

“WHO ARE THE ‘SONS OF GOD’ IN GENESIS 6?”

Part 2: Understanding the Biblical Message

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In Part 1 of this series I stated my personal standards for teaching God's Word, and I outlined some sound principles of proper Biblical interpretation. While various protocols for studying and interpreting the Bible can be found, I believe the responsible ones largely conform to the rationale and standards I've shared.

With those issues behind us, let's return to the operative question, “Who are the ‘sons of God’ in Genesis 6?” Our focus is the first four verses of that chapter. Let's see if the rules and guidelines we considered in Part 1 will help to clarify the right answer.

We'll begin by asking a question and establishing a response to it: “*What is the original meaning of the English translation, ‘sons of God?’*” This question assumes the Bible is capable of interpreting itself, and it specifically applies the interpretive principle that passages must be understood in light of their original Biblical meaning.

The original language of Genesis 6 was Hebrew, a language of greater dimension and richer hues than English. The Hebrew term for “sons of God” is *b'nai Elohim*, which Jewish scholars of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) define as “heavenly beings.”

A more technical dissection of *b'nai Elohim* reveals that *b'nai* is plural for “sons” and *Elohim* is plural for “God.” Did you get that? Plural - for “God!”

“Elohim” first shows up in Gen. 1:1, “*In the beginning, God...*” The Bible unwraps the doctrine of the trinity right out of the gates. “Elohim” is used because the inspired writers of Scripture understood that God exists as a plural being.

I'm not on a wild goose chase here. Since nothing is left to chance in the Bible, there's no room to teach it casually. God's Word must be handled on His terms, not ours.

God opens the Scriptures with a proper view of Himself, because a proper view of God leads to a proper view of everything else. When things start going sideways in the Lord's work and in the expressions of our faith, chances are good that someone somewhere forgot who God really is and how He needs to be revered.

Let's keep going. The term *b'nai Elohim* is also constructed in such a way as to mean a direct physical creation of God. In other words, whoever these heavenly “sons of God” are, they did not originate through natural processes like you and I who came from human parents. Rather, they began as the result of the supernatural, creative, *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”) activity that only God Himself is capable of. Plainly put, these *b'nai Elohim* were not present in one moment - but in the next one they fully were.

Now, angels are direct physical creations of God in this very manner, and moreover they are also “heavenly beings” as opposed to “earthly beings,” like ourselves. This raises the next question which is this: *“Is ‘b’nai Elohim’ used elsewhere in the Bible to refer specifically to angels or heavenly beings?”* This second question correctly assumes the self-clarifying nature of the Bible, and it applies the next interpretive principle that passages must be in harmony with other passages on the same subject. One passage of Scripture is always supported by another.

We discover that the term *b’nai Elohim* is only ever used in the Bible to refer to angels or heavenly beings, the latter being in one form or another. As we’ve seen, it first appears in the book of Genesis (6:2 and 6:4). It’s used next in Job 1:6 and 2:1 to describe occasions when the angels gathered to present themselves before God.

In these Job texts, Satan is part of this *b’nai Elohim* gathering too. This not only underscores the angelic nature of this Hebrew term, but it reinforces that it can accommodate a “fallen” element. This fallen element - as we will see – is also within the details of Genesis 6:1-4.

Later on in Job 38:7, *b’nai Elohim* reappears once more, this time during God’s rebuttal to Job. In response to Job’s many complaints, God dialogues with him. He reinforces Job’s humanity while emphasizing His own divinity. It’s a reality check for Job because despite his own traumas, he ends up seeing himself and God as he really needs to. Trials have a way of doing that.

Woven into this discussion is a moment where God rhetorically asks Job if Job was present during the creation of the earth, an occasion during which *“...all the angels (b’nai Elohim) shouted for joy(?)”* Here the Hebrew term is employed to describe the righteous angels who are celebrating God’s creation, perhaps at a point prior to any of them becoming fallen.

The New Testament invites other considerations. There is the passage of Luke 3:38 which reads, *“The son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.”* It’s the Greek equivalent of *b’nai Elohim*, and it argues the same dynamics as the Hebrew term. The translators of the Septuagint understood that.

Inevitably, some liberal commentators will cackle, “Aha! “You see, ‘b’nai Elohim’ can mean other things!” They see Luke’s passage as evidence that the concept is not confined to “heavenly beings.”

But, not so fast. Luke 3:38 concludes Luke’s genealogical record of Jesus Christ, and the whole record’s pattern is consistent with the sole exception of Adam. Every human named in the list is shown to be the direct descendent of another human. The only deviation from this model is Adam who descended directly from God.

You see, Adam had no earthly parents like everyone else did. He was instead formed from the dust of the ground by God Himself, and so the original argument of “heavenly beings” is not only sustained by Luke 3:38, but it is reinforced quite elegantly. Remember, according to scripture the term “sons of God” (*b’nai Elohim*) is limited to those beings created directly by God. Being of “heavenly origin” in his own way, Adam fits these parameters just fine, and so he is the only human in this record to receive this special designation.

Let's take these considerations one final step, because I would be irresponsible to not address the concept of *b'nai Elohim* in those portions of the New Testament where believers are also thus described (John 1:12, Romans 8:14-17, 23; Galatians 4:4-7; Ephesians 1:5). In a spiritual sense, the definition of *b'nai Elohim* applies here too because believers are new creatures created directly by God.

Seen this way, believers are "heavenly beings" which are born of above through a sovereign and exclusive act of God. Salvation is a supernatural transaction, executed entirely by God. It transcends all boundaries of natural and measurable form.

But here is an *extremely* important fact to consider: it is only after the death and resurrection of Christ that believers are called *b'nai Elohim*. At no time before this point are natural humans given this distinction, no matter how faithful they were. The Biblical record is clear on this. This pregnant detail warrants careful consideration insofar as the historical timing of Genesis 6:1-4 is concerned because the context of this passage was thousands of years *before* the cross.

So, while flying high over this landscape and looking down upon it, the options are very limited to reasonably fit the meaning of *b'nai Elohim* into the context of Genesis 6:1-4. Within the Hebrew term in the Old Testament, or within its equivalent in the New Testament, the greater counsel of Scripture effectively moves the intent of this Genesis text *away* from any human definitions.

If one obstinately insists that *b'nai Elohim* in Genesis 6:1-4 refers to humans, then they must also accept the ramifications of their choice to overlook the ways the Bible has always affirmed its divine origin. It's a decision to willfully ignore the proper rules of interpretation, and this amounts to setting up one's own will against the will of God. That's a very bad place to be.

I feel there is only one interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 which adheres to the duty of properly engaging the Word of God, which aligns with all the other confirming passages, and which applies the responsible rules of interpretation, and that is this: it's talking about angels. More specifically, as the context of Genesis 6:1-4 clearly communicates, the *b'nai Elohim* here are fallen angels, a specific distinction which Job 1:6 and 2:1 supports.

The essential pieces of the puzzle are in place now and the plain language of the text makes the picture clear. Fallen angels entered the visible and tangible sphere of earthly life, forcibly "married" human women, and produced offspring with them.

Righteous angels ate with Abraham in Gen. 18:8, and *righteous* angels stay within the bounds of heavenly laws according to Matthew 22:30. But both these passages suggest fallen angels could violate those boundaries and engage in other physical expressions if they chose to.

And indeed they did! The gigantic progenies which resulted from mixing these two types of created entities were not entirely human nor entirely angelic - but both. They were hybrids. This *breach of divine laws* was so abhorrent to God that He punished these fallen angels with the imprisonment spoken of in Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4.

While God detested what had happened, these progenies - these “*Nephilim*” - left such an impression on mankind that they became the stuff of legend through their feats and strength. Ancient cultures throughout the world - Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Grecian, Roman, and others – interpreted the events of this time in their own mythology. All of them tell the same types of stories with very similar nuances. That’s not coincidence.

Brief as it is, the passage of Genesis 6:1-4 bears all this out. Within its immediate narrative as well as within the greater context of the rest of Scripture, these truths are affirmed. This recalls the third interpretive guideline which states that passages must be in compliance with the development of the context.

It is this understanding of Genesis 6:1-4 that places the remainder of that particular chapter under the proper lens, and it is this view that clarifies other subsequent portions of God’s Word as no alternative interpretation is able to do. These elements will be explored in following installments of this article series.

Meantime, I will mention that - based on my own studies in these matters - I have noted that a large number of pastors, theologians, and scholarly-types appear to agree with everything I’ve stated up to, but not including, my conclusions within those last five paragraphs.

The thought processes of such folk are mostly captured by the following outline:

1. They concur with the Hebrew understanding of *b’nai Elohim*, both in the construct of the term and its original meaning.
2. They accept the argument that *b’nai Elohim* is used very selectively in the Scriptures to apply to “heavenly beings.”
3. They agree that in the aforementioned texts of Job, *b’nai Elohim* refers not only to angels, but more specifically, it also applies to fallen angels.
4. They, for the most part, give consensus to my interpretation of Adam as being *b’nai Elohim*, though this is a juncture that sees some of these individuals choosing silence. They simply do not comment on it. There are less opinions offered on this particular point than with the previous three.
5. Finally, there is scarce discussion – almost none - on the New Testament passages which connect believers *after* the death and resurrection of Christ to the definition of *b’nai Elohim*. This may be due to the element of sovereign election which is inherent to the creative process of *b’nai Elohim*. The Biblical doctrine of sovereign election is actively suppressed in many churches today.

As I ponder what I’ve learned, I’m chagrined by the behavior of these Christian leaders. It defies common sense to track through these five points as some of these individuals have done, confess agreement with each (or most) of them, but then return to Genesis 6:1-4 and declare, “It does not mean what it says.”

You may as well google the address to the nearest McDonalds, follow the directions to it, park under the golden arches, walk inside and order a Big Mac and fries, then tell everyone within earshot that you're at Pizza Hut! This posture seems to be nothing other than intentional ignorance, and I find the implications of this foolishness in the church to be alarming.

In the next installment of this series, we will take a thorough look at the origins of the "Sons of Seth" theory, an argument which touts alternative explanations concerning this passage of Genesis 6:1-4. We will pay careful attention to *how* this theory emerged and *what* it chooses to support.

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