

The Making of the Nephilim in the Days of Moses

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. (Genesis 6:1–4)

Why are these four verses in Genesis? Who are "the sons of God"? Who are the Nephilim? In Genesis 4:26, men began to call upon the LORD; in chapter 5:2, God blessed humanity. However, in chapter 6:6, God regretted making man on earth. What happened? In chapter 5, Adam lived to be 930 years old, but in chapter 17, Abraham believed he was too old to father children at 100. What moved God to say, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years"? What moved God to destroy the entire earth with a global flood? Genesis 6:1-4 and v. 5 tell us.

Determining who the "sons of God" are in this passage is the essential exegetical (the process of correctly interpreting the Scripture) task in the text. Are the "sons of God" men or spiritual beings? If the sons of God are humans who marry daughters, this isn't a big deal. Sons have been taking daughters as wives from the beginning. But if the sons of God are fallen spiritual beings taking daughters of men as wives, we have something bizarre happening. In Job 38:7, "the sons of God shouted for joy" when God created the earth. Verse 7 is our first clue as to the identity of the sons of God. Job calls these sons of God "morning stars". Throughout the OT, stars are often angelic beings (Psa 148:2-3). In Isaiah 14:13, we read about "the stars of God." Job 1 and 2 present two more references to "sons of God" that cannot be humans.

In Deuteronomy 32:8, we read about God fixing national boundaries according to "the sons of God" (ESV). The translators of the Septuagint (LXX) understood these "sons of God" to be ἄγγελος, that is, angels. The NET Bible agrees that "the sons of God" are not humans and translates the Hebrew text as "heavenly assembly." The CSB has a footnote on v. 8 referring the reader to the LXX that translated the Hebrew as "sons of God." Does the NT provide any help?

Both Jude, 2 Peter, and the noncanonical book of Enoch (written before the birth of Christ) provide solid evidence that angels were sexually immoral. Jude 6 describes angels who did not keep their proper dwelling place and are then compared to Sodom and Gomorrah, who likewise committed sexual immorality and perversion. Jude then references Enoch in v. 14. Is this a cryptic reference to the book of Enoch? Enoch 6:1-2 reads: "And it happened that when the sons of men multiplied in those days, they begat good and beautiful daughters. And the angels, the sons of heaven, saw them and longed for them and said to one another, 'Come let us choose for ourselves women from among the people and bring forth for ourselves children.'" Study 2 Peter 2:4-10. See how Peter moves from fallen "angels kept in chains" (v.4) to Noah, to Sodom and Gomorrah, to "those [angels and humans] who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority" (v. 10). Evidently, some angelic beings rebelled against God's authority and engaged in sexual relations with attractive women who gave birth to "Nephilim."

Again, we ask why Moses wrote v. 1-4? Verse 4 provides more help. Verse 4 explains to the people of Israel the origin of the giants in the promised land. Numbers 13:33 references "Nephilim" just like verse 4. Moses explains that the Nephilim are the product of the union of fallen angels and the daughters of man. He says Nephilim were in the land both "in those days," that is, before the flood and "afterward." That is after the flood. Nephilim is a transliteration, not a translation, of נְפִילִים which is a masculine noun. We know they were giants because the Israelite spies said they were like grasshoppers compared to the Nephilim. Like all the land's inhabitants, the Nephilim must be destroyed (Deu 20).

The first people to read the book of Genesis would have been the Israelites charged by God to conquer the Canaanites, including the giants in the land. These verses explain God's change in disposition to humanity (He regrets creating man) and why God now chooses to limit humanity's days on earth to 120 years. Additionally, it explains that the Nephilim did not survive the flood. Instead, they are the byproduct of an unholy union between angelic beings and women, and the Israelites must destroy them. While it is unwise to be dogmatic that this is the only correct interpretation of the text, both Old and New Testament texts support this conclusion well. And it fits exceptionally well with the context of Genesis and the book's first readers (the Israelite generation who now knew the origin of the giants in the Promised Land).