

Who Are the Sons of God? Understanding Genesis 6:1–4

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The “sons of God” (Hebrew *benê hā’ēlōhîm*) are one of the most mysterious groups in Scripture. They appear suddenly, without explanation, and the narrator assumes that his audience will recognize them. For us today, their identity is unclear. Over the centuries, scholars have suggested several possibilities. While these interpretations differ, it’s important to note that none of them ultimately changes the message of Genesis 6: humanity was crossing boundaries God had set, and sin was spreading.

Three Major Interpretations

1. Angels

The oldest interpretation, dating back to Jewish writings like *1 Enoch* (2nd century B.C.), sees the “sons of God” as angels who left their proper place and married human women. The Hebrew phrase *benê hā’ēlōhîm* is understood here as referring to divine beings. Their unions with human women produced “men of renown” whose evil required God’s judgment. Early Christian writers, including those in the East up to the 3rd century and Latin authors like Ambrose, also supported this view.

Supporters point out that elsewhere in the Old Testament, “sons of God” can refer to heavenly beings (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps 29:1). Moreover, some ancient cultures, like the Canaanites, believed celestial beings married humans, and Genesis may be correcting this mistaken idea, showing that these were fallen angels, not gods.

However, this interpretation has challenges. Angels, as spiritual beings, do not have sexual relations (Matt 22:30), and the narrative of Genesis 6 focuses on human sin, not angelic sin. Also, procreation is a gift given to humans and animals, not angels (Gen 1:22, 28). So while this view is interesting, it’s not the only (or even the strongest) way to understand the passage.

2. Human Rulers or Judges

Another view is that the “sons of God” were dynastic rulers or judges. In the ancient Near East, kings were often seen as divine or semi-divine, ruling on behalf of the gods. In Israel, judges and rulers are sometimes called *benê hā’ēlōhîm* (Ps 82:6). According to this view, the

daughters of men were the wives of these powerful leaders. The sin involved may have been polygamy or the abuse of power, similar to Lamech in Genesis 4:19.

This interpretation keeps the story grounded in human history, avoiding mythological explanations. The Nephilim are seen as contemporaries or descendants of these rulers. The main limitation is that while individual kings were called “sons of God,” there’s no evidence that groups of kings were referred to this way in the ancient world.

3. Godly Men—The Sethites

The third major interpretation, championed by Augustine and the Reformers, identifies the “sons of God” as the godly descendants of Seth, and the “daughters of men” as ungodly descendants of Cain. The sin was intermarriage between the godly and ungodly, which led to widespread moral decline.

This fits the flow of Genesis 4–5, where two lines of humanity—Cainite and Sethite—are contrasted. The emphasis is on the moral consequences of choosing companionship outside God’s covenant family. Even though “sons of God” isn’t used elsewhere for Sethites, the Hebrew can describe godly lineage (*benê hā’ēlōhîm* as a genitive of quality: “godly sons”), and the context of godly men living in a sinful world supports this view. It is the descendants of Seth who began to call on the name of the Lord (4:26).

This interpretation highlights the timeless warning of the story: when God’s people mix with the ungodly in ways he did not intend, sin spreads.

The Nephilim: Offspring or Contemporaries?

The text also mentions the Nephilim, (in Hebrew, literally “the fallen ones”). Are they the offspring of these unions, or simply people who existed at the same time? The text mentions that the Nephilim were on the earth in those days and afterward. This disconnects their origin from being understood as the consequential offspring of the sons of God and the daughters of men. Numbers 13:33 later references the Nephilim in Canaan as giants, but this likely draws on the reputation of the Nephilim from ancient times rather than identifying them as literal descendants of the sons of God.

It’s helpful to see Genesis 6:1–4 as a snapshot of a period in human history when wickedness was spreading rapidly. The Nephilim and the “mighty men” underscore the moral chaos of the age. They are not presented as divine or semi-divine; they are men whose lives were marked by notoriety and violence, just like the people of Babel (11:4).

Why Interpretations Don't Change the Meaning

Even with these differing views, the main point of Genesis 6:1–4 is the same: humanity was corrupting itself and disregarding God's boundaries. Whether the sons of God were angels, rulers, or Sethites, the story communicates that sin was widespread, divine standards were violated, and God's judgment—the Flood—was coming.

The text shifts focus here from individual sins (Adam, Eve, Cain, Lamech) to corporate sin, showing how rebellion can multiply across generations. The details about the Nephilim, the mighty men, and the marriages serve to illustrate the scale of human sin, not to confuse us with secret identities.

Key Takeaways for Today

- God's people are called to be cautious in whom they align with and whom they marry.
- God warns against the spread of sin through alliances with the ungodly.
- No matter how mysterious the "sons of God" are, the narrative emphasizes that sin has consequences, but God preserves a faithful remnant (Noah).

Genesis 6:1–4, then, sets the stage for the Flood and reminds us that God is serious about holiness and faithful obedience, even in times of rampant evil.

Bibliography

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