

# Who Were the Nephilim?

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## Genesis 6:1–4: Who Married the Daughters of Men?

Few texts in the history of interpretation have aroused more curiosity and divergence of opinion than Genesis 6:1–4. It is at once tantalizing and deeply puzzling.

What is most difficult is the identification of the main participants in this short narrative— the “sons of God,” the “daughters of men” and the “Nephilim” (or “giants”). An impressive array of scholars has lined up for each of the three major positions taken on the identification of these three groups of participants. The three positions may be labeled “the cosmologically mixed races view” (angels and humans), “the religiously mixed races view” (godly Sethites and worldly Cainites) and “the sociologically mixed races view” (despotic male aristocrats and beautiful female commoners).

By all odds, the view that may perhaps claim the greatest antiquity is the cosmologically mixed races, or the angel theory, view. The pseudepigraphal and noncanonical 1 Enoch, dating from around 200 B.C., claims in 6:1–7:6 that two hundred angels in heaven, under the leadership of Semayaz, noticed that the humans had unusually beautiful daughters. These they desired for themselves, so they took a mutual oath to go down to earth together, and each took a wife. They taught these wives magical medicine, incantations, the cutting of roots and the care of plants. When the women became pregnant, they gave birth to giants that reached three hundred cubits. The giants in turn consumed all the food, thereby arousing the deep hatred of the earthlings. The giants turned to devouring the people along with the birds, wild beasts, reptiles and fish. Then it was that the earth, having had enough of these huge bullies, brought an accusation against them.

The famous Jewish historian Josephus (born 37 B.C.) also appears to follow this angel theory. He wrote, “Many angels accompanied with women, and begat sons that proved unjust” (*Antiquities* 1.3.1). Likewise, the Greek translation of the Bible of the third century B.C. reads “angels of God” for the phrase “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2. In spite of the antiquity of the cosmologically mixed races view, there are such overwhelming problems with it that it is not recommended as the solution to this problem. While it is true, of course, that the term “sons of God” does occur in Job 1:6, 2:1 and 38:7 with the meaning “angels” (and that the phrase “sons of the mighty” appears in Ps 29:1 and 89:7 with the meaning “angels”), it does not fit well here for several reasons.

Nowhere else in Scripture are we told that angels married humans. In fact, our Lord specifically stated that angels do not marry (Mk 12:25). And though the Septuagint translated the expression as being equivalent to “angels,” it is in fact only the Alexandrian manuscript that does so. The critical edition by Alfred Rahlfs does not reflect the angelic interpretation. Even more serious is the problem of why judgment should fall on the humans and on the earth if the angels of heaven were the cause of the

trouble. God should have flooded heaven, not earth. The culprits came from above; the women seem to have been doing nothing except being beautiful!

Some, however, will appeal to the New Testament passages of 1 Peter 3:18–20, 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6–7 for further support of the angel theory. But these passages do not say anything about angelic marriages. To argue from the phrase “in a similar way” in Jude 7 that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is the same as the sin of Genesis 6:1–4 claims too much, for the sin of sodomy is not the same thing as marrying a wife from another part of the universe! In fact, “in a similar way” does not compare the sin of the angels with the sin of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah; instead, it compares the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah with the sins of “the cities about them” (that is, Admah and Zeboiim; see Deut 29:23 and Hos 11:8). Thus the sins of Jude’s angels (Jude 6) and the sins of the five cities of the plain (Jude 7) are held up as warnings of the judgment that could come to others. The fall of the angels that Jude mentions is that which took place when Lucifer fell. To connect this fall with the time of the flood because of the proximity of the references in Jude 4–7 would demand that we connect the flood with the overthrow of the five cities of the plain. But the events listed in Jude are successive, not simultaneous: (1) the fall in eternity of Satan (Jude 4), (2) the preaching of Noah prior to the flood (Jude 5) and (3) the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 6).

To allege that “giants” were the results of such sexual unions is once again to go beyond any data we possess in Scripture. Did the angels procreate without the use of natural bodies? Or did they already possess natural bodies? Or did they create for themselves natural bodies by the use of some mysterious, intrinsic, but rebellious power? Any and all answers to such questions would be purely speculative. To use extracanonical evidence such as 1 Enoch as a witness against or even for Scripture would be unprecedented.

The religiously mixed races view identifies the “sons of God” as the godly line of Seth. Given the sin they committed, they are generally looked on as the apostate line of Seth. “The daughters of men” are equated with the ungodly line of Cain. The sin condemned, then, would be the sin of being “unequally yoked”—that is, the marriage of believers to unbelievers.

This view also fails to meet the test of consistency with the biblical data and context. It uses the term *men* in verses 1 and 2 in two different senses: in verse 1 “men” is used to indicate humanity generically, while in verse 2 it is understood to refer to the Cainite line specifically. Suggesting such an abrupt change in meaning without any indication in the text is unwarranted.

But even more alarming is the problem of the offspring. Why would religiously mixed marriages produce *nephilim-gibborim* (or, as some translate this Hebrew expression, “giants”)? Does the mixture of pagan and godly genes assure that the offspring’s DNA will be wild and grotesque?

This religiously mixed view should be abandoned as well as the cosmologically mixed view. Neither one can stand the weight of the evidence of the passage.

The preferable interpretation of this passage is the sociologically mixed view. “Sons of God” is an early, but typical, reference to the titularies for kings, nobles and aristocrats in the ancient Near Eastern

setting. These power-hungry despots not only lusted after power but also were powerfully driven to become “men of a name” (or “men of renown”—Gen 6:4).

In their thirst for recognition and reputation, they despotically usurped control of the states they governed as if they were accountable to no one but themselves. Thus they perverted the whole concept of the state and the provision that God had made for some immediate amelioration of earth’s injustices and inequities (Gen 6:5–6; see also Gen 10:8–12). They also became polygamous, taking and marrying “any of [the women] they chose” (Gen 6:2).

What evidence can be produced for the correctness of this view? There are five lines of evidence. (1) The ancient Aramaic Targums render “sons of God” as “sons of nobles” (Targums of Onkelos), and the Greek translation of Symmachus reads “the sons of the kings or lords.” (2) The word *gods* (Hebrew *elōhim*) is used in Scripture for men who served as magistrates or judges (“Then his master must take him before the judges [*elōhim*],” Ex 21:6; see also Ex 22:8; Ps 82:1, 6). (3) Structurally, the account of the Cainite Lamech (Gen 4:19–24) and that of the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:1–4 are very much alike. In each there is the taking of wives, the bearing of children and the dynastic exploits. The former passage ends with a boast of judgment by Lamech, and the other ends with God’s decree of judgment. Lamech practiced bigamy (Gen 4:19), and he enforced his policies by using tyranny. The portraits are parallel and depict states of tyranny, corruption and polygamy. (4) Near Eastern discoveries have validated the pagan use of all sorts of gods’ and goddesses’ names in order to give more clout and prestige to the governments of Egypt and Mesopotamia—hence the title “sons of God.”

The fifth and final line of evidence concerns the *nephīlim/gibborom* of Genesis 6:4. The word *nephīlim* occurs only here and in Numbers 13:33, where it refers to the Anakim, who were people of great stature. The root meaning of the word *nephīlim* is “to fall.” However in Genesis 6:4 the *nephīlim* are associated with the term *gibborom*. The word *gibborom* comes from *gibborom*, meaning “a mighty man of valor, strength, wealth or power.” Nimrod, in Genesis 10:8, was such a *gibborom*. He also was clearly a king in the land of Shinar. Hence the meaning of *nephīlim/gibborom* is not “giants,” but something more like “princes,” “aristocrats” or “great men.”

Genesis 6:1–4, therefore, is best understood as depicting ambitious, despotic and autocratic rulers seizing both women and power in an attempt to gain all the authority and notoriety they could from those within their reach. Their progeny were, not surprisingly, adversely affected, and so it was that God was grieved over the increased wickedness on planet Earth. Every inclination of the hearts and thoughts of humanity was evil. Thus the flood had to come to judge humankind for the perversion of authority, the state, justice and human sexuality.