

account the culture and its language. The result of this attitude is far-reaching. It also adversely affects interpretation of the Scriptures in our own native language and cultural contexts.

If this discussion of just one case has revealed or given a picture of what has happened and is happening in our translations, a lot of work will have to be done in other similar areas. This is especially the case in those areas of meaning where similar words and expressions have been deliberately imposed without due consideration of the culture and language of the readers and hearers. This observation is also relevant for transliteration of key words of the original language into the language of the translation, as well as borrowings from a dominant language, two processes that do not exploit the resources of the culture and language of the people who receive and use a translation.

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## REVISITING “THE SONS OF GOD” IN GENESIS 6.1-4

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Genesis 6.1-4 is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible to interpret. Its nature has been described as “puzzling and controversial in the extreme” (Speiser), and the words “the sons of God” as “an enigmatic phrase” (Hamilton). It is simple enough to understand the text as it stands. It is when we try to identify the participants that we are faced with one problem after another. The text (NRSV) says:

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 God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

I want to focus here on the problem phrase “the sons of God”, and not on detailed interpretation of the whole passage. There have been various attempts to identify “the sons of God” but three stand out. We might call them:

The heavenly-earthly mixed race view;  
 The religious mixed marriage view; and  
 The ruling class “harem” view.

### The heavenly-earthly mixed race view

In this interpretation, “the sons of God” (in Hebrew *bene-ha 'elohim*) refers to **angels**. This is supported by the Septuagint rendering *angeloi tou theou* (“angels of God”). It is also supported by other passages from

the Old Testament such as Job 1.6; 2.1; 38.7, where the same phrase "the sons of God" appears, and Psalm 29.1, where NRSV translates the same Hebrew phrase as "the sons of gods". In these passages scholars understand that the biblical writers meant "angels" by the phrase in question. This theory has received support from many writers throughout the centuries: from the famous Jewish historian Josephus (born 37 BC), from early Church Fathers including Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen, and from some current biblical scholars. In fact Gerhard von Rad in 1961 pronounced this issue as settled:

The question, which has been asked from the time of the early church down to our own day, whether, namely, the "sons of God" are to be understood as angelic beings or as men, i.e., as members of "the superior human race of Seth," can be considered as finally settled. The *bene ha elohim*, here, by the way, clearly contrasted to the daughters of men, are beings of the upper heavenly world. The *ben* (sons) describes them, however, as sons of God, not in the physical, genealogical sense, i.e., mythologically, but generally as belonging to the world of the Elohim (*Genesis*, The Old Testament Library, page 44).

However, von Rad's pronouncement seems to be premature, because the case is not quite "finally settled." Old Testament scholars have raised many questions relating to the problems involved in it. Some of the objections raised are:

1. Nowhere else in Scriptures are we told that angels married human beings. To assume that they did would be a lonely enterprise in interpretation. Although the Septuagint translated the Hebrew expression as being equivalent to "angels," it is in fact only the Alexandrian manuscript that does so. The critical edition of Alfred Rahlfs does not reflect the "angel" interpretation. Moreover, it is worth noting that although comparison between Genesis 6 and the Gospels is not in focus here, the Gospel of Mark (12.25) records the words of Jesus that angels do not marry.

2. In order to be married to human beings, assuming that this is what is meant, the angels, or any heavenly beings, would have to assume bodies like those of human beings. And this position seems to be very difficult, particularly considering that it was the angels who initiated marriage, leading to immorality: "they took wives for themselves of all that they chose." In other passages such as Genesis 12.10-20, and 2 Samuel 11, the contexts show that seeing and taking women is automatically condemned.

3. In the context we see a situation where humankind was being punished for the sins of "the sons of God." The crucial question is: If it was angels who were the ones to blame, why was the judgment of God not directed against them? And why do the innocent suffer for the sins of the guilty? The guilty ones were those who came from above; the women seemed to have been doing nothing except being beautiful.

For reasons such as these the number of scholars who accept this position appears to be decreasing.

### **The religious mixed marriage view**

In this interpretation, “the sons of God” is taken to mean the **descendants of Seth**, the son of Adam and Eve. “The daughters of men” is likewise understood to mean the descendants of Cain. The situation referred to in Genesis 6.1-4 is that there were marriages between the godly descendants of Seth and the ungodly descendants of Cain. The basis for this proposal is the idea that the descendants of Seth are the chosen line that Noah is descended from, and that elsewhere in the first five books of the Bible the chosen nation Israel is called God’s son (for example, Exo 4.22-23; Deut 14.1). As some commentators have said, this theory has been “for a long time the preferred Christian exegesis.”

The main reason for holding this point of view is that it avoids the suggestion of human beings having sexual intercourse with angels. The sin condemned here would be the sin of being “unequally yoked” – that is, the marriage of members of the godly line of the descendants of Seth to members of the ungodly line of the descendants of Cain.

The difficulty with this point of view centers on three points:

1. The Scriptures nowhere else say that the descendents of Seth are more godly than those of Cain. Apart from the idea that the descendants of Seth are the chosen line because Noah was descended from them, this view is often held on the basis of a shaky interpretation of Genesis 4.19-24. That interpretation proposes that since Cain’s descendant Lamech took more than one wife, Cain’s descendants became ungodly – whereas Seth had “sons and daughters” without evidence of such polygamous practice, and so his descendants were assumed to be godly. This assumption has no solid biblical support, to say the least.

2. There is an abrupt change of meaning of the word rendered “man” between verses 1 and 2. In verse 1, “When man began to multiply,” “man” is understood to indicate humanity in general, while in verse 2, “the daughters of man,” “man” is understood to refer to the line of the descendants of Cain in particular. Suggesting such an abrupt change in meaning without any indication in the context is unwarranted.

3. A more difficult point is the problem of the offspring of the marriages. Why would, or why should, religious mixed marriages produce *nefilim-gibborim* (or “giants”, as some translations render this Hebrew expression)? Does the mixture of pagan and godly genes result in the DNA of the offspring being wild and grotesque? We are not given any reason as to why the union of members of the two lines of Seth and Cain should result in the birth of giants!

This position therefore also fails to convince many Old Testament scholars today. As Wenham says, “The Sethian interpretation ... has few advocates today” (*Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, page 140).

### The ruling class "harem" view

In this interpretation, "the sons of God" is understood to mean **rulers** in human communities, an early royal aristocracy. "The daughters of men" who they took as wives formed the royal harems of these powerful rulers. The sin is therefore the sin of polygamy, along the lines of Lamech who also "took wives" (Gen 4.19). Advocates of this view find biblical support in passages where those who administer justice are called *'elohim* (literally "gods"; see Exo 21.6; 22.7-9). In these other passages the word *'elohim* is translated as "judges" in NIV. The son of David, who was a king, is called "the son of God" (2 Sam 7.14), and many scholars also take the phrase "the son of God" in Psalms 2.7; 89.26-27 to refer to David himself.

Jewish commentators first introduced this theory in the second century AD. Subsequently it became the most usual rabbinical view; and it has a number of Christian advocates up to the present time. In my opinion the objections to this interpretation are less severe than those against the other interpretations. And the evidence for it is as strong if not stronger than that for the other positions. In support of this theory we may note the following:

1. It has been maintained, perhaps with good reason, that the passage in question is "an ancient fragment, a folk explanation for a race of giants" (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, volume 2, page 157). Significantly Genesis 6 begins with a statement, "When people (literally 'man') began to multiply on the face of the ground." It would seem that the writer of this passage wanted to introduce some new information, more than what is in the narrative itself. The introduction of new information is significant, but what is its purpose? I suggest that what it intends to convey is the fact that more organized societies had developed, new structures had arisen in human communities, and that the distinction between rulers and common people had become more and more a reality in society.

2. In all the occurrences of the expression "sons of God" in the Old Testament, the word *ben* "son" is never used in a construct relationship before *YHWH*, "the LORD". This is striking! But then what does it show? In my opinion it reveals the author's desire to communicate to the readers that the "God" in the "the sons of God" is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, the God (*'elohim*) referred to in the words in question is somehow lower or less than "the LORD". The significance of the shift of meaning here is that it points to *'elohim* who are of the earth, and not to "the LORD" the Almighty.

3. The ancient Aramaic Targum of Onkelos (in use in the third century AD) renders "sons of God" as "sons of nobles." Moreover the Greek translation of the Old Testament by Symmachus, which was in use in the second century, also renders the same phrase as "the sons of the kings or lords." Thus two of the earliest translations of the Hebrew Old Testament favor this interpretation, rather than either of the others.

4. As I have already pointed out, the word "god/gods/God" (Hebrew *'elohim*) is often used in Scriptures for men who served as magistrates

or judges. For example, Exodus 21.6 has (NIV) “Then the master must take him (the servant) before the judges (*elohim*).

5. Structurally, the account of Cain’s descendant Lamech in Genesis 4.19-24 and that of the “sons of God” in Genesis 6.1-4 are very much alike. In each account there is the taking of wives, the bearing of children, and the exploits of famous ancestors. The pictures are parallel and reveal situations of tyranny, corruption, and polygamy. The earlier passage ends with a boast by Lamech, and the other ends with God’s decree of judgment. If we take the story of Lamech as a narrative connecting the story of Adam’s family with the story of Noah, we could also take the “sons of God” passage in Genesis 6 as part of the overall story leading directly to Noah without much disruption.

6. Near Eastern discoveries have revealed the use of all sorts of gods’ and goddesses’ names to give more clout and prestige to the governments of Egypt and Mesopotamia and their rulers. Hence the title “sons of God” in Genesis 6 also most probably refers to rulers of communities with the characteristics of their life and the consequences of their lifestyle.

7. This point deals with the *nefilim/gibborim* (“giants”) of Genesis 6.4. The word *nefilim* occurs only here and in Numbers 13.33, where it refers to the *Anakim* who were people of great stature. The root meaning of *nefilim* is “to fall”. However in Genesis 6.4, the *nefilim* are associated with the term *gibborim* which is the plural of *gibbor* meaning “a mighty man of valor, strength, wealth or power.” Nimrod in Genesis 10.8 was such a *gibbor*: he was clearly a king in the land of Shinar. Hence the meaning of *nefilim/gibborim* probably is not “giants”, but something more like “princes”, “rulers”, or “great men.” As John Walton and Victor Matthews say, “There is no reason to consider the Nephilim to be giants. It is more likely that the term describes heroic warriors, perhaps the ancient equivalent of knights errant” (*Bible Background Commentary: Genesis – Deuteronomy*, page 26).

## Conclusion

Each of the three positions have their own strengths and weaknesses. However, for me the “descendants of Seth and Cain” theory is the least acceptable for the simple reason that there is no similar passage in the Bible to support it. Nowhere else in the Scriptures are the descendents of Seth called “the sons of God” or anything like it. It may be attractive and easy to maintain it in the face of simple and uncomplicated questionings; and it also has the advantage of avoiding the issue of sexual intercourse with angels. But it is hard to maintain the position from the point of view of interpretation.

The heavenly-earthly mixed race theory, or the “angel” theory, is also less than satisfactory, because it faces a lot of theological problems. One serious problem is that nowhere in the Scriptures are we told anything about angels marrying human beings. To the Hebrew way of thinking, heavenly beings marrying human beings is “utterly abhorrent” (Wenham, page 146). The attempt by some scholars to link this passage

and the books of Peter and Jude in the New Testament has been less than successful.

Genesis 6.1-4, therefore, is best understood as presenting a picture of ambitious, despotic, and autocratic rulers seizing both power and women in an attempt to take everything from those within their reach. Not surprisingly, their abuse of power and of their subjects has adversely affected both the societies they ruled and their own lifestyle. From the point of view of the author of this passage the consequences of their lifestyle was one of the reasons that led to the flood of Noah's time.

In this interpretation, the second verse in Genesis 6 could be alternatively translated as:

"The despotic rulers saw that the women of common people were beautiful, and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose."

## FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

*[In the following notes Dr Daud Soesilo examines how the Revised Malay Bible Alkitab Berita Baik (Bible Society of Malaysia, 1996) handles one of the most important terms in the New Testament, namely "the Kingdom of God".*  
- Editor]

### Translating "the Kingdom of God" in the Malay Bible

"The Kingdom of God" is the common literal translation of the Greek *he basileia tou theou* that is found in New Testament texts, especially Mark, Luke, and Acts. In keeping with the Jewish-Christian character of Matthew, we find in this gospel the variant "the Kingdom of Heaven," or literally, "the Kingdom of the Heavens" (Greek *he basileia ton ouranon*). Since the Divine Name YHWH was uttered only once a year by the chief priest in the Holy of Holies, except for this very special usage it was a kind of "taboo" term. So "the Heavens" was used as a reverent round-about expression to avoid uttering or writing the Divine Name. Thus, "the Kingdom of (the) Heaven(s)" in Matthew is equivalent to "the Kingdom of God" in the other gospels.

Although the actual phrase "Kingdom of God" does not appear in the Old Testament, except for one occurrence in the form of "Kingdom of the LORD" in one of the latest books (1 Chr 28.5), it is deeply rooted in the thought of the Old Testament. The word "kingdom," however, is sometimes used in relation to God; for example, "your kingdom" (Psa 45.6; 145.11, 13), and "his kingdom" (Psa 103.19; 14.12). "My kingdom" appears on the lips of "the LORD of hosts" (1 Chr 17.14). "The kingdom" is described as "the LORD's" (Obadiah 21; Psa 22.28), and "Yours is the kingdom, O LORD" (1 Chr 29.11). In the Aramaic portion of the book of Daniel we find "his kingdom" (Dan 4.3, 34; 7.27), and "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom" (Dan 2.44).

In the New Testament "the Kingdom of God/Heaven" is the central