Genesis 6:1-4 in Old Testament Interpretation

Problems of the Text

Old Testament scholars agree that Gen. 6:1-4 is one of the most problematic texts in the Old Testament. It is riddled with textual, exegetical, syntactical, and philological difficulties. No doubt the problems of translating and interpreting this passage are the major reasons for the periodic revival of interest in this story of the marriage of the sons of god with the daughters of men. It goes without saying that the translation and interpretation of such a difficult text—one whose meaning is so elusive—are interdependent tasks.

A brief listing of the major problems of the text follows:
1) There is no attempt to identify the sons of god and the daughters of men. 2) The offense of the sons of god and the nephilim is not spelled out clearly. 3) The relationship between v.3 and v.4 is problematic due to the lack of a satisfactory connective. 4) There is confusion about the time of the appearance of the nephilim. 5) The identity of the nephilim and the gibborim is unclear. 6) The meaning of "my spirit" is uncertain. Should it be understood through the doctrine of the Spirit, or is it the life breath of God, or a divine life-sustaining power from God which is not only God's but also possessed by the sons of god? The meaning of the expression is also subject to the understanding given to the word "flesh." 7) Should the Hebrew word yādōn be rendered "strive," or "abide," "dwell," "contend," etc. A conclusive understanding of this text depends on how one translates this word. 8) Should the consonants bēṣām be pointed so that they mean "since," "because," "in as much as;" or "through their erring," "by reason of their going astray," "in their wandering?" If one points the consonants bēṣagām the meaning is the former, if they are pointed bēṣagām the meaning is one of the latter renderings. 9) What is the meaning of "man" in the expression ha'ādām (v.3)? Is it to be taken as mankind in general, or the race produced by the sons of god and the daughters of men, and then secondarily to mankind in general? 10) The significance of the 120 years is obscure. Is this time period a period of grace before the flood, or is it a maximin limit of human life after the withdrawal of the spirit? 11) Careful reading of the story along with the flood story raises question about its relationship to the latter narrative. There are no verbal, linguistic or thematic connections between them. The sons of god are the apparent offenders in the story in Gen. 6:1-4, but mankind receives the punishment of the flood while the sons of god go unpunished.
Analysis of the Interpretation

Nineteenth and early twentieth century critical interpretation of the text overwhelmingly agreed that this passage contained mythological material. It told about a time when divine beings bred human women who, in turn, bore offspring that inherited their sires' immortality. Many critical scholars, largely influenced by Wellhausen, who considered the passage an aetiology of the giants in Num 13, concluded that, due to the truncated nature of the passage and its mention of the nephilim, it did not have any connection with the flood story originally.¹

Scholars have repeatedly attempted to defend the mythological interpretation of the passage while providing solutions for the problems the mythological interpretation raises, or have rejected the mythological interpretation outright. Some have tried to solve the problem by accommodating both interpretations through the process of demythologization. Both comparative approaches and contextual approaches have been used to support both natural and the preternatural interpretations.

Natural Interpretations

The middle decades of the nineteenth century produced naturalistic interpretations of the passage in the works of Hengstenberg, Keil, Lange, Rampf, Keerl, Yeith, Scholz, et al. The Wellhausen school had made an impact, but these authors followed a common theme: as the population of the earth increased there was an obliterating of the distinction between Sethites and Cainites until godly living was overcome by worldly living.² Keil argued that only a theological definition could be given to the sons of god, thus disallowing any lexical arguments for identifying them as angels.³ In 1895 the French scholar C. Robert argued against the dominant critical mythological interpretation, yet accommodated it, by suggesting that originally Gen. 6:1-4 was about the Cainites and Sethites, but was later mythologized.⁴ J. Rothstein, in 1920, argued for the Sethite interpretation, but admitted that originally the story was mythological. A priest redactor had reworked it to provide a new motive against mixed marriages of his time.⁵ H. Junker (1935) argued for a natural interpretation through the theme of the image of God which he saw represented in the Sethites.⁶ G. E. Clossen (1937) categorically rejected any mythology in or behind the text on the grounds that the truth of scripture could hardly be founded on a myth. The sons of god are merely men who are near to God, and the daughters of men are women who are not women of divine similitude; rather simply women. The intention of the story is to tell us of the practice of polygamy, and the power and glory of the wicked.⁷ P. Jouon
followed in 1939 discussing the textual problem intelligently, but in the end he traced the line of the faithful before the flood from Adam to Seth, and after the flood from Abraham onward. Thus he defended the Cainite-Sethite view.

D. Poulet, in 1942, argued for the traditional Cainite-Sethite view, bewildered that the plain reading of the text could be swept aside by the critics so that much less obvious views could be presented. He appealed to various ways God’s sons are spoken of in the OT identifying these sons with the sons of god in Genesis 6. Wisdom 10:6 and the testimony of the Church Fathers adds final proof to his position. Poulet’s conclusion was that moral corruption resulting from sensual mixed marriages between Sethites and Cainites was the cause of the flood. He also gave women the distinction of being the chief moral offenders.

M. G. Kline, dissatisfied with the mythological view set out in 1962 to set things straight by arguing from what he had learned about ancient near eastern life and culture. Kline, comparing the ancient understanding of sacral kings, who were also considered sons of various gods, with the material in Gen. 6:1-4 decided that the author of the Genesis passage had appropriated the term sons of god from the idea of divine kingship and applied it to the antediluvian kings, the line of Cain. This line ruled over cities and practiced polygamy. The wickedness resulting in the flood was the responsibility of this line. Kline also traced the covenant line to Christ.

F. Dexinger added weight the natural interpretation in 1966. Alerted by the fact that the Ugaritic bn ilm was applied to Krt, a hero king, as well as to divine beings he interpreted the sons of god as heroes, or warrior heroes. A year later J. Scharbert applied traditio-historical and redaction-historical methods to the text to affirm a natural interpretation, although he did not doubt that the story originally had a preternatural meaning. The reductor reinterpreted the passage so that it represented the opposing development of the Cainites and Sethites.

The mid-sixties also saw the publication of H. W. Wolff’s, The Kerygma of the Yahwist. This along with a monograph by R. Clements, placed the interpretation of the patriarchal stories within the context of the Davidic Monarchy. W. Bruggemann extended the investigation to the Yahwistic primeval history. Without much doubt the ideas of C. Westermann which appeared in the first volume of his monumental commentary on Genesis (1972) were a major moving force in this direction of interpretation. The dissertation of W. Schlisske (Heidelberg, 1970) published in 1973, and presenting a natural view of a demythologized
story should also be understood in the context of this influence. 17

Departing from the pervasive Heidelberian influence for a moment, we should mention the study of H. Gese. He argued, like Westermann, that the expression the sons of god was terminology taken over from the pre-flood Urzeit, but that the story was originally about the nephilim who are to be understood in the context of the hero cults, or cults of the dead. The text means to say that God limited the possibility of excessive spiritual power derived from the hero cults, in as much as the dead were without God’s spirit. God determined the uppermost limits of human life and power denying any derivation of power from the dead. 18

Westermann held that the expression the sons of god was merely taken over by the Yahwist as data from the primeval history. What the Yahwist is concerned with, however, are events in which humanity is endangered because of man’s desire for a beautiful woman. Yet it is not the desire that is the problem. It is a powerful characteristic of humanity which is capable of destroying the boundaries which are necessary for human existence. This encroachment can easily move to encroach on divinity itself. The narrator is interested in a class or group, along with the community and laws which govern its destiny. When the powerful who do not respect the boundaries violate them God intervenes with punishment. 19

W. Wifall applied the type of approach advocated by Westermann, and Bruggemann in 1975 to the narrative of Gen. 6:1-4. He observed that there are similarities between the acts of the sons of god and their marriages to human females, and the David and Bathsheba incident. The nephilim-gibborim hint of Solomon, the son of this union. The story reflects a non-Israelite myth, and the nephilim-gibborim were pre-Israelite princes who imitated the form and content of the idolology of Egyptian divine kingship. The Yahwist, also familiar with the Atra-hasis epic, employed this example of pompous pride, along with the sequence of events in the Atra-hasis epic as an illustration of man’s depravity not his divinity. The spread of sin was, thus, the cause of the flood. 20

In 1979 L. Eslinger employing a contextual approach came to the conclusion that the sons of god were Cainites, the descendents of Eve, the would be goddess, who placed herself above Yahweh. The Cainites led the daughters of Adam, the submissive, the unassertive, astray, thus violating the limits God placed upon them by infringing on the adamah (ground). The narrative, thus forms an introduction to the flood story. 21
D. Clines developed a contextual study of the text in 1979 following the theme of "breaking the bonds," which appears in two forms: the attempt of man to become divine, and the attempt of the gods to become part of the human world. The issue of monogamy is part of this theme. The sons of god are both divine beings and antediluvian rulers similar to Gilgamesh. These beings violated communion with God by "royal violence" and "despotic authority" in contrast to the ideal "kingly representative" intended of man by God. The making of a name, a "permanent memorial in ones descendants" belongs to the ambitions of these early rulers.  

K. Luke (1983) took a position similar to that of Rothstein. The story was originally a myth, but due to a redactor in the time of Ezra/Nehemiah it is to be understood as referring to the sons of Seth and the daughters of Cain. It demonstrates the consequences of mixed marriages, and because of its context is a part of the flood story.

Preternatural Interpretations

F. Delitzsch, after being influenced by Wellhausen, Kuenen and Dillman rewrote his commentary on Genesis to take account of the new criticism. He argued for a preternatural interpretation, suggesting that angels took human form, an angelic incarnation, and formed unions with human females. The result of these unions were the nephilim, "bastards," "chance" children, "the fallen as unnaturally begotten." They "entered into existence" in prediluvian times, and also during the 120 yr. period of respite.

In 1889, O. Gruppe, an expert in the field of mythology contradicted the dominant critical opinion of his time which considered Gen. 6:1-4 a mere aetiology with no relation to the flood story. While he considered the material mythological Gruppe considered Gen. 6:1-4 a prologue to the flood story. The passage constituted a J1 source, and intended to inform the reader that the marriage of the divine beings with human women constituted a violation of the created order. The offense to Yahweh was not in the marriages themselves, but in the fact that the offspring had a greater measure of God's spirit. This narrative provided the rationale for the flood story.

Cassuto joined the debate in 1942 arguing for an angelic interpretation. Angels took the place of the Canaanite gods, and became the household of God with different orders. The lower orders are the same as the sons of god in Genesis 6. The purpose of the story was to polemicize against gentile myths that spoke of men who were immortal because of their divine origin. This story has no connection with the flood story.
Kraeling (1947) employed a comparative method using both Babylonian and Ugaritic material to conclude that Gen. 6:1-4 while mythological provided a moral cause for the flood in contrast to Enlil's trivial displeasure with humanity. The sons of god are the same type as the bn ʾilm of the Ras Shamra texts.\textsuperscript{27}

Major commentaries such as von Rad's, *Das erste Buch Moses, Genesis* (1956), and Speiser's, *Genesis* (1964) reinforced the preternatural view of the text. Von Rad spoke of angel marriages, and thought the Yahwist wanted to portray a demonic invasion to suggest the mixing of "superhuman spiritual powers" with man in order to depict a general corruption of man. The story is linked to the flood but it is not accomplished smoothly.\textsuperscript{28} Speiser felt that the discovery of Hittite texts containing translations of Hurrian myths indicated that these myths were the source of Phoenician and Greek myth, and that the Yahwist was familiar with them. Whether the Yahwist took them at face value is of little consequence, he obviously "viewed the whole as the product of man's morbid imagination." A world that entertained such ideas deserved to be destroyed. Thus, one can scarcely separate the narrative from the flood story. Speiser takes the 120 yrs. a period of grace.\textsuperscript{29}

Between the publication dates of these major critical commentaries B. S. Childs developed a strong argument for the mythological interpretation of the text, tracing the literary process which resulted in the present story. Childs affirmed that the text formed an introduction to the flood, and the 120 yrs. a period of grace before the disaster.\textsuperscript{30} At the same time W. Hermann published a careful study of the relationship between the sons of god and the religious world view of Canaan.\textsuperscript{31}

O. Lorez responded to the debate in 1967 launching criticisms at Dexinger for his Sethite-Cainite interpretation which he thought forced the Ugaritic material to support it, and at von Rad for his angelic interpretation which he thought ignored the Ugaritic material. The Ugaritic texts give convincing evidence of the religio-historical context of the Genesis narrative, but Israel made the myth serve its own purposes. Bisexuality in myth and cult was a dominant thing in Canaanite religion, and so the story was used to illustrate the relationship between human wickedness and death. The story serves as a kind of polemic against the fertility cult which tried to increase vitality in the wrong way. Lorez believes that the material of the Ugaritic texts makes it possible to lay aside all varieties of angelic and Sethite interpretations.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1979, D. Peterson, suspicious of all attempts to find ancient near eastern parallels to the story, or even the attempt to find a common mythic archetype, and disenchanted
with the opinion that the passage is fragmentary, interpreted the passage as a complete narrative, an ironic Schuld-Strafe (sin-punishment) story. Man was not guilty, but got punished anyway. Within the context of the primeval history it functions as a myth of temporal organization. The theme of the passage is not morality, but mortality, because the boundaries between God and man had been breached.\textsuperscript{33}

R. Manns (1980) chose to stay strictly with the meaning provided for the sons of god by the Hebrew text, i.e. they are members of Yahweh's divine council. The preternatural interpretation is the best one because it demonstrates the sovereignty of Yahweh over both the human and divine realm of creation. Everything is subject to Yahweh. The narrative is also connected to the flood story.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1981, W. van Gemeren opted for the preternatural interpretation, although he is obviously within the conservative tradition. He understood the sons of god to be angels, a position he took because it is a very ancient tradition, and 1Pt. 3:19 refers to angelic beings who will be judged eventually. Also, scripture is sufficient for life and faith. The nephilim-gibborim were the results of the marriages, and these offspring were destroyed in the flood. The 120 yrs. is the antithesis to man's attempt to live forever.\textsuperscript{35}

I. Marzal, in 1982, contradicted Cline's position that the text had anything to do with earthly rulers. He also disputed the Sethite view. The text tells how the daughters of men had sexual intercourse with divine beings in an attempt to gain long life for their children. God responded by limiting the life-span to 120 years.\textsuperscript{36}

**Interpreting the text in the classroom**

As one can see there is a variety of contextual studies in addition to comparative studies that disagree significantly. One characteristic of this text is that because it is so problematic it can function much like oral tradition taking on new meanings when they are needed and can be suggested. Thus, there are contextual studies in which the role of the sons of god and the daughters of men are reversed; studies that see an attack on polygamy and mixed marriages, and studies that do not find these elements significant. There are studies that see a reference to special classes and others that see a reference to humanity as a whole. There are interpretations that are clearly defensive of tradition, and others that are more analytical. The book seems to remain open on this text. Resistance to mythological interpretation is based largely on myth being incongruous with historical faith.
By the time I get to Gen. 6 the student is already familiar with some ancient mythology and its function. Whether the student is a freshman or upper classman should be taken into consideration, but denying freshmen full treatment while opening up more material to an upper classman is not the total answer. I function on the basis of class interest in a text. Unfortunately, many students find the idea of myth in scripture incredible, or are downright hostile at even the suggestion. Interpreting the text as having a mythological reference brings even more surprises.

I begin by asking if anyone has a question about this text. There is usually at least one that sees a difficulty in the text, and is confused about the identity of the sons of god. I proceed with a comparative study of the terminology in scripture: Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; also, Ps. 29:1; 89:6. I demonstrate the similar structure in the expression, sons of the prophets. I introduce them to the bn ilm of the Ugaritic texts, and explain the existence of Israel in an ancient near eastern environment. I then ask if they see something puzzling about v. 4. This introduces them to the idea that possibly the text has been reworked by an editor.

This introduces the question of reinterpretation. After going over the witness of the Chruch Fathers and early Jewish exegesis of the passage I entertain the possibility that during the time of Ezra/Nehemiah the text could have been understood to refer to Sethites and Cainites, but also introduce them to the LXX and IEnoch where the angel interpretation is found. This always raises questions about a similar motif found in The Great Controversy which takes the interpretation a step farther.

The student is already familiar with man's attempt to enlarge himself on the godward side from the fall story, and the tower of babel narrative. Gen. 6:1-4, regardless of the reversal of the characters acting, still illustrates a theme, the violation of the created order, similar to the earlier stories. I show how the Sethite/Cainite interpretation basically serves to confront the problem of marriages between believers and unbelievers, which endangers the order of faith, setting aside the will of God for the desires of mankind, thus reversing the intended order of rank in authority.

I then present what I think the writer intends to do with the passage. He attacks the patriarchal system (not that he knew it by that term). The role of Eve in the fall story, and the function of the daughters of men in Gen. 6 are not theological accidents. The patriarchal system was inherently abusive and exploitive of women. Thus, the Davidic Monarchy, especially the David and Bathsheba incident and the Amnon and Tamar story cannot be ignored as the possible Sitz of the narrative. Adultery, polygamy, rape, and incest
were the trademarks of the patriarchal system. That is why there are so many laws against them, or regulating them in the OT. What the author of this text intends to do, I think, is to contrast the God who established the boundaries with the gods who do not respect them. Obviously, as was later clearly understood, in addition to man’s part in the fall, rebellion had to have taken place in the world of the gods, with Yahweh casting out the rebels.

In the original setting of this passage, however, the sons of god are the canaanite gods. What the author wishes to imply by using this story is that the Israelites, especially the powerful, the heroes (gibborim), in the way they assert their might over the powerless, the weakest of whom are women, are not venerating Yahweh who established the social (moral) and legal boundaries that regulate life; rather they worship the gods of the canaanites who commit the same kind of violent and abusive acts. Man behaves just like his gods, the ones that fathered the nephilim-gibborim, and Yahweh will not allow this to go unpunished. It is a violation of the social and legal boundaries. If man imitates his gods, his sons will imitate him.37

The idea of living on through ones sons is also a patriarchal tradition. The author possibly was polemicizing against this idea of immortality, or as Clines says, "making a permanent memorial in ones descendents," by making reference to Yahweh limiting the life span of man as a judgment on his bid for immortality.

The possibilities that suggest themselves when one recognizes that this text is speaking about hubris are many. One might even go so far (tongue in cheek) to say that the real sons of god are biblical scholars who are out to make a name for themselves and achieve immortality through their publications (their offspring). These scholars usually exploit a number of secretaries (the daughters of men) in order to accomplish this, and their publications often do violence to the text. A flood of criticism follows, purifying the world of scholarship of its mistakes. The survivors of this judgment, who claim to have gotten it right, in turn, propagate another generation of publications which soon are imitating the earlier errant ones. A complete argument for this can be found in the appendix of my new cook book: Nutrition for Malnourished Theologians.

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Notes


2F. Delitzsch, Genesis (New York, 1889) 225.


8C. E. Clossen, Die Sünden der Söhne Gottes (Rome, 1937) 170f.

9P. Jouon, "Les Unions entre les 'fils de Dieu' et les 'filles des hommes,'" Recherches de science religiuse, 29 (1939) 108ff.


12F. Drexinger, Sturz der Göttersöhne oder Engel vor der Sintflut? Versuch einer Neuverstândnisses von Gen. 6, 2-4,


15R. Clements, Abraham and David (Naperville, 1967)


17C. Westermann, Genesis, 1 (1972).


24F. Delitzsch, A New Commentary on Genesis, (New York, 1889).
29E. A. Speiser, Genesis (New York, 1964) 44ff.
37A fuller argument for this position is contained in another paper by the author to be presented at another professional meeting early next year.