

Chapter 5

The 'Sons of God' (Genesis 6:1-4)

Judging by the number of times the early church fathers referred to Genesis 6:1-4 it would appear that the passage stirred their interest then as much as it does modern readers. The identity of the “Sons of God” was clearly a controversial subject. In the early centuries of the church there were three main positions to choose from (unlike today when the number has increased to nine or more). A few Jewish sources (Symmachus, Aquila and the Targums) identify the “Sons of God” as the sons of nobles or kings who married below their rank.(1) This view has no support in the text of Genesis and is not found in the writing of the early Christians. For them the choice appears have been between identifying the “Sons of God” as fallen angels or as the descendants of Seth.

The church fathers were far from united when it came to the origin of the fallen angels (See Table 5.1). Some held that fell at about the same time as Satan (whether this is before the creation of the world or after). Others linked the fall to the events described in Genesis 6, which also goes some way to explain why they considered this passage so important. Justin Martyr(2) and Lactantius(3) believed in the latter, identifying two classes of fallen spirits: the fallen angels and their offspring. Tertullian likewise believed that some of the angels fell through lust for women and referred to their offspring as a “more wicked demon-brood”.(4) Irenaeus’ writings are ambiguous on the subject but appear to indicate that he believed in two separate angelic falls.(5) In one of the earliest references to the passage Irenaeus draws heavily on 1 Enoch 6-9 when he writes the following:

And wickedness very long-continued and widespread pervaded all the races of men, until very little seed of justice was in them. For unlawful unions came about on earth, as angels linked themselves with offspring of the daughters of men, who bore to them sons, who on account of their exceeding great were called Giants. The angels, then, brought to their wives as gifts teachings of evil, for they taught them the virtues of roots and herbs, and dyeing and cosmetics and discoveries of precious materials, love-philtes, hatreds, amours, passions, constraints of love, the bonds of witchcraft, every sorcery and idolatry, hateful to God; and when this was come into the world, the affairs of wickedness were propagated to overflowing, and those of justice dwindled to very little.(6)

Tatian,(7) Clement of Alexandria(8) and Tertullian(9) all echo Irenaeus’ statements and his use of 1 Enoch in attributing to the fallen angels the origin of the magic arts and cosmetics. It is not difficult to account for the influence of 1 Enoch on the early church writers. After all it was the only (what we now call) apocryphal book explicitly cited in the New Testament (Jude 14, cf. 1 Enoch 1:9).(10) The Ethiopian church accepted the book into its canon(11) and the writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* approved of it,(12) as did Tertullian,(13) even though the majority rejected it.(14) Interestingly some of the later Fathers doubted the canonicity of Jude precisely because it cited apocryphal books such as Enoch.(15) The influence of the Book of Enoch and the popularity of the Septuagint (which translated “sons of God” as “angels”) in the early church may explain why no Christian writer challenged the view that the Sons of God were angels until the third century AD. With the rejection of the canonicity of Enoch there was a corresponding decline in the ‘angel’ interpretation of the

‘sons of God’. In a similar way the idea of a fall (or second fall) of the angels prior to the Flood drops out of theological history after the time of Lactantius. From that point on the view that the Sons of God were purely human - the descendants of Seth - began to dominate. As can be seen from Table 5.2 the other early references to the Sethite theory were found in Jewish sources that few of the early Christian would have had access to. It was not until after the middle of the second century that a Christian writer (Julius Africanus) suggested that the 'sons of God' were Sethites.

Table 5.1: The Early Church Fathers Views on the Chronology of the Fall of the Angels

Name	Date	Time of Fall		Reference
		Genesis 3	Genesis 6	
Justin Martyr	c.100-c.165		X	<i>2 Apology 5, 7</i>
Tatian	110-180	X		<i>Address, 7</i>
Irenaeus	c.115-202	X	X	<i>Heresies 3:23; 4.40.1; Proof, 16</i>
Tertullian	c.160-c.225		X	<i>Apology 22</i>
Lactantius	240-320		X	<i>Institutes 2.14-15</i>
Augustine	354-430	X		<i>City 15.23</i>

Many writers including Tatian and Athenagoras, saw extrabiblical support for the angel interpretation of the Sons of God in the Greek legends of the gods having children by human women. Such references demonstrated to them both the veracity of the biblical account and the corruption of the pagan versions of the events it described.(16) Eusebius believed that the son’s of God of Genesis 6 were fallen angels and found further evidence for this in the writings of the Greeks.(17) These beings were openly hostile to God and were responsible for introducing mankind to the black arts of witchcraft and sorcery, bringing the whole of the human race under judgement. This judgement took the form of the Flood, which destroyed everyone one earth, except Noah and his family.(18) It is noteworthy that Eusebius sees a strong connection here between the activities of the ‘Son’s of God’ and the Flood that followed. John Chrysostom, for his part, argued that the ‘sons of God’ of Genesis 6:1-4 were the descendants of Seth, pointing out (incorrectly) that the Bible does not refer to angels by that name (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1).(19) Augustine accepted that not only were those who lived before the flood long-lived,(20) but they were of great size. In support of this Augustine described how he himself found a human(?) molar on the shore of Utica 100 times larger than one of his and noted the discoveries of giant’s tombs, citing Virgil as his source.(21)

Today the debate seems to have gone full circle. with the majority of modern scholars now holding to the angel interpretation. This view finds support in Psalm 29:1; Job 1:6; 2:1; & 38:7 and New Testament references to the antediluvian world in Jude 6, 1 Peter 3:19-20 and 2 Peter 2:4. Those who reject this identification point to a saying of Jesus found in all three synoptic gospels which they claim proves that angels are sexless, and therefore incapable of interbreeding with human women under any circumstances (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:24-25; Luke 20:35-36). F.B. Huey in his discussion of these passages writes:

...a careful, unprejudiced reading of that text reveals that Jesus was making an analogy. He was not talking about procreation but about relationships. He was saying that the relationship of resurrected Christians will be different from the relationship experienced in marriage on earth. He was no more saying that angels are sexless than he was teaching that resurrected Christians will be neither male nor female.(22)

In an important article on the subject, W.A. van Gemeren suggests that evangelicals have resisted the identification of the sons of God with angels not on linguistic grounds, but because of difficulties in accepting the possibility of interbreeding between angels and mankind.(23) Robert C. Newman points out some interesting facts concerning the current debate:

The present form of the debate is rather paradoxical. On the one hand, liberal theologians, who deny the miraculous, claim the account pictures a supernatural liaison between divine beings and humans. Conservative theologians, though believing implicitly in angels and demons, tend to deny the passage any such import. The liberal position is more understandable with the realisation that they deny the historicity of the incident and see it as a borrowing from pagan mythology. The rationale behind the conservative view is more complex: though partially a reaction to liberalism, the view is older than liberal theology.(24)

Table 5.2: Early Jewish & Christian Identifications of the ‘Sons of God’ (Gen. 6:1-4)*

Date	Writer	Angels	Sethites	Reference
c.250 BC	Various	X		<i>Septuagint</i> , Gen. 6:3
165-64 BC	Unknown	X		<i>1 Enoch</i> 6-19; 86-88; 106: 13-15, 17
150 BC	Unknown	X		<i>Jubilees</i> 4:15, 22; 5:1
100 BC	Unknown	X		<i>Damascus Document (Qumran)</i> 2:16-19
20 BC-50 AD	Philo of Alexandria	X		<i>Giants</i> 6-7
37-100 AD	Josephus	X		<i>Antiquities</i> , Book 1.3.1 (73)
c.70	Pseudo-Philo		X	<i>Biblical Antiquities</i> 3:1-2

Late 1st Cent.	Unknown	X		<i>Genesis Apocryphon</i> 2:1
Late 1st Cent.	Unknown	X		<i>2 Baruch</i> 56:10-14
c.100-c.165	Justin Martyr	X		<i>1 Apology</i> 5; <i>2 Apology</i>
c.115-202	Irenaeus of Lyons	X		<i>Demonstration</i> 18; <i>Heresies</i> 16.2
c.130	Rabbi Akiba		X	[Greek translation of OT]
130-160	Rabbi Simean b. Yohai		X	<i>Genesis Rabbah</i> 26:5-7
130-160	Rabbi Jose		X	<i>Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin</i> 108a
2nd Cent.	Athenagoras	X		<i>A Plea for the Christians</i> , 24.
Late 2nd Cent.	Symmachus		X	[Greek translation of OT]
c. 150-215	Clement of Alexandria	X		<i>Miscellanies</i> 5.1.10
c.160-c.225	Tertullian	X		<i>Idolatry</i> 9; <i>Veiling</i> 7; <i>Women</i> , 1.2
c. 160-240	Julius Africanus		X	<i>Chronology</i> , Fragment 2
240-320	Lactantius	X		<i>Divine Institutes</i> 2.15
263-339	Eusebius of Caesarea	X		Eusebius, <i>Preparation</i> , 5.5
306-373	Ephrem the Syrian		X	<i>Commentary on Genesis</i> 6.3.1
340-397	Ambrose of Milan	X		<i>Noah and the Ark</i> 4.8
c.345-420	Jerome	X		<i>Hebrew</i> , 6.4
374-407	John Chrysostom		X	<i>Homily on Genesis</i> , 22.6-8
363-420	Sulpicius Severus	X		<i>History</i> , 1.2
354-430	Augustine of Hippo	X		<i>City of God</i> 15:22-23

KEY: X indicates agreement with this view

* Based upon Robert C. Newman, "The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2, 4" *GTJ*, Vol. 5.1 (1984): 13-36 and Richard J. Bauckham, "Jude, 2 Peter," *WBC*, Vol. 50. (Waco: Texas, 1983), 51.

Table 5.3: Church Fathers Who Attributed the Flood to the Events Described in

Genesis 6:1-4

Date	Church Father	Reference
d. 315-386	Cyril of Jerusalem	<i>Catechetical Lecture 2.8</i>
363-420	Sulpicius Severus	<i>History 3</i>
263-339	Eusebius of Caesarea	<i>Preparation, 7.8</i>
263 - 339	Jerome	<i>Letter 10.1</i>

Perhaps because of its controversial nature Genesis 6:1-4 is often ignored when discussing the causes of the flood,(25) even though the strong link between them has been noted in the past (see Table 5.3).(26) One of the clearest examples from the early church is provided by Jerome.

For when the first tiller of paradise had been entangled by the serpent in his snaky coils, and had been forced in consequence to migrate earthwards, although his deathless state was changed for a mortal one, yet the sentence of man's curse was put off for nine hundred years, or even more, a period so long that it may be called a second immortality. Afterwards sin gradually grew more and more virulent, till the ungodliness of the giants brought in its train the shipwreck of the whole world.(27)

Frederick Filby concurs, concluding his discussion of the evidence of the early church fathers by noting that:

...although the whole subject is mysterious the evidence for the 'angel' interpretation is much the stronger and that it is not only consistent with the early Hebrew mode of expression but provides the adequate impetus for that great moral decline which brought the Flood.(28)

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References

- (1) Donat Poulet, "The Moral Causes of the Flood," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 4 (October 1942): 294.
- (2) Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition*. (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 65-66.
- (3) Russell, 156.
- (4) *Apology*, 22 (*ANF*, Vol. 3, 36). Russell, 96.

(5) Russell, 81, n. 8.

(6) Irenaeus, *Demonstration*, 18. Joseph P. Smith, *St. Irenaeus: Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1952), 58.

(7) Tatian, *2 Apology* 5 (*ANF*, Vol. 1, 190): “[God]... committed the care of men and of all things under heaven to angels whom He appointed over them. But the angels transgressed this appointment, and were captivated by the love of women, and begat children who are those who are called demons; and besides, they afterwards subdued the human race to themselves, partly by magical writings, and partly by fears and the punishments they occasioned, and partly by teaching them to offer sacrifices, and incense, and libations, of which things they stood in need after they were enslaved by lustful passions; and among men they sowed murders, wars, adulteries, intemperate deeds, and all wickedness.”

(8) Clement, *Miscellanies* 5.1.10 (*ANF*, Vol. 2, 446): “To which also we shall add, that the angels who had obtained the superior rank, having sunk into pleasures, told to the women[13] the secrets which had come to their knowledge; while the rest of the angels concealed them, or rather, kept them against the coming of the Lord.”

(9) Tertullian, *Women*, 1.2 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 14-15).

(10) F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1988), 51.

(11) Bruce, *Canon*, 85.

(12) *Barnabas*, 16:4 (*ANF*, Vol. 1, 147).

(13) Tertullian, *Women*, 1.3 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 15-16).

(14) Origen makes a clear distinction between the Book of Enoch and the canonical Scriptures: “And in the book of Enoch also we have similar descriptions. But up to the present time we have been able to find no statement in holy Scripture in which the Holy Spirit could be said to be made or created?” Origen, *Principles*, 1.3.3 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 252); cf. *Celsus*, 5.54 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 567). The present writer is in agreement with S. Thelwall when he writes: “The fact that St. Jude refers to Enoch’s prophesyings no more proves that this book is other than apocryphal than St. Paul’s reference to Jannes and Jambres makes Scripture of the Targum.” (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 26.)

(15) Eusebius, *History*, 2.23.25: “These things are recorded in regard to James, who is said to be the author of the first of the so-called catholic epistles. But it is to be observed that it is disputed; at least, not many of the ancients have mentioned it, as is the case likewise with the epistle that bears the name of Jude, which is also one of the seven so-called catholic epistles. Nevertheless we know that these also, with the rest, have been read publicly in very many churches.” (*NPNF*, 2nd series, Vol. 1, 128).

“Jerome, *Letter* 181.4: “Jude the brother of James, left a short epistle which is reckoned among the seven catholic epistles, and because in it he quotes from the apocryphal book of Enoch it is rejected by many. Nevertheless by age and use it has gained authority and is reckoned among the Holy Scriptures.” (*NPNF*, 2nd series, Vol. 3, 362).

(16) Tatian, *2 Apology* 5 (*ANF*, Vol. 1, 190); Athenagoras, *Plea*, 24-25 (*ANF*, Vol. 2, 141-143).

(17) Eusebius, *Preparation*, 5.4-5 (Gifford, Part 1, 203-207).

(18) Eusebius, *Preparation*, 7.8 (Gifford, Part 1, 331-332).

(19) John Chrysostom, *Genesis*, 22.6-8 (Hill, 72-74).

(20) Augustine admits that he cannot support this with evidence outside Scripture, but is content to rely on its testimony. *City*, 15.9 (Bettenson, 610).

(21) Augustine, *City*, 15.9 (Bettenson, 609-610); Virgil, *Georgias*, 1, 4, 93-97. Later writers suspected that what

the tooth that Augustine found actually belonged to an elephant. See Sir Henry H. Howorth, *The Mammoth and the Flood: An Attempt to Confront the Theory of Uniformity with the Facts of Recent Geology*. (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1887), 30.

(22) Wiseman, 142.

(23) Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism*. London: California University Press, 1993), 155.

(24) Wiseman, 122, 177.

(25) Wiseman cites Dickie, 121. Wiseman, 122. Wiseman omits full bibliographic details and a page number.

(26) Victor P. Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis 1-17," *NICOT*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 55; Augustine, *City*, 11.6 (Bettenson, 435-436).

(27) Jerome, *Letter* 10.1 (*NPNF*, 2nd series, Vol. 6, 11).

(28) Roger Forster & Paul Marston, *Reason & Faith: Do Modern Science and Christian Faith Really Conflict?* (Eastbourne: Monarch Publications, 1989), 358.

