

The Sons of God and the Nephilim: A Historical and Theological Survey

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Introduction

Few passages in the Hebrew Bible have generated as much curiosity and controversy as Genesis 6:1–4. These enigmatic verses introduce “the sons of God,” their union with “the daughters of men,” and the mysterious offspring known as the *Nephilim*. This passage, serving as a prelude to the judgment of the flood, has been interpreted in quite a few ways throughout both Jewish and Christian history. Central to the debate is the identity of the “*sons of God*” and the nature of the *Nephilim*. There are two major interpretive streams:

1. The Sethite View interprets “sons of God” as the godly line of Seth intermarrying with the ungodly line of Cain.
2. The Angelic View interprets “sons of God” as divine beings or fallen angels who cohabited with human women, producing a hybrid race.

This article will briefly survey the major positions among modern scholars, and then provide a historical overview of how the Church Fathers and various Christian thinkers have understood Genesis 6 and the Nephilim across the centuries.

Scholarly Debate: The Nature of the “Sons of God” and the Nephilim

1. The Angelic Interpretation

This is the older of the two primary views and has deep roots in Second Temple Judaism, the Septuagint, and the Book of Enoch. According to this view:

- The term “sons of God” (*bene ha’elohim*) refers to angelic beings.
- These beings took human women as wives, violating divine boundaries.
- Their offspring, the Nephilim, were a hybrid race of giants or semi-divine beings, contributing to the corruption that led to the flood.

Supporting Evidence:

- The term *bene ha'elohim* elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7) consistently refers to heavenly beings.
- 1 Enoch elaborates upon this narrative with vivid apocalyptic imagery, describing the descent of 200 Watchers to Mount Hermon.
- The Septuagint renders *Nephilim* as *gigantes* (giants), reinforcing the hybrid or monstrous interpretation.
- New Testament passages such as 2 Peter 2:4–10 and Jude 6–7 appear to reference the sin of these angels, connecting it with sexual immorality and divine punishment.

2. The Sethite Interpretation

This view emerged primarily in the post-Apostolic era and became dominant in the Western Church during the 4th and 5th centuries. According to this view:

- The “sons of God” refer to the righteous descendants of Seth.
- The “daughters of men” refer to the ungodly descendants of Cain.
- The Nephilim are either tyrannical humans or metaphorically referred to as “giants” in terms of power and violence.

Supporting Arguments:

- Emphasis on human sin rather than supernatural rebellion as the cause of the flood.
- A desire to avoid mythologizing Scripture with what later interpreters saw as pagan or fantastical elements.
- Jesus’ statement in Matthew 22:30 that angels “neither marry nor are given in marriage” was interpreted to preclude angelic-human sexual unions.

3. Hybrid or Watcher View (Revisited)

A growing number of modern scholars, including Michael S. Heiser, John Day, and Loren Stuckenbruck, argue that the angelic interpretation is the original and correct one.

- These scholars emphasize the ancient context of Genesis, showing that its worldview aligns with Second Temple Jewish texts that present cosmic rebellion and divine beings overstepping their bounds (e.g., 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and the Dead Sea Scrolls).

- They note that later reinterpretations—such as the Sethite view—reflect theological discomfort rather than fidelity to the texts.

II. Early and Later Christian Interpretations of Genesis 6 and the Nephilim

1. Second Temple Judaism

Before surveying the Church Fathers, it's important to note that Second Temple Jewish literature overwhelmingly favors the angelic interpretation:

- 1 Enoch (chs. 6–16): Expands Genesis 6 into a cosmic rebellion narrative, where angels called *Watchers* descend, take human wives, and produce giants. The punishment of the Watchers is linked with the final judgment.
- Jubilees (5:1–11): Affirms the same view and associates the Nephilim with demonic activity.
- Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE – 50 CE): While sometimes allegorical, Philo accepted the idea that “sons of God” were angelic beings (*De Gigantibus*).

2. Early Church Fathers (1st-3rd Century)

Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165)

- Affirmed the angelic interpretation.
- In *Second Apology* 5, he attributes the rise of demons to the fallen angels who sinned with women.

“God, in the beginning, made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right... But the angels transgressed this appointment; and were captivated by love of women, and begat children who are those that are called demons.”

Athenagoras (2nd Century)

- In *A Plea for the Christians*, defends the Christian faith against charges of superstition by affirming that the giants were the offspring of angelic beings.



The Sons of God

Irenaeus (ca. 130–202)

- In *Against Heresies* (Book IV, ch. 36), he affirms the angelic interpretation and connects it with the corruption of humanity.

Tertullian (ca. 160–225)

- Strongly affirmed the Enochic interpretation.
- In *On the Apparel of Women* (Book I, chs. 2–3), he defends the authority of 1 Enoch and sees it as canonical Scripture, asserting that the “sons of God” were angels who produced the giants.

Commodianus (3rd Century)

- In *Instructions* 3, writes of the “giants” born from angels and women.

3. Middle Patristic Period (4th–5th Century)

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

- Rejected the angelic interpretation and became the most influential proponent of the Sethite view.
- In *The City of God* (Book 15, chs. 23–24), he argues that angels cannot physically copulate with women and that the passage must refer to the sons of Seth.

“It is not to be believed that angels, who are spirits, could have bodily intercourse with women.”

- His influence ensured that the Sethite view became dominant in the Western Church for centuries.

John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407)

- Rejected the angelic view, favoring the human line interpretation.
- Emphasized moral and ethical corruption rather than cosmic rebellion.

4. Later Eastern and Western Traditions

Eastern Orthodox Theologians

- The Eastern tradition retained more openness to the supernatural reading.
- Many Byzantine writers referenced Enochian traditions, though not all explicitly affirmed the hybrid Nephilim view.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

- In *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas dismisses the idea of physical union between angels and humans.
- Follows Augustine's reasoning that spiritual beings cannot physically procreate.

Reformation and Post-Reformation Writers

- Martin Luther and John Calvin both followed the Sethite view, seeing the angelic interpretation as mythological.
- Calvin, in particular, argued that the plain reading pertains to intermarriage between faithful and unfaithful humans.

5. Modern and Contemporary Thought

- The 19th–20th century saw a revival of interest in the angelic view through the rediscovery of the Book of Enoch and increased engagement with Second Temple Jewish texts.
- Scholars like E.R. Goodenough, R.H. Charles, and, more recently, Michael Heiser (*The Unseen Realm*) and Timothy Gombis have championed the return to the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers.
- Evangelical scholars are increasingly open to the idea that Genesis 6 describes a real incursion of rebellious spiritual beings, consistent with the worldview behind passages such as 1 Peter 3:19–20, 2 Peter 2:4, and Jude 6.

Conclusion

Throughout Church history, the interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4 and the identity of the Nephilim has undergone significant development. The earliest Jewish and Christian interpreters, including the writers of Enoch, Justin Martyr, and Tertullian, took the account at face value, believing that divine beings had violated the heavenly order and produced monstrous offspring. However, with the rise of theologians like Augustine, the Church increasingly preferred a more "rational" and human-centered explanation—the Sethite view.

In the modern era, however, scholars are increasingly returning to the original cosmic reading, informed by ancient Near Eastern context and Second Temple Jewish literature. While the issue remains debated, it serves as a case study in how worldview, theology, and textual context shape biblical interpretation across the ages.

Select Bibliography

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