

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE
'SONS OF GOD' EPISODE (GENESIS 6.1-4)
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 'PRIMAEVAL HISTORY' (GENESIS 1-11)*

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Most studies of the 'Sons of God' pericope (Gen. 6.1-4) have busied themselves with the narrower exegetical problems within the pericope itself as an independent, not to say intrusive, piece of 'heathen mythology'¹ or as a partly demythologized 'foreign particle'² within the biblical text. My purpose here is to examine, via the exegetical problem of the identity of the 'sons of God' and via the backward and forward links between the material and its surroundings, the function of the pericope within the larger whole of the 'Primaeval History'. Without calling into question the consensus of opinion that the material of the piece derives from a pre-Israelite myth, I am concerned here essentially with the 'final form of the text'.³

1. *The Identity of the 'Sons of God'*

Concentration on this particular interpretational crux can, I think, point us to a solution of the larger problem of the function of the whole pericope within its present setting.

Three chief interpretations of the identity of the 'sons of God' have been advanced:

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¹. H. Holzinger, *Genesis* (KHAT I, 1; Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1898), p. 64.

². Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (SBT, 17; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1962), pp. 57-59.

³. See J.F.A. Sawyer, 'The Meaning of *בצלם אלהים* ("In the Image of God") in Genesis i-xi', *JTS* NS 25 (1974), pp. 418-26 (418-19); 'The "Original Meaning of the Text" and Other Legitimate Subjects for Semantic Description', *BETL* 33 (1974), pp. 63-70; David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), esp. pp. 10-11, 82.

2 The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode (Gen. 6.1-4)

(i) The 'sons of God' are the Sethites (cf. 5.1, 3), while the 'daughters of men' are from the Cainite line.⁴ In favour of this view is the division of the human race into two lines of descent in the previous chapters (4.17–5.32), but against it are the arguments that since 'humanity' (הָאָדָם) is used in v. 1 of humankind generally, it is unlikely to mean only one section of humanity in v. 2,⁵ and that 'sons of God' does not appear as a collective term for the Sethites, either in these chapters or elsewhere.

(ii) The 'sons of God' are heavenly beings,⁶ who mate with earthly women. In favour of this interpretation is the regular use of the term 'sons of God' for the heavenly court that surrounds Yahweh (e.g. Ps. 29.1; 89.7; Job 1.6). There is a *prima facie* case for supposing that both the Nephilim and 'mighty men' (גִּבּוֹרִים) of v. 4 are to be regarded as the offspring of such unions, though it has been argued that the structure of v. 4 deliberately affirms the existence of the Nephilim *before* the unions of v. 2.⁷ We may leave aside, however, the problem of the origin of the Nephilim, and note that the majority of scholarly opinion supports the identification of the 'sons of God' as heavenly beings.⁸ The principal objection to this identification is that it is far from clear in the present context why humankind as a whole should be subjected to the divine

⁴. The origins of this view, supported by many Fathers and Reformers, are adequately dealt with by P.S. Alexander, 'The Targumim and Early Exegesis of the "Sons of God" in Genesis 6', *JJS* 23 (1972), pp. 60-71; and L.R. Wickham, 'The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men. Genesis vi 2 in Early Christian Exegesis', *OTS* 19 (1974), pp. 135-47.

⁵. For the view that this is not an overwhelming objection, see M.G. Kline, 'Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1-4', *WTJ* 24 (1962), pp. 189-90.

⁶. Frequently understood as 'angels' (cf. Jan Holman's review of *Sturz der Göttersöhne oder Engel vor der Sintflut? Versuch eines Neuverständnisses von Genesis 6,2-4 unter Berücksichtigung der religionsvergleichenden und exegetischgeschichtlichen Methode* [Weiner Beiträge zur Theologie, 13; Wien: Herder, 1966], by Ferdinand Dexinger, in *Bib* 49 [1968], pp. 292-95 [293-94]); but see Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT, 1.1; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), pp. 493-94, 501-503.

⁷. E.g. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (trans. John H. Marks; OTL; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1963), p. 115.

⁸. For example, Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 1910), pp. 55-56; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2nd edn, 1930), pp. 141-42; von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 110; G. Cooke, 'The Sons of (the) God(s)', *ZAW* 76 (1964), pp. 22-47 (23-24).

threat of v. 3 for the sin of such non-human beings; the 'daughters of humans' can hardly have been regarded as culpable (though their beauty [v. 2] was the antecedent condition,⁹ since they were taken by force).

(iii) The 'sons of God' are dynastic rulers who, as oriental despots, established royal harems by force¹⁰ or practised indiscriminate rape. This view has the merit of taking seriously the phrase 'and they took for themselves wives from all whom they chose (ויקחו להם נשים מכל (אשר בחרו)'. It also makes intelligible the divine punishment upon humanity as a whole because of the sin of these despots; for in oriental ideology it is not uncommon to find the fate of the people at large bound up with the fate of the king. Nevertheless, the identification of the 'sons of God' simply as human rulers has the weakness that it is rarely if ever attested in the ancient Near East as a term for kings in general. Though kings in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan and Israel were frequently spoken to as 'son of God', such language seems to have been reserved in the main for courtly rhetoric and poetic adulation, and is not to be met with, in the Old Testament at least, in straightforward narrative style with such a signification.¹¹

Westermann appears to feel no difficulty at this point. Though he seems not to know of the paper of M.G. Kline, he regards the term בני אלהים as the only one available to the narrator (J) of Gen. 6.1-4 to designate a class of beings superior to humans; for in the 'Primaeval History' humanity is otherwise undifferentiated and undivided socially and politically. Since the pericope concerns essentially the power of

⁹. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 495-96, 503-504.

¹⁰. So Kline, 'Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1-4', pp. 187-204; followed by A.R. Millard, 'A New Babylonian "Genesis" Story (Epic of Atrahasis)', *TynBul* 18 (1967), pp. 3-18 (12). Similarly also Ferdinand Dexinger, *Sturz der Göttersöhne oder Engel vor der Sintflut? Versuch eines Neuverständnisses von Genesis 6,2-4 unter Berücksichtigung der religionsvergleichenden und exegetischgeschichtlichen Methode* (Wiener Beiträge zur Theologie, 13; Vienna: Herder, 1966). This view was adumbrated by some Jewish interpreters who saw in the 'sons of God' rulers and in the 'daughters of men' women of lower rank (see Dexinger, *Göttersöhne*, pp. 122-24, 129-20; Alexander, 'Targumim and Early Exegesis', pp. 61, 64-66).

¹¹. Both Dexinger, *Göttersöhne*, pp. 37-39, and Kline, 'Divine Kingship', p. 192, lay weight upon the description of King Krt in the Ugaritic tale as *bn il* 'son of God'. The criticisms of R. de Vaux, *RB* 74 (1967), pp. 114-15, and Holman, *Bib* 49 (1968), pp. 292-95, should be taken into account.

one group over another, only the polarity of 'sons of God' and '(daughters of) humans' is open to him.¹²

It is perhaps no contradiction of Westermann's position, but rather a development of it, to make the new suggestion that the author of Gen. 6.1-4 in its present form did not work with a system of closed categories in which 'sons of God' must be *either* human or non-human.¹³ Are the בני האלהים here then *both* divine beings *and* antediluvian rulers? The use of the term may indeed be inherited from earlier formulations of the pericope in which the 'sons of God' may have been divine beings *tout court*, but it is not improbable that the author of this text in its final form should have understood it in reference to rulers of the *primaeval* period who had belonged in part to the divine world. In this connection we may observe the appearance of divine names in the Babylonian lists of antediluvian kings, notably the identification of several rulers with the god Dumuzi or Tammuz.¹⁴ Strictly speaking, of course, Gen. 6.1-4 represents the 'sons of God' as the generation prior to the Nephilim and the 'mighty men' (גברים),¹⁵ so that a simple identification of 'sons of God' with the other terms is inappropriate.¹⁶ But the intercourse of 'sons of God' with 'daughters of humans' is not envisaged as occurring at only one definite period—the imperfect verb in v. 4 should probably be translated as a frequentative, viz. 'Whenever

¹². Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 496: 'Der Erzähler meint mit den בני אלהים den Menschen schlechthin überlegene Klasse: Männer, die so mächtig sind, daß es für ihr Begehren der Schönheit einer Frau die Grenzen, die hier für gewöhnliche Sterbliche bestehen, nicht gibt'.

¹³. Cf. Patrick D. Miller, *Genesis 1-11: Studies in Structure and Theme* (JSOTSup, 8; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), pp. 25-26: 'In the stories of the origin and beginnings of "man" or the human creature it is not surprising that there is some attempt to define the relation of 'ādām beings to 'elōhîm beings and wrestle with the extent and limitation of that relationship. At one point in the story [Gen. 3.22] the relationship is seen to be very close and the human creatures are like the divine ones. But the story goes on to say that these two worlds are nevertheless distinct and that it is possible to overstep the bounds and seek to blend the two into one.'

¹⁴. Millard, 'A New Babylonian "Genesis" Story', p. 12 n. 28, cites the Akkadian god-list in *Cuneiform Texts*, XXIV, pl. 19, K4338b; XXV, pl. 7, K7663 + 11035.

¹⁵. Construing the complex sentence thus: 'There were in those days the Nephilim, whom whenever the sons of God went in unto the daughters of men they (the latter) bore to them (the former)'.

¹⁶. So Dexinger, *Göttersöhne*, pp. 44-46.

the sons of God went in unto the daughters of humans'¹⁷ —, so that it is perhaps unnecessary to distinguish too sharply between kings who were 'sons of God' in the strict sense, and kings who were only *sons of* the 'sons of God', part-human and part-divine.

Such a 'son of God' has his portrait sketched in Akkadian literature, the hero Gilgamesh:

Two-thirds of him is god, [one-third of him is human]...
The nobles of Uruk are gloomy in their chambers:
'Gilgamesh leaves not the son to his father;
Day and night is unbridled his arrogance...
Gilgamesh leaves not the maid to her mother,
The warrior's daughter, the noble's spouse...
The onslaught of his weapons verily has no equal.'¹⁸

That Gilgamesh was regarded in the epic as a historical human personage is beyond question; the belief in his divine or semi-divine origins explains his significance and the survival of the story of his deeds from ancient times, as well as his titles and entitlements; it does not mean that the epic poet conceives of him as any more than a human, and a mortal human at that.

The same outlook is credible in the biblical pericope: that the 'sons of God' were both regarded as rulers of ancient times, and traditionally ascribed divine or semi-divine origins. On this interpretation, the 'sons of God' pericope is no alien intrusion into the story of *primaeva* humanity, since it concerns—from first to last—humans; but neither is it simply an episode in the catalogue of human sinfulness, since it also concerns the relationship between the divine and the human world that is displayed in the actions of these 'sons of God'. Connections with the surrounding material will become apparent in the ensuing motif analysis.

2. Motif Analysis

(a) The motif of 'breaking the bounds', which recurs in every major

¹⁷. So LXX ὡς ἄν εἰσεπορεύοντο; cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, p. 146.

¹⁸. *Gilgamesh* I.ii.1, 11-13, 16-17, 21 (*ANET*, pp. 73b-74). It is perhaps also significant that like the 'sons of God' who find their life expectancy greatly reduced, Gilgamesh, since 'he too is flesh' (cf. Gen. 6.3), even though only one-third human, is oppressed by the thought of death and he searches for immortality, only to find it eludes him at the end.

episode of the 'Primaeval History', appears here in two forms, if the foregoing solution to the question of the identity of the 'sons of God' is accepted.

First, there is in the union of 'sons of God' with 'daughters of humans' a breach of the primal boundary between the divine and the human worlds. The attempt of humanity in Genesis 3 at self-divinization—and the at least partially successful attempt (cf. 3.22) to merge the spheres of the human and the divine—is here taken up afresh from the other direction in the attempt of divine beings to join the world of humanity. Their attempt also is only partially successful, in that 'sons of God' (בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים), or at least their offspring, inasmuch as they have breached the bounds between the divine and the human, have forfeited the immortality that is a token of their divinity and have become (like Gilgamesh) subject to death (v. 3).

Secondly, there is clearly another form of 'breaking the bounds' present in the violent and polygamous lust of the 'sons of God'. Westermann¹⁹ has pointed to the formal similarity between this story and those of Gen. 12.10-20 (and parallels) and 2 Samuel 11, where the beauty of a woman is alleged by some commentators to lead a man to break the bounds of accepted morality. We may observe further backward links within the 'Primaeval History' that highlight the significance of the sons of God 'taking wives of all whom they chose'. The monogamous order established by God (2.24)—in which, incidentally, it is not the man but God who chooses the wife for the man—has in the course of human decline been casually abandoned by the tyrant Lamech of whom it is first noted (? in emphatic position) that he 'took two wives'.²⁰ The glimpse in Gen. 6.2 of 'titan promiscuity'²¹ reveals the ultimate stage in the development of a society that has produced a Lamech. The 'sons of God' are intelligible therefore in the present context as the royal successors of Lamech, taking for themselves (לָהֶם) wives of as many

¹⁹. Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 494-97.

²⁰. It is hard to agree with Skinner that 'no judgment is passed on Lamech's bigamy, and probably none was intended. The notice may be due simply to the fact that the names of the wives happened to be preserved in the song afterwards quoted' (*Genesis*, p. 118). If the latter is the case, it is all the more probable that by drawing attention to the fact the narrator is implying a judgment.

²¹. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1971), p. 40.

women as they chose.²² Bonhoeffer was not far from the mark when he spoke of the unrestrained sexuality here depicted as 'avid, impotent will for unity in the divided world' [note the link with Gen. 11]; 'it desires the destruction of the other person as creature; it robs him of his creatureliness, violates him as well as his limit... [It] ... is therefore destruction *par excellence*. Thus it is an insane acceleration of the Fall; it is self-affirmation to the point of destruction.'²³

(b) In the 'Primaeval History' the relation of the divine to the human comes to expression not only in the concept of a boundary between the two spheres, but also in the concept of communication, or communion, between the two spheres. Thus, in Genesis 2, though God is creator and the man is a creature, the man is infused with the divine breath (2.7), and God walks in the garden that the man tends (3.8). To the same effect is the concept of human creation in the image of God (1.26), whatever precisely that may mean; in some sense, at least, the boundary between the divine and the human is not absolute, and humanity can represent God on earth (1.28). In 6.1-4, on the contrary, we find a satanic parody of the idea of the image of God in humanity. Far from God being present on earth in the person of humans as his kingly representatives exercising benign dominion over the lower orders of creation,²⁴ we now have the presence of the divine on earth in a form that utterly misrepresents God through its exercise of royal violence and despotic authority over other humans.

(c) A further link between 6.1-4 and the surrounding material lies in the concept of the possession of 'name'. The Nephilim, here identified, it appears,²⁵ with the 'mighty men who were of old' (הגברים אשר)

²². Kline, 'Divine Kingship', pp. 195-96, E.G. Kraeling, 'The Origin and Significance of Gen. 6:1-4', *JNES* 6 (1947), pp. 193-208 (197).

²³. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3* (trans. John C. Fletcher; London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 80.

²⁴. See further, D.J.A. Clines, 'The Image of God in Man', *TynBul* 19 (1968), pp. 53-103, reprinted in this volume as 'Humanity as the Image of God'; J. Barr, 'Man and Nature—The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament', *BJRL* 55 (1972-73), pp. 9-32 (21-23).

²⁵. I assume that the phrase וְגַם אַחֲרֵי־כֵן, whether a later interpolation (Holzinger, *Genesis*, p. 66; Childs, *Myth and Reality*, p. 55) or not, does not distinguish between the Nephilim and the גְּבֵרִים by suggesting that the Nephilim were already in existence before the 'sons of God' cohabited with the daughters of humans, but is intended as a note of the continued existence of the Nephilim far beyond primaeval times, and into the period represented, for example, by Num. 13.33.

מְעוֹלָם), were the men of renown, lit. 'men of name' (אֲנָשֵׁי הַשֵּׁם) of ancient times. The striving for a 'name', a permanent memorial in one's descendants, belongs to the dynastic ambitions of these antediluvian rulers. Earlier in the 'Primaeval History', Cain, in a sense the spiritual though not the physical ancestor of the heroes of 6.4 (here the old patristic identification of the 'sons of God' is not entirely beside the mark), is represented as having the same dynastic ambition: he strives to perpetuate a family name, calling the name of his city by the name of his son Enoch (4.17).²⁶ Similarly the self-sufficient builders of Babel set about building their city and tower with the explicit purpose of making a 'name' for themselves. This desire to make a name for oneself is more than arrogance; just as their tower whose top reaches to the sky may be seen as an assault on heaven, so their ambition for 'name' is an attack on the prerogative of God, who himself makes his own name great or glorious (2 Sam. 7.23; Jer. 32.20; Isa. 63.12, 14) and who is the true source of 'name' (cf. Zeph. 3.19-20). While it is ironically true that the builders of Babel succeeded in making a name for themselves, it was only a name of derogatory significance, Babel, 'confusion'.²⁷

While the line of 'name'-seekers is scattered, there has already come into being a man of 'name', Shem (שֵׁם, 9.18), ancestor of the 'Semitic' nations, whose name is 'probably intended to be deliberately allusive, providing a contrast to the illegitimate attempt by humans to achieve a name for themselves (11.4; cf. 6.4), and anticipating the great name to be accorded to Abraham... (12.1-3)'.²⁸ וְאֶגְדְּלָהּ שֵׁמֶךָ, 12.2; cf. also the prophetic word to David, 'I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones (הַגְּדֹלִים) of the earth' (2 Sam. 7.9).²⁹

(d) A final motif with interesting connections in the preceding and following chapters is that of the multiplication of humanity. Its appearance in the 'sons of God' episode is interesting not so much for the fact of its presence, but more for the sake of its irrelevance. Throughout the

²⁶. That is, if Enoch himself is not the builder of the city and himself the perpetuator of his own name (cf. Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis* [trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961], I, p. 230).

²⁷. Cassuto, *Genesis*, II, p. 242.

²⁸. A.K. Jenkins, 'A Great Name: Genesis 12:2 and the Editing of the Pentateuch', *JOT* 10 (1978), pp. 41-57 (45).

²⁹. On the connection between Gen. 12.2 and 2 Sam. 7.9 see H.W. Wolff, 'The Kerygma of the Yahwist', *Int* 20 (1966), pp. 131-58 (141-42).

'Primaeval History' the multiplication of humanity is enjoined, furthered and blessed by God. The first command to humankind in Genesis 1 is: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' (1.28). In Genesis 4 Eve bears Cain 'with the help of Yahweh (אֵת־יְהוָה, 4.2), and God 'appoints' (tv, 4.25) another child, Seth, instead of Abel. After the Flood, the first divine command to surviving humanity is a repetition of 1.28: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'. I have argued elsewhere³⁰ that the position of the Table of Nations (Gen. 10) *before* the Babel episode (Gen. 11) compels us to regard the dispersal of the nations not only as a mark of judgment following upon Babel, but also as a fulfilment of the divine injunctions to multiply the race.

Against that background, it is remarkable that the multiplication of humanity in 6.1 is viewed entirely neutrally, and has no real relevance to the narrative that proceeds from it. C. Westermann, it is true, argues that the increase of humankind, which is indeed an appropriate consequence of the primal blessing, begins to create negative possibilities: the sheer size of humanity creates danger-points for the relation between humans and God (or the gods).³¹ From the point of view of the form of the pericope, which is Westermann's starting-point, it does indeed appear that the introductory clause will be of great moment for the development of the narrative. That is not in fact the case, for the narrative would have the same significance if the phrase 'when humans began to multiply on the face of the ground' were absent. To be sure, some multiplication of the human race from the primaeval pair of Genesis 2 must have occurred for the events of 6.1-4 to be possible, but such a multiplication has already been adequately attested by the genealogies of the Cainites (4.17-22) and the Sethites (Gen. 5).

The reference in 6.1, then, to the multiplication of humankind has narrative significance only if the tale is told differently, with the multiplication of humanity a reason or cause for the ensuing events. For the second time in this study, therefore, we are compelled to designate an item 'traditional'. (I should stress that I do not regard an overriding concern for the 'final form' of the text as precluding acceptance of the possibility that some, if not much, of the material, has been incorporated into the final form largely because it has become traditional. We do not have to suppose final authors of our texts being actively engaged in the precise wording or arrangement of every part of their material;

³⁰. Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, pp. 68-69.

³¹. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 500.

'final form' criticism—if it may be so designated—makes only the assumption of authorial intention in the end-redactors, and authors obviously have many different styles of handling their material. In the present case, I would argue that it makes effectively no difference whether the clause is present or not, so that its presence falls beneath the level of the author's intention.)

Have we then any evidence that the tale may have been told differently, especially in relation to the multiplication motif? Yes, in the *Atrahasis* epic, the story of the Deluge is prefaced by the lines:

Twelve hundred years had not yet passed
When the land extended and the peoples multiplied.
The land was bellowing like a bull.³²

Here the growth of humankind results in such clamour that it disturbs the sleep of the high god, Enlil:

'The noise of mankind has become too intense for me,
With their uproar I am deprived of sleep.'³³

The Flood is sent as the final, and successful, attempt, to halt the unlimited growth of humankind. And following the drastic reduction in the size of humanity brought about by the Flood, measures are taken to ensure that henceforth the size of the human population will be controlled: there are to be sterile women as well as fertile women, various orders of religious women who will not marry, and a demon of infant mortality to 'snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it'.³⁴

The story of the Flood, therefore, with the near extinction of humankind, may be told as a story about the problem of 'over-population', while the multiplication motif presents the reason for the problem and thus effectively accounts for the origin of death. This explanation for the institution of death figures in many myths.³⁵ 'Earth becomes overcrowded, some check has to be put on mankind increasing to an alarming extent. Thus the only solution is Death.'³⁶

Two aspects of the Biblical pericope are particularly instructive

³². *Atrahasis* II.i.2-3 (Lambert and Millard, pp. 72-73).

³³. *Atrahasis* II.i.7-8 (Lambert and Millard, pp. 72-73).

³⁴. *Atrahasis* III.vii.1-8 (Lambert and Millard, pp. 102-103); cf. W.L. Moran, 'Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood', *Bib* 52 (1971), pp. 51-61 (56).

³⁵. See H. Schwarzbaum, 'The Overcrowded Earth', *Numen* 4 (1957), pp. 59-74.

³⁶. Schwarzbaum, 'The Overcrowded Earth', p. 60.

against this background. First, the multiplication of humankind, though still forming the backdrop of the 'Sons of God' pericope, is not the cause of the introduction of death. Even though in the pericope a limitation of the human life-span (or, the onset of the death-dealing Flood (7.21-22) after only a brief period of respite—if that is what the 120 years of v. 3 points to) is decreed, the grounds for it are certainly not the over-population but the purely ethical grounds of the sin of the 'Sons of God', however that sin is understood precisely. The origin of death in the 'Primaeval History' has of course already occurred, even more evidently as a result of human wrongdoing. The mere multiplication of humankind, therefore, is no cause for catastrophe in Genesis 1–11 as it is in the Atrahasis epic;³⁷ sheer numbers and the clamour of teeming life are no threat to the cosmos of divine order—but sin is.

Secondly—and this must be tentative—it is possible that the Hebrew text of v. 3 contains a relic of the old idea of the clamour of humankind being the immediate cause of the Flood. The unparalleled conjunction **בְּשִׁנְיָם**, usually translated 'because' or 'in that', is a notorious difficulty.³⁸ Not only is **שֵׁנ** not attested in the Pentateuch as an abbreviation for **אֲשֶׁר**, and not only is the **נְיָ** difficult to make sense of, but the logic of the divine sentence is hard to decipher. We would expect, as Westermann observes, that the decree should be based on an act rather than on a state of affairs. Is it too far-fetched an explanation to suggest that **בְּשִׁנְיָם** was earlier the preposition **ב** with a noun cognate with the Assyrian root *šagāmu* 'to bellow, howl'?³⁹ The text would then have read: 'My spirit will not abide in humanity forever because of the clamour of flesh'.⁴⁰ If that was the case, it is clearly no longer the case, and the sentence, though not crystal-clear, is generally intelligible. It would be strangely appropriate if the 'clamour' of the Mesopotamian myth should have faded in the biblical text into a mere conjunction in a divine speech.

³⁷. Moran, 'Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood', p. 61, goes so far as to say, 'Gen. 9,1ff. (be fruitful and multiply) looks like a conscious rejection of the Atrahasis Epic'.

³⁸. See e.g. Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 507.

³⁹. W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–), I, pp. 112-13. I am grateful to Mr A.R. Millard for pointing out to me this possible connection.

⁴⁰. **הוּא** 'he', in the present text is admittedly unintelligible on this interpretation.

The multiplication motif, along with that of the clamour of humankind, could have provided a rationale for the sending of the Flood. Though the former motif survives, and the latter is possibly present in disguise, neither of them functions significantly in the pericope. And that is what is significant about these motifs in the context of the 'Primaeval History': the fundamental sin–punishment pattern⁴¹ has been stamped upon this doubtless ancient and variously recounted tale of the 'sons of God'.

3. *Relation to the Flood Narrative*

Enough has been said to show that the 'Sons of God' pericope is well anchored in its present position in the 'Primaeval History' by motif connections with preceding and following material.⁴² One specific point, however, needs to be dealt with separately in order to clarify the connection between the pericope and the succeeding narrative of the Flood. The question is whether the 120 years of 6.3 has a specific reference to the coming of the Flood. In other words, is the 120 year period intended as the normal life-span of humans, or as a period of respite before the Flood descends?

In favour of the view that 120 years represents the maximum span of life, it may be argued first, negatively, that the figure 120 has no necessary or symbolic connection with a period of grace or respite,⁴³ whereas, positively, there is some evidence that 120 years was considered the ideal lifetime. Moses lives the full 120 years (Deut. 31.2; 34.7), while

⁴¹. Whether seen as a developing 'spread of sin' (as von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 152-53) or as simply a portrayal of the variety of sinfulness (so Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 498).

⁴². As against, for example, Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 59 (it had nothing to do with the Flood originally, but was used by J to depict the antediluvian state of humankind); August Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (trans. Wm. B. Stevenson; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), I, pp. 230-31; S.R. Driver, *Genesis* (London: Methuen, 12th edn, 1926), p. 82; Skinner, *Genesis*, p. 141; Cassuto, *Genesis*, I, pp. 290-301.

⁴³. I have not had access to the article of Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher, 'Die Zahl 40 im Glauben, Brauch und Schrifttum der Semiten', *Abhandlungen der philologisch-historischen Classe der Königlich-sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften* (1909), mentioned by Kraeling, 'The Origin and Significance of Gen. 6:1-4', p. 201 n. 32, as containing evidence for the use of 40, which is 120 when trebled, as a period of respite in Hebrew and other Semitic literatures.

Herodotus reports that the Ethiopians habitually lived to the age of 120.⁴⁴ In Egypt, 110 years was apparently regarded as the ideal span of life;⁴⁵ Joseph and Joshua, significantly, each live to 110 (Gen. 50.22; Jos. 24.29). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is true, 80 years is regarded as a normal maximum lifetime (Ps. 90.10; cf. 2 Sam. 19.34-35). It is true, moreover, that the ages of the post-diluvians are not immediately reduced to 120 years;⁴⁶ but that could be accounted for as a mitigation of the penalty, just as the sentence 'in the day you eat of it you shall surely die' (2.17) only slowly begins to take effect. Some have indeed warned against imposing the Priestly system of decreasing ages arbitrarily on the Yahwist account,⁴⁷ while others have claimed to find here polemic against the Babylonian tradition (and, one might have thought, the Hebrew Priestly tradition) of *primaeval* kings who are said to have lived extraordinarily long lives.⁴⁸ In either case, we should ask how the redactor of J and P reconciled to himself the J figure of 120 years with the P data of the life-spans of the post-diluvians—unless perhaps the redactor no longer saw the 120 years as a life-span. No insuperable problem remains against the view that the 120 years is the limitation or bounding of life-span as punishment in kind (so to speak) of the bound-breaking by the sons of God.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, it seems more probable that in the present setting the threat of the withdrawal of the divine spirit refers to some event that is about to occur. Since, if we assume that the 'spirit' (רוח) of Yahweh is equivalent to his 'breath' (נשמה) breathed into the man at his creation (2.7),⁵⁰ the Flood brings about the destruction of everything in whose nostrils is 'the breath of the spirit of life' (נשמת־רוח חיים), the

⁴⁴. Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.23; in *Hist.* 1.163 he mentions a ruler of Tartessus who lived to 120.

⁴⁵. Cf. Jozef Vergote, *Joseph en Egypte: Genèse Chap. 37-50, à la lumière des études égyptologiques récentes* (Orientalia et Biblica Louvanensia, 3; Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1959), pp. 200-201.

⁴⁶. Given by P, while 6.1-4 is (possibly) J; though cf. Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 28 n. 83; Dexinger, *Götterersöhne*, pp. 56-57, reckons it to P.

⁴⁷. So Childs, *Myth and Reality*, p. 54.

⁴⁸. Kraeling, 'Origin and Significance', p. 201.

⁴⁹. So Westermann, *Genesis*, p. 508.

⁵⁰. So already Dillmann, *Genesis*, I, p. 236. For parallels between *jwʿ* and *hmvn*, cf. Job 32.8; 33.4.

relation of the decree of 6.3 to the destruction of 7.22 appears to be that of cause and effect. Of course, it may be argued that humankind is not in fact entirely destroyed and that the spirit of Yahweh remains in humanity even after the Flood; but it is an adequate rejoinder that 6.3 is in the nature of a threat, and it is just as appropriate to speak of the Flood as the destruction of humankind as to describe it as the salvation by God of the human race from total annihilation.⁵¹

Some further support for the view of the 120 years as a period of respite comes again from the Atrahasis epic, where periods of 1200 years intervene between the catastrophes that are climaxed by the Flood.⁵² The figures 120 and 1200 clearly originate from the Babylonian sexagesimal system,⁵³ and it is therefore possible that the prehistory of this item in the biblical pericope points to its significance from the beginning as a period of respite. The clinching argument seems to me to be the existence of the Atrahasis epic as a unified sequence of creation, multiplication of humankind, and Flood. Since the biblical 'Primaeval History' is built on the same pattern, it is plausible to regard the 120 years as always having had the same kind of function as the 1200 years of the Atrahasis epic, viz. a period of remission or respite.⁵⁴ If this admittedly somewhat distant parallel is not cogent enough, I would fall back on the position of B.S. Childs: 'Regardless of what the original meaning of the one hundred and twenty years was, in its present position one cannot help seeing some connexion with a period of grace before the coming catastrophe'.⁵⁵

⁵¹. The 'all' of 7.4, 21-22 is to be taken as seriously as the exceptions to the 'all' in 7.1-2, 23b.

⁵². 'Twelve hundred years had not passed when...' (*Atrahasis* I.352; II.i.1; Lambert and Millard, pp. 66-67, 72-73).

⁵³. Cf. Millard, 'A New Babylonian "Genesis" Story', p. 13.

⁵⁴. Millard, 'A New Babylonian "Genesis" Story', p. 12; W.G. Lambert, 'New Light on the Babylonian Flood', *JSS* 5 (1960), pp. 113-23. Similarly Kraeling argued that the pericope was designed from the beginning as the introduction to a flood story ('The Origin and Significance of Gen. 6:1-4', p. 195).

⁵⁵. Childs, *Myth and Reality*, p. 58.