An Explanation of the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2

By

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**Introduction**

There are a number of texts in the book of Genesis which are consistently being debated. Many debate the meaning of the “days” in the first chapter of Genesis, where Cain got his wife, and the meaning of the “us” and “our” in verse 26 of chapter 1. However, it seems to be agreed upon that the most debated passage in the book of Genesis is the interpretation of the phrase “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2. For some, the issue of who they were is one of great importance and emotional bias. This is due to the fact that for many Christians, the topic of angels has become something in which they are very interested because of the mystery that it entails. For most people, the debate over the “sons of God” is one of secondary importance. It is an issue where people can agree to disagree and there are no hard feelings. This is the right attitude to take because there are no foundational issues being questioned and no fundamentals of the faith are being debated. It is simply an interesting study which arouses our minds and challenges the heart to interpret God’s Word as best as is possible.

**The Context**

Genesis 6:1-2 states, “now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, of all whom they chose.” The issue that is to be discussed here is the identity of these “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2. What does it mean that they took wives for themselves? Before these issues can be discussed, a look at the context is necessary because the context must rule one’s interpretation of the text.

After the fall of Adam and Eve into sin and their exodus from the garden in chapter 3, the story of Cain and Abel appears. In chapter 4, the ungodliness of Cain and his descendants is contrasted with the godly Seth and his offspring who “began to call on the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26). Cain’s wickedness is demonstrated earlier in the murder of his brother Abel, after which, God put a mark on Cain so that everyone with whom he came into contact would know not to kill him. The fact that when Moses begins to record the line of Seth he states that then they “began to call on the name of the Lord,” implies that before this, with the line of Cain, the people did not call on the name of the Lord (defending Mosaic authorship is not the purpose of this paper so it will be assumed here). Their ungodliness is contrasted with the godliness of Seth and his descendants. Chapter 5 closes with a great man of God, Noah, and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Immediately following the genealogies of Seth and Cain, Moses then begins to talk about the time when “men began to multiply on the face of the earth.” It is in this context that he uses the controversial phrase, “sons of God.”

**Major Viewpoints**

The first position as to who these “sons of God” are is the “men of rank-common women view.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This view states that the “sons of God” are men of high rank, such as kings or lords. These powerful men took wives for themselves but they did not take women of nobility as would be expected, but married common women. They were lower class women. This view is simply summarized as pre-flood marriages between men of power and prestige, and women of a lower class.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second view, and the one which is more commonly accepted, is the Sethite line-Cainite line. The “sons of God” are simply the offspring from the godly line of Seth, while the “daughters of men” are women descended from the ungodly line of Cain. This view states that Genesis 6:2 refers to “pre-flood marriages between two distinct lines of human descent: the

godly line of Seth recorded in Genesis 4:25-5:32, and the ungodly line of Cain, recorded in Genesis 4:1-24.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The last view is the sinful angel-human women view. This view states that the “sons of God” were angels who sinned and that the “daughters of men” were just human women from no line in particular. These angels who left their proper dwelling place looked on these beautiful women and took them as wives. After which, they bore the children who would become the giants mentioned later in chapter 6.

**Historical Development of the Major Views**

Certain liberal scholars believe that determining who the “sons of God” are is somewhat irrelevant. They believe that Old Testament writer altered “an ancient myth, and with embarrassment, set it forth as a basis for God’s judgment in the form of a flood.”[[4]](#footnote-4) However, there is no reason to conclude that the author altered the truth of God. The only reason one would come to that conclusion is if he first denies any possibility of divine inspiration and inerrancy, as well as denying the possibility of super-natural events in human history. However, this view is not an evangelical option, and for sake of space, it will not be addressed in depth here. Simply stated, this view overlooks the overall trustworthiness of scripture.

The first major view is the men of rank-common women view. According to Dr. Renald Showers, this is a “very old view.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Dr. John Davis makes a similar statement as well. He states that this view is “suggested by both the Aramaic Targums and the Greek translation of the Symmachus.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The fact that this is an older view gives this position much credibility although it does not prove the position.

The second position, the Sethite-Cainite view, did not begin until the fourth century A.D.[[7]](#footnote-7) The fact that this view comes so late in history is significant. It is the most recent of the three major views. This does not mean that it is incorrect, but it does make it harder to prove its trustworthiness. As Dr. Showers points out, “*The* *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states that this view ‘that sees in these sons of God the Sethites and in the daughters of men the Cainites dates from the fourth century and is influenced by theological concern for maintaining the spirituality of the angels.’”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The third position, the sinful angel-common women view is, like the first position, also very old. R. Kent Hughes states that the “angel view of Genesis 6 is the oldest view. The earliest Jewish exegetes held this view as represented in such sources as I Enoch, the Book of Jubilees, the Septuagint, the writings of Philo and Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. This position was also held by the early Christian writers Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Not only they, but Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Lactantius also held this view. This view was also the historic understanding of the Jews all the way back to the second century B.C. and probably further.[[10]](#footnote-10) The fact that this is the oldest of the three views does not prove its truthfulness. Every belief, no matter how old or widespread, must come back to the Bible for examination. The Bible alone is the judge of truth. However, one should take seriously the historical positions of the church and early Jews since they were more closely connected to the historical and cultural context. To not take their opinions into account when studying such a controversial text would be a definite mistake.

**Pros and Cons of the First Two Views**

The first argument in favor of the men of rank-common women view is that it is very old and is supported textually in the Aramaic Targums and the Greek translation of the Symmachus. In those translations, the phrase “sons of God” is translated as “sons of kings.” Second, a ruler is sometimes referred to in the Bible with the Hebrew word *elohim* (Ex 21:6). Therefore, the sons of these rulers could be called “sons of god.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Third, kings were sometimes referred to in ancient near-eastern literature to be sons of deities, or sons of gods.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Though there are some strong points with this view, it seems that there are reasons to object to this view. First, there is no evidence that there would have been this type of kingship already established in the lines of Cain or Seth. Second, why would Moses not simply use the term for kings? There seems to be no reason that he would refer to kings in such an ambiguous way. Third, no author of scripture would have considered rulers to be deities or sons of deities.[[13]](#footnote-13) Fourth, this view must make a distinction between the daughters of men in verses 1 and 2. The “men” in verse one refers to all men in general and therefore the text is speaking of daughters in general. But in this view, the “daughters of men” in verse 2 does not refer to all daughters in general, but only those of a low class. Yet, these verses do not seem to make such a distinction.[[14]](#footnote-14) It should also be noted that this “interpretation has no longer any advocates.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Sethite-Cainite view also has some arguments in its favor. It should be noted, as Dr. Shower’s states, “most of the arguments offered by proponents of this view are not positive arguments in favor of their view. Instead, they are arguments against the third view (fallen angel view).”[[16]](#footnote-16) The first positive argument that is offered is that the lines of Cain and Seth are recorded just prior to Genesis 6. It is then concluded that those lines have a direct link to the marriages in Genesis 6. This argument seems to have much weight to it. R. Kent Hughes mentions that because of the surrounding context, “I reasoned, these verses describe the ‘sons of God’ (the godly Sethites) sizing up the ‘daughters of man’ (the beautiful but ungodly Cainite women) and marrying them, which of course promoted the Sethites degeneration. Nice and neat.”[[17]](#footnote-17) His initial belief was the Sethite-Cainite view because he believed it made sense from the surrounding context. However, he then goes on to state why he now rejects that view based on II Peter and Jude, as well as its early support from Jewish literature.

The second argument is that the phrase “sons of God” can refer to godly men. Since the people descended from Seth “began to call on the name of the Lord” in Genesis 4:26, it is assumed that they are the “sons of God.” In this view, the godly men of Seth married the ungodly daughters of Cain.

There are reasons to reject this view. First, the phrase “daughters of men” is generic and refers to daughters of mankind in general, not simply the daughters of Cain. Second, it should be remembered that this view did not come into view until the fourth century A.D.[[18]](#footnote-18) Although its late appearance does not disprove the Sethite-Cainite view, it does make it harder to defend. Last, this view does not take into account the relevant texts in II Peter and Jude.

**Defense of the Fallen Angel-Human Women View**

Before a defense of the last view is made, it should be recognized that “certain identification of the sons of God is impossible at this point.”[[19]](#footnote-19) There are many great men of God who stand on opposite sides in this debate in favor of either the fallen angel view or the Sethite-Cainite view. Advocates of the latter view are R. C. Sproul, Geerhardus Vos, Matthew Henry, John Calvin, Augustine, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome, and J. D. Davis. Those who would hold to the fallen angel view are John MacArthur, Renald Showers, John Whitcomb, Henry Morris, Steven Lawson, Merrill Unger, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Lactantius, and R. Kent Hughes. From this alone, it is clear that any person who claims to know for sure on this side of heaven is either sincerely misled or arrogant. However, this does not mean that one is unable to hold a position and defend it with a good degree of confidence, as long as he understands that error is possible and that humility is a must.

There are certain difficulties that come with the fallen-angel view. First, angels are immaterial beings who do not have sexual features. How could they have sexual relationships with human women? Second, Jesus say’s in Mark 12:25 that angels in heaven do not marry and here in Genesis 6:2 it states that they “took wives.” A third argument against the fallen angel view is that it is based on pagan mythology. In ancient pagan myths, deities had sexual relations with human women which produced half god-half human children.[[20]](#footnote-20)

It seems that the fallen angel view is sometimes just too unbelievable for human minds to accept. As John Calvin states in his commentary on Genesis 6, “the old story about angels having sexual intercourse with women must be refuted, for it is absurd.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Though this view seems “absurd” to many, it does have much biblical warrant.

First, it is true that angels are a-sexual and it is hard to understand how they could have relations with women. However, this is a secondary issue that should be addressed when one determines whether or not the “sons of God” are angels. Also, there are times when angels appear in the Bible and seem to have human bodies. This is true in Genesis 18 and 19. At the beginning of chapter 19, Lot pleads with the angels to stay at his home that night and in verse 2 he tells them that they could “wash” their “feet.” This assumes that these angelic beings had bodies. In Genesis 19:10 they are also referred to as “men.” It was not that they were literally men, but that they had human bodies. Furthermore, if one believes that it was possible for Jesus Christ to take on flesh, then it is completely possible, though beyond understanding, for an angel to take on flesh (not that there is a 1:1 ratio between the incarnation of Christ and angels taking on human bodies; there is definitely a unique way in which the Lord Jesus incarnated).

Second, although angels “in heaven” do not marry and are not “given in marriage,” in Genesis 6 the text is dealing with angels who “left their proper domain” (Jude 6). These angels were not “in heaven” and are therefore excluded from Jesus statement in Mark 12:25.

Third, instead of believing that the fallen angel view is *founded* upon pagan mythology, it is more possible that “pagan mythology is a perversion of the actual events that are recorded Genesis 6.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Is it not true that many civilizations that have an idea of a global flood simply have a distorted view of the Genesis flood? Yet evangelicals do not claim that Noah’s flood is simply a perversion of pagan myths. It is then reasonable that the pagan myths may be a distortion of the biblical event in Genesis 6.

Fourth, it is the most historic understanding of both the Jews and the early church (since this was expounded upon under the development of the major historical views, it will not be defended here).

Fifth, II Peter 2:4 and Jude 6-7 suggest that both Peter and Jude understood the “sons of God” to be fallen angels. II Peter 2:4 states that “if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment…” Peter then mentions the physical salvation of Noah and his family from the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the righteousness of Lot. It is reasonable then to conclude that Peter is assuming the fallen angel view. Also, in Jude 6-7, it reads that “the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, he has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” If this referred, as some believe it does, to the original fall of angels when Satan took “one third of the stars of heaven,” then it would have to be concluded that all fallen angels, including Satan, are bound in chains under darkness waiting for the judgment now; but the Bible is very clear that not all fallen angels are bound currently and that Satan also “walks about as a roaring lion.” This must refer to a separate sin of angels and the text implies it to be a sexual sin which would fit perfectly with Genesis 6. Only the angels who committed this sexual sin are bound in hell, *tartarus*, awaiting the judgment.

Sixth, the “sons of God” are not “godly Sethite choirboys.”[[23]](#footnote-23) They are lustful creatures who desire to fulfill their own passions with no restraint. They were not people who “called on the name of the Lord” as the Sethites were (Gen 4:26).

Last, the phrase “sons of God,” although sometimes refers to God’s people, is usually understood to be angels. Job 1:6 say’s that “there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.” It is not disputed that the reference here to “sons of God” refers to angels. Job 38:7 also uses the phrase to refer to angels. Although it is possible that the phrase refers to God’s people in general in Genesis 6, it is not probable. As Henry Morris argues, “there seems no reasonable doubt that, in so far as the language itself is concerned, the intent of the writer was to convey the thought of angels- fallen angels, no doubt, since they were acting in opposition to God’s will.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Conclusion**

It is concluded that the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2 were most likely angelic beings “commandeering the souls of men (demon-possession, in modern parlance), and these demonized men marrying the daughters of other men.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Those who find this position to be unbelievable or “absurd” as Calvin did, fail to recognize the power of super-natural spirits and bring their theology down to a more modern level of thinking.

With all the objections to the fallen angel view not holding up to biblical scrutiny, one should not be hesitant to embrace this view with confidence. It is the most common understanding of the phrase “sons of God,” it is the most ancient and widespread interpretation, and it is the most obvious explanation from II Peter 2:4 and Jude 6-7. Though many godly men may choose to take a different position, the fallen angel view has a solid biblical foundation and a well-grounded foundation throughout the history of Judaism and the church.

**Application in a Church Setting- Sermon Outline**

Introduction:

Temptation to sin has been a struggle for every follower of God since the fall of Adam. No matter what time period in which people lived or where they lived, temptation is always there. Some have tried to flee temptation by secluding themselves in the desert or in a cave. Others have mutilated themselves or deprived themselves of basic necessities. As we can see here in Genesis 6:1-8, sin grieves the heart of the Lord. Therefore, it is the goal of every Christian to stay away from every sin as best as he can.

I. The Depravity of Man (6:1-2, 5)

A. Lust of the eyes (they saw their beauty)

B. Lust of the flesh (they took wives of all whom they chose; without restraint)

--A brief defense of the fallen angel view and explanation of the other views.

II. The Anger of God (6:3, 6-7)

A. Demonstrated in shortening man’s life

B. Demonstrated in destroying the earth

III. The Grace of God (6:8)

A. Given to those with faith (Hebrews 11:7)

B. Exhibited in Obedience (Noah obeyed in building the ark)

Conclusion:

As Christians, we must never give in to the lust of the flesh or the lust of the eyes. The angels who took wives and committed sexual sin are now in *tartarus*, the deepest pit of hell, in chains, and waiting the judgment of God (II Peter 2:4). Not only are they in chains, but they are in “everlasting chains under darkness” waiting for the day of judgment (Jude 6). When these angels sinned, God did not give them the chance for repentance and forgiveness. But for sinners today who do not have the grace of God, today can be the day of salvation. Today, if you will turn to Christ as Lord and Savior, you can find grace in the eyes of God. The angels who sinned have no salvation. They have no Savior. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Now, “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

For those of you here today who are already saved by the grace of God, are you doing your best to stay away from sin? Are you doing everything you can to be pleasing to God or are you content to grieve the heart of God? Will you glory in the grace of God towards you, which, unlike the angels who sinned in Genesis 6:2, is always available? God’s grace is infinite and He is offering it to all who will go to Him in faith. Will you do that today?

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