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GENESIS 6:1-4 AND THE “SONS OF GOD”

Trevor Major, M.Sc., M.A.

Roughly fifteen hundred years of human history transpired between the Creation and the Flood. What happened in these biblical Dark Ages to cause the great rebellion against God, and the watery judgment that followed (Genesis 6:5-7)?

The key piece in this puzzle is Genesis 6:1-4. In this passage, Moses records a time when the population of the antediluvian world had begun to flourish. The “sons of God” saw that the “daughters of men” were beautiful, and married any they desired. Because of their universal, unrepentant sinfulness (6:5), God warned them of His impending judgment. But who were these sons of God, and how did this terrible situation arise?

FALLEN ANGELS

One common interpretation of this passage argues that the sons of God were fallen angels who married human beings, thus corrupting the Earth. Some would view the passage as a direct borrowing from pagan myth and, therefore, another example of the Bible’s fallibility.

The main contention is that the phrase, “sons of God,” means angels—a common title for spiritual beings in the ancient Near East. Also, the book of Job uses the same phrase three times (1:6; 2:1; 38:7), all with a clear reference to angels.

Proponents further argue that the Jews believed this mythological interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. They draw their evidence from Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphal literature of the intertestamental period, focusing especially on the book of First Enoch. This book had several authors who wrote 100-200 years before the death of Christ. It tells a version of the fallen angel story, suggesting that Enoch the patriarch failed in his efforts to save humanity, thus bringing the deluge upon the world. They derive additional support from Jude, who quotes Enoch in verses 14-15, having just referred to sinful angels in verse 6 (see also 2 Peter 2:4-5).

PROBLEMS

However, the phrase “sons of God” does not have to mean “angels.” Neither Genesis 6:1-4, nor any other book of Moses, specifically refer to angels as sons of God. Even in Job, the sons of God appear as good spiritual beings in contrast with Satan, the fallen angel.

The problem in using First Enoch as a model is that it post-dates Genesis by more than a millennium. It is unreasonable to impose the later story on a much older historical narrative. Further, like so many works of its genre, Enoch appeared in a special time for the Jews. It used the Flood, with the patriarch in the title role, to portray Jewish hopes of a divine judgment on their godless oppressors. Jews knew it was not inspired, and that Enoch was not the author.

Whether or not Jude quoted from the book of Enoch, we have no reason to believe he endorsed the apocryphal work as Holy Scripture. The quote simply emphasizes Jude’s message (i.e., that the Lord **will** judge the ungodly). More important, the passage quoted by Jude says nothing about angels. Although he does discuss sinful angels in verse 6, nowhere does Jude mention human/angel intermarriage.

GODLY AND UNGODLY

Genesis 6 begins by naming two opposing groups: the sons of God, and the daughters of men. It is no coincidence that chapters 4–5 also describe two groups, the descendants of Cain and Seth. Beginning with their founder, we find that Cainites lacked positive spiritual attributes. They were earthly, selfish, sensual, and an authority unto themselves. Sethites, however, had qualities of consecration, devotion, communion, service, and righteousness toward God.

Knowing this context, we can identify Sethites as the sons of God. They were His chosen people in the pre-Flood era. The Cainites, however, were the daughters of men—in that they had separated themselves from God.

Despite their commendable history, the descendants of Seth intermarried with the descendants of Cain. Through these spiritually mixed marriages, Sethites failed to remain pure and true to their mission. They jeopardized God’s plan of salvation (3:15), leaving Noah the only righteous one among them (6:9). God preserved the Messianic line by sending a great Flood to save Noah and his family, and to judge unrepentant souls (1 Peter 3:20). Humanity’s sorry state followed ages of willful disobedience, not a fantastic mingling with angels.

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