

MB732

GENESIS

LECTURER: TIM BULKELEY



ASSIGNMENT 3: PROJECT

GENESIS 6:1-4

Genesis 6:1-4 is a difficult passage. It uses images and references in its narrative that are neither complete nor well understood today. Throughout history interpretations of this passage have swung from angels having sexual relationships with women, to rulers and issues of inter-marriage, to the Sethite theory, and back again to angels. The only thing agreed upon about this passage is that it is very unclear.

Taking the interpretation of "sons of god" as rulers and using the Gilgamesh Epic as a cultural and worldview guide it is possible to come to an interpretation that not only makes sense in the unfolding narrative of sin in Genesis, but also has relevance to the current world we live in.

Imitating the mythical style of *The Lord of the Rings*, I retell Genesis 6:1-4 as a story of domination and oppression, where sin reveals itself at the societal level.

Genesis 6:1-4

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days- and also afterward - when the sons of Gods went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

This passage and the issues it raises, as Walton notes, is one of the thorniest in the Old Testament.¹ Julius Wellhausen remarks that it is a "cracked erratic boulder," and Hendel goes on to note that all scholars agree that the story is strange and incomplete.²

Context and Literary features

This passage presents itself in a mythological form that is unfamiliar in our present context. As Speiser comments, "The undisguised mythology of this isolated fragment makes it not only atypical of the Bible as a whole but puzzling and controversial in the extreme."³ In Gunkel's words, it is a *torso* — a remnant of something once told more fully but abbreviated.⁴

How this passage fits into the greater narrative of Genesis is debated. Walton notes there are three main options. Firstly, this passage is an introduction to the flood and so is part of Chapter 6:1-8. Secondly, Chapter 6:1-8 is a summary and conclusion of chapters 4-5. Thirdly, verses 1-4 are independent, a separate episode documenting the advance of sin. Walton notes that all three positions have merit.⁵ However, like Walton, this essay will

¹ John H Walton, *The Genesis NIV Application Commentary*. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 291

² Ronald Hendel. 'Of demigods and the deluge: Toward an interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4.' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987), 14

³ Willem A VanGemeren. 'The sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 (an example of evangelical demythologization)'. *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981), 324

⁴ *Ibid*, 324

⁵ John H Walton, *The Genesis NIV Application Commentary*. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 290

treat the passage as a separate episode in the greater narrative documenting the advance of sin.

Sons of God interpretation

Most fundamental and problematic for the interpretation of this passage is what is meant by the 'sons of God'. There has been several ways that 'sons of God' has been understood and so the interpretation of the text has varied greatly.

The earliest records of interpretation of this passage come from the second century B.C. book of *1 Enoch* where the 'sons of God' are understood as angels.⁶ This interpretation suggests the offence committed is a confusion of boundaries as divine beings and human beings intermarry.⁷ Mann, following this line of thought, notes '...this tale now represents the most serious - indeed, metaphysical - possibility of human beings becoming "Like God."⁸

This Jewish interpretation continued to hold favor until second century A.D. when, out of a conviction that angels could not indulge in sexual intercourse,⁹ scholars shifted to an interpretation that the passage refers to 'sons of nobles'.¹⁰ Moving to a less mythical understanding, the sin of this passage was seen as intermarriage of distinct social groups.¹¹ It was argued that only an interpretation as "son of nobles" could explain why humans only and not angels are judged for the intermarriage that occurred.¹²

The earliest church fathers, like early Jewish circles, also understood the 'sons of God' as referring to angels. In a similar period as the Jewish move toward a new interpretation, a shift began in a different direction towards the Sethite theory.¹³ This theory, made mainstream in Augustine's *City of God*, concluded that the 'sons of God' were men from the line of Seth while 'the daughters of men', were women from the line of Cain.¹⁴ As Wenham notes this interpretation has few advocates today.¹⁵

⁶ John Walton in T D Alexander, and David W Baker (Editors). *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 794

⁷ J. Rogerson. *Genesis 1-11*. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 69

⁸ Thomas W Mann. *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 22

⁹ Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1*. (electronic ed. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 1998), Comment on Gen 6:1-4 "sons of God"

¹⁰ John Walton in T D Alexander, and David W Baker (Editors). *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 794

¹¹ Rick Marrs. 'The sons of God (Genesis 6:1-4) *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1980), 219

¹² Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1*. (electronic ed. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 1998), Comment on Gen 6:1-4 "sons of God"

¹³ John Walton in T D Alexander, and David W Baker (Editors). *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 794

¹⁴ John H Walton, *The Genesis NIV Application Commentary*. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 291

¹⁵ Gordon J Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1*. (electronic ed. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 1998), Comment on Gen 6:1-4 "sons of God"

The end of the nineteenth century saw a return again to the angels interpretation. With access to materials from the Near East critical scholars increasingly saw this passage as an example of promiscuous behavior of the divine reflected in the literature of Babylon and Canaan.¹⁶

As the passage has been interpreted throughout history, the worldview of that time has impacted its conclusions. Early interpreters had little problem with mythological interpretations as their own worldview supported this. Recent interpreters have also had little problem interpreting from a mythological standpoint as they believe Israel's worldview was little different to its neighbors. In the period between interpreters neither had a mythological worldview nor believed that the bible represented such a worldview.¹⁷

Interpretation of the passage

Interpretation of this passage must be done in light of Israel's worldview. This passage, however, lacks much detail in which to work with. Looking at other traditional cultures may give us some insight into how the Israelites may have talked about what they saw in regards to the term 'sons of God'.

In recent years having lived and worked within Tibet I have noticed that Tibetans speak of leaders in both spiritual and physical terms. For example, Chairman Mao is seen as both a historical leader and also as a something akin to an evil spirit - powerful enough that his picture is now used to scare other lesser demons.

Likewise for some Near Eastern cultures the King had spiritual significance as they ruled for a particular deity. Often they were called the "son of Horus," "son of El," or "sons of god."¹⁸ Bratcher notes that in scripture Israelite kings were also referred to with this language, and likewise their officials were referred to as the sons of the king. 'It was not a biological designation, but a title.'¹⁹ Walton too argues for an interpretation of 'sons of God' in terms of social rank rather than that of angels. He notes that the title 'son of God' can be identified as a royal motif both in the Bible and outside of it.²⁰

This historically Jewish "ruler" interpretation has, however, had difficulty offering a plausible offence for which humanity was punished. Promiscuity is unlikely when the passage uses the word marriage, and polygamy is not proscribed in the Old Testament.²¹

The Gilgamesh Epic offers insights into what Genesis 6:1-4 may have been talking about. In the story of Gilgamesh the practice of the "right of first night" is described: the king,

¹⁶ John Walton in T D Alexander, and David W Baker (Editors). *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 795

¹⁷ Ibid, 795

¹⁸ Son of God and giants: Cultural and Historical context in Genesis 6:1-4

<http://www.cresourcei.org/giants.html>

¹⁹ Ibid.,

²⁰ John Walton in T D Alexander, and David W Baker (Editors). *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 797

²¹ John H Walton, *The Genesis NIV Application Commentary*. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 293

governor, or lord can exercise the right to spend the first night with any woman who is being married. 'This practice is universally recognized as oppressive.'²²

Walton, noting the similarities between the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis 6:1-4, uses the Epic as a starting point for understanding this passage. In doing so he interprets the "sons of God" as oppressive kings and rulers. He goes on to note that "the daughters of men" are women within the kingdom. The offence of the kings is oppressive laws and behaviour, in particular the taking of women on the night of their marriage. The shortening of human life span to 120 years was a containment of sin, a way to shorten the long, oppressive reigns of kings. Finally the reference to the 'Nephilim' places the account within the heroic age.²³

This interpretation fits well with the Genesis record of the advance of sin in the world. Genesis 3 records the fall of humanity, Genesis 4 the fall of family, and finally Genesis 6:1-4 records the fall of society, in particular the beginning of institutionalized oppression.²⁴ All of these sins we see replayed again and again throughout history, but, as Walton notes, God has not chosen to eliminate the problems, instead containing them to some extent.²⁵

With reflection on our world and its leaders we quickly identify with the above interpretation of the text. Christian, writing about poverty issues, notes that poverty is the result of a minority who hold political functions, monopolize power and enjoy the advantages that this power brings. He goes on to note this minority has formed a "god complex" - they claim absolute power, influence the future, overflow scope-specific influence, claim immutability and fear power deflation. All of these traits are normally attributed to gods.²⁶

Performance

In my performance of Genesis 6:1-4, I have retold the story in the same style as the opening scene of *The Lord of the Rings - The Fellowship of the Ring*. This was chosen to provide the listener with a sense of the mythical air of the passage.

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy has captured the minds of western viewers in a style that is mythical and yet communicates the struggle against evil and oppression that we all face in this world.

The story of struggle resonates with our present time, despite the fact that it looks back on times that have past and stories remembered but not in their fullness. Likewise this Genesis primeval history passage has lost its full narrative as it has been passed through to the modern reader. What was once understood clearly has become unclear and forgotten and yet we know it has some kind of significance to our present life.

In the telling of the story I have reworded the text in line with the conclusions I have come to in the above interpretation.

²² John H Walton. *The Genesis NIV Application Commentary*. (Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 293

²³ Ibid, 295

²⁴ Ibid, 298

²⁵ Ibid, 298

²⁶ Bryant L. Myers, *Working with the poor: New insights and learning from development practitioners*, (Monrovia: World Vision, 1999), 6

It is important to note that the text is unclear and interpretations are varied and so in this presentation I offer one interpretation which I have come to resonate with.

Conclusion

Genesis 6:1-4 is a mythological passage containing only a remnant of a story, which makes interpreting the passage very difficult. Interpretations have changed and developed as theologians have considered the passage in light of historical information and their own worldviews.

Using the Gilgamesh Epic as a starting point, it is possible to come to some rather different conclusions than historically understood. The "sons of God" can be interpreted as rulers that use their power to oppress by exercising the "right of first night". This interpretation sees this passage as part of the advance of sin in the early chapters of Genesis, from personal sin, to family sin and finally the societal sin recorded in this passage. God, in his grace, puts a limit on human life span, shortening the years that such powerful rulers can reign.

This interpretation not only speaks of a time in history but reminds us again of sin's destructive force at societal level and its effects seen in leaders and governments today.

Script to accompany MP3 file: *The world has changed*²⁷

The world has changed
much that once was is lost
for none now live who remember it.²⁸

In the first age,
when men had multiplied on the face of the earth,
In the time of the heroes of old,
the Nephilim roamed the earth,
and a line of great kings arose.

The kings were strong and brave
their kingdoms grew.
But the hearts of men are easily corrupted
and above all else, they desire power.²⁹

The kings saw that the people who served them were growing strong.
So they took for themselves what was not theirs.

The daughters of men,
fair of face,
promised in marriage to another,
were taken instead by the king.
And the daughters of men bore the children of the kings.

The Lord looked on the wickedness of mankind and
His heart was grieved.
And the Lord said
"No longer will my spirit abide in mortals forever
for they are flesh
their days shall be one hundred and twenty years."

And so it came to pass that the kings of old
could no longer reign forever.

²⁷ Soundtrack. Howard Shore (Composer) Track: Lothlorien. Album: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. 2001. Narrator: Jo Robertson.

²⁸ The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring. DVD. Section of script is taken from opening scene.

²⁹ The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring. DVD. Section of script is taken from opening scene.

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Appendix

Son of God and giants: Cultural and Historical context in Genesis 6:1-4
<http://www.cresourcei.org/giants.html>

Wikipedia. The Epic of Gilgamesh.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_of_Gilgamesh