

Who were the Sons of God in Genesis 6:2, 4?
From Genesis Syllabus by Dr. James Rosscup

There are three main views that seek to explain the “sons of God.” Briefly explained they are:

1. They were sons of the magnates of great ones who were rulers at that time. These chose wives from among the daughters of men (the low-born). This view is expounded in detail by Meredith Kline (*The Westminster Journal*, 1962, pp. 187-204; cf. Also E. G. Kraeling, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1947, pp. 193-208).
2. They were angels that fell from their high heavenly estate, became enticed by women on earth, and co-habited with them. This view dates back as early as the Septuagint, at least (ca. 250 B.C.), where the Greek translation of the O.T. has manuscripts differing between the reading “sons of God” (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ) and “angels of God” (οἱ ἀγγελοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ). Two apocryphal books lend support by representing angelic beings as having cohabitation with earthly females. They are *The Book of Enoch* and *Minor Genesis* (cf. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the O.T.*). In addition, the apocryphal *Book of Tobit* (vi. 15) also reveals how demoniacs have regard for human women. The angel view of Genesis 6 gained exponents in the first century and later in Philo, Josephus, most rabbinical authors, and church fathers such as Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian and Ambrose). However, it fell into disrepute among Christian interpreters from the 4th - 18th centuries (cf. Lange, I, 284). In modern times, it has been embraced by those who consider the Genesis account mythical, but also by many conservative, Bible believing scholars who discountenance mythological views. Recent writers subscribing to it include such men as: Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, pp. 45-52; A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, p. 94; G. H. Pember, *Earth's Earliest Ages*, pp. 205-213; Kenneth S. Wuest, *First Peter in the Greek New Testament*, (on 3:19ff).
3. They were men of the godly Sethite line who inter-married with women of the ungodly Cainite line. This view also appeared early, dating back to at least Chrysostom (Born A.D. 347), Cyril of Alexandria, Theodoret, and Augustine. Most interpreters since the 4th century, outside the mythical school, have accepted it. More recently it has been the conviction of such men as: Lange, (I, 280-284), Jamieson-Fausset-Brown (I, 87-90); Keil (I, 127-140); Leupold (I, 257-263); J. Sidlow Baxter, *Studies in Problem Texts*, a whole chapter devoted to it; and John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Appendix A, pp. 243-249. Keil, Murray and Baxter are especially helpful.

This writer (Rosscup) believes that this view gives the true meaning of the “Sons of God.” Arguments for the angelic view and the line of Seth view are below in more detail.

The Angelic View

1. The phrase “*sons of God*” in this exact technical Hebrew construction (vv. 2, 4) always refers to angels in the three other places where the O.T. uses it. So it must mean angels here. Job uses it the three times in the same plural form (1:6; 2:1; 38:7). Daniel 3:25 has the expression, but in the singular form.

2. Direct antithesis between “*sons of God*” and “*daughters of men*” argues for regarding the former as non-human.

3. Judgment so extraordinary as the great flood is more explainable on the basis of angelic sin than other human sin.

The Sethite-Cainite View

1. This is true, but the essential idea of the term is very closely paralleled by other O.T. expressions which refer unmistakably to men. Note Deut. 14:1, “*ye are the sons of the Lord your God;*” Psalm 82:6, “*ye are the sons of the most high;*” Hosea 1:10, “*ye (Israel) are the sons of the living God.*” Also see Exodus 4:22-23; Deut. 32:5-6; Psalm 73:15; Malachi 1:6.

Also, while the construction does refer to angels in Job, it is used of good angels, not angels known to have fallen at any time.

2. On the surface this may appear veiled, but the fact that the O.T. in other places uses similar expressions to mean only men dulls the point of the argument (cf. Keil, I, 130-131)

Judges 20:1-2 speaks of all the tribes of Israel assembled to war against Benjamin. Yet, the distinction between all Israel and Benjamin, when properly understood, does not exclude Benjamites from classification as Israelites. Jeremiah 32:20 speaks of God as working miracles “*in Israel among men.*” The portion “among men” does not remove Israelites from the category of men. Rather, the expression distinguishes those in Israel (men) from other men.

Sons of God, then, can be themselves men (the Sethite or godly line of Genesis 4), yet be referred to as distinct from daughters of men. Sinful departure from God occurred among the majority of even the earlier godly line, and all perished in the flood except Noah and seven others. Outward connection as “sons of God,” part of the godly line recognized by God, no more meant that they were actually saved than outward connection of Israelites among the “sons of the Most High” meant that they were genuinely saved. These “sons of God,” like many unsaved Israelites later, perished.

3. Yet the context of Genesis 6 itself emphasizes the sin of men and the judgment of men (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, etc.). Murray says: “*It is significant that the judgement has respect to man alone. If the sons of God were angels we should expect some intimation of the judgement executed upon them. The sons of God were the initiators of this travesty - - ‘they saw . . . they took’. If they were angels the severest penalty would have been inflicted upon them. But the narrative has in view only the judgement upon men To say the least, we are led to suspect that only mankind was involved in the wrong*” (pp. 245-246)

4. Attempts by the devil to defile the seed of the woman is easy to expect after the statement of Genesis 3:15. This can include various methods, even a strategy involving the extraordinary cohabitation of angels with women.

5. The “*giants*” (nephilim) mighty ones) of v. 4 seem to have been the offspring of these marriages. Such monstrosities call for some extraordinary explanation, such as angelic being cohabiting with women.

6. The angel view can explain N.T. passages which say that angels do not marry (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35-36). See Unger.

A. Angels that Jesus refers to are angels “in heaven” (Mt. 22:30). However, angels that came down to earth might have become involved in this sin.

B. Angels are deathless and so have no need to perpetuate their own species. However, they might seek to produce another species, through women.

C. Angels are spoken of in only one gender (masculine). They have no possibility of a marriage union among their own kind, and so do not have one. But this does not preclude the possibilities of a relationship with human beings.

4. Satan does make several attempts to defile the seed, but all other attempts in Scripture are by men, not angels. It is more likely that men be involved here also.

Secondly, the O.T. frequently warns against intermarriage of God’s covenant people with outsiders (Exodus 34:16) or shows the carefulness of some to marry within their own people (Gen. 24; 27:46; 28:1 etc.).

Thirdly, Scripture nowhere warns women against sexual union with angels - - a rather strange silence if indeed angels were illicitly involved in pre-flood days and with other wicked angels might be lured by women later.

5. The nephilim were on earth before and after, not simply after the marriages (vs. 4; cf. Murray).

Secondly, the word does not necessarily mean giants.

Thirdly, Num. 13:33 uses the term nephilim twice and identifies these as sons of human parents. The human father is Anak (13:22, 28, 33). If nephilim denotes offspring of human parents in Numbers 13:33, why not in Genesis 6:4?

Fourth, the sons of Anak (Anakim) were very tall people and are mentioned in Numbers 13:22f in Hebron, Negev. Canaanites in Deut. 1:28; 2:10,11, 21; 92. Listed as certain Canaanites in Joshua 15:13,14,; 21:11 & Judges 1:20. Caleb defeated those in Hebron. Goliath was a possible descendant of these Anakim.

While such angelic cohabitation is not put outside the realm of possibility, it does not appear to have been the case. The reasoning about the possibility are, after all, quite conjectural and do not really prove the viewpoint or give any edge to it.

In the passages referred to, the contrast is the nature of the current human body which does enter into marriage and the resurrection body which will not enter into marriage but instead be like the angels. The angelic view of Genesis 6:2,4 does not give any explanation to these N.T. passages.

7. Both 2 Peter 2:4-5 and Jude 6-7 appear to link angels with sexual perversion in the days of Noah.

7. These passages do not link angels with sexual perversion.

2 Peter 2:4-5. Three different cases of sin and judgment are marked off consecutively. It is not the same type of sin in each case that links the three cases, but rather the fact that in each case there was sin and a consequence of judgement. V. 4 - First, sin among the angels (which could have been in eternity past, even before Genesis 1:1). V. 5 - Secondly sin in Noah's day. V. 6 - Thirdly, sin in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Jude 6-7 Here, again, there are three cases of sin and the judgment that is inevitable because of it. These cases are: V. 5 - Israelites, saved out of Egyptian bondage, did not believe God and so were destroyed in judgement. V. 6 - Angels did not keep their original state (i.e., as worshipers who recognized the sovereign authority of God). Rather, they aspired beyond the bounds set for them by God, seeking a "limitless dominion" (Lange, I, 283). The statement means that they defected from the ranks of their own divinely established habitation. The statement does not mean that they left their estate as angels and entered into cohabitation with women on earth.

Some use the "even as" (v. 7) to construe the statement as making a comparison in which the sin of the angels in v. 6 is the same type sin as that of Sodom and Gomorrah, gross immorality, or going after strange flesh. They use it as a proof in v. 7, translated "as these" (NASB), is masculine in gender and must refer back to angels (ἀγγέλους) in v. 6 which are also masculine. They insist that this is a necessity because of the masculine gender. But, in answer to this, the gender of the pronoun τούτοις should be clarified. This form, a dative plural, is not unequivocally masculine. In the Greek, the form for the masculine and the neuter is the same. τούτοις can be neuter and refer back to the more immediate Sodom. If so, the meaning would be as follows: The angels that sinned are kept for judgment (v. 6) just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these (as S. & G) indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, and are reserved for judgement.

Or, if τούτοις should be taken as masculine, it is grammatically possible for it to refer back to the ungodly men, ἄνθρωποι, of v. 4. This can be the case just as the masculine pronoun οὗτοι ("these") in vv. 8ff refers all the way back to the men of v. 4. For example, there are the οὗτοι ("these"), v. 10; οὗτοι ("them"), v. 11; αὐτοῖς ("these"), v. 12; τούτοις ("these"), v. 14; οὗτοι ("these"), vv. 16, 19.

In the later possibility, the big point in verse 3, the necessity of contending for the faith, is followed in vv. 4-19 by an emphasis upon the men who deny Jesus Christ. The main subject is not Israelites, angels, or Sodom and Gomorrah, but these ungodly persons (masculine in v. 4 and masculine all through the rest of the epistle). The examples of sin and judgement in vv. 5-7 are brought in simply as cases in point of judgment that comes upon those who sin. (Cf. Keil on Genesis, I, 133, as he discusses the Jude passage in connection with Genesis 6:2ff).

2 Peter 2 and Jude 6,7 do not really prove the angel view in Genesis 6. There are other possibilities of interpretation here in line with evidence for Sethite-Cainite explanation of Genesis 6

Additional:

8. Everything reproduces after its own kind - Genesis 1:12, 21; 24, 25. Each kind of flesh is different including the spiritual body - 1 Cor. 15:39f.

Therefore a hybrid human / angel would be against this basic design. The angelic view requires a viable and reproducing hybrid between two different kinds - human and angel. This also has theological implications since man can be redeemed and fallen angels cannot. What would be the redeemable state of such a hybrid?

Conclusion.

Dr. Rosscup believes that the Sethite-Cainite explanation in Genesis 6 fits the flow of the context best. In a passage where a question such as this occurs, it is important to integrate carefully with the emphasis that leads into that particular context. Here, chapter four has emphasized the Cainite (ungodly) line and chapter five the Sethite (godly) line. The merging of the two in chapter six is quite natural. A consideration like that use of “sons of God” in Job to mean angels cannot offset this since it can be answered by pointing to a number of similar expressions that refer to men. Even the argument using Jude 6-7 seems to be ruled out by the series of pronouns as Jude uses them. It is interesting that while some Greek scholars think Jude’s words favor the angel view in Genesis 6, Hebrew scholars like Keil and Leupold, in their own specialized territory in Genesis 6, argue for men.

Additional Addendum from Pastor Scott L. Harris that was in response to an article sent to him arguing for the demon/human woman view.

I looked over the article you had linked. As I said in class, those who believe the “Sons of God” in Genesis 6 are angels are in good company since, as the author pointed out, there is a long list of theologians and Bible scholars that line up with that view including John MacArthur. In addition, it makes for exciting preaching. I don’t attack those who believe it that way, but neither do I find their arguments convincing to believe it. The author (not listed) does a better job than most, and I appreciate that he notes in several statements that he recognizes there is a lot of speculation.

The major objections I have are as follows - not in order of importance

1) Genesis and Job have different authors, so it is not correct to assume that both authors use a phrase, in this case, “*sons of God*,” in the same way with the exact same meaning. They could be doing so and it is proper to refer to Job when trying to understand Genesis, but it would also be appropriate to use similar phrasing by other authors to gain insight into possible meanings (as the author points out in Psalm 29:1; 89:6. Add in Psalm 82:6 - “sons of the Most High)

2) Genesis 1 repeats multiple times that each kind of plant and animal is “after their kind.” If two animals can reproduce offspring, then they are after the same kind. Two different kinds do not reproduce. Related to this, in 1 Corinthians 15:39-49 Paul is explaining the radical difference in the future resurrection body, and as part of that discussion he makes it clear there are different types of physical flesh and that a natural body is different from a spiritual body. That must be part of the discussion of what Jesus says in Matthew 22:30 about the angels neither marrying or being given in marriage.

3) If the purpose of the flood was to destroy the Nephilim - the hybrid offspring of fallen angels and human women - then it did not work since Genesis 6:4 specifically states "*The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward,*" and the report of the spies on the land of Canaan in Numbers 13:33 states, "*There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.*" The author does not explain why this would be a different "species" since the exact same word is used written by the same author. He also does not explain his assumption that humans designated with this term were not "Giant in size" but were "in strength, intelligence and ability." The description in Numbers 13:33 relating the sons of Anak to be part of the Nephilim gives us indication these people were giants since included among them were Goliath and his brothers.

4) Related to 3, the author states "*Without the fact of their being two different species angelic and human co- mingling there can be no plausible explanation of God's severe judgment,*" and that after citing Genesis 6:5 & 13 just prior. Does the author think that man could not be so evil as described unless they were hybrid angel-men? If so, then it would be more than Noah that would have to have a pure genetic line. His wife's line would have to be pure in order to have sons whose genetic line is pure, and the wives of those sons would also have to be pure, which would require their parents' lines to also be pure genetically. Yet siblings of Noah, of Noah's wife and of their daughter's-in-law were also destroyed in the flood. Noah was spared because he found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:5) and had a character marked by being righteous and blameless (Genesis 6:9) in his generation. This is not a reference to having a pure human genetic line instead of one mixed with angelic genes (if such were even possible).

He seeks to tie 2 Peter 2:4 as having to have occurred at the flood, but the flow of that passage is different events and different times: 1) Judgment of sinning angels, 2) Judgment of the ancient world by a flood during the days of Noah, 3) Judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah. Since the later two are at very different time periods, why the insistence the first happens concurrent with the second? He can make a better case from Jude 6-7 that the angels sinned in like manner as the men of Sodom (actually the reverse), but the emphasis in that section of the passage is God's punishment of sin, not the similarity of the particular sins (are the men in verse 8 committing the same particular sin as those of Sodom and Gomorrah?).

The author has a better explanation of trying to tie in a demonic element by demons inhabiting humans and that somehow being a corrupting influence.