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Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117 U.S.A.
334/272-8558
800/234-8558



www.ApologeticsPress.org

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Genesis 6:1-4 speaks of the universal degeneration of man into ungodliness prior to the equally universal, worldwide Flood of Genesis 6-9. What, then, is the significance of these verses to the beliefs of the Christian? As will be discussed in detail below, these verses either present a historical account, or make the writer of Genesis a perpetrator of myths; they either provide sufficient warrant for the Noachic Flood, or they mock it; they either are consistent with biblical teaching, or they contradict it and promote false doctrine. An overview of previous works dealing with this passage also sheds light on the influence of prior assumptions. Almost without exception, those scholars who accept the Documentary Hypothesis, and who otherwise have little regard for the inerrancy and divine inspiration of the Bible, reach one conclusion, and those who respect Scripture come to quite a different conclusion. Most of this controversy surrounds the meaning of “sons of God” in verses two and four, and so after I outline the passage and note problems in translation, I will present some possibilities for the meaning of the phrase “sons of God.”

BACKGROUND TO GENESIS SIX

Overall Context

While it is recognized that Genesis 4 and 5 contain many interesting problems in their own right, the following outline is intended merely to provide a contextual background to the problem in chapter 6.

Verses three and four of Genesis 4 discuss the offering of sacrifices by Cain and Abel. However, it soon becomes apparent that these sons of Adam and Eve exhibit contrasting attitudes toward God. Cain offered to God a sacrifice of such a nature that was unacceptable to God, for it is recorded that the Lord had no respect for Cain’s offering (vs. 5). In verses six and seven, God reproached Cain for the inadequacy of his sacrifice, and admonished him to “do well.” It appears, however, that Cain did not react to such guidance with humility and a penitent attitude, and in his jealousy murdered Abel (vs. 8). To compound the seriousness of both an unfit sacrifice and a murder, Cain denied his crime when confronted by Jahweh (vs. 9). One thus is led to infer that Cain possessed ungodly attributes, not so much by the fact that he committed murder, but that he failed to worship God in the proper manner, and then lied to Him. God’s response was to exile Cain (vss. 12-16) to a land away from his parents. The generations of Cain, which are listed in verses 17-24, include Lamech, who already had abandoned the concept of a monogamous marriage, and who boasted of his violence (vss. 23-24). Other Cainites are noted for certain material pursuits, including Jabal (animal husbandry), Jubal (musicianship), and Tubal-Cain (metal working).

Meanwhile, Adam and Eve bore another son of note named Seth (although Adam and Eve had more children, 5:4). With the arrival of Seth and his son Enosh (4:26a), the writer notes: “Then began men to call upon the name of Jehovah” (4:26b), as if there was now a renewed spirit of devotion toward God. Seth’s descendants (5:6-32) included Enoch, of whom it is said, “he walked with God: and he was not; for God took him” (5:24). The concept of “walking with God” probably means that Enoch was in spiritual communion and favor with God—an interpretation supported by the writer of Hebrews, who remarked of the patriarch that he did not see death because “he had been well-pleasing unto God” (Hebrews 11:5). Finally, Lamech is seen to rejoice in the birth of his son Noah, in whom he saw the hope of comfort in their work and toil (5:29). Later, Noah became the one who “found favor in the eyes of Jehovah” (6:8).

However, this latter verse presents a problem in understanding the state of the pre-flood peoples: the inspired writer gives examples of those who are quite worldly (e.g., Lamech), and those who are favored by God (e.g., Enoch), but then a situation arises in which only one man is considered “perfect [i.e., blameless] in his generations.” In fact, the state of affairs had reached such a point that when God viewed mankind, He was grieved over the total wickedness and unrepentant state into which people had fallen (6:5). From verse nine onwards, Noah is instructed by God to prepare a means of rescuing a component of hu-

manity and the living world from a flood that will destroy all life on land (6:17). What, then, changed the spiritual condition of humanity to such a degree that God would bring about a universal destruction? It is my view that the verses between the end of chapter five, and verse five of chapter six, provide the reason, or at least the grounds, for the Noahic Flood. The thrust of the following discussion is to find a reasonable solution consistent with the language, context, and Scripture in general.

Some Notes on Translation

As the passage is relatively brief, it would be useful to quote it in its entirety (from the ASV in this case):

- (1) And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born unto them,
- (2) that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all that they chose.
- (3) And Jehovah said, My Spirit shall not strive with man for ever, for that he also is flesh: yet shall his days be a hundred and twenty years.
- (4) The nephilim were 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 were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown.

With regards to the translation, the following notes on key words or phrases will help when discussing problems with the above passage in the remainder of this work.

1. “Men” is translated from *ha’adham*, and “daughters” from *benoth*. The critical questions here are as follows: Are these the same men and daughters mentioned in the succeeding verses?; and, Are the “daughters” merely female offspring, or does the word convey a broader meaning?

2. The expression “sons of God” is taken from *bene-ha’elohim*, while “daughters of men” is derived from *benoth ha’adham*.¹ While few would argue with the common rendering of the latter phrase, some would say that the former should read “sons of the gods” or “lesser gods.”² Although a reference to a plurality of gods or god-like characters may be inferred, the word *’elohim* in the Old Testament most often refers to the One God of the Israelites, and hence the former usage cannot be used to affirm the pagan definition as the only option.

The word “fair” (referring to “daughters of men”) can be equally translated “beautiful” (as in the more modern versions). Maars further suggests that this could mean “sexually appealing.”³ “They took them wives” (referring to the actions of the sons of God) is the common Hebrew expression for marriage.⁴ Lastly, “all that [or “whomever”—NAS] they chose” probably is intended to mean the indiscriminate selection of mates.⁵

3. Most versions capitalize the word “Spirit,” clearly indicating their translators’ belief that it refers to the Holy Spirit, although this is not necessarily the case. Willis considers that “spirit” refers to the God-given breath of man (Genesis 2:7), over which God has ultimate control (Numbers 16:22).⁶ The word *yadhon* has been rendered variously as contend, strive, or abide; the etymology is uncertain. It is usually taken to mean that “God will not forever bear the consequences of man’s sin.”⁷

4. The translators of many versions chose to transliterate the Hebrew *nephilim* in order to avoid problems in deriving its meaning. As I will discuss later, the word generally is thought to have its root in *naphal* (“to fall”), but what connotation should be given as a result is an important question.

Immediate Context

According to various scholars, *ha’adham* in verse one refers to all men everywhere then existing.⁸ However, such an interpretation results in either misunderstanding or inconsistency due to consequent restrictions placed on the meaning of the corresponding phrase “daughters of men” in verse two. Misunderstanding arises when the “daughters of men” are also considered the whole of mankind, in which case

the “sons of God” are excluded from the human population designated “men.” The thrust of this first option centers on the possible involvement of divine beings, the merits of which will be considered later. Inconsistency occurs when “men” is taken to mean all mankind in the first verse, but only some of mankind in the form of “daughters of men” in the second. In this latter interpretation, the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” are seen as two components of mankind who are multiplying. Thus, *ha’adham* in verse two must be made to carry a more limited sense than the word in verse one.

The problem with the second option, as critics often have pointed out, is that it forces an unnatural shift in meaning that may not be the intention of the passage.⁹ However, if the initial premise of the second option is correct (i.e., that two groups of mankind are under discussion), then consistency may be maintained if the men of verse one also are considered a subset of the population in general. Thus, the daughters born to men in verse one equate with the “daughters of men” in verses two and four. In this respect also, the phrase “with man” (*ba’adham*) is found in verse three between references to both daughters and sons, yet occurs with no similar qualifications. It is likely, therefore, that the men whom God is viewing in verse three includes all humanity and not just the “daughters of men.”

As to the range in meaning of the word “daughters,” the natural conclusion is to assume a reference is here being made to female offspring exclusively. However, the word also may be equated with both males and females, as in the singular collective for the inhabitants of a place or city; especially “daughter of Zion.”¹⁰ While I prefer the latter view, it is not necessary to insist on one interpretation over another. As I will show, the overall effect is the same in either case.

If it is understood that verse three expresses the result of what has occurred prior to that time, where is the adequate reason in verses one and two? In other words, if the taking of women described in verse two is proper marriage, what is so wrong with the union that it should cause God to bring judgment on mankind in such a dramatic way? Unfortunately, nowhere in the immediate context of the passage is the wrongdoing of the people explained. I thus concur with Keil, who stated: “To understand this section, and appreciate the causes of this complete degeneracy of the race, we must first obtain a correct interpretation of the expressions ‘sons of God’ and ‘daughters of men.’”¹¹

Defining the “Sons of God”

The word “son” (*ben*) has a far wider meaning in Hebrew than it does in contemporary English use, and occurs some 4,850 times in the Hebrew Bible.¹² The most common meaning is of a son, as in the male offspring of his parents (e.g., Genesis 5:4), but in general terms the word refers to a variety of relationships in which a person or object belongs to, or is influenced by, someone or something. A son could be a citizen of a city (Psalm 147:13), a student (Proverbs 1:10), or an arrow (Job 41:28). The expression “sons of God” refers to some entity somehow connected or related to God, but whether by birth, creation, ownership, or characteristic, it is impossible to say from the phrase alone. The only way to examine the issue further is to study the use of the phrase in Scripture and other literature sources.

The phrase “sons of *‘elohim*” is used in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7, as well as in Genesis 6:2,4. In each of the former cases, the reference is to angels. Psalms 29:1 and 89:7 use the phrase “sons of *‘elim*,” which may refer to heavenly objects. “Sons of *‘elyon*” (Psalm 82:6) may refer to the elders of Israel.¹³ Daniel (3:25) uses the phrase “like a son of *‘elohin*,” which has reference to spiritual beings of some description. In addition, God’s chosen nation Israel often is portrayed as the spiritual son or child of God (cf. Deuteronomy 32:5; Isaiah 45:11; 43:6; Jeremiah 3:4; Hosea 1:10; 11:1). Apart from the latter usage, Hendel sees parallels in terminology with Ugaritic and other Semitic mythology in which, for instance, “the chief god of the pantheon, El, is called *‘ab bn il*, ‘father of the sons of El,’ which indicates that the term *bn il* originally included the notion of the patrimony of El.”¹⁴ In a similar vein, Kline would interpret the “sons of God” as a parallel to the “pagan ideology of divine kingship,” which was borrowed as a designation for antediluvian kings.¹⁵

However, while the influence of related cultures on Hebrew literature must not be ignored, the uniqueness of the passage under consideration should serve as a caution against the over exuberant comparison of Scripture with pagan mythology. Interpretations (as opposed to simple definitions) drawn from other cultures may serve as an unnecessary imposition on the text, especially in this case where the con-

cept of divine patrimony has such a wide range of use, even within the Hebrew Bible itself. The whole point here is that a precise meaning as to who or what the “sons of God” are, cannot be gained simply from a study of the phrase divorced from either its immediate or broader context. As I will show in the following sections, various meanings have been proposed, but these must be assessed according to the plausibility of the explanation with respect to the context as outlined previously.

INTERPRETATION OF GENESIS 6:1-3

First Hypothesis Discussed

The fact that *bene-ha 'elohim* and similar forms occur in the Old Testament and extra-biblical literature, and often refer to angels or minor deities, respectively, provides one with a strong incentive to conclude that the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2,4 also must refer to spiritual beings. In this case, the “daughters of men” would then be females of the human race or mankind in general (see notes on verse two). However, having defined the phrase in the preceding manner, there is still a considerable information gap. Somehow one must explain why angels left their heavenly abode, and why their marriage to human females precipitated God’s judgment. A whole story must therefore be fabricated so as to offer a solution to these problems. In fact, the “story” goes something like this: Once upon a time, some angels were in heaven looking at the women of the world and, noticing how beautiful they appeared, those angels became full of lust [or had a desire to reproduce themselves, or desired to exalt themselves, depending on the version of the story¹⁶]. They left their proper abode (heaven) and rightful duties, took on the form of men, and chose the wives they desired from among the population. In the course of these events, Enoch tried to intercede on behalf of what is now corrupted humanity, prophesying the destruction of man by a great flood unless the demons departed. Needless to say, Enoch did not succeed in ridding mankind of these fallen angels, and thus God found it necessary to destroy all life, except for righteous Noah and his family.

The above account is the gist of the story in the pseudepigraphal apocalyptic books of Enoch, and is similar in many respects to various myths of Near Eastern peoples. This “explanation” of Genesis 6:1-4 is favored by liberal scholars and the higher critics because the passage can then be rendered mythological and ahistoric. A number of scholars argue that Near Eastern ideas on the assembly of divine beings are rife throughout the Bible, and thus Genesis 6:1-4 is merely a “fragment of mythical narrative” having Ugartitic parallels.¹⁷ Speiser traces the “fragment” to Hurrian myths, originating sometime in the second millennium before Christ.¹⁸ Similar views are held by Von Rad,¹⁹ Graves and Patai,²⁰ Maars, and Dillmann,²¹ to name but a few. The common denominator in all of the foregoing works, as alluded to in the introduction, is the unquestioning acceptance of the Documentary Hypothesis. Speiser even ventures that the “final redactor” of Genesis found this passage distasteful, and so toned down the “obvious” mythological connotations.²² Thus, according to these expositors, the passage only **appears** to be factual and objective because the extraneous fabrications have been removed. It would not occur to these writers that perhaps the Bible’s rendering is based on the original event, and is accurate because of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And while the myths of neighboring peoples have their origin in a common event, true history has been corrupted and embellished by man over time.

First Hypothesis Refuted

The Book of Enoch is given credit as the “earliest interpretation” of this passage,²³ and the early Christians such as Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria are supposed to have been influenced by these writings.²⁴ Even Jude and Peter are purported to refer to Enoch as if it was Holy Scripture. However, the validity of Enoch is highly questionable, and its interpretation cannot be given credence as the inspired Word of God for the following reasons. First, while the book may be named after Enoch, it was not written by him. In fact, it probably was written by a number of people in early-Maccabean to late pre-Christian times.²⁵ Enoch is believed to reflect events surrounding the Maccabean revolt, and was used extensively by Essenes (as is evinced by the findings at Qumran),²⁶ perhaps because of the many references to a coming Messianic kingdom.²⁷ And second, because of the inconsistencies and

contradictions that permeate Enoch and the other pseudepigraphal books, their canonicity was accepted by neither the New Testament writers nor the early Church Fathers. The latter may have drawn upon the books for homiletical or devotional purposes, but that was all.²⁸ Jude 14-15 may be a reference to Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, although the latter cannot be checked because the book no longer exists and its origin is unknown.²⁹ However, such usage by inspired writers does not prove the inspiration of non-biblical sources. Green makes the very pertinent point that Paul quoted from the Greek poets Aratus, Menander, and Epimenides, but this obviously was done for preaching purposes in order to facilitate his outreach to his audience. Yet neither Paul nor Jude uses the quotes in the manner of “it is written” or “the Scriptures say.” As Geisler and Nix observed: “Truth is truth no matter where it is found, whether uttered by a heathen poet, a pagan prophet..., or even a dumb animal...”³⁰

In further support of the angel explanation, writers quote Jude 6-7 and 2 Peter 4,5, both of which discuss rebellious angels and their consignment to a dark prison until the day of judgment. It is apparent, however, that if Jude and Peter are referring to Genesis 6, it is only on the prior assumption that the latter passage is in fact about fallen angels. In fact, these New Testament passages nowhere refer to angels partaking in earthly marriages and having children. Even if one suggests that the word “these” in Jude 7 has its precedent in verse six (which may not be a correct interpretation³¹), the passage clearly refers to fornication and homosexuality, whereas Genesis 6:2 refers to proper marriage. In addition, other parts of Enoch do not include the marriage element in the stories surrounding the fall of angels, and so it is inconsistent to say that Jude is attempting to teach doctrine from one part of Enoch while ignoring contradictory statements in other parts. Keil argues in detail to the effect that Peter and Jude are not condoning the stories in Enoch, and “give no credence to these fables of a Jewish gnosticizing tradition.”³²

Attempts to substantiate a second fall of angels (i.e., in addition to that which can be inferred from the appearance of Satan in Genesis 3:1-6) violate Scripture in every way, apart from the violence done to Jude and Peter. An explanation can be acceptable only if it is logically consistent with biblical teaching on angels. Thus, an answer must be found in theology, not philology. Note the following:

- (a) Prior to Genesis 6:1-4, no mention is made of angels—not even their creation (although this does not mean to say they were not included in the acts of creation in Genesis 1);
- (b) Jesus taught (Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:34) that angels neither marry nor are given in marriage. While they often take on a male form while acting as messengers of God on Earth, they do not function as physical or sexual beings. Angels have been observed to eat (Genesis 18:8; 19:3), but this is a far cry from breeding, and besides, who is to say that their eating was not simply for purposes of courtesy, rather than for sustenance? It is impossible to imagine how angels could have acquired totally new characteristics merely by virtue of their fall. Interpretations of Genesis 6 aside, there is no instance of angel/human interbreeding in the Bible;
- (c) The judgment in verse three specifically refers to men and not “sons of God” or angels. It is inconsistent to argue that God would punish the tempted and not the tempters. If Genesis 6:1-4 is paralleled to chapter three, as Willis suggests,³³ one can see that Satan (the tempter) is judged or cursed **first**, and **then** Adam and Eve (the tempted). For the sentence to be universal, those who are judged must refer to all humanity (*‘adham*), thus incorporating both “sons of God” and “daughters of men”;
- (d) Angels never are called “sons of God” in Genesis,³⁴ or anywhere else in the Pentateuch;³⁵
- (e) The reference to angels as “sons of God” in Job 1:6 is contrasted with Satan; good spiritual beings are thus contrasted with evil spiritual beings, not with earthly beings. Further, it is incongruent to suggest that Satan’s minions, the demons of hell, should be described as sons of God in the same manner as angels are described in Job. Therefore, the “sons of *‘elohim*” comparison between Job and Genesis should not be viewed as a direct analogy;
- (f) The Alexandrine text of the Greek Old Testament translates *bene-ha’elohim* as “angels of

God,”³⁶ which certainly demonstrates the pervading view of Jews in Alexandria during the third century B.C. However, other versions read “sons of God” in Genesis 6:1,2, while nearly all versions read “angels of God” in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7.³⁷ Thus, if any power of definition is ascribed to the Septuagint at all, it would seem to contradict the claims concerning the consensus of Jewish opinion, some of whom obviously thought that Genesis 6 did not refer to angels.

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

Second Hypothesis Discussed Briefly

Before discussing what may be considered the conservative view on this subject, it is important to mention an interpretation that is unpopular today, but is not insignificant in the examination of this passage.

Early Targums and certain orthodox Jewish authorities considered (and some still do even today) that the “sons of God” were an aristocratic class of rulers who, believing themselves to be autocratic, married whom they wished from the people of lower orders called the “daughters of men.” The references in verse four to men of renown is ascribed to these rulers, whose evil supposedly was evident in their lust for a name of glory.³⁸ Kline sees this view as essentially “on the right track” and attempts to refine the theory by finding a royalty/commoner distinction in Genesis 6 from genealogies in the preceding chapters. Many of his arguments, however, merely substantiate the moral descent of man in general into the ways of the Cainites—a view that will be considered in the following section.

In addition, there are some problems with the interpretation in general. First, distinction between royalty and commoners does not occur in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and second, nowhere does the Old Testament forbid marriage between these two classes of people. Even if these kings are thought of as pagan rulers, who through their example led to profane marriages in the lower classes, it still reduces the explanatory power of Genesis 6:1-3. One must seek an answer that explains how the ungodly influenced the righteous to such an extent that the whole of humanity became wicked. A few kings practicing tyranny, and advocating polygamy and paganism, hardly seems warrant for a global flood that destroyed every living thing. As Willis has noted, if this interpretation were applied, it would give no adequate cause for the occurrence of a universal destruction.³⁹

Alternative Explanation Proposed

The first hypothesis described above rests its case almost entirely on a defense of the definition of “sons of God” as angels. However, such an interpretation can be shown to be inconsistent both contextually and doctrinally, and the definition an unnecessary imposition. The key to this passage, therefore, is to determine its relationship to the characteristics of the antediluvian generations described in preceding chapters, and the ensuing judgment in the form of the Noahic Flood.

Notice, as Thomas does,⁴⁰ the contrast between the descendants of Cain and the descendants of Seth (refer back, also, to the section on Overall Context). Through their activities, it can be seen that the Cainites possessed characteristics of cleverness, culture, and civilization. Furthermore, by the ungodly behavior of Lamech, they generally are portrayed as earthly, selfish, sensual, and an authority unto themselves. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the professions associated with the Cainites, and Lamech is the only one (apart from Cain) specifically cited as sinful, but note that nothing positive is said of them in a spiritual sense. One therefore cannot help but notice the contrast given in 4:26 with the arrival of Seth. Maars, wishing to avoid such a comparison, maintains that there is no basis in the belief that the Sethites were known for their godliness,⁴¹ but as can be seen, this is simply not true. The Sethites were noted by their devotion (4:25), consecration (26), fellowship (5:22), testimony (Hebrews 9:5), service (5:29), and righteousness (6:8) in the sight of God.

Thus, after the generations of Cain and Seth have been outlined in chapters four and five, and 6:2 then speaks of two groups of people, is it not reasonable to conclude that the earlier familial division is being carried on into the later discussion? If this is the case, the “sons of God” expression is used in a spiritual or covenantal sense, that is, referring to those who possessed characteristics of faithful service to God. The “daughters of men” would then be those of a worldly disposition. Given the contrasting nature of the two lines of descendants described previously, I suggest that the “sons of God” were the godly Sethites, while the “daughters of men” were the worldly, ungodly Cainites. Such a distinction also parallels the Israelites of the Old Covenant and the Christians in the New. If this explanation is applied, the events of those times fall logically into place.

For example, and most important, the reason for the Flood becomes evident. One could conclude that the judgment was delivered purely on the basis of mixed and/or indiscriminate marriage on the part of the Sethites. Indeed, morally mixed marriages are reprobated repeatedly throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Genesis 24:3,4; 28:1; Exodus 34:15,16; Deuteronomy 7:3). However, it probably is better to consider that the judgment was given not merely on the basis of mixed marriages, but also on the failure of the sons of God and the daughters of men to maintain their spiritual integrity **despite** those marriages. Thus, universal destruction is prescribed for universal sinfulness. It is easy to see how this situation may have arisen, especially if the phrase “multiply on the face of the ground” indicates that the Cainites were increasing in great numbers, in which case the influence of the numerically superior Cainites may have been overwhelming. Through intermarriage, the Sethites would have become subsumed both racially and morally: it would be easier for the Sethites to descend to the moral level of their newly acquired relatives than for the converse to occur.

God already had promised a way of overcoming sin through a descendant of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15), and hence must have decided that unless He intervened in a miraculous way, the integrity of the messianic line would be defiled, and man would have no chance of redemption. Therefore, the sons of God departing from their mission and marrying in an improper manner, leading to an overwhelming apostasy, provides the appropriate connection between the parallel genealogies of Genesis 1-5 and the Noachic Flood of Genesis 6-9.

120 years—Life Span or Probationary Period?

While the meaning of the phrase “yet shall his days be a hundred and twenty years” has no direct relevance to the “sons of God” expression, it is convenient at this time to discuss this part of verse three before moving on to an analysis of verse four.

Most scholars, liberal and conservative alike, support the idea that 120 years refers to a period of grace or probation in between God giving Noah his instructions, and the Flood finally coming upon the Earth. Von Rad⁴² is practically alone in supporting the view that the time represents the life span of longer than 120 years for many generations after the Flood, at least until Abram. Also, there were at least one hundred years between Noah receiving his instructions from God soon after his sons were born, at which time he was 500 years old (Genesis 5:32), and the Flood commencing when Noah was 600 years old (Genesis 7:6). Thus, the time frame separating these two events is consistent with the “period of grace” interpretation.

THE “NEPHILIM” OF VERSE FOUR

The diversity of interpretations of the nature of the nephilim in verse four makes it evident that the preceding three verses exert only minor constraining power on the definition of these antediluvian men.

Probably because the Septuagint translates the word *nephilim* as giant, and the King James Version carried this definition through, the majority of scholars are inclined to the view that these were men of gigantic stature. This also appears consistent with the only other occurrence of the word in Numbers 13:33, where the returning spies describe themselves as being “grasshoppers” by comparison with the nephilim. The word itself generally is considered to be derived from the verb *naphal* meaning “to fall.”⁴³ From this, liberal critics interpret *nephilim* to mean “those fallen from heaven,” in reference to their progenitors’ angelic origins. Thus, in this line of thinking, the nephilim must be a fantastic race of some de-

scription because they are the offspring of the mythological marriages described in verse two.⁴⁴ Or, extrapolating in the reverse direction, it is argued that the “sons of God” must be angels because the word *nephilim* means fallen from heaven. In either case, as Archer aptly argues, no one proposes that Goliath or the sons of Anak had angelic forbears, so why suggest it here?⁴⁵ Note also that the “from heaven” part has to be provided artificially. In fact, Brown, Driver, and Briggs provide several definitions, including to fall by accident—by violent death; in prostration—upon (attack), and others.⁴⁶

Although there is nothing wrong in proposing that a tribe of tall peoples lived in those days, the full explanation may lie beyond a mere physical interpretation. The whole problem with verse four is relating the allusion to these men who were mighty or strong and “men of renown [name]” to the context of the degradation of humanity. An answer may lie in the reference to *nephilim* in Numbers 33. Note that when the spies returned from Canaan, they reported that the people were strong and the cities fortified, and the descendants of Anak lived there (vs. 28). But when Caleb challenged the people to possess the land, the spies resorted to hyperbole, saying the inhabitants were stronger and bigger than they, “the land eateth its inhabitants,” and the nephilim, sons of Anak were there, with the Israelites being as grasshoppers in their sight (vss. 30-33). So, while these nephilim could have been tall and strong (with some exaggeration by the spies being considered), their obvious military prowess may have struck fear into the Israelites. This encounter could have been an early reference to the Philistines who occupied that region, who often were portrayed as fearsome fighters, and later included the champions Goliath and Saph. Thus, *nephilim* may not have been a reference to a racial group as such, but rather to those of a fearsome character.

With the above interpretation applied to Genesis 6:4, I find myself in agreement with Carroll, Stigers, Leupold, and Keil, who propose that the “nephilim” were a group of people who were violent attackers, invaders, and the like, based on the idea that *naphal* might be interpreted “to fall upon.”⁴⁷ This would also be consistent with the description of the *nephilim* in the latter half of verse four in terms often used for military heroes or champions, warriors, and tyrants.⁴⁸ The difficulty of the expression “in the earth in those days, and also after that” also may be overcome. To some, it means that these nephilim existed prior to the marriages, and afterwards as well,⁴⁹ most adding that the Nephilim belonged to the Cainite line, but who also resulted from mixed marriages. The purpose of the verse would be, in this case, to give an example of the terrible conditions in those times, showing how men were given to war and making a name for themselves, rather than pursuing righteousness. But again, what would be the purpose of mentioning at this point that such ungodliness existed prior to and after the union mentioned in verse two and reiterated in verse four? The idea that mankind had descended into ungodliness had been well stated in the preceding verses.

An alternative interpretation, and the one that I favor, ascribes the comment “after that” to a reflection on the perspective of Moses who was noting that those sort of men lived prior to the flood, and also afterward in the land of Canaan.⁵⁰ In the antediluvian world, the Sethites may have become warring as part of their assimilation into the Cainites, or perhaps they allowed themselves to be subjugated by tyrants. Thus, one should consider not so much the **fact** of the *nephilim*, but the **effect** they had on the population. Moses, writing through inspiration, may be making a comparison between the influence of the godless before the Flood, and their influence at the time when the Israelites were supposed to occupy the land. The result in the former was a universal Flood, and in the latter, Yahweh’s chosen people were condemned to forty years’ wandering in the wilderness. On each occasion, perhaps, these fierce warriors caused the faithful to stumble through lack of courage, rather than trusting in God and acting according to His will.

In conclusion, it is preferable to seek an explanation that considers more than the mere existence and physical attributes of the men mentioned in verse four. Just as the mere fact of the marriages is not the key problem in verse two, but rather the effect of those marriages on those who should be faithful, so also the effect of the tyrannical warrior-type people should be given a spiritual, rather than wholly physical, interpretation.

CONCLUSION

While Genesis 6:1-4 possesses many difficult aspects of interpretation, its general meaning may be ascertained by the examination of the peripheral context and doctrinal principles in both the Old and New Testaments. The latter procedure eliminates a popular explanation that defines the “sons of God” as angels, and refutes another interpretation which attributes the same expression to a class of nobility. Instead, the overall context suggests that the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” exist as an antithetical parallelism, and refer to the godly Sethites (Genesis 4:26) and worldly Cainites (4:11), respectively. The unsanctioned and improperly motivated marriages between these two groups (6:2) led to the total moral breakdown of the existing world order (6:5), the exception among them being Noah and his family (6:8). Further, the nephilim should not be considered the strange, mythological offspring of this union, but rather as a class of tyrannical warriors who maintained a faith-breaking reign of terror. In this respect, they serve as a deliberate parallel to the *nephilim* of Numbers 33, who also caused God’s people to stumble.

Problems in the interpretation of the phrase “sons of God and daughters of men,” and difficulties in defining the nature of the *nephilim* in verse four, can be overcome through consideration of the influence of an overwhelming majority of ungodly on the spiritual integrity of a lesser group of worshipful people. Thus, rather than examining merely the act of marriage, or the presence of *nephilim*, one should consider the effect of these evil influences in order to provide sufficient cause for the corresponding divine judgment. The cleansing Flood of Noah was brought about to maintain the sacred messianic lineage, and thus a single generation was left to repopulate the earth (9:1). Although man still was capable of evil and a life devoted to ungodliness (e.g., 9:22), God promised that there would never be a flood to destroy the Earth again (9:11). Through the descendants of Noah’s son Shem (9:26), Jesus Christ the Son of God came to complete the Christocentric theme of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17).

ENDNOTES

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