers, and was not written until after 200 B.C. It was almost certainly influenced by the Septuagint rendering of "sons of God" as "angels" in Genesis 6, as also was Josephus. It is not therefore difficult to deduce how the fallen angels story came to light. Other Jewish legends speaking similarly are doubtless quoting this one source and can be discounted.

Jewish authorities

Jewish writers are divided in identifying the sons of God in Genesis 6. The commentary in the *Soncino Chumash*, edited by Dr A. Cohen, has this to say: "*The Sons of God*. i.e. the sons of princes and judges, *Elohim*, always implying rulership . . . Thus the very men who defended justice openly committed violence". In his book *Everyman's Talmud*, the same writer says concerning angels: "The general belief was that angels were immortal and did not propagate their species" (p. 49).

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in *The Living Torah* comments that, according to some Jewish scholars, the sons of God were fallen angels, but others translate it as “sons of the rulers” or “judges”. It is interesting also that the Septuagint, whilst translating “sons of God” in Job as angels, does not do so in Genesis 6. This suggests that the translators did make a distinction between the two passages.

Other authorities

Regarding Filby’s reference to the *Codex Alexandrinus*, the following must be said. The *Codex Alexandrinus* is a fifth-century Greek copy of the Bible. The two older versions, *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*, are fourth century and do not render “sons of God” as “angels”.

Early scholars may have been misled by the Septuagint translation in concluding that “the sons of God” were angels, but Calvin rejected this in favour of the Sethite alternative, as also do later scholars such as Adam Clarke. The latter quotes Dr Wall’s paraphrase of Genesis 6:1,2 as follows: “When men began to multiply on the earth, the chief men took wives of all the handsome poor women as they chose. There were tyrants in the earth in those days; and also, after the antediluvian days powerful men had unlawful connections with inferior women, and the children which sprang from this illicit commerce were the renowned heroes of antiquity, of whom the heathens made their gods”.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The AV rendering of Deuteronomy 32:8, following the Hebrew Massoretic text, is: “When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the *children of Israel*”. The Septuagint, however, reads “angels of God” instead of “children of Israel”, which from the context of the passage seems most inappropriate since it is speaking about men and territory. This must be the reason why some Greek translations have “Sons of God”.¹ J. C. Vanderkam mentions that the 4Q Dead Sea cave yielded a scroll fragment of the same passage which reads “Sons of God”.²

The passage in Deuteronomy 32 seems to be a reference to the dividing up of the nations after the Flood, as recorded in Genesis 10, where verse 32 reads: “These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations: and by these were the nations divided in the

earth after the flood”. This being the case, the AV rendering “children of Israel” would hardly be appropriate, since the dividing up of the earth into nations was long before Jacob’s time. The use of “Sons of God” by the Scribes at Qumran, and the context of the passage, argues strongly for *human* sons of God rather than angels, and indicates that this is how Jews of that period understood the term.

Peter and Jude

The passages in Peter and Jude are not by any means easy to explain whatever side one takes regarding the sons of God in Genesis 6. They read as follows:

“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 Pet. 2:4,5); “I will therefore put you in remembrance, though ye once knew this, how that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not. 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” (Jude vv. 5,6).

Peter writes first, as a warning against the imminent arising of false brethren in their midst, whilst Jude, writing later, reiterates much of what Peter says, as a reminder that the situation warned of by Peter was now current.

Truth with legend?

It would not be unreasonable to explain the references to these rebellious ‘angels’ in Peter and Jude as simply the using of Jewish legend by the two apostles, either to add emphasis to their condemnation of false disciples, or for the benefit of unconverted Jews who had not yet learned to separate truth from legend. It is otherwise difficult to find a reason why Peter would use the word *tartarus* from Greek mythology (translated ‘hell’) as the place of punishment for the fallen ‘angels’. It might be added in support of this view that Jesus in his teaching sometimes

1. See NIV Study Bible footnote on this passage.
2. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, p. 127.

borrowed from Greek and Jewish legends, for example, in Luke 16:19-31.

Pre-Adamic rebels?

Although Brother John Thomas agrees with the Sethite explanation of Genesis 6,³ he opts for the unusual view that the wicked 'angels' of Peter and Jude were disobedient humans from a pre-Adamic creation.⁴ He supports his theory by the reference in 1 Corinthians 6:3 to the saints judging angels in the Kingdom. Whilst this is most ingenious, and worth serious consideration, some might discount the view on the grounds that there would be little point in referring to an incident about which there was no Scriptural revelation. It would mean nothing to the immediate readers of the epistle.

Korah's mutiny?

The view that Korah, Dathan and Abiram were the rebels spoken against by Peter and Jude seems to be the most fitting explanation, in that they were indeed cast into the bowels of the earth as a punishment for rebellion. The context in the Jude passage is certainly that of the Exodus period. As we have seen earlier from Dr Cohen's comments, 'angel' can also mean a human ruler or judge, and as leading dignitaries in the wilderness journey Korah and his company certainly fit that description.

Sethite 'angels'?

If 'angel' can refer to a human ruler or judge, it might be fairly asked, Why not take the line of least resistance and apply this same meaning to the Sethite rebels? The only problem with this view is that there is no reference in Genesis 6 to the Sethites being delivered into "chains of darkness". To this it could be fairly replied that *tartarus* was used simply as a graphic description of the swallowing up of these rebels into the dark and unknown depths of the deluge.

Summary of alternatives

Rejecting the view that the rebellious sons of God in Genesis 6 were wicked angels of God, we are left with four alternative explanations of the passages in Peter and Jude:

- 1 Peter and Jude utilised non-Biblical legends to add emphasis to their warning against false brethren.
- 2 The 'angels' were pre-Adamic rebels who died and are awaiting judgement.
- 3 The passage refers to the rebellion of Korah,

Dathan and Abiram, termed 'angels' because of their high positions in Israel.

- 4 The 'angels' were the rebellious Sethites, whom both Peter and Jude called 'angels', meaning human dignitaries.

Conclusion

The passages in Peter and Jude may always remain obscure. They present difficulties whatever view one takes, which is why neither these passages nor the one in Genesis 6 can reasonably be used to teach the existence of active supernatural satanic forces. It is unacceptable to make such a deduction from obscure Scripture, dubious metaphor, and Greek and Jewish legend. Scripture, on the other hand, speaks plainly about the fall of Adam and the deceptiveness of the human heart (Jer. 17:9). Jesus taught that evil thoughts come from within (Mk. 7:20-23). Paul taught that his own struggle against sin was within himself (Rom. 7:19-21), and James wrote that temptation comes from our own lusts (Jas. 1:13,14).

As spiritual 'sons of God' we are nevertheless involved in a battle to the death with sinful forces from both within and without. Though not from any supernatural source, they are nonetheless real and very powerful. Because these worldly influences press sorely and constantly upon us, we are exhorted by the apostle, as latter-day 'sons of God' in a wicked and adulterous generation, to stand firm in Christ Jesus with all defences at the ready:

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (Eph. 6:12-18).

3. *Elpis Israel*, pp. 118-20.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.