The Identity of the Sons of God in Genesis 6:

A Comparison of the Angelic and Line of Seth Viewpoints

By

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After the fall of Adam but before the flood of the earth there is an interesting story in Genesis 6:1-4 about a group known as the sons of God. These sons of God, or *bene ha’elohim*, are spoken of as intermarrying with another group, known as the daughters of man. The meaning of this passage has been debated since even before the time of Christianity. In fact some have called it a *crux interpretum*,¹ or a passage whose meaning has been so obscured by time that its meaning is either very difficult or impossible to truly discern.

Two views put forth for the identity of the sons of God could be called the angelic view and the line of Seth view.² The angelic view states that fallen angels took human women and intermarried with them, thus creating hybrid angelic and human creatures. The line of Seth view says that the godly line that descended from Seth intermingled with the fallen line of Cain and was thus corrupted.

This paper will seek to show that an angelic explanation is not needed to interpret Genesis 6:1-4 and that the line of Seth view is the most plausible explanation. In order to accomplish this goal we will seek to briefly outline the context surrounding the passage in question. We will answer the common objections against the line of Seth view as well as addressing the theological issues that can stem from the angelic viewpoint of our passage. In so doing this paper will also examine the issues relating to the nature of angels and why the angelic view may cause more problems than it answers.

In order to properly interpret the identity of the sons of God, it is important to look at the context surrounding Genesis 6:1-4. This story occurs early in the Genesis narrative in a time

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referred to as “Primeval History.” The author of Genesis is recalling for his audience the story of the covenant, starting with the creation of the world and the first human beings. He then traces this history all the way to the chosen people that were brought forth by Abraham, whose story begins in chapter 12.

A pattern is evident in the structure of the first few chapters of Genesis, which purpose is to distinguish the chosen people from all other races on earth. Within this pattern is a cycle of men overstepping their bounds, thus bringing judgment on themselves, starting from the Garden of Eden all the way to the tower of Babel. The overstepping and judgment in chapter 4 of Genesis illustrates the consequences effecting human relations after the fall. Cain kills Abel and is thus banished from the people’s presence. The narrative then follows with a genealogy of Cain’s descendants and the continued sin of his line. Seth is introduced in verse 25 of chapter 4 as the new head of the chosen people. It is important to note that in verse 26 Enos is born to him and the Bible proclaims “then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.” This verse distinguishes the line of Seth from the aberrant line of Cain.

Verse 26 of Chapter 4 alluded to Enos and Chapter 5 then goes into detail about Seth’s line. The genealogy of Enos is completed with foreshadowing of a new leader for the people of God, Noah. Chapters 6-10 give us the individual story of Noah. After Noah it shows another break in the people of God between Noah’s three sons and the Tower of Babel incident. Just as before it then continues the genealogy of the faithful and ends with an introduction to Abram.

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Chapter 12 gives us the story of Abraham who is the father of the chosen people. This pattern of separating the Godly people from the ungodly, giving a genealogical list of the righteous line that foreshadows the next hero of the narrative, and then the telling of that persons story repeats throughout the first few chapters in Genesis.

When seen in the context of the entire book, the story of the sons of God in Chapter 6 is not meant to be a separate story unto itself. Rather, it is an introduction to the story of Noah. The author ends his genealogy of chapter 5 with Noah and then provides us a backdrop to Noah’s story in chapter 6:1-7 in order to give us contextual information to the drama that is about to take place.

We see that the information presented is a historical recounting of the journey from Adam to Abram. This is not a cosmology or an explanation of angelology, but a recounting of the beginning of the covenant people. The Hebrew term translated angel, *malak*,⁵ is used multiple times in Moses’ writings, but we do not see it introduced until chapter 16 of Genesis. Surely if angels were in view in 6:1-4 *malak* would be available for the author to explain the nature of the beings in focus. The term “sons of God” is never again quoted in the Pentateuch. The introduction of angels into this context seems out of place and unnecessary. This is especially true because it is a backdrop to the judgment poured out on mankind. Fockner concludes, “Because of the way the narrative is designed from Genesis 4 to Genesis 10, the reader expects the passage to deal with the two lines of humanity and the vanishing of one of them. ‘Sons of God’ is a term which here describes human, loyal followers of God.”⁶

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Now that we have seen the overall placement of the passage in the Torah, we can now focus on its immediate context. Genesis 6:1 starts off with mankind in the introduction “when men began to multiply on the face of the earth.” Verse 2 and 3 records the incident of the sons of God looking at the daughters of men and God proclaims “My Spirit will not always strive with man.” Verse 4 recounts the progeny of the union. The nature of these children coincides with the interpretation of their parentage. Any understanding of who they are is dependent upon the nature of the sons of God. Verse 5 then places the guilt of the situation back on to mankind when it says “The wickedness of man was great on the earth.” Likewise, in verse 6 and 7 God declares, “it repented the LORD that He had made man” and “I will destroy man who I have created.” This destruction also carried on to all those that man had dominion over “the beasts, creeping things, and the fowls of the air.”

Nowhere in this narrative is there a mention of judgment against angelic beings. The entire onus is on man and his moral failings. In fact the judgment on man alone is so clear that even those that take a mythic view of the text can only explain the lack of angelic judgment as “irony” on God’s part. The daughters of men are presented here as the passive participants in this affair. The sons of God are the ones that “saw that they were fair” and lusted after them in a linguistic style that mirrors the temptation of Eve in the Garden. God is judging man, and all he has rule over because of man’s sinful desires. This leads us to our hero in verse 8, “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” The godly line of the chosen people was corrupted. In fact, all of mankind was destined for the judgment of God, except for Noah. The inclusion of Genesis 1:1-4 is not to inform us of a supernatural comingling. Rather, it tells us of the failure of man and

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God’s need to purge the earth, while maintaining his protection on the faithful. Noah trusted God and became the forerunner to his descendent Abraham, who carried the tradition of the covenant people that is being followed in the Genesis narrative.

Given this information it would appear that the view of the sons of God in Genesis 6 as those from the line of Seth would most readily fit the context. In fact this interpretation has a very old historical witness. An early example of rejecting an angelic interpretation is from the Jewish rabbi Simeon bar Yochai, who called the mixture of angelic and earthly people as heresy. Wright notes that the 1st century AD rabbi “began a campaign to condemn anyone who dared to call the bene elohim angels.”\(^9\) The second to third century Christian historian Sextus Julius Africanus says of Genesis 6:1-4:

> “the descendants of Seth are called the sons of God on account of the righteous men and patriarchs who have sprung from him, even down to the Savior Himself; but that the descendants of Cain are named the seed of men, as having nothing divine in them, on account of the wickedness of their race and the inequality of their nature, being a mixed people, and having stirred the indignation of God.”\(^10\)

Perhaps the most famous early Christian to hold this view is St Augustine, who comments that, “the good was abandoned by the sons of God . . . and when they were captivated by the daughters of men, they adopted the manners of the earthly to win them as their brides, and forsook the godly ways they had followed in their own holy society.”\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Archie Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits*, (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 64.


While there are many other writers who take the Angelic view of the text, these examples show that the line of Seth view has long been an accepted interpretation. Some of commentators who hold the angelic view use information from the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch. This non-canonical book, which was supposedly written by the great-grandfather of Noah, outlines a complex angelology that fills in the gaps of Genesis 6. Because of the limited information of the Genesis text, the acceptance or dismissal of 1 Enoch becomes a crucial piece in how one interprets the sons of God. As shown above, without the additional information of 1 Enoch, there is no compelling reason to insert angels into the context.

The reason that some Christians use the information of a non-canonical book is because of its use in Jude 14-15. Jude, in warning Christians about false teachers, relates to us many examples of those who fell away and perished. The author writes in Jude 14-15:

“It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying,

‘Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.”

This is an almost direct quote of 1 Enoch 1:9. There may also be an indirect allusion to 1 Enoch 45:2 in Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4 where it talks about those angels who are bound until judgment day.

There are a few reasons why using these passages to support angels as the sons of God in Genesis 6 is problematic. First and foremost is that the Book of Enoch is a non-canonical book that is not placed in the Sacred Scriptures. Biblical authors frequently drew upon other sources to
highlight truth that is present even to the lost world. The fact that an apostle quotes another work does not automatically make the entire work inspired Scripture. Titus 1:12 contains a quote from the pagan Epimenides.\(^{\text{12}}\) Paul appeals to the Athenians by quoting their own poet, Aratus.\(^{\text{13}}\) Even the great proverb in 1 Corinthians 15:33, “Bad company corrupts good morals,” appears to be a quote from Menander.\(^{\text{14}}\) Just because these authors are quoted as having a piece of the truth correct does not mean that the Apostles agree with everything that was contained in their writings.

Secondly, those passages that are quoted from Enoch do not deal with Genesis 6. One would have to extend beyond the simple quotations the Biblical authors use in the inspired scripture into the parts of the book that are not quoted in order to make any connection to the sons of God. It would be just as dangerous to make connections through the pagan Aratus’ writings even a sentence after Paul’s quotation of him, as it would be to attribute truth to the other portions of the non-inspired book of Enoch. Augustine proclaims that “For though there is some truth in these apocryphal writings, yet they contain so many false statements, that they have no canonical authority.”\(^{\text{15}}\)

The last reason why Enoch does not hinder the view of sons of God as not being angels is because those books that quote parts of Enoch directly contradict other parts of it. In 1 Enoch 9:1-10 it was Michael who brought the accusation of judgment against the fallen angels. This is contradicted by Peter when he says “Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing accusation against them before the Lord” (2 Peter 2:11). Also Jude 9 states


\(^{\text{15}}\) Dods, 463.
“Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee.” In the two inspired books of scripture that do quote Enoch they warn us that there are details that are in error. There is no reason to assume truthfulness to the Enoch story apart from that which is quoted in scripture. Those sections which are quoted are not directly related to Genesis 6:1-4 and thus are not appropriate for a contextually Biblical interpretation of the passage.

Another argument for the angelic view of the sons of God comes from the terms use in other places in the Old Testament. While the New Testament uses the term “sons of God” extensively it is rarely placed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The only other clear use of bene ha’elohim is in the book of Job. Job 1:6 and 2:1 both use the term to reference angelic beings that have come to gather before God. Satan is among them and lays out the accusation that will be the catalyst for the rest of the book of Job.

While this is another example of the term in question from Genesis 6, we must be careful to examine each use of the term within their respective contexts. Job and Genesis are not written by the same authors. While we can surmise a common cultural understanding between the two writers in their use of the term, it is shaky ground at best. Simply because bene ha’elohim is used in Job to refer to angelic beings, does not necessitate that the term must always mean angelic beings. Even in English many terms have multiple definitions depending on their use. Proper hermeneutics requires that the use of a word is determined by the context wherein the term is placed.

The context of both books is quite different. Job deals with the age old philosophical problem of theodicy. Genesis traces the line of the covenant people from the beginning of the

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world to their founding as a distinct race chosen by God. Job begins in heaven and concludes with God displaying his majesty above all creation. Genesis begins with the creation of the world and mankind and ends with the chosen people living among the Egyptians. The former has no mention of the covenant promise and thus has a universal feel, with Job becoming an everyman who suffers for doing right. The latter is distinctly focused on the covenant bloodline of Abraham. While Job focuses on heavenly mysteries, Genesis portrays earthly blessing and promise.

Clearly the purpose of each book is distinct. The uses of *bene ha’elohim* in Job and Genesis 6 are so dissimilar to each other that any definitive connection between them cannot be warranted from their context. The use of either book to interpret the other begs the question as to which text should take precedence over the other. Because of the limited occurrence of *bene ha’elohim* in the Hebrew Scriptures there is simply not enough evidence on how to interpret the terms common use by itself. We must rely on the context of each passage individually.

Another objection to the line of Seth view is the use of the term *nephilim*, usually translated giants, not only in Genesis 6 but also after the flood such as in Numbers 13. *Nephilim* itself is a seldom used word in the Hebrew Scriptures. Proponents of the Angelic seed view usually claim that the offspring of the Angels and humans became giants because of their mixed lineage. This can lead to a circular argument that assumes a supernatural origin to the giants and then uses that as evidence of angelic parentage.

The main thrust of the Angelic view is that the flood was caused partly in order to judge the world and those who produced such offspring. The very presence of those called *nephilim* in Numbers 13, however, directly contradicts that claim. Unless God failed to destroy all of the
offspring or allowed such intermingling after the flood and no longer thought it was worthy of any sort of divine judgment, then this assumption becomes untenable.

These supposed mysteries vanish when the line of Seth view is understood in passages such as Numbers 13. Augustine states it plainly, “There is therefore no doubt that, according to the Hebrew and Christian canonical Scriptures, there were many giants before the deluge, and that these were citizens of the earthly society of men, and that the sons of God, who were according to the flesh the sons of Seth, sunk into this community when they forsook righteousness.”17 The presence of people with a large stature does not necessitate supernatural intercourse with angelic creatures. Even today there are many who are taller than average, and these genes are also passed down from parent to child.

The narrative of Genesis 6:1-4 does not fit the Angelic beings view but the following of a covenant people. Furthermore, the main objections to the line of Seth view are easily answered. However, there are huge problems with the Angelic intermarriage interpretation. First, there is the problem of genetics. There is nothing to lead us to assume that angels are genetically able to come into union, let alone reproduce, with human beings. In fact, there is nothing that tells us that angels have any sort of genetic makeup at all. The issue is not just to do with whether or not Angelic beings have the anatomical necessities for copulation, but also if they were designed by God to be able to produce offspring with a kind of creature separate from themselves.

To further complicate the matter there is the problem of the words of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 22 the religious sects of the day sought to trap Jesus in a question about a woman widowed multiple times and her marital status in the life to come. After rebuking them he says in

17Dods, 463.
verse 30 “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” God has created each of the angels that exist and thus there is no need of propagation among themselves, let alone among humans. For God to design such beings with the ability for sexual intercourse yet no godly function for it in an un-fallen state would be a contradiction to His statement on creation that “it was good.” Jesus’ statement is clear, just as we will not have marriage and produce further offspring in heaven, neither do the Angels perform such activities.

Lastly, as stated at the beginning of this paper, the contextual setting around Genesis 6:1-4 does not necessitate an Angelic interpretation and actually fits better in the narrative of tracing the godly line of Seth. Erickson comments that “It is necessary to conclude that there simply is not enough evidence to justify this passage as a source of information about angels. This should not be considered a case of ‘evangelical demythologizing’ . . . it is simply a matter of remaining skeptical in the face of insufficient evidence.” Or put another way, if there is no compelling reason for an Angelic view then why insert them into the text? I believe it goes further than a lack of evidence for one view however, and that there is good evidence for the line of the covenant people. Fockner supports this when he says of the line of Seth view that, “such an interpretation of the passage makes sense of every feature of the text.”

This paper has outlined the context around Genesis 6:1-4 in order to see the broader narrative picture of the “sons of God” as the godly line of Seth. It has looked at the most common objections put forth by those who hold to an Angelic viewpoint of the “sons of God” and has shown them to not be insurmountable issues to overcome. And this paper has raised some issues relating to the nature of angels, the testimony of scripture and a lack of evidence for

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19 Fockner, 456.
the opposing viewpoint. This has shown that a supernatural explanation is not needed for an interpretation of the passage and that the line of Seth view is the most plausible explanation.

Genesis 6:1-4 may appear to be a trivial topic to many but the lessons learned are immense. Not just is it a great tool for honing in one’s interpretive principles and ability, but also in the spiritual ramifications of its interpretation. While it is hard to see life application from Angelic human hybrids roaming the earth, it is easy to see the danger of the people of God mixing with the world. The salt had lost its savor and thus “every intention of the thoughts of [mankind’s] heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Over and over again the moral responsibility of the text points to mankind’s failings, thus warranting the judgment of a holy God. This failing began not because of the ungodly, but because “the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive” (Genesis 6:2). The people of God succumbed to a temptation that mirrors the temptation of Eve. Instead of being a reason for God’s mercy upon the world they indulged in pleasures and were a reason for God’s condemnation instead. Even in this intense wickedness however, “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8). And so may we through God’s mercy.

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20 Eslinger, 66.
Bibliography


