



Truth

On Tough Texts

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Who In the World Were Those “Sons of God”? (1)

Gen. 6:4; 1 Pet. 3:18-20; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6

PERHAPS AT THE TOP OF THE LIST OF debated texts is Genesis 6:4, which refers to the “sons of God” and “daughters of men.” Along with it, however, are three related texts. Let’s quote all four and then deal with them collectively:

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. (Gen. 6:4)

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water (1 Pet. 3:18-20).

For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment (2 Pet. 2:4).

And the angels who kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgement of the great day (Jude 6).

Tragically, the debate over these verses has gone on for centuries. I say “tragically” because one view is

based exclusively on pagan myths instead of the sole authority of Scripture. Sadly, and shockingly, the most common view is that there was an invasion of the earth by fallen angels (the “sons of God,” Gen. 6:4) who cohabited with earthly women (the “daughters of men”) and produced a race of giants. It is absolutely incredulous to me that a large portion of Evangelical Christianity today holds this view when the fact of the matter is, as we will prove, *it is totally pagan in origin*.

To explore this great debate, let’s first consider why the “sons of God” were not fallen angels, second their true identity, and third the identity of the angels in Jude 6.

I. Why the “Sons of God” Were Not Fallen Angels

Let us examine three reasons why the “sons of God” in Genesis 6 cannot possibly refer to fallen angels.

This View Is Untenable

By *untenable* we, of course, mean that the view is difficult to maintain and is even indefensible. To put it simply, this theory is just plain fanciful. Respected pastor and author Warren Wiersbe puts it this way: “The whole explanation, though held by teachers I respect, to me seems a bit fantastic.”¹ And that is putting it mildly. Joseph Exell (1849-1909), a British clergyman who compiled the monumental, multi-volume work, *The Biblical Illustrator*, rightly brings out the fact that Jewish rabbis tended toward views that were fantastic. He

writes, "Hence Apocryphal Jewish literature assumes this [theory] constantly . . . which, nevertheless, seems fanciful and ungrounded."²

Actually, the Jewish Scriptures themselves assume this. The Tanakh Translation of Genesis 6:4, for example, reads: "It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown." But "translating" the Hebrew *ben elohim* as "divine beings" is total conjecture and is not really translating at all, rather it is interpretation. *Ben* clearly means "son" and *elohim*, while it sometimes refers to any god, usually refers to the supreme "God." There is absolutely no linguistic support for "divine beings," and such translation is indefensible.

We'll come back to this later, but we need to point out here that this view has its roots in Old Testament pseudepigraphal books. These are books that have been proven over and over again to be unreliable, extremely fanciful, mythological, mystical, and pagan. So, as we'll see, this theory, in the final analysis, is of pagan origin and has no Scriptural support whatsoever.

This View Is Unthinkable

I submit this point out of real burden. For not only is this theory *unthinkable*, it is also quite *objectionable*. The Word of God makes it very clear that angels are "sexless," that is, incapable of physical relations. Matthew 22:30 plainly declares that angels "neither marry nor are they given in marriage." Of course, the proponents of this theory immediately say, "Angels took human form." That is certainly true; angels have, more than once, appeared in human form. These appearances are called "theophanies," physical presentations of Deity. But may we submit that *appearance* is one thing while *incarnation* is quite another. Angels that *appeared* human did not necessarily *become* human.

This is further demonstrated by the fact that Jesus was the only *incarnate* manifestation of God. No angel was ever an incarnation. They were not *human*; they were *spirit*. In his book, *Studies in Problem Texts*, J. Sidlow Baxter includes a lengthy chapter on the identity of the "sons of God," which is the best study I have read on the subject. In it he writes:

As for the suggestion that these evil angels somehow took human bodies to themselves and thus became capable of sex functions, it is sheer absurdity, as anyone can see. Both on psychological and physiological grounds it is unthinkable.³

"Fallen Angel Theory" proponents try to answer this problem by saying that Matthew 22:30 only says that angels "do *not* marry," but that it doesn't say they

could not or *did* not. Others insist that the verse only says that angels *in heaven* don't marry, so perhaps they can *on earth*. But is this not just playing word games? Is not the implication clear that angels are sexless? Why in the world would angels be capable of sex anyway? The whole subject is utter nonsense. And may we add, no other Scripture states that angels married humans. As any first year seminary student knows, to base a teaching on a single Scripture reference (Gen. 6) is bad hermeneutics.

Additionally, this theory is extremely *objectionable*. Think of it! Our dear Savior was an incarnation. Are we to believe that these wicked angels were like Him? In the final analysis this theory brings our Savior down to the level of these fallen angels. In fact, the incarnation of God is no longer something unique. Put bluntly, it makes His incarnation "old news" because it had been done before. No, a thousand times no! We must not allow our Savior to be thus defamed.

This View Is Unscriptural

Again, the "Fallen Angel Theory" maintains that the "sons of God" in Genesis 6 refer to fallen angels who assumed human bodies, cohabited with human women, and produced a race of giants on the earth. It also maintains, however, that *this sin was the main reason for the flood*, and that Jude 6 (along with 1Pet. 3:18-20 and 2 Pet. 2:4) also refers to this. Let us deal with a few of what the proponents of this theory call "proofs" and compare them with Scripture.

First, it maintains that the term "sons of God" (Gen. 6:2) is a title used for angels. Again, this is absolutely true; we find this title used for angels in Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7. But the fact that many ignore is that all three of these refer to *unfallen* angels, not *fallen* angels. Is it not unthinkable that God would ever refer to Satan as "a son of God?" He is, indeed, "the son of perdition," but he would never be a Son of God. Why then would a Scripture writer refer to any other fallen angel as a "son of God?"

We can also point out that Moses mentions angels some fifteen times in the Pentateuch, but not once does he refer to them as "sons of God." The "Fallen Angel Theory" proponent, however, leads us to believe that just this once Moses is referring to "fallen angels." But why? Are we to conclude that Moses was inconsistent or that he had a lapse in thinking?

Second, it maintains that these angels cohabited with human women and produced a race of giants. But this is a violation of Genesis 6:4, which is simply misread by the angel theorist:

There were giants in the earth IN THOSE DAYS; and also AFTER THAT, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they

bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown (emphasis added).

This clearly shows that the “giants” were already on the earth when these events were taking place. *They were not the offspring of this cohabitation.*

It is also important to understand the word “giant,” which has been greatly misunderstood and abused. It simply does not *necessarily* mean “giant” as we think of the word. One reliable Hebrew source makes this clear:

Actually, the translation “giants” is supported mainly by the LXX [the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament] and may be quite misleading. The word may be of unknown origin and mean “heroes” or “warriors,” etc. The . . . transliteration “Nephilim” is safer and may be correct in referring the noun to a race or nation.⁴

So, these were not necessarily “giants,” rather they were “warriors,” “men of violence.” This is further substantiated, in fact, by the context—“the earth was filled with violence” (6:11). Why? Because the earth was filled with these “men of violence.” Right in line with this is our next point.

Third, the “Fallen Angel Theory” maintains that these “giants” were the main reason God destroyed the earth through the flood. But may we submit: *that is simply not what the Scripture text says.* Genesis 6:3 and 5 clearly declare:

And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with MAN, for that HE also is flesh: yet HIS days shall be an hundred and twenty years . . . And God saw that the wickedness of MAN was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of HIS heart was only evil continually (emphasis added).

God’s judgment was poured out on *man*, not angels. While this theory says the “giants” were destroyed in the flood, if this were true, why do we see “giants” in Numbers 13:33? The twelve spies saw “giants” (*Nephilim*, “men of violence”) in the land of Canaan. But how could this be true if these “giants” were killed in the flood some 800 years earlier? Charles Ryrie well summarizes our thoughts thus far:

Nephilim. From a root meaning “to fall;” i.e., to fall upon others because these individuals were men of strength (only other use of this Hebrew word is in Num. 13:33). Evidently they were in the earth before the marriages of Gen. 6:2 and were not the offspring of those marriages from which came the

mighty men (military men) and men of renown (of wealth or power).⁵

Fourth, the “Fallen Angel Theory” maintains that the clauses “even as” and “in like manner” in Jude 6 show that Sodom and Gomorrah sinned in like manner as the “angels” in Genesis 6. But this not only violates the *grammar* but also the *context*. Verses 5-7 contain *three separate historical examples that serve as warnings.* They do not overlap, neither is one like the other; they are completely separate. The angel theorist, however, insists that “even as” and “in like manner” indicate that Sodom and Gomorrah sinned in the same way as the fallen angels of Genesis 6. But, again, both clauses are used simply to emphasize the phrase “are set forth for an example.” We’ll see later who those angels were who “kept not their first estate,” but for now just consider these two verses this way:

The angels who kept not their first estate are set forth as an example, even as and in like manner as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities about them are set forth as examples.

In the same vein, the angel theory also has a very serious problem with the specific sins present in each of these instances. To put it simply, even *if* Jude were saying that these fallen angels sinned in exactly the same way as the Sodomites did, then the angels in Jude *cannot possibly* be the same ones as in Genesis 6. Why? Because the Sodomites were guilty of homosexuality, while the so-called “fallen angels” of Genesis 6 are not guilty of homosexual acts, rather relations with earthly women.

Fifth, the “Fallen Angel Theory” maintains that I Peter 3:18-20 shows that the fall of the angels took place “in the days of Noah.” E. W. Bullinger, who was notorious for his fanciful views in several areas, even maintained that Christ, in His resurrection body, went and preached to these fallen angels! How absurd! If the above passage isn’t enough, farther along in the context we read: “For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead” (4:6). All this clearly shows that *men* were being preached to, not angels. This passage is simply saying that the Spirit of the preincarnate Christ was preaching *through* Noah. But because these men rejected God’s message, they are in prison (*hades*) awaiting final judgment. This view is, in fact, the position of many reliable writers. Older scholarship includes, among others, the rock-solid Puritan commentator Matthew Henry. Twentieth century scholarship includes the beloved Harry Ironside, Charles Ryrie, Roger Raymer in Dallas Seminary’s *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, and others.

Sixth, the “Fallen Angel Theory” maintains that 2 Peter 2:4 also shows that the angels fell “in the days of

Noah.” Of course, the reason these proponents want to show that the angels fell in Noah’s day is because they think this gives credence to the angel’s “invasion” of the earth and their cohabitation with human women. But all this is wasted effort. Note the verse again along with its context (vs. 5-6):

For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly;

It is so obvious that these verses are presenting three separate historical incidents that it’s ridiculous to argue otherwise. In fact, here is one of the several similarities between Jude and 2 Peter 2. The passage in 2 Peter 2 is not teaching that the angels fell in the days of Noah because the incidents are presented as being separate and independent from one other. Much confusion is eliminated when this principle is observed here *and* in Jude 6.

Theologian Louis Berkoff also points out that the “Fallen Angel Theory” actually teaches “a double fall” of the angels: Satan fell through pride, but the other angels fell because of “their lusting after the daughters of men.” He goes on to say, however, that this teaching was “gradually discarded . . . during the Middle Ages” and then adds, “in view of this it is rather surprising to find that several modern commentators are reiterating the idea in their interpretation.”⁶ Indeed, how tragic that many today are still holding to a once discarded view.

We’ll conclude this study in our next issue.

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NOTES

- ¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Alert* (Wheaton: Victor Books), 1984, p. 140.
- ² Joseph Excell, *The Biblical Illustrator, Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), p. 401.
- ³ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Studies in Problem Texts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 152.
- ⁴ Laird R. Harris, et. al. (Editors), *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), Vol. 2, p. 587.
- ⁵ *Ryrie Study Bible* (NASB edition).
- ⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993 reprint), pp. 141, 148.

Too many ministers are toying with the deadly cobra of “another gospel,” in the form of “modern thought.”

Charles Spurgeon, *The Sword and the Trowel* (1887)

Why Doctrinal Preaching Declines

Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

During the last two or three generations the pulpit has given less and less prominence to doctrinal preaching, until today, with very rare exceptions, it has no place at all. In some quarters the cry from the pew was, We want living experience and not dry doctrine; in others, We need practical sermons and not metaphysical dogmas; and yet others, Give us Christ and not theology. Sad to say, such senseless cries were generally heeded: ‘senseless’ we say, for there is no other safe way of testing experience, as there is no foundation for practicals to be built upon, if they be divorced from Scriptural doc-

trine; while Christ cannot be known unless he be preached (I Cor. 1:23), and he certainly cannot be ‘preached’ if doctrine is shelved. Various reasons may be given for the lamentable failure of the pulpit, chief among them being laziness, desire for popularity, superficial and lop-sided “evangelism,” love of the sensational.

Laziness

It is a far more exacting task, one which calls for much closer confinement in the study, to prepare a series

of sermons on say the doctrine of justification, than it does to make addresses on prayer, missions, or personal-work. It demands a far wider acquaintance with the Scripture, a more extensive perusal of the older writers. But this was too exacting for most of the ministers, and so they chose the line of least resistance and followed an easier course. It is because of his proneness to this weakness that the minister is particularly exhorted, 'Give attendance to reading... take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine: continue in them' (I Tim. 4:13,16); and again, "Study to show thyself approved unto God a workman that needeth not to be ashamed" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Desire For Popularity

It is natural that the preacher should wish to please his hearers, but it is spiritual for him to desire and aim at the approbation of God. Nor can any man serve two masters. As the apostle expressly declared, "For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10): solemn words are those! How they condemn them whose chief aim is to preach to crowded churches. Yet what grace it requires to swim against the tide of public opinion, and preach that which is unacceptable to the natural man. But on the other hand, how fearful will be the doom of those who, from a determination to curry favour with men, deliberately withheld those portions of

the truth most needed by their hearers. "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it" (Deut. 4:2). O to be able to say with Paul, "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you...I am pure from the blood of all" (Acts 20:20,26).

A Superficial And Lop-Sided "Evangelism"

Many of the pulpiteers of the past fifty years acted as though the first and last object of their calling was the salvation of souls, everything being made to bend to that aim. In consequence, the feeding of the sheep, the maintaining of a Scriptural discipline in the church, and the inculcation of practical piety, was crowded out; and only too often all sorts of worldly devices and fleshly methods were employed under the plea that the end justified the means; and thus the churches were filled with unregenerate members. In reality, such men defeated their own aim. The hard heart must be ploughed and harrowed before it can be receptive to the gospel seed. Doctrinal instruction must be given on the character of God, the requirements of his Law, the nature and heinousness of sin, if a foundation is to be laid for true evangelism. It is useless to preach Christ unto souls until they see and feel their desperate need of Him.

"Pin not your faith upon men's opinions, the Bible is the touchstone."

The Works of John Owen Vol. 13, pp. 40-41

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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