

SONS OF GOD, DAUGHTERS OF MEN, AND GIANTS:  
AN EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 6:1-4

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## I. Introduction

If one is to properly understand the Christian faith, a believer must seek to understand the writings of the Pentateuch. Even Jesus made it clear that the Pentateuch, the books of Moses, are a prerequisite to the Christian faith: “Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; it is Moses who accuses you, on whom you set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (Jn 5:45-47 RSVCE) <sup>1</sup>

One passage in the books of Moses that is, on the surface, difficult to comprehend can be found in the beginning of Genesis 6.

When men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose. Then the LORD said, “My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown. (Gn 6:1-4)

This passage lends itself to several questions to understand what the author seeks to convey. First of all, a reader must identify to whom the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” refer. Second, a he must understand the meaning and purpose of God’s decree that “his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.” (Gn 6:3) Third, it seems important to properly understand what is meant by the “Nephilim” and “mighty men that were of old” since these terms not infrequently cause confusion to the modern reader. This discussion will examine each of these questions in turn from the perspectives of modern scholarship, the Fathers of the Church, and the living magisterium as found in the Catechism.

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<sup>1</sup> Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994). All scriptural citations will be based on this version unless otherwise indicated.

## II. Who are the “sons of God” and “daughters of men”?

The first question that this paper will examine is the identity of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” within the text. There are three common interpretations. First, the sons of God may refer to gods or angelic beings and the daughters of men to humans. Another interpretation presents the sons of God as ancient dynastic rulers and the daughters of men as their harems. Finally, sons of God may indicate the descendants of Seth and daughters of men the descendants of Cain.<sup>2</sup>

Some would identify the sons of God as angels in a similar way to the phrase’s use in Job 1-2. Indeed, some scriptural translations make this interpretation explicit in the text. For example, the International Standard Version (ISV) contrasts the two groups in this phrase as “some divine beings” and “human women.” (Gn 6:2 ISV) The Scriptural text in the Anchor Bible similarly translates the two terms as “divine beings” and “human daughters.”<sup>3</sup> The *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* goes so far as to categorically state, “The phrase ‘sons/children of God’ always denotes superhuman beings in the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>4</sup> The explanatory footnote in the *New Jerusalem Bible* notes that this seem to be a retelling, without indication of veracity, of the story of giants, offspring of gods and mortals. It further notes that the phrase “sons of God” seems to be taken as clearly indicative of angelic beings, specifically, fallen angels, to the later Jewish and early ecclesiastical writers. It is only as the understanding of angels as immaterial beings becomes more accepted that the interpretations of this term morphs to mean the

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<sup>2</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook On the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> E A. Speiser, trans., *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 1, Genesis (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Gene M. Tucker and Mark Allan Powell, “Sons of God, Children of God,” ed. Mark Allan Powell, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (Revised and Updated) (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 985.

descendants of Seth.<sup>5</sup> The footnotes of the Catholic Study Bible also take this as a given interpreting “sons of God” as “celestial beings of mythology.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, in so doing, this text is relegated to mere myth. All of these seem to build from the linguistic parallel between the sons of God in this usage in Genesis and that in Job. However Orchard and Sutcliffe, in the *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* observe that it is, “illegitimate to introduce this late use into this passage against the context both immediate and remote.”<sup>7</sup> There is, it should be noted, a further difficulty in this interpretation. If the sons of God in fact refer to angels or other divine beings, then it seems unjust that God would punish man for the sins of angels as he does when he pronounces sentence limiting man’s life. (Gn 6:3)

The second interpretation that is proposed is that of dynastic rulers and their harems. This interpretation falls prey to the same problem as finally identified in the previous interpretation: the punishment is leveled against the innocent, not the guilty. If the sin were only on the part of the rulers, it would not seem right that God should punish the unjust along with the just. Clearly, while this seems unlikely, it is not impossible as exemplified in David’s punishment for taking a census of Israel in 2 Samuel.<sup>8</sup> However, it does not seem the most frequent of God’s punishments. Indeed, in the story recounting Abraham’s intervention on behalf of Sodom, the injustice of punishing the innocent alongside the guilty is the very argument that he proposes to God.

The third interpretation, and that which this discussion will accept as most plausible, is that the sons of God refers to the descendants of Seth whereas the daughters of men refer to the

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<sup>5</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Senior and John J. Collins, *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible, Including the Revised New Testament and Psalms, Translated from the Original Languages with Critical Use of All the Ancient Sources*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>7</sup> E. F. Sutcliffe, “Genesis,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. Bernard Orchard and Edmund F. Sutcliffe (Toronto; New York; Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1953), 189.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook On the Pentateuch*, 62.

descendants of Cain. This can be seen as likely based on linguistic parallels, for example, the sons of God who took them as wives which echoes the account of Lamech who “took two wives.” (Gn 4:19) It is to be noted that there is a role reversal in this parallel, but that should not be seen to make the interpretation untenable.<sup>9</sup> This interpretation also flows directly from the lineage of Seth that was discussed immediately above in Genesis 5, which concludes with the birth of Noah. Knecht extends this interpretation to modern times in *A Practical Commentary on Holy Scripture* by identifying the sons of God as, “those who do God’s will, who live in the grace and love of God, and who strive after heavenly things.”<sup>10</sup> It is to be noted that this does not necessarily imply a specific sex to either group, but rather, as is common in scripture, marriage language which requires speaking of men and women rather than simply descendants. This reflects the thought of Augustine that will be discussed later.

### **III. What is the meaning and purpose of God’s decree that “his days shall be a hundred and twenty years”?**

A second question to be asked is closely connected to the first: What does God mean when he imposes a limit on mans days and why is such a limit imposed? There are two possible interpretations of the meaning of this sentence, and the sin that it is punishing.

The meaning of the sentence as it is imposed can either refer to a more concrete limit on the life of the individual or a foreshadowing of the flood, which is to take place in 120 years.<sup>11</sup> The former interpretation seems to be the more simple stated in the text, and it is proposed in *A Practical Commentary on Holy Scripture*,<sup>12</sup> but many other scholarly sources acknowledge this

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<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook On the Pentateuch*, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Justus Knecht, *A Practical Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London; St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1910), 38.

<sup>11</sup> George Leo Haydock, *Haydock’s Catholic Bible Commentary* (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1859), Ge 6:3.

<sup>12</sup> Knecht, *A Practical Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 39.

interpretation, but give more credence to the latter. The Anchor bible notes that the English rendering of the text as “abide in” is “a guess lacking in any linguistic support.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, it proposes the translation that God’s spirit “shall not shield man,”<sup>14</sup> a translation more explicitly indicating the flood as the meaning of the 120 year sentence. *The New Interpreters Bible* shares this interpretation and adds the reflection that, since there is a causal link implied in the language between man’s flesh and this limit, it is, in fact, an act of mercy by God since a fleshly body is prone to wear out.<sup>15</sup>

The idea that God’s statement points to the duration before the flood seems to fit better in several commentaries. For example, *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* asserts that this “cannot be to the length of individual lives because the sentence of mortality had already been passed on man and many are reported later to have lived much longer than 120 years.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, it compares the sentence to that in Jonah 3:4 in which Jonah declares that Nineveh is to be destroyed. In much the same way, God declares the destruction of mankind. Unlike the city of Nineveh, however, man did not heed its warning, and failed to repent, so the sentence was carried out.<sup>17</sup> Hamilton seems to prefer this interpretation also, and he further notes a parallel in the New Testament. Paul, in writing his second letter to the Thessalonians, predicts the coming of the “Man of lawlessness” who will deceive many. This time before he comes, while he is being held back serves, like Jonah, and like God’s pronouncement of sentence in Genesis 6:3, as a time when grace is available.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, both interpretations of this text are plausible.

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<sup>13</sup> Speiser, trans., *The Anchor Bible*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 1:383.

<sup>16</sup> Sutcliffe, “Genesis,” in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, 189.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook On the Pentateuch*, 64.

From there, one must determine why this sentence is imposed. This answer is frequently related to the interpretations of “sons of God” and “daughters of men.” If the definition of the perpetrators of the sin is accepted as angelic or divine beings, then the sin is clearly one of unnatural union. If they are kings, then the sin is polygamy. If they are the descendants of Seth and Cain, respectively, then the sin is the commixing of the righteous with the ungodly. The verse can also be divorced from the previous verses to simply refer to the increasing wickedness of mankind.<sup>19</sup> Of the three explanations, the first two, divine beings and kings, seem inappropriate since the sentence extends far beyond either group. In the case of the divine beings, they would be immune from any punishment since the punishment that God imposed would be sufficient to kill flesh, but not to harm immaterial beings. If the “sons of God” were the kings and secular rulers, then it would be unusual, although not entirely alien as noted above, for God to impose such a broad punishment.

Therefore, it seems most likely that the sentence is punishment for continued and increased wickedness of man, which was spread wide by the intermixing of the righteous sons of God, the descendants of Seth with the earthly daughters of man, the descendants of Cain. This punishment could be seen to take the form of either a shortened individual lifespan, which would be gradually imposed,<sup>20</sup> or a deluge to destroy the wickedness of mankind before which God offered a 120-year chance for repentance.

#### **IV. What is meant by the “Nephilim” and “mighty men that were of old”?**

The terms “Nephilim” and “mighty men that were of old” cause no little confusion to modern readers and even to those of past years. The most common of the problematic

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<sup>19</sup> This is implied but rejected in *The Anchor Bible*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Haydock, *Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary*, Ge 6:3.

translations and interpretations of this passage refers to the Nephilim and mighty men as “giants,” a translation that is to be found in the Septuagint. These are frequently identified as “such as the poets describe, tearing up mountains, and hurling them against heaven.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, they should be understood to be imposing in stature, but not necessarily to a mythical proportion. Furthermore, the implication is that they are warriors and feared. The transition from righteous men to Nephilim seems to have followed the offspring of Seth, “who had lived hitherto with great temperance, but now gave full scope to their passions, and the love of the fair daughters whom *they chose*,” therefore, “we need not wonder that they should be amazingly strong and violent.”<sup>22</sup>

It is noteworthy that the word “Nephilim” is the same used in Numbers 13:33. That later reference could be related to this in one of three ways. First of all, they could be one and the same race, but that seems problematic since they would have perished in the deluge. Second, the usage in Numbers could be seen to be a metaphorical usage by the Hebrew spies to call to mind these mighty men of old.<sup>23</sup> Third, the reverse could be true; the passage could have been set to paper for a contemporary audience in the time of Moses and used a contemporary people, the Nephilim, as an analogue for those in the antediluvian age.<sup>24</sup>

The Catholic Study Bible makes the relationship between the Nephilim of Genesis and that of Numbers explicit by asserting that the text is present to “account for the prehistoric giants of Palestine.”<sup>25</sup> The scholarship behind the New Jerusalem Bible takes another approach and treats this portion of the text as little more than mythic legend. This interpretation rightly notes

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<sup>21</sup> Haydock, *Haydock’s Catholic Bible Commentary*, Ge 6:4. Haydock both acknowledges and rejects this interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> Haydock, *Haydock’s Catholic Bible Commentary*, Ge 6:4.

<sup>23</sup> Speiser, trans., *The Anchor Bible*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1994), 1:383.

<sup>25</sup> Senior and Collins, *The Catholic Study Bible*, 14.

that the passage does not make an explicit assertion of fact nor textually relegate the story to the realm of legend. Rather, according to this thought, the “anecdote of a superhuman race simply [serves] as an example of the increase in human wickedness which was to provoke the Flood.”<sup>26</sup> Both of these explanations, however, seem insufficient from a Catholic context since they fail to take into account any possibility for a properly literal meaning of the text, but rather relegate this difficult text to the realm of legend. *The Interpreter’s Bible* stops short of relegating the story itself to legend, but it instead marks it as a victim of overtelling and hyperbole. Men who were merely imposing became giants and the offspring of a union between human and divine.<sup>27</sup>

It seems the most likely interpretation of these terms escapes the translation of the Septuagint as “giants,” but rather falls into a description and a name. It is not necessary to define either term as giants as the Septuagint does for both, but instead “Nephilim” can refer to the name of the people and “the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown” (Gn 6:4) to their description. Whether the term “Nephilim” itself refers to the Antediluvian people or the contemporary residents of Canaan to Joshua’s spies is immaterial to a robust understanding of the text in question. Based on the available information, either interpretation is plausible.

## V. The Living Tradition

The answers from contemporary scholarship have now been briefly discussed. However, since any proper interpretation of Sacred Scripture must take place within the spirit and context of the Church and under her guidance, this examination will now look to the Fathers and the magisterium for insight to this passage. As before, this section will take the form of a brief reflection on each of the previously examined questions.

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<sup>26</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible in Twelve Volumes* (New York;Nashville: Abington Press, 1952), 1:533-37.

An interpretation of the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” is not offered from magisterial documents from recent centuries; however, the Fathers made frequent mention of this question. For example, Pseudo-Clement of Rome proposes the following interpretation: “the human race also having multiplied, in the eighth generation, righteous men, who had lived the life of angels, being allured by the beauty of women, fell into promiscuous and illicit connections.”<sup>28</sup> While this does not perfectly match the definition above, it certainly reflects it at some level. Ephrem the Syrian explicitly asserted the interpretation proposed above, however, that the “sons of God” refers to the descendants of Seth and the “daughters of men” to those of Cain.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most authoritative support for this interpretation within the tradition comes from Augustine. In *City of God*, he rejects the idea that the sons of God are angels: “those angels were not angels in the sense of not being men, as some suppose, Scripture itself decides, which unambiguously declares that they were men.”<sup>30</sup> Instead, he asserts, “the sons of Seth formed a connection with the daughters of Cain.”<sup>31</sup> It must be admitted, however, that this interpretation is not unanimous. Alexander of Lycopolis interprets passage as “a species of fable...[signifying] that the nutritive powers of the soul descended from heaven to earth.”<sup>32</sup>

The second question, that of the explanation for God’s sentence of a 120 year term, is cited in the Catechism in the context of the penultimate statement in the creed: “I believe in the

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<sup>28</sup> Pseudo-Clement of Rome, “Recognitions of Clement,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, the Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. M. B. Riddle, vol. 8 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 85.

<sup>29</sup> Ephrem the Syrian, “Commentary on Genesis 6.3.1” in Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture. Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 124.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series: St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 304.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Alexander of Lycopolis, “Of the Manichæans,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. James B. H. Hawkins, vol. 6 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 252.

resurrection of the Body.” The Catechism cites this statement from God to define “flesh” as man in his state of weakness and mortality.” It goes on to say, “The ‘resurrection of the flesh’ (the literal formulation of the Apostles’ Creed) means not only that the immortal soul will live on after death, but that even our ‘mortal body’ will come to life again.”<sup>33</sup>

The Fathers varied on their interpretation of this sentence. Many held to the interpretation that this was a limit on the individual’s life for various reasons. For example, Lactantius asserted that God gradually reduced the lifespan of man in order to limit the evil he could conceive in a single lifetime.<sup>34</sup> The interpretation of the 120-year span indicating the respite prior to the deluge can be found in, among others including Ephrem the Syrian, Jerome, and Augustine. In Augustine’s understanding, this sentence “is not to be understood as a prediction that henceforth men should not live longer than 120 years,—for even after the deluge we find that they lived more than 500 years,—but...120 years were predicted as being the remaining span of those who were doomed, which years being spent, they should be destroyed by the deluge.”<sup>35</sup>

The identity of the Nephilim is not mentioned in magisterial teachings of the Church. However, the Fathers do not hesitate to discuss them. It is clear that the translation of this term as “giants” in the Septuagint affected much of the thought on the question. Jerome, in his tenth letter, refers to the “the ungodliness of the giants.”<sup>36</sup> Augustine notes that the giants were not necessarily the results of the union between the sons of God and the daughters of men, but they

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<sup>33</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 258.

<sup>34</sup> Lactantius, “The Divine Institutes,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. William Fletcher, vol. 7 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 63.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 305.

<sup>36</sup> Jerome, “The Letters of St. Jerome,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series: St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 11.

were already in the world.<sup>37</sup> Neither of these necessarily interprets the term giant to mean that of legend, though; rather, they leave the size that the giant would be undefined. Ambrose takes this argument a step further and equates the Nephilim, the giants, with men who take care of only their body at the expense of their souls.<sup>38</sup> It is perfectly imaginable from this interpretation that the term giant could be imposed solely as a reference to an intimidating physique and stature rather than one of mythical proportions.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Genesis' few verses opening the account of the Flood have caused no little confusion and discussion among readers. Several interpretations for the literal sense of the text are proposed in this discussion that properly respect the intention of the sacred author and provide the foundation for the deeper truths that are being proposed in the text. Of these, the most helpful is the understanding that the passage refers to the Sethites intermarrying with the Cainites and thereby growing in imprudence and vice rather than wisdom and virtue. From this union, wicked mankind descends to ever more violent tendencies and, after a merciful respite of 120 years, is finally destroyed so that the new creation may begin with the new Adam in Noah.

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<sup>37</sup> Augustine of Hippo, "The City of God," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 304.

<sup>38</sup> Ambrose of Milan, "On Noah" in in Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture. Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 126.

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