

## THE SONS OF GOD IN GENESIS 6:1-4

(An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?)\*

WILLEM A. VAN GEMEREN

### INTRODUCTION

WHY does the theology in which creation, miracles, the miraculous birth and resurrection of Jesus have a place, prefer a rational explanation of Genesis 6:1-4? Evangelical writers proffer, instead of the angelic/demonic intermarriage view, the view that the Sons of God are the Sethites and the daughters of man are descendants of the line of Cain or variations of the intermarriage of two classes of human beings. Why do evangelicals prefer the view of the intermarriage of humans, in whatever variety it may be found? This question is more difficult to answer. What concerns me is a seeming inconsistency. Normally, the goal of interpretation has been the elucidation of the Word of God so the community of faith may know what to believe and what to do. When, however, the object of interpretation becomes the removal of apparent obstacles to which the passage may give rise, reinterpretation is introduced, and one may wonder how this differs from demythologization. It is granted that it is hard to imagine how preternatural (angelic, supernatural, demonic) beings have sexual relations with women of the human race and father offspring. But is the difficulty so great that it *must* be removed as something offensive? Is it possible that theology has taken the place of exegesis?<sup>1</sup> Or has

\* This study is a revised form of a lecture given under the auspices of the Harry A. Worcester Lectureship and Publication Fund at Westminster Theological Seminary, February 24, 1976. The author has benefited from a recent discussion of the paper in revised form with Dr. Meredith G. Kline.

<sup>1</sup> D. Poulet's arguments are theological rather than exegetical. He disposes of the preternatural interpretation on the argument: that it is contrary to how we conceive of spiritual beings and what sound theology teaches ("The Moral Causes of the Flood," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* IV (1942), 297.

a philosophical theology explained away the difficulties of Genesis 6:1-4?

The problem is intensified by the seeming simplicity of the explanation. A careful consideration of the linguistic and conceptual data present the exegete of Genesis 6:1-4 with significant problems. The question arises how one of the admittedly most difficult passages in the Hebrew Old Testament is given such a simple, natural explanation as if there were more significant issues elsewhere.

The passage is one of the most difficult pieces of Old Testament literature, in that it has many problems.<sup>2</sup> First, is the passage a prologue, and if it is, how is it related to the Flood narrative? Second, several words contain difficulties which have been treated in articles and monographs:

"Sons of God"  
 "Daughters of men"  
 "my spirit" or "my Spirit"  
 "dwell" or "strive"  
 "nephilim" and  
 "gibborim" (giants).

Third, the flow of the passage is interrupted by the absence of the nexus between verses 3 and 4. The sin of the Sons of God is not specified, and yet it is highly offensive in God's sight, for which reason he judged men. Is the judgment of God (verse 3) related to God's judgment in the Flood? Is the rise of the nephilim-gibborim (verse 4) one of the causes of the Flood? To these problems the issue of the identity of the Sons of God must be added as the *crux interpretum*. Finally, what genre of literature is represented in this section; poetry, narration, saga, myth?

In spite of these difficulties, evangelical writings at times assume that understanding the passage requires a naturalistic, rational frame of mind. Jesus' words that angels are not given in marriage (Mt. 22:30) provides the theological justification for looking in the context for a natural explanation. Others give extensive arguments to provide a "reasonable" explanation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis I* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> G. H. Livingston, "Sons of God" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclo-*

Why is it that evangelicals prefer a natural(istic), reasonable explanation of a passage whose style, vocabulary, syntax, and idioms leave the exegete weary? Several explanations may be given.

### 1. *Genesis 6:1-4 and Mythology*

For one, in critical writings the account has been explained as a remnant of an ancient mythological account in which gods eat, drink, get intoxicated, sleep and can procreate. A Hittite myth has some similarities to Genesis 6:1-4.<sup>4</sup> The myth details the battles between the weather god and Illuyankas, the dragon. The dragon robbed the eyes and heart of the weather god after his defeat. The weather god, unable to engage the dragon again in battle, makes plans for having his organs restored. For this he needs a human being to foil the dragon. He marries "the daughter of a poor man," who bears him a son. When the son was old enough to be married, he was prepared to marry the daughter of the dragon, Illuyankas, with the intent of requesting the return of the eyes and heart of his father. Illuyankas, unfamiliar with the parentage of the young man, fulfills the unusual request. The prospective son-in-law returns the organs to his own father. The weather god, having regained his eyesight and heart, is ready to engage the dragon in battle. He slays the dragon and also kills his son upon his own request.

The myth of the weather god contains the motif of a male god marrying a daughter of man with the intent of using the semi-divine and semi-human offspring for his own purpose. The text breaks off after the death of the son, so it is not clear what happened to his human wife. It is little surprise that the four verses of our pericope have generated controversy and many different interpretations. Does Genesis 6:1-4 include in abridged form a remnant of a Canaanite legend or myth? Is the author setting this interpretation of the legend over against the legends or

---

*pedia of the Bible*, pp. 493f; James Oliver Buswell, Jr., in "Sons of God," *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Merrill C. Tenney, ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1963), p. 806.

<sup>4</sup> W. Beyerlin, ed. *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), D III, 5, p. 158.

sagas of the nations to explain the origin of the nephilim-gibborim? The consensus of modern scholarship responds positively to these suggestions. This opinion is reflected in commentaries on scholarly and popular levels, and it may be found in notes to the English text, as does the New American Bible:

This is apparently a fragment of an old legend that had borrowed much from ancient mythology. The sacred author incorporates it here, not only in order to account for the prehistoric giants of Palestine, whom the Israelites called *the Nephilim*, but also to introduce the story of the flood with a moral orientation — the constantly increasing wickedness of mankind.

It is easy to see how evangelicals today as well as Christians in the Early Church developed an alternate explanation, which was not reminiscent of pagan mythology. The question of demythologization remains a significant issue.

## 2. *Genesis 6:1-4 and Criticism*

Second, the account of the sons of God and the daughters of men is generally considered as related to the narrative of the Flood. Though the offence is not stated, it is assumed that intermarriage of the godly and ungodly descendants of Adam, polygamy, and violence was the wrong for which reason God regretted having made man and decided to destroy the human race except for Noah's family. But the passage does not clearly state the nature of the offence of the sons of God and the nephilim. It seems to be isolated from the narrative of the flood where the violence and the wicked imagination of mankind are judged by God to be the reason for the radical judgment in the flood. Critical scholars show a much greater sensitivity to the text, even when they express in a radical manner that the text (6:1-4) is adrift. Conservative scholars have already assumed the nature of the wrong and have difficulty listening to the arguments by which the text is separated from the immediate context. First, it was suggested that the text contains a fragment of mythology. God forbid! Next, critics do not always see a reason for connecting it as a prologue to the Flood narrative and therefore, the passage is considered to be an intrusion in the Flood story. The

effect of negative criticism is seen in the separation of literary strands and sources and in the judgment that the passage contains a mythological motif. What justification is there in the argument that Genesis 6:1-4 is not in its proper literary context?

First, due to the unusual brevity and due to the unrelated motif of the Sons of God and the flood story, the passage is thought to have been isolated from the surrounding chapters and hence, must be treated separately. According to this view, the section is a part of a larger story which cannot be reconstructed. There are no parallels in the literature of the Ancient Near East. One concludes that the myth is not left intact. Second, the absence of any verbal, linguistic, or thematic connections with the Flood story corroborate the fact that Genesis 6:1-4 is not in its proper place. Possibly it was incorporated by accident as a scribal mistake. Speiser's terse characterization is quite representative: "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."<sup>5</sup> It is assumed that the section is an independent narrative which seems to be like "a cracked erratic boulder."<sup>6</sup> In Gunkel's words, it is a *torso* — a remnant of something once told more fully but abbreviated.<sup>7</sup> The complexity of the linguistic and contextual problems have made an argument for the unity of the larger context more difficult. The discussion of the many problems of the passage kept the focus of scholarship on the text itself and made it impossible to see any connections with Adam's genealogy (chapter 5) and the Flood (chapter 5ff.).<sup>8</sup>

Others agree with the conclusion that the story is an "erratic boulder," but nevertheless attempt to explain how the story was ultimately adopted as a proper introduction to the Flood story. They posit that the final composition belongs to a Yahwist, who in various recensions added it at this place to portray "the cul-

<sup>5</sup> E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Otto Procksch, *Die Genesis* (3rd ed.; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1924); p. 59, was followed in this usage by G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press; rev. ed., 1961), p. 113

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Emil G. Kraeling, "The Significance and Origin of Genesis 6:1-4," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, VI (1947), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), I, 497f.

minating act of human wickedness."<sup>9</sup> The question of why the nature of the wickedness is not explained is still unresolved. If it is intermarriage, why should God's wrath come upon mankind, since there is no apparent condemnation of intermarriage given in Genesis 6:1-4. If it is the rise of the *nephilim*, it is not clear from our pericope what the *nephilim* have done wrong to be singled out as the object of judgment.

## I. THE CONTEXT OF GENESIS 6:1-4

In response to the evangelical concern for these widely held positions, it is first our object to show that the text as it stands is not necessarily misplaced. The problem of the apparent lack of contextual ties is real. If we can establish that the passage is a unit connected to the larger context, the conclusion will lend support to viewing the mixture of the two classes of beings as related to the Flood story. In our method we focus first on the context. The broader connections must be viewed before the details can be put into a perspective.

### A. Linguistic Data

The introductory clause וַיְהִי כִי הֵחֵל הָאָדָם לָרֶב (‘‘Now it came about, when men began to multiply’’) has been construed to have closely followed the account of creation. On first sight there is a semblance of truth to the suggestion that the section followed the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:22-24)<sup>10</sup> or the genealogy of Cain (Gen. 4:17-24 or 4:25f.).<sup>11</sup> Older critics opposed the connection with Genesis 5 on the assumption that it derives from the Priestly source, whereas chapter 4 and 6:1-4 derive from the Yahwist source. Nevertheless, critical scholars admit that any connection with chapters 2-4 is difficult on account of the supposed drastic abridgment of the ‘‘sons of God’’ episode. For want of a better solution it is the prevailing opinion that ‘‘any clear literary relations are difficult to establish.’’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cuthbert A. Simpson, ‘‘Genesis,’’ *Interpreter's Bible*, vol. I, p. 533.

<sup>10</sup> N. C. Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963<sup>2</sup>), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> Habel, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

The phrases *על פני האדמה* ("on the face of the earth") and *בנות בנות האדם* ("daughter"/"the daughters of men") lead us to find literary connections with the preceding chapter. Contrary to critical opinion there is a link between 5:29 and 6:1. The observation that the word *אדמה* ("ground") occurs mainly in chapters 2-4 has supported the supposition that 6:1-4 is a part of the literary unit of chapters 2-4. The difficulty of such a supposition is caused by the failure to observe that the word is also used in chapter 5. Its usage at the conclusion of the chapter, therefore, makes for a verbal transition to the "sons of God" episode. Upon Lamech's naming of his son Noah, he expressed a clear hope of a future deliverance: "This one shall give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground (*מִן הָאֲדָמָה*) which the Lord has cursed."<sup>13</sup> Hence, no need exists to look for a literary relation to Genesis 2-4 as suggested by Habel, on account of the presence of the word *אדמה* ("ground").<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this nexus, the word *בנות* ("daughters")<sup>15</sup> recurs nine times in chapter 5 in the phrase, "so and so begat sons and daughters."<sup>16</sup> Here as elsewhere the phrase "sons and daugh-

<sup>13</sup> The usage of Yahweh and *'adamah* ("ground") viewed as indicative of the J source must not be seen as an explanatory insertion into a P source. Ch. 5 leads up to the story of Noah, whose name explained in 5:29 as "comforter" raises new hopes immediately preceding the dark page in the history of man (6:1-7).

<sup>14</sup> Habel, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> The exegesis of 6:1 favors a connection with chs. 4 and 5. The distinction between the ungodly and the godly lines of the family of man should not be pressed. The incomplete genealogy of Cain's family is purposefully climactic. It ends on the self-exalting taunt song of Lamech. In this manner the family of Cain is reduced to insignificance in God's eyes and the reader is assured of the presence of a righteous remnant at the time of Enosh (4:26). On the basis of the connection of ch. 6 with ch. 5 and the usage of the word "daughters," one could argue that the "daughters of men" are identical with those mentioned repeatedly in ch. 5, the line of Seth. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 112, expressed his difficulty in determining the exact relationship between the two lineages. He considers that possibly the narrator used the genealogy of Cain "to show the increase of sin" and the genealogy of Seth to bring him "down in the history of tradition directly to Noah and the Flood."

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 5:4,7,10,13,16,19,22,26,30.

ters" signifies the many children that were born.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, chapter 5 with its emphasis on man's ability to reproduce himself in God's image suggests that there is a verbal connection with chapter 6:1, 2.

Returning to the clause "when man began to multiply on the face of the land," we consider that 6:1 contains a restatement of chapter 5 similar to the summary of the creation account written to introduce the sabbath (Gen. 2:1-3) and the restatement of the creation of Adam and Eve (5:1,2) before the genealogy of the Sethite line. Curiously, chapter 6 begins with the words "when man began to multiply." In Hebrew the introductory words ("now it came about that, when . . .")<sup>18</sup> has a clear connection with the preceding unit, and introduces a new development. It is a transition from one theme to a different motif, and the chronological aspect is secondary.<sup>19</sup>

### B. *Conceptual Framework*

Another approach to the passage is conceptual. In the book of Genesis we are given four divine judgments: the fall, the flood, the tower of Babel, and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah. In each of these episodes God comes down to see firsthand what has happened and to judge the guilty parties. In the Garden of Eden He walked in the garden and after He called to Adam and Eve ("Where are you?," 3:9) man admitted that he was naked. God made the charge that man had eaten from the forbidden fruit, had disobeyed Him, and therefore was culpable. Based upon the fact of the case the verdict was given (Gen. 3:14-19). The story of the Tower of Babel sets forth the plotting of men in building a tower by which man could make a name for himself so as to defy the divine command of populating the earth (11:3,4). During the outright act of rebellion, God is said to have come down to see what man had schemed (11:5,6). Again, based upon the facts, the verdict was to scatter the people by confounding their means of communication (11:7,8). Similarly, the wickedness of the cities of Sodom, Gomorrah, Adamah, and

<sup>17</sup> Cf. ch. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Gen. 26:8; 27:1; 43:31; 44:24; cf. Ex. 1:21; 13:15, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Similar to *ויהי כאשר* and *ויהי כ*.

Seboim had been "heard" by Yahweh (18:20). Yahweh told Abraham that he had come down to "see" if he had heard properly (18:21). His coming down to see is an anthropomorphic expression to convey in literary style the impending judgment, described in Genesis 19. The incident of the angels in Sodom (Gen. 19:4-11) further illustrates the wickedness of the Sodomites and gives warrant for the destruction of the city.

The conceptual model of judgment includes a statement on the evil perpetrated, God's coming down to see the facts, and the verdict. How do the facts in Genesis 6 fit this model? If the episode of the Sons of God is *not* to be related to the Flood story, why does the narrative of the flood begin with God's "seeing"? "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). The verdict is given thereafter as in the other episodes, "So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth — men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air — for I am grieved that I have made them'" (6:7). The evil perpetrated is not clearly given as in the narratives of man's fall and the building of the tower of Babel. In the story of the overthrow of the four cities of the plain, the account of the homosexual desires of the Sodomites is at least illustrative of their wickedness. What are *the* offences which account for so radical a judgment as the flood? Certainly the context gives reason for believing that the wickedness was so great that it had to be dealt with, "So God said to Noah, 'I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth'" (6:13). If the episode of the Sons of God is not related to the Flood narrative, the judgment is unique, in that the reason is not explicitly stated. On the other hand, the model seems to be complete when the episode of the Sons of God is taken as a prologue, giving some indication of the iniquity in which mankind involved itself so as to fill the earth with "violence."

### *Conclusions*

In summary, the passage is hedged in between the genealogy of Adam and the story of Noah, the central figure of the Flood

narrative. Its connections with the preceding chapter (5) are mainly linguistic: אָדָם ('adam, "man" or "Adam"; 5:1; 6:1, 2,3,4), (אֲדָמָה, 'adamah, "land," "earth"; 5:29; 6:1), בָּנוֹת (banot, "daughters"; 5:4,7,10,13,16,19,22,26,30; 6:1,2,3), יָלְדוּ (yuldu, "were born"; 6:1, from the root (yald, "to bear"; cf., the repeated use of וַיֹּלֵד (wayyoled, "and he begat," from the root yald, "to bear"; 5:26,28,30,32). The connections with the next section also show verbal links: הָאָדָם (ha-adam, "man"; 6:5,6,7).

The passage also has a nexus with 6:5-8. The phrase יְהוָה וַיֵּרָא ("Yahweh saw"; 6:5) is God's assessment of the situation. In the narrative of the Tower of Babel we have a parallel. After the expression of the human motivation, God's judgment is introduced with these words וַיֵּרַד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת ("Yahweh came down to see"; 11:5).<sup>20</sup> The passage connects the existence of the *nephilim-gibborim* (verse 4) and God's assessment of the situation: "the evil of man (הָאָדָם) is great" (4:5) by a linguistic device. God is said, in anthropomorphic terms, to have regretted creating man (הָאָדָם, verse 6). Consequently, he will destroy man from the earth (מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה), from which he was taken. The repetition of the Hebrew words הָאָדָם, "man," and הָאֲדָמָה, "earth," has the literary function of tying together the birth of Noah (chapter 5), the intermarriage of the Sons of God with the daughters of man (6:1-4), and God's judgment of man in the form of the Flood (6:5ff.).<sup>21</sup> The passage (verses 1-4) sets the context for the Flood. It is a literary bridge between the genealogy of Seth leading to Lamech, who expressed his hope of deliverance from man's toil in Noah's generation (5:29), and God's tribute paid to Noah, the man who with his family would be exempted from the Flood (6:7,8).

The linguistic relationships and the conceptual model permit us to see the unity of the material. I agree that the unity is not so apparent as to make the critical arguments invalid. The flow from the genealogies, to the episode of the Sons of God, and finally to the narrative of the Flood seems to go forward and then backward. Even within chapter six the story of the Flood has several starting points:

<sup>20</sup> Cassuto, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Psa. 14:2 (. . . יְהוָה מִשְׁמַיִם הִשְׁקִיף עַל בְּנֵי אָדָם.)

- a. the episode of the Sons of God (1-4) ;
- b. the corruption of mankind (5-8) ;
- c. the generations of Noah (6-12) ;
- d. God's command to build the Ark (13-21).

The argument leading up to the necessity of the Flood is therefore composite: the Sons of God and the rise of the *nephilim-gibborim* (1-4), the wickedness of man's imaginations (5-8), and the violence of mankind (9-13). From a critical perspective, Brevard S. Childs came to the same conclusion:

The story serves as an example in 6.5 of the ungodly conditions before the flood. Disregarding the difficulty that mankind in general is punished for the sins of the "sons of gods," the Yahwist has worked this material into his "history." It serves as a plastic illustration of the increasing sinfulness of man before God. The magnitude of sin is seen in the appalling fact that even the divine beings transgress the established order of the creator.<sup>22</sup>

## II. THE IDENTITY OF THE SONS OF GOD

The second issue concerns the identity of the Sons of God. The issue is not only what the exegesis of the text may demand, but also how its conclusions fit our understanding. Camps are easily drawn up, so that the proponents of differing view may have problems in hearing one another. The hermeneutics of the passage demand careful attention to several problems: What is the significance of the phrase "daughters were born to man" (בנות אדם)? Is it not to be expected that daughters are born? Why are the daughters of man singled out as being beautiful? How are we to understand the contrast: Sons of "God" and the daughters of "man?"

### A. *Daughters of "Man"*

The first question pertains to "the daughters of man." The introductory phrase "when man began to multiply" recaptures past events. It relates to both chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4, "the

<sup>22</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1960), p. 57.

man" (verse 1, אָדָם) became the father of Cain, Abel, and Seth. The genealogy of Cain includes mainly prominent male leaders of the clan and one lady, Naamah, sister of Tubal-Cain. Chapter 5 returns to the genealogy of Adam (אָדָם) and gives the genealogy from Adam through the line of Seth to Noah and his three sons. The reference to "the man" (אָדָם; cf., Gen. 1:27; 2:7; 8:15,16,18-23,25; 3:8,9,20,22,24; 4:1) may suggest that Adam ("the man" of 4:1) was first in fathering daughters. This suggestion is not quite out of line, as we are informed that Adam begat sons *and daughters* (5:4). It is most appropriate to read 6:1 as a summary statement of chapters 4 and 5, and especially of chapter 5 with the repeated emphasis that the men in the genealogy of Adam via Seth begat daughters (5:4,7,10,13,19,22,26,30). The word *ha-adam* ("man") is generic, and this usage is supported by the context, since the prepositional phrase ("daughters were born to *them*") must be read as referring back to a plural subject. Hence, daughters were born to many *men*. The context relates directly to the daughters of chapter five, but one goes too far in limiting it to the Sethites. The verse simply tells us that more daughters were born than one might expect based upon a superficial reading of chapters 4 and 5.<sup>23</sup>

What is the relevance of the observation that daughters were born? Abraham Kuyper explained it as an unusual phenomenon, whereby the number of girl babies increased.<sup>24</sup> The sudden increase of the percentage of women to men might favor the view that polygamy was the wrong committed and that the text hereby explains the circumstances in which the evil arose. Attractive as this view may be, the birth of the daughters to men (אָדָם) is to be related to the next verse, according to which the sons of God see the daughters of man (אָדָם) are beautiful (literally "good"). I agree with the traditional translation of "beautiful" instead of "good." The quality of moral goodness is not in view. The word "good" is a shortened form of the idiom "good in appearance."

<sup>23</sup> W. H. Gispen, *Genesis I: Kommentaar op het Oude Testament* (Kampen: J. H. Kok), p. 251.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *De Engelen Gods*, p. 65; cited by Gispen, *ibid.*, p. 215.

The beauty of the women has an important bearing on the exegesis. I do not think that it gives warrant for the view that the mere physical beauty led the "sons of God" to lust carnally. Calvin comments that the daughters of men were beautiful to the sons of God through the eyes of lust which led to their marriage "without discrimination, rushing onward according to their lust."<sup>25</sup> The element of lust introduces an idea foreign to the text and prejudices the case. All that can be said here is that the attractive appearance of human daughters made them appealing to the sons of God.<sup>26</sup>

The suggestions of polygamy and lust have been associated with certain interpretations of "the Sons of God." It is better not to read too much into the observation that "daughters were born to men" and the observation that they were "beautiful," lest conclusions are adduced to the passage which are not transparent.<sup>27</sup> It is sobering to recognize how difficult it is to read the passage without preconceived ideas and even more how the exegete can analyze every word and phrase and yet have difficulty in coming to a synthesis. Thus, the absence of any reference to "sons of man" should not suggest that only girl babies were born. The Old Testament genealogies rarely include references to girls or women, and from this one should not conclude that the ratio of men to women was unfavorable. The intent of the authors is rarely to provide the twentieth-century historian with the information he desires. All we have here is an observation that "girls" were born and that the girls were attractive in looks. We are not even told to what genealogy "the daughters of man" belong, whether to the genealogy of Seth or Cain. A possible reading from Genesis 5 to Genesis 6 may suggest that the daughters descended from Seth. How else can one explain the repeated refrain: "and he begat sons and daughters?" However, this suggestion contradicts the view according to which the sons of God are the Sethites and the daughters of man are identified with the female descendants of the line of Cain (chapter 4). The reference to "the daughters of man" cannot be limited to the

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 294.

<sup>26</sup> Cassuto, *Genesis*, p. 294.

<sup>27</sup> Poulet rejects sensuality and lust as the moral cause of the flood, "Nothing in the sacred text justifies this explanation, and it is now generally discarded that its refutation would be superfluous" (*op. cit.*, p. 294).

genealogy of Seth or Cain. They are the daughters of *man*. They belong to the category of human beings of the feminine gender.

### B. *The Sons of God as Sethites*

The second question pertains to the identity of the "Sons of God." As we focus on the *central* question of the passage, exegesis again seems to be tied to traditional understanding and attachment. In the past couple of hundred years the debate of the theological, exegetical, and critical issues has led interpreters into different camps. The conclusions are associated with other than exegetical considerations. Those who hold that the sons of God are preternatural (divine) beings also hold to the view that Genesis 6:1-4 is a piece of raw mythology or that the ancient Israelites used the pagan myth and demythologized it to fit in the confessional framework of Israel's faith.<sup>28</sup> Fewer Old Testament scholars favor the point of view of an intermarriage of human beings.<sup>29</sup> Conservative scholars have strongly argued against the intermarriage of angelic (divine) beings with human females. Among those opposing the intermarriage of the angelic beings with humans are Keil and Delitzsch.<sup>30</sup> Their carefully set forth arguments, together with William Henry Green's exposi-

<sup>28</sup> Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 55f.; Cassuto explains the verses as a polemic against pagan myths. The Canaanites held to the tradition of viewing the giants as demigods, born from the union of gods and the daughters of men. This section sets forth that they are after all flesh, even though they may have a supernatural origin. "Following her usual procedure, the Torah explains how the giants came into being, and from what is stated we can infer that which is rejected. The giants are not at all related — Heaven forbid! — to the Deity, but only to 'the sons of God,' that is to say, to the Divine household, to the attendants of God, and actually to the lowest order of them. Every word is carefully weighed. The Torah was deliberately brief, confining the subject to a few verses, as though she wished to say that the episode was entirely uncongenial to her, and was not mentioned for its own sake, but only so as to disabuse the reader's mind of certain concepts." Cassuto, "The Episode of the Sons of God and the Daughters of Man," in *Biblical & Oriental Studies*, I (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1973), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 502 ("Die Stimmen, die für die Menschen-  
deutung eintraten, sind zurückgegangen")?

<sup>30</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.), 131-38.

tion<sup>31</sup> on these verses, provide the most stimulating apology for the intermarriage of the Sethite and the Cainite families. John Murray summarized the arguments in an appendix in his significant work on ethics, *Principles of Conduct*.<sup>32</sup> In a manner characteristic of Murray the lengthy arguments of Keil, Delitzsch, and Green are reduced to several pages of extremely worthwhile reading. These arguments against the "angel" theory are here further reduced to the bare bones in seven theses:

1. The divisions of "the daughters of man" and "the Sons of God" are drawn from the human family.
2. The genealogies given in chapter 4 (the family of Cain) and in chapter 5 (the family of Seth) provide the background for the distinctions of "daughters of men" and "Sons of God."
3. The phrase "the Sons of God" also applies to human beings and applies properly to the godly family of Seth.
4. Scripture is silent on the sexual functions of angels or demons.
5. The phrase "and they took wives for themselves" is the Hebrew idiom for a legal marriage relationship and can hardly refer to an unnatural relationship.
6. The judgment is inflicted on men (6:3), not on angels.
7. The *nephilim* are not necessarily the offspring of the intermarriage between the sons of God and the daughters of men.

According to this reconstruction of the events, the Sons of God are men of the genealogy of Seth. Their sin lies in marrying with women from the line of Cain. Moreover, the phrase "and they took for themselves wives, whomever they chose" is considered to be an allusion to the multiplication of wives. Therefore, the Sethites sinned by marrying outside of the godly family and by multiplying wives, just because of the physical attractiveness of "the daughters of man." Their indiscriminate marriage

<sup>31</sup> William Henry Green, "The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, V (1894), 654-60; and *The Unity of the Book of Genesis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), pp. 53-61.

<sup>32</sup> John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 243-249.

is interpreted by the beauty of the line of Cain. This intermarriage, on the one hand, endangered the purity of the godly line, and with that the promise of God and, on the other hand, it explains the widespread corruption at the time of the flood in that the offspring did not fear God.

The human intermarriage view has enjoyed a place in the history of the interpretation. From the third century on (Julius Africanus) and especially in the Syriac church, the Sethites have been identified with "the Sons of God." Luther and Calvin both chose in favor of this view. According to Luther the Sons of God are those male descendants who had the promise of the *protevangelium* (Gen. 3:15),<sup>33</sup> and Calvin posits that the Sons of God enjoy the status of being related to God by the decree of eternal election.<sup>34</sup>

Criticism has been leveled, however, against the exegetical consideration given in support of the seven theses. Among the critics are those who hold to a human marriage view, but find that theses two and three are questionable, and for this reason they posit several different interpretations. The strongest argument is the lack of exegetical warrant in making arbitrary separations between the descendants of Adam. As we have stated above, the close link to chapter 6:1-4 is chapter 5, and according to this chapter man in his various generations "begat sons and daughters." Since the genealogy of Seth is traced in chapter 5, it is not farfetched to assume that the "daughters of man" are at least the daughters born to the family of Seth. In the intermarriage theory one must also differentiate between the usage of "man" in verses 1 and 2. In verse 1 the usage of the word man is generic. It states in the most general way that man began to multiply. However, the usage of "man" in the phrase "the daughters of man" (verse 2) denotes the line of the Canaanites exclusively. The contrast is *not* between a man as a large group and man in a more limited sense, rather it is between "the Sons of God" and "the daughters of men." Therefore "the daughters of men" must signify any female whether of the family of Cain or Seth or of Adam's other sons and daughters (5:4).

<sup>33</sup> *Luther's Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 129.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 238.

M. G. Kline also argues against thesis 7.<sup>35</sup> He is convinced that the *nephilim-gibborim* (verse 4) are the offspring of the marriage mentioned. If this is not the case, verse four stands by itself. Then, we have *another* fragment with no apparent relation to the context.

In view of his expressed reservations with theses 2, 3, and 7, Kline considers the spiritual interpretation of "the Sons of God" as godly men to be anachronistic.<sup>36</sup> The interpretation that "the sons of God" are the "children of God" is so unique in Genesis that it demands "a more plausible explanation for its appearance there than can be readily discovered."<sup>37</sup> Constrained by the force of these objections, Kline expressed the following judgment: "Unless the difficulty which follows from this conclusion can be overcome, the religiously mixed marriage interpretation of the passage ought to be definitely abandoned."<sup>38</sup>

Gispen, likewise, considered the serious objections against the human intermarriage view. Among the objections and problems he mentions the absence of contextual connections of 6:1-4 with chapter 5; the lack of clear identification of the Sethites with "the sons of God"; the problem of how the *nephilim* were born into families of mixed marriage; the strange supposition that only the daughters of the line of Cain were beautiful; and to the difficulty of positing two separate meanings for "man" in verses 1 ("mankind") and 2 ("the Cainites"). He observes rightly that the clue to the interpretation lies in the *contrast* between "the Sons of God" and "the daughters of man."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 189; cf. Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1960). The conservative exegete Leupold observed independently that "the bringing forth of daughters is being considered as taking place throughout all mankind" (*Exposition of Genesis* [Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1942], p. 252). The absence of distinctions based on those supposedly drawn in chs. 4 and 5, is an argument in favor of the angel view, as Murray also observed that the absence of the distinctions drawn within the human family "gives plausibility to the argument that 'the sons of God' must refer to preter-natural beings" (p. 245).

<sup>36</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> Gispen, pp. 218,219.

### C. *The Sons of God as Rulers*

There are two major variants of the human marriage view. They avoid several objections as raised by Kline, Gispén, and others. An ancient Jewish interpretation gives an alternative to the theologically sticky problem of angelic marriage by the novel suggestion that the word אלהים in the Old Testament may denote "judges"<sup>40</sup> or "magnitude, strength."<sup>41</sup> The consistent avoidance of anthropomorphisms led to the widespread view that "the Sons of God" of our passage are to be identified with nobles, princes, or heroes who married girls outside their rank and status.<sup>42</sup>

The sin of the nobles was that they looked at the "daughters of man" with sensual desire and took great numbers into their harems. The sensuality and lust was the expression of their sinful hearts. Writing from a Jewish perspective, Hertz expresses the point of view well: "These marriages were the result of mere unbridled passion, and are an indication of the license and oppression of that time."<sup>43</sup> However, how does this explain the presence of the *nephilim-gibborim* (thesis 7)? It is again assumed that there is no relationship.

The *nephilim-gibborim* are considered to be loosely connected to the narrative. Their existence brings out the perverse condition of mankind, which was oppressed by men who gained for themselves a reputation as heroes with no or little regard for the rights of others. Rashi reiterated a popular etymology of *nephilim*. They were called nephilim in that "they fell (*naphlu*) and led the world to its fall (*hippilu*)."<sup>44</sup>

### D. *Sons of God as Dynastic Rulers*

Some interpreters are in basic agreement with the human kingship view, but object to the easy manner in which the

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Exod. 21:6; 22:8,9,20; Psa. 82:6.

<sup>41</sup> Jonah 3:3,4; Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon des Alten Testaments*, p. 52.

<sup>42</sup> Cassuto, "The Episode of the Sons of God and the Daughters of Man," *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, I (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973), 18.

<sup>43</sup> Hertz, *Pentateuch* (London: Soncino Press, 1965), p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Rashi, *ad loc.*

*nephilim-gibborim* are dismissed as a separate issue altogether. Kline moves beyond the traditional point of view by understanding the passage from the ancient Near Eastern conception of kingship. The expression "Sons of God" is taken as an ancient designation of kings who were honored as divine or theocratic rulers. The idiom "Sons of God" is a title which functions as a "genuinely theistic expression honoring these potentates in their office."<sup>45</sup>

Consistent with the usage of "daughters of men," Kline points out that the "divine" kings took to themselves any wife, whether from the line of Cain or of Seth. The nature of the transgression is thought to lie in *polygamy*.<sup>46</sup> The children, born out of the relationship of the aristocrats and the wives of the harem, characterize themselves by a flagrant disobedience against God's laws and established institutions. They are to be identified with the *nephilim-gibborim*, who were intent on making a name for themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Support for the sacral kingship may be found in the phrase "sons of the Most High" (Psa. 82:6). The parallel expression of "sons of the Most High" is "gods," as we read, "I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the most High'" (Psa. 82:6). The theocratic ruler receives the title of "god" and "son of the Most High." Other passages may be considered in favor of the thesis that theocratic kings were in a sense considered like God.<sup>48</sup> The Hebrew word God (אלהים) does not distinguish between Yahweh God and judges and kings who are at times entitled as "gods." The argument receives further support if Melamed's reconstruction of the text is right. In his penetrating analysis of Hebrew stereotyped phrases, he poses two problems of Psalm 82:6: (1) no human being addresses another human being with the words "you are gods"; the phrase בני עליון occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament.<sup>49</sup> It is his contention that compound

<sup>45</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Exod. 21:6; 22:7,8,27, in English versions vv. 8,9,28 translated "judges."

<sup>49</sup> Ezra Zion Melamed, "Break-up of Stereotype Phrases as an Artistic Device in Biblical Poetry," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961), VIII, 118f.

linguistic stereotypes may be broken up into two components for poetic effects. The original of the expression in Psalm 82:6 may have been אֱתֵם כְּלַכֶּם בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים עֲלִיּוֹן.<sup>50</sup> On the basis of such a reconstruction, the sacral kingship view would receive scriptural support, since kings are entitled to the honorary position of being "Sons of God Most High."

In this interpretation the rule of the sacral kings (Gen. 6:1-4) was marred by tyranny. Kline finds an exegetical connection between Cain's line in which urbanization, industrialization, and arts are combined with oppression and threats of tyranny (chapter 4). Lamech's polygamy and readiness cruelly and mercilessly to avenge himself is an expression of how the dynasty of Cain developed. Kline connects this description with 6:1-4, in which the progress of tyranny and polygamy have reached their apex. The sin of the generation of the Flood is found in the uncontrolled development of human leadership without regard for God. They viewed themselves as divine potentates and as such they may well have called themselves "sons of God." The children born out of the relationships more evidently manifest the character of their parents. Autonomy, tyranny, and an utter disregard for God and man gave way to an avalanche of sin which could only be stopped by God's special intervention.<sup>51</sup>

### E. *Objections to the Kingship Hypothesis*

Apart from the seeming lack of continuity between the genealogy of Cain (chapter 4) and the description of "the Sons of God" and the rise of the *nephilim-gibborim* (6:1-4), there are several other issues to be considered. First, the expression "sons of God" is used in contrast to "the daughters of man."<sup>52</sup> Cassuto presses

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Psa. 57:3; 78:35,56. The first objection remains unresolved, unless the current identity of the sons of God with the gods is accepted (cf. Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 502).

<sup>51</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>52</sup> Cassuto, "The Episode," p. 19. Keil observed "the antithesis" but rejected it on the basis of non-linguistic considerations (p. 128). The cases cited (p. 130) to minimize the antithesis generally do not relate to the matter. Murray was likewise struck by the contrast: "Genesis 6:1-3 does appear to lend support to the view that 'the sons of God' are non-human. We should naturally suppose that 'the daughters of men' represent

this point hard and, in my opinion, it seems to be a proper exegetical consideration. Since the phrase *ha-'adam* (הָאָדָם, "man"; 6:1,2) denotes mankind generically, Hebrew grammar dictates that "the daughters of *man*" refer to the female offspring, regardless of the family relationship. Any interpretation of בני האלהים short of divine beings does not satisfactorily appreciate the "balanced contrast"<sup>53</sup> of these verses. Hence, I agree with Cassuto who wrote: ". . . it is clear that the former (בני האלהים) pertains to beings outside the human sphere."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the usage of *bene ha'elohim* (בני האלהים, "Sons of God" in Genesis 6:2) as "divine kings" is so significantly unique in Scripture and particularly in the Book of Genesis that we should expect an additional explanatory phrase.

Though the above interpretation of Psalm 82:6 seems to favor the sacral kingship view, we observe that we do not have a complete parallel expression. I am willing to accept Melamed's thesis that there are many examples of broken linguistic stereotypes. It is known that the idiom אל[הים]עליון occurs in the Old Testament (Gen. 14:8; Psa. 57:3) and that the idiom may be broken up, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells" (Psa. 46:4). However, the breaking up of the idiom is rare and it is not a good exegetical step to argue from this text or any other verses where the king could be considered as "God" to the conclusion that the phrase "sons of God Most High" is functionally equivalent to "Sons of God" in Genesis, in that the real question still is whether the sons of God are kings. One expects that additional explanation be given in the context, justifying why the usage of "Sons of God" to denote "angelic beings" (Job 1:6; 2:1) is not relevant in Genesis 6:2.

An objection to all variants of the "human marriage" view is the usage of בני האלהים or בני אלים in the Book of Psalms 29:1;

---

mankind and that those designated 'sons of God' must not only be contrasted with the women of mankind but also with mankind. We might expect that if the contrast were simply between 'daughters' and 'sons,' that is between the women and the men, the distinction would be drawn in terms of 'the daughters of men' and 'the sons of men' (*op. cit.*, p. 244).

<sup>53</sup> Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> Cassuto, "The Episode," p. 19.

139:6, Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7, and the Septuagint text of Deuteronomy 32:8 — supported by a Hebrew fragment at Qumran<sup>56</sup> — the phrase denotes angelic beings.<sup>56</sup> As the expression **הַאֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי** is elsewhere a technical term referring to angelic beings, we cannot assume that it is in some way semantically equivalent to “son” with reference to Israel<sup>57</sup> or to divine kings.<sup>58</sup> Were we to find the phrase **הַאֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי** employed with respect to the Israelites,<sup>59</sup> judges, or kings, a case might be made to broaden its meaning to include all human beings — a point in favor of the spiritual interpretation of **בְּנֵי הַאֱלֹהִים**. Were it to be clearly shown that kings and “sons of God” are synonyms, three problems beg an answer. First, the expression in Genesis 6:2, **הַאֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי**, is not clearly explained as a reference to kings. Second, there is no place for the contrast between “the Sons of God” and “the daughters of man,” since both classes belong to the category of “people.” Third, what is the reason for the reference to the *nephilim-gibborim*? Are they merely “giants” by their acts of violence, or do the words also denote men of special stature?

Partly in appreciation of the contrast and partly because the idiom “the Sons of God” nowhere refers to the members of the covenant community, Kline concluded that the Sethite inter-

<sup>56</sup> P. W. Skehan, “A Fragment of the ‘song of Moses’ (Deut. 32) from Qumran,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 136 (1954), 12.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Cassuto, “The Episode,” p. 19 (“ . . . we may conclude that an examination of the structure of the verses before us and of the usages of the Hebrew tongue make it evident that **בְּנֵי הַאֱלֹהִים** can only mean *angels*”).

<sup>57</sup> In recognizing plausible grounds for the angelic explanation Keil claims to be led by the context and the tenor of the passage. We wonder whether the “first” explanation that suggested itself to Keil was rejected in favor of the established interpretation of the Sethite intermarriage. “. . . these two points would lead us *most naturally* to regard the ‘sons of God’ as angels, in distinction from men and the daughters of men. But this explanation, though the first to suggest itself, can only lay claim to be received as the correct one, *provided the language itself admits of no other*” (p. 128, emphasis ours). He answered our question in admitting that “these passages show that the expression ‘sons of God’ cannot be elucidated by philological means, but must be interpreted by theology *alone*” (p. 128, emphasis ours).

<sup>58</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-94.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Keil, *op. cit.*, p. 128; Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 54f.; Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 246, thesis 6.

marriage view had to be abandoned.<sup>60</sup> In turn, Cassuto used the same argument against any interpretation other than divine beings: "When, therefore, we find in our section the expression *בני האלהים* without any *explanatory* addition, we have no right to attribute to it a connotation other than that which it *normally* has in the Bible."<sup>61</sup>

In addition to these questions, what is the wrong involved in the marriage of "the Sons of God" to the daughters of man? The supposition that the wrong lay in the multiplication of wives, must be inferred from the text, since it is not clearly stated.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, though the validity of an interpretation of Scripture may be tested by external literary data, we cannot agree with the supposition that a theme prominently treated in the Sumerio-Babylonian epic tradition must have a counterpart in the biblical narrative.<sup>63</sup> There is presently no clear evidence in support of the argument that the Sumerio-Babylonian tradition knew of a kingship which brought about the Flood. Alexander Heidel specifically contends that though the Flood was sent because of man's sin, the epic "does not give us any clue as to the nature of man's offence."<sup>64</sup> The fragmentary tablet of Nippur<sup>65</sup> deals with the themes of creation, kingship,<sup>66</sup> and the flood. The record of each of these themes is broken off so that no clear connection is drawn

<sup>60</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, pp. 191ff. "Nevertheless, the use of the designation 'sons of God' for members of the covenant community would be isolated in the context of the Book of Genesis and would moreover be so remarkable as to demand a more plausible explanation for its appearance there than can be readily discovered."

<sup>61</sup> Cassuto, "The Episode," p. 19 (emphasis ours); cf. Skinner *op. cit.*, p. 141 ("The *sons of God* . . . are everywhere in Old Testament members [but probably inferior members] of the divine order, or [using the word with some freedom] *angels*.")

<sup>62</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 196. Cassuto opposes the idea of a harem and straightforwardly suggests the translation that each Son of God chose for himself a desirable wife (p. 295).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 225; cf. p. 268.

<sup>65</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>66</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 44, sees a correspondence between the *Sumerian Kings List* and the ten generations between Adam and Noah and the ten generations between Noah and Abraham.

nor to be inferred from the lacunae. Nothing can be assumed about a relation between these topics until a better copy of this text is discovered. In view of these reservations, we cannot agree with Kline's conclusion: "It appears then that the theme of antediluvian kingship centering in cities under the hegemony of various gods *constituted the main introductory motif* in the Sumero-Babylonian flood traditions."<sup>67</sup>

The variants of the "human marriage" view have thus far not proved to be satisfactory. The linguistic, semantic, and literary considerations adduced to establish each one of these variants fail in one aspect or another to be compellingly attractive.

I agree with Gispén that Kline's alternative is an excellent example of good scholarship and sensitivity to the text, even where he goes against "hallowed" traditional views. Gispén is hesitant in deciding in favor of Kline or a variant of the angelic marriage view. However, certain questions have been raised and with a great deal of hesitation I present the following proposals for further reflection. I have not yet been persuaded by any of the above proposals of the human intermarriage view. Kline's alternative has answered many questions, and yet it is not wholly satisfactory. Therefore, my proposal follows his observation,

. . . what has contributed most to the continuing dominance of the mythical (or at least angelic) interpretation of the passage has been the absence of a satisfactory alternative.<sup>68</sup>

### III. PROPOSALS

A. We propose that any reinvestigation of the "angelic" interpretation must be clearly set off from the dominant critical view according to which 6:1-4 is a mythological fragment incorporated into the biblical text.

1. The current critical view, according to which these verses

<sup>67</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 199 (emphasis ours); cf. Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 141, "The Babylonian Flood — legend also is free from any allusions to giants, or mingling of gods and men."

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 188f.

were arbitrarily put into the present order of the text as an "erratic boulder" has no support.<sup>69</sup>

2. No connection exists between the passage and pagan mythology.<sup>70</sup> The shift in identification of "sons of God" from Sethites to beings belonging to the class of god has been viewed as a support for the mythological interpretation.<sup>71</sup> Yet, the assumption that the Israelites demythologized a Canaanite myth in which the sexually motivated love of the gods for the human beauties gave rise to a super-race is completely unacceptable to the teaching of the Torah.<sup>72</sup> It is not sufficient to suppose that the "editor" of Genesis drastically abridged the work so as to remove those elements inconsistent with Yahwism.<sup>73</sup>

3. The passage does not belong to a class of aetiological myths.<sup>74</sup> Those who primarily view the story aetiologically propose that the passage in the first place gives an explanation of the origin of the *nephilim-gibborim*,<sup>75</sup> and secondarily gives reason for the shortened span of human life.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>69</sup> See Introduction, Section 2 above; Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>70</sup> Westermann, *op. cit.*, pp. 498ff., 514ff.; Childs, in *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, subsumed Genesis 6:1-4 under the heading "Myth in Conflict with Old Testament Reality" (emphasis ours).

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Westermann (*op. cit.*, pp. 499ff.) for an account of the shift as well as excellent bibliographical references. In German works the change in idiom is noticeable: *Göttersöhne* instead of *Gottessöhne*.

<sup>72</sup> Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 115. Cassuto finds no point of contact with pagan mythology. He finds in the passage a contradiction of pagan myths "without a direct polemic" ("The Episode," p. 24). As such the purpose of the narrative is to teach: "Do not believe the gentile myths concerning men of divine origin who became immortal. This is untrue, for in the end all men must die, בשגם הוא בשר, because they, too, are flesh" (p. 26). However, Yahezkel Kaufman *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), viewing the section as a mythical fragment, did not think that it was foreign to the faith of Israel. "It was not felt to be foreign, however, because its protagonists on both sides are creatures of God, not God himself. That any conscious censorship had been at work to purge these stories of pagan features is improbable in view of the folk naïveté that permeates the legends of Genesis 2-11" (p. 68).

<sup>73</sup> Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

<sup>74</sup> Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>75</sup> Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

<sup>76</sup> Habel, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Von Rad correctly observed that "the special aetiological concern of the ancient myth cannot move forward after the 'demythologization' practised by the editor."<sup>77</sup> If it is assumed that the passage is an "erratic boulder" cut out of a rock of unknown origin, how can we reconstruct the original purpose and significance? The passage is not arbitrarily placed here. Any aetiological purpose of the story is only a twentieth-century guess.

4. The passage is not a fragment of ancient material which after a gradual process of demythologization came to serve as an introduction to the Flood narrative.<sup>78</sup> Westermann expressed his reservations with Child's view that J employed the story of the intermarriage as an illustration of the sinfulness of man which brought the Flood upon mankind. He posits that the whole of the J narrative grounds the necessity for the Flood in the multitude of man's transgressions (chapter 3; 4:2-16; 6:1-4; 11:1-9).<sup>79</sup>

B. We propose that the ancient "angelic" interpretation must be reinvestigated. The tradition is extremely ancient.<sup>80</sup> After a popularity in the apocalyptic literature<sup>81</sup> and in Rabbinic Judaism, it declined in favor along with the apocalyptic elements which had gained an official status in Judaism of the first century A.D.<sup>82</sup> In the early centuries of Christianity an angelic interpretation was widely held by the Church Fathers.<sup>83</sup> Though Murray accepted the Sethite intermarriage view, he was impressed with the case for the angelic explanation based on interpretations of I Peter 3:19. He cautiously stated:

Most recently Bo Reicke . . . and E. G. Selwyn have ably

<sup>77</sup> Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>78</sup> Childs, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>79</sup> Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

<sup>80</sup> Cassuto, "The Episode," p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), pp. 249ff.

<sup>82</sup> Poulet, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>83</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) provides references to the works of Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria (p. 256). Poulet, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

presented the case for this interpretation of I Peter 3:19 and, by implication of Genesis 6:1-3. Without question, if I Peter 3:19 refers to angelic beings, whether exclusively or partially so as to include also the disembodied souls of men, this interpretation would necessarily turn the scales in favour of the view that the sons of God in Genesis 6:1-3 were angelic beings.<sup>84</sup>

The difficult passages in I Peter 3:19,20 and Jude 6,7 will have an important bearing on the discussion of Genesis 6:1-4 and we welcome further insights from New Testament scholars.

(1) The problems with all variants of the "human marriage" view leave no satisfactory alternative to the ancient "angel" interpretation. Theological objections against the angelic marriage with the daughters of men must be re-studied in the light of what Scripture teaches about the nature of angels. No inferences should be drawn from the silence of Scripture. Elsewhere angels may appear in human form, dressed as men, eat, drink, walk and are subject to being molested (Gen. 18:1,2,8; 19:1,5). Here we are dealing with fallen angels who apparently have no regard for God.

(2) Any contextual interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 must recognize its limitations. Defenders of the "human marriage" view have admitted that the exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4 favors the "angel" view.<sup>85</sup> We believe that, despite the brevity of the passage, the complexity of the issues and the linguistic problems, the "angel" view solves more exegetical problems than the "human marriage" view can account for.

(3) The exact offence of the marriage is not stated. In the reconstruction of the human marriage, the wrong is assumed to lie in the intermarriage of the godly Sethites with the

<sup>84</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 246; Poulet, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Kline's positive remark: "It has been a merit of some who have thought that they found in this passage a preternatural intrusion into earthly history, a sort of pseudo-messianic embodiment of demonic spirits in human flesh, that they have sensed more fully than the advocates of the traditional exegesis, the titanic, one might almost say the eschatological, character of the ancient crisis" (pp. 192f.).

daughters of Cain. The mere statement of the relationship of angels with the daughters of men needs no further explanation as to the wrong involved. It clearly contradicts the marriage ordinance (Gen. 2:24).

(4) The perverted nature of man's thoughts (6:5) may be inferred from 6:3. Being under God's judgment since the Fall, man made an attempt to circumvent God's plan (*Grenzüberschreitung*) by being enticed to the Satanic scheme of intermarriage with demonic beings with the hope of ultimate prolongation of life. The resultant super-race, produced by the intermarriage of "the sons of God" and the daughters of men,<sup>86</sup> is in God's judgment still *בשר* ("characterized by flesh", verse 3). Hence it is also observed that the super-race of the *nephilim-gibborim* was characterized as belonging to the earth (*בארץ*, verse 4). To crush the attempt of introducing man into the realms of the divine, God sovereignly and justly judged man<sup>87</sup> to death in the Flood. As a perpetual judgment on man's wickedness, the human race is under the divine limitation on longevity, characteristic of those generations before the Flood. The life span of man is reduced to 120 years. The judgment stands in stark contrast to the aim of man to obtain everlasting life (*לא ידון רוחי לעולם*) — "my [life giving] spirit will not abide in man forever".<sup>88</sup>

(5) The argument that the "sons of God" as angels are not judged assumes that all that happened is revealed or at least that all that is revealed is completely revealed. We hold to the sufficiency of Scripture pertaining to faith and life, but it does not mean that all is revealed. The lot of the angelic beings was not in the direct interest of the author of Genesis 6:1-4. However, an intimation may be gained

<sup>86</sup> The consecutive verbs used in Gen. 6:2-5 support the assumption of a transgression-sin-judgment narrative. In 3:6 and 9 the verbs *ראה*, *לקח* and *אמר* indicate the actions involved in the transgression ("saw" and "took") and in God's judgment ("said"). Again in 6:2-5 we find the verbs "saw" and "took" and "said."

<sup>87</sup> Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

<sup>88</sup> Speiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 126f.; Cassuto, *Commentary, ad loc.*; Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum AT*, I, 208

from Jude, "And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home — these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day" (verse 6).

(6) A modification of the angelic view is not impossible and deserves all consideration. In Hebrew the phrase "the Sons of God" may refer to any being which is not man and not God. The language is not precise.<sup>89</sup> They may be angels, demons, or one could even conceive of demon-possessed men who took to themselves wives, who were not possessed. Gispén feels a strong attraction to this possibility, "It is difficult to make a definite choice. To assume the demonic background has many advantages. However, one must accept that the text presents us with men who are controlled by fallen angels."<sup>90</sup>

On the basis of our exegesis and the exegetical results of students of the text, we provide the following translation:

When men began to multiply on the earth and daughters were born, the Sons of God noticed that the daughters of mankind were attractive and they married those whichever they chose. Yahweh said: My [life giving] spirit will not abide permanently in man, since he is flesh. His days will reach 120 years! In those days and also later, after the Sons of God had cohabited with the daughters of men, the *nephilim* appeared on earth. These were the heroes of old, men of renown.

Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Jackson, Mississippi

<sup>89</sup> Cassuto, "The Episode," pp. 22, 23.

<sup>90</sup> Gispén, *op. cit.*, p. 221.