

The identity of the sons of God in Gen 6:1–4 – brief survey of the interpretation

Tożsamość synów Bożych w Rdz 6,1–4 – krótki przegląd interpretacji

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Gen 6:1–4 is one of the most intriguing and obscure texts of the Hebrew Bible. The story it tells is set within the realm of the antediluvian world, which was already suffering consequences of the earlier disobedience of Adam and Eve. Gen 6:1–4 is a report on one of many abuses to the cosmic order created by God. Mysterious figures of sons of God take wives for themselves from among women (daughters of men) on earth. In reaction to this the Creator puts limits to human lifespan. Finally *nefilim* are born to this world. They are the offspring of the earlier mentioned unions. They are not less mysterious than their fathers. As far as the interpretation of the story is concerned the key problem has always been the identity of *the sons of God*. The following study will present a spectrum of difficulties and solutions offered over the centuries for the interpretation of *the sons of God* periscope.

1. Gen 6:1–4 – text and composition

The story is in fact one of the shortest in the Hebrew Bible. Authors differ in judging its literary value. For instance J. Westermann considered it “cracked

erratic boulder”¹. For H. Gunkel it was “a torso” or “a fragment”². Consequently both authors did not give much of a credit to the literary value of Gen 6:1–4. That opinion seems to be shared by many contemporary authors as well³. Sometimes though one may find quite contrary opinions. For example S. Fockner holds that the unit at stake “presents itself as a carefully structured, unified text”⁴. D. L. Petersen argues for the story to be a complete and coherent narrative. His arguments are quite persuasive and I am very much in favor of them.

Petersen points out to the fact that even though the story is short it contains a complete plot. The action is first placed in a temporal setting, then *the sons of God* see women and take them for their wives. As a result to this sequence Yahweh enters the stage and puts limits to human lifespan. From then on humans would not live longer than 120 years. “The narrative may be compressed, but it is in no way a fragmentary plot. The verses comprise a complete narrative structure”⁵.

For Petersen the story reaches its climax when God enters the stage. One might expect his intervention only after the wives of *the sons of God* gave birth to the *nefilim*, because that’s presumably the main concern for Yahweh. Considering the image of God who is in control of everything in this world the order of the verses may seem somewhat strange. However, Petersen argues, the sequence of the events in the narration is meant to emphasize the direct answer of Yahweh to the situation that fell out of control when his heavenly helpers went down to earth. God is acting preventively⁶.

Finally Petersen observes that Gen 6:1–4 belongs to the narrations in the antediluvian history, which move from state x, through action and punishment to state y. It was first C. Westermann to discover this pattern. He called the stories containing it *Schuld–Strafe (sin–punishment) stories* (cf. Gen 2:4b–3:24; 4:1–16; 6:1–4; 6:5–7:24; 11:1–9). Typical to their structure is „the violation, speech of condemnation and punishment”. There are however a few things that differ in Gen 6:1–4 from the standard form determined by Westerman. First

¹ Cf. J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Eng. trans.), Edinburgh 1885, 317.

² Cf. H. Gunkel, *Genesis übersetzt und erklärt*, HKAT, Göttingen 1901, 59.

³ Cf. R. S. Hendel, *Of Demigods and the deluge Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4*, JBL 106.1 (1987) 13–26 [14].

⁴ Cf. S. Fockner, *Reopening the discussion: another contextual look at the sons of God*, JSOT 32.4 (2008) 435–456 [455].

⁵ Cf. D. L. Petersen, *Genesis 6:1–4, Yahweh and the Organization of the Cosmos*, JSOT 13 (1979) 47–64 [48].

⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, 48.

of all, in Gen 6:1-4 there is no punishment per se. A speech of condemnation and punishment were combined into one single “speech act”. Secondly, even though no man or men are guilty here, humanity is the party judged. Thirdly, as we earlier observed, the typical sequence of completed action followed by punishment has been inverted. Such deviation from the expected classical form is an example of irony, a situation in which what we expect is reversed totally, a situation in which what is said conveys a criticism of the implicit incongruity. Hence Gen 6:1-4 is not only ironic in tone, but also in form. In short, from the literary perspective, Gen 6:1-4 is a complete narrative which is couched in ironic tone, and is, as well, an ironic version of a genre typical to the primeval history, the *Schuld-Strafe story*⁷.

Consequently I don't agree with the claims that the story we deal with here is incomplete or that due to its alleged incongruity makes any analyses futile. Nevertheless, a challenge to exegetical explanations is still there. It is basically related to the identity of *the sons of God*. It was not difficult to note that Petersen believed that they were divine beings – i.e. *angels*. This is actually one of the two main approaches to the whole issue of *the sons of God's* identity in Gen 6:1-4 that have developed over the centuries.

2. The identity of *the sons of God* in Gen 6:1-4

In 1972 C. Westerman in his commentary on the Book of Genesis suggested that the discussion on the interpretation of Gen 6:1-4 was closed. *The sons of God* were to be viewed as *angels* and the whole story was supposed to be a mythical insertion that originally developed without any connection to the Flood account. According to Westerman those who did not accept this consensus betrayed “dogmatic biases”⁸. This authoritative statement however has not stopped the discussion on the subject. Twelve years later R. C. Newman commented on the state of affairs related to the interpretation of our story speaking of “a strange status quo”. He observed: “Liberal theologians who deny the miraculous, claim the account pictures a supernatural liaison between divine beings and humans. Conservative theologians, though believing implicitly in angels and demons, tend to deny the passage any such import”⁹.

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, 48-49.

⁸ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, Darmstadt 1972, 74.

⁹ R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, „Grace Theological Journal” 5.1 (1984) 13-36 [13]. C. M. Kaminski, *Beautiful Women or 'False Judgment'? Interpreting Genesis 6.2 in the Context of the Primaeval History*, JSOT 32.4 (2008) 457-473 [458], holds

Finally G. J. Wenham noted that there have been three most serious interpretations concerning the identity of *the sons of God* among contemporary exegetes:

- a) angelic – they supernatural beings such as angels, demons or spirits;
- b) royal – they are mighty, superior men such as kings or rulers;
- c) traditional Sethite – they are godly men, descendants of Seth, as opposed to godless descendants of Cain¹⁰.

It may also be repeated after R. C. Newman that there are in fact two kinds of interpretations: “supernatural” (seeing supernatural creatures in *the sons of God*) and “nonsupernatural” (considering *the sons of God* as humans)¹¹. I will follow this distinction in my paper.

2.1. Supernatural (angelic) interpretation

This interpretation is the oldest and still the most supported among contemporary commentators. There are three arguments used in support of it: first, there are other texts in the Old Testament where *sons of God* is a designation for godlike creatures (cf. Ps 29:1; Hb 1:6). Secondly, in Gen 6:1–4 there is clearly contrast between *sons of God* and *daughters of men*, where the latter most surely represent the human race. Thirdly, in the Ugaritic pantheon *sons of God* were members of the divine board and it is very probable that in Gen 6:1–4 the expression is used in a similar sense¹². Of course, among the supporters of this interpretation the most common claim is that those godlike beings are just angels. J. E. Coleran believes that other biblical texts favor that very understanding of *the sons of God* as angels. On the other hand he observes that the idea of people being sons of God is quite common in the Old Testament. God calls Israel his “first born son” (Ex 4:22; Deut 14:1; 32:5; Ps 72:15)¹³.

K. Coblenz Baultch notes that already three centuries before Christ that interpretation was attested to in some apocalyptic writings. It is clearly reflected in the myth of the fallen watchers (angels), which we find in first book belonging to *Corpus Henoichicum*, namely in the Book of Watchers. The latter in its present form was composed around the third century before Christ and

that „most scholars agree that the beauty of the daughters of humankind is central to the story”.

¹⁰ Cf. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Nashville 1987) 139–140.

¹¹ Cf. R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4, 13*.

¹² G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 139.

¹³ J. E. Coleran, *The sons of God in Genesis 6,2*, 495

probably contains even older traditions. The story clearly draws on the account of Gen 6:1-4, but it also significantly differs from it¹⁴. For instances, in Gen 6:1-4 there is no mention of any punishment for *the sons of God*, whereas the Book of Watchers presents an extended story about a condemnation of the watchers who came down to earth¹⁵. A. Y. Reed speaks even here of a “radical departure from Genesis’ view of antediluvian history as the progressive alienation of sinful humans from their good Creator (Gen 1-9)”¹⁶. R. S. Hendel sees some other differences – particularly related to the way *the sons of God* and the watchers are portrayed in respective accounts. First or all, “*the sons of God* are not depicted as rebels in Gen 6:1-4, neither are they punished. Second, the sexual mingling with mortal women is not explicitly condemned”¹⁷.

The Book of Jubilees is another example of the literature which echoes the Genesis account. It contains a similar version of the watchers descent onto earth as that of the Book of Watchers¹⁸. Even though it differs in some aspects from the latter’s account it preserved the same understanding of the creatures at stake – i.e. they are angels (cf. Jub 4-5). Finally that very same understanding – seems to be attested to in the New Testament (cf. 2 Pet 2:4,5; Jude 6)¹⁸.

In this context the testimony of the LXX is worth mentioning. The Greek translators rendered the Hebrew phrase *בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים* *sons of God* literally as οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ *the sons of God*. On the other hand, the corrector in the Codex Alexandrinus (4th century A.D.) changed it into οἱ ἄγγελοι *the angels*¹⁹. That latter reading is also supported by Philo and Josephus (1st century A.D.)²⁰.

¹⁴ J. T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4*, Oxford 1976, 31, suggested that Gen 6:1-4 was dependent on account from the Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 6-11). This opinion, however, has been widely rejected (cf. A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity. The Reception of Enochic Literature* [Cambridge 2005] 53).

¹⁵ K. Coblenz Bautch, *Heavenly Beings Brought Low*, 462.

¹⁶ A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 53.

¹⁷ Hendel, *Of Demigods and the deluge Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4*, 16.

¹⁸ R. C. Newman *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, 17.

¹⁹ J. E. Coleran, *The sons of God in Genesis 6,2*, 487.

²⁰ R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, „Grace Theological Journal” 5.1 (1984) 13-36 [15]. Ch. Begg, *Angels in the Work of Flavius Josephus*, in: F. V. Reiterer, T. Nicklas, K. Schöpflin (ed.), *Angels. The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature. Yearbook 2007 (Walter de Gruyter-Berlin-New York 2007) 525- 553 [529], observes: “Josephus’ initial mention of angels comes in Ant. 1.73 where, in line with a LXX reading in Gen 6:2, he alludes to ‘angels of God’ who generate hybrid beings (‘giants’ 6:4) with human women. While Josephus does thus reproduce the Bible’s attribution of such a questionable activity to certain God-linked

One must admit though that the reports of Philo and Josephus are ambiguous, which will be dealt with later in this paper. It is undeniable though that Jewish exegetes from the pre-Rabbinic period mostly interpreted Gen 6:1–4 as echoing the descent of the fallen watchers onto earth – hence they gave an angelic interpretation to the passage²¹.

In the second and third centuries A.D. the angelic (supernatural) interpretation was prevailing among virtually all Christian exegetes²². One may indicate only a few of them: Justin Martyr (+160 A.D.), Tatian (110–172 A.D.), Tertulian (160–220 A.D.); Lactantius (240–320 A.D.)²³.

The interpretation seeing angels in *the sons of God* has some considerable weak points. Already W. H. Green pointed out that “the whole conception of sexual life, as connected with God or angels, is absolutely foreign to Hebrew thought” and has no parallels in the Bible²⁴. Hence for many commentators this “angelic interpretation” of Gen 6:1–4 is untenable²⁵. They would rather see in *the sons of God* a particular category of men. This was eventually the interpretation which Judaism and then Christianity accepted.

2.2. Nonsupernatural (anthropological) interpretation

The angelic interpretation of Gen 6:1–4 lost its attractiveness in the Jewish circles since the second century A.D. It gave way to a nonsupernatural – anthropological interpretation of *the sons of God*²⁶. A. Y. Reed sees the beginning of the process already in the Book of Jubilees which by distancing

angels, he does not take over the accompanying biblical motivation for this, namely, the angels’ seeing that the women were ‘fair’. In this instance, Josephus envisages angels as engaging in a very human and physical activity, copulation”.

²¹ A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 82.

²² A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 148. For a broad presentation of the sources cf. J. C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch, Enochic Motifs, and Enoch in Early Christian Literature*, in: J. C. VanderKam, W. Adler (ed.), *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (CRINT III.4; Minneapolis 1996) 33–101 [62–84].

²³ Cf. J. C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch, Enochic Motifs, and Enoch in Early Christian Literature*, 63–65, 67–70, 84; R. C. Newman *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, 21–22.

²⁴ W. H. Green, *The Unity of the Book of Genesis*, New York 1897, 54.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. L. Birney, *An Exegetical Study of Genesis 6,1–4*, 45.

²⁶ Cf. J. Dochhorn, *The Motif of the Angels’ Fall in Early Judaism*, in: F. V. Reiterer, T. Nicklas, K. Schöpfung (ed.), *Angels. The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature. Yearbook 2007, (Walter de Gruyter–Berlin–New York 2007), 477–495 [479–480].

heaven from evil makes the wicked angels look more like “wayward men”²⁷ J. Dochhorn mentions Symmachus who claimed that בני האלהים were οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν δυναστευόντων *the sons of the powerful* or *sons of the rulers* and Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (A.D. 130–160) who cursed anyone translating the expression as *sons of the gods* instead of *sons of the judges* (בני דייניה)²⁸. Newman notes that according to R. Simeon b. Yohai the reason they were given the title *sons of God* was their long lifespan. According to Rabbi Judan (A.D. 325) those noblemen took virgins – who were at the same time just married to other man. It was supposed to be the noblemen’s privilege to enjoy the bride before the bridegroom could. Finally he interpreted the expression “whomever they chose” as an indication that they indulged in homosexuality and bestiality²⁹.

That allegorical interpretation is also attested in Aramaic Targums (eg. Targum Neofiti, Targum of Onqelos). In short *the sons of God* would be understood here as rulers–kings or nobles³⁰. J. E. Coleran believes that further discussions on the meaning of the expression sons of God may contribute a lot from at least a brief consideration of the possible senses of *elohim* in Old Testament usage. After a short presentation of those senses he concludes that the word at stake can designate the true God or false gods. There are texts though where *elohim* seems to denote other divine beings who are under God (angels) or humans – mostly judges and rulers (Ex 21:6; 22:27; 1 Sam 2:25)³¹.

Newman speaks here of an allegorical interpretation. Among its representatives he also mentions Philo of Alexandria who considered *sons of God* in Gen 6:1–4 *God-oriented persons* who fell and become *earth-centered persons* “by consorting with vice and passion (daughters of men)”³². They were for him simply “a symbol of the sensual pleasures (On the Giants 6.1)”³³. At any

²⁷ Cf. A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 90.

²⁸ Cf. J. Dochhorn, *The Motif of the Angels’ Fall in Early Judaism*, 480.

²⁹ Cf. R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, 26. A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 209, notes: “In the interpretations of Gen 6:2–4 in Gen.Rab. 26.5–7, their human identity is presumed throughout. The question is not whether these sons of God are men, but why Scripture calls these men sons of God: Why are they called sons of God? R. Hanina and Resh Lakish both said: Because they had long lives [lit. multiplied days; cf. Gen 6:3] without trouble or suffering. R. Huna said in R. Jose’s name: It was in order that men might understand the calendrical cycles and calculations. Our Sages said: It was in order that they might receive the punishment of themselves and also of the Generations that followed them (Gen. Rab. 26.5)” (ibidem).

³⁰ Cf. L. Birney, *An exegetical study of genesis 6,1–4*, 47.

³¹ J. E. Coleran, *The sons of God in Genesis 6,2*, 491

³² R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, 23.

³³ A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 107.

rate it was the second century A.D. that saw a “widespread reaction in Judaism against the interpretation of bene Elohim as angels”³⁴. Be they earthly rulers – kings or simply persons led by sensual pleasures they were considered human figures. Thus the nonsupernatural interpretation prevailed over among Jewish commentators.

The nonsupernatural interpretation would eventually be accepted by most Christian writers. However as I have already mentioned among the in the second and third century Christian authors the angelic interpretation was dominant. A progressive dissatisfaction with that angelic interpretation was definitely related to a progressive lack of respect towards the Enochic literature. A. Y. Reed states that “the Christian rejection of the angelic approach to Gen 6:1–4 occurred concurrently with the abandonment of early Enochic Pseudepigrapha”³⁵. That might occur in the late third and fourth century A.D. On the other hand one should keep in mind that it was already Julius Africanus (A.D. 160–240) to give an alternative (nonsupernatural) reading of Gen 6:1–4. He saw a possibility that by *the sons of God* the Sethites were meant in the text³⁶. At the same time he did not condemn or abandon the angelic interpretation of the passage. He seemed to accept both as plausible³⁷.

Augustine (A.D. 354–430) commented on Gen 6:1–4 in his *City of God*. He offered allegorical approach to *the sons of God* and *daughters of men* considering them as cities – respectively *city of God* and *city of man* (15.22):

And by these two names (sons of God and daughters of men) the two cities are sufficiently distinguished. For though the former were by nature children of men, they had come into possession of another name by grace. For in the same Scripture in which the sons of God are said to have loved the daughters of men, they are also called angels of God; whence many [!] suppose that they were not men but angels³⁸.

³⁴ P. S. Alexander, *The Targumim and Early Exegesis of “Sons of God” in Genesis 6*, JJS 23 (1972) 60–71 [62]. A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 207, observes that “in the early Middle Ages, that Rabbinic Jewish sources even deign to suggest again that the sons of God of Gen 6:2 might be angels”. She also points out that it seems to prove “that the Rabbinic rejection of the angelic interpretation of Gen 6:1–4 was not merely a matter of exegetical concern. The attitude towards this readings seems to root in polemics against minim who used Enochic texts and traditions – and, hence, in the broader construction of Rabbinic authority over against other forms of Judaism” (ibidem). Cf. also R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2,4*, 21.

³⁵ A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 218.

³⁶ Cf. J. Dochhorn, *The Motif of the Angels’ Fall in Early Judaism*, 480.

³⁷ A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 219.

³⁸ After J. C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch, Enochic Motifs, and Enoch in Early Christian Literature*, 86.

In the following verse (15:23) he admits that it might be possible for the angels of God to appear in bodies, but as for the case in Gen 6:1-4 he states firmly that he “could by no means believe that God’s holy angels could at that time have so fallen”³⁹. Thus he rejected the angelic interpretation of the passage concerned.

After abandoning the angelic interpretation, Christian exegetes embraced the anthropological interpretation which had already been suggested by Julius Africanus namely, that the sons of God from Gen 6:1-4 were sons of Seth. They sinned by intermarrying with the daughters of Cain (i.e. the daughters of men)⁴⁰. Newman believes that “the Christian nonsupernatural view – sons of Seth or believers – is most likely based on the NT use of sons of God for believers (e.g., in John 1:12), coupled with Gen 4:26 and 5:24”⁴¹.

Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that in modern days the situation seems to be still complex. Regardless of what C. Westermann declared, the interpretation of Gen 6:1-4 is still “an open case”. Commentators differ mostly in determining the identity of *the sons of God*. Whereas some see in them angels for others they are just humans. They were called respectively – supernatural (angelic) and nonsupernatural (anthropological) interpretations. It seems in order to bring forth the most common arguments which both sides use in support of their claims. *Supernatural interpretation.*

The title *sons of God* is clearly used in the Bible to refer to angels (Hb 1-2; Ps 29:1). The story of Gen 6:1-4 intends to draw a contrast between *sons of God* and *daughters of men*. There is no doubt the latter are women representing human race – hence the *sons of God* must represent divine world and hence are angels. Finally, extra biblical sources seem to support this thesis. For example in Ugaritic mythology *sons of God* are also attested to. They are members of the divine pantheon. Hence Gen 6:1-4 up to a point echoes this pattern.

³⁹ R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis* 6:2,4, 26.

⁴⁰ A. Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels*, 221.

⁴¹ R. C. Newman, *The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis* 6:2,4, 33.

Nonsupernatural interpretation

The idea of sexual intercourse as related to the angels in the OT is totally absent. Such unions would have had mythological background and the Torah as a whole is totally opposed to mythology. Gen 6:1–4 clearly states that the punishment falls upon humans and not on any angels – hence human beings are meant. As a matter of fact the context calls for anthropological interpretation. The story is followed by the flood which is to wipe out the universally corrupt human race. Gen 6:1–4 is one more exemplification of the corruption of the people on earth.

Summary

Gen 6:1-4 has not ceased to challenge exegetes. The key problem remains the identity of the mysterious Sons of God who are the main protagonists of the perycopy. The article focuses on the main issues related to the understanding of Gen 6:1-4 and presents a survey of the most prominent approaches to it.

Streszczenie

Perykopa Rdz 6,1–4 wciąż pozostaje wyzwaniem dla egzegetów. Główny problem stanowi pytanie o tożsamość głównych bohaterów tego opowiadania, którymi są tajemniczy Synowie Boży. Artykuł koncentruje się na głównych zagadnieniach związanych z rozumieniem Rdz 6,1–4 oraz prezentuje przegląd najważniejszych interpretacji, które pojawiły się w historii egzegezy tego fragmentu.