

1-1-2003

The Sons of God(s) and the Daughters of Men (Genesis 6.1-4): A Model Text for Interpretive Method

Christopher Rollston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rollston, Christopher (2003) "The Sons of God(s) and the Daughters of Men (Genesis 6.1-4): A Model Text for Interpretive Method," *Leaven*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol11/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Sons of God(s) and the Daughters of Men (Genesis 6:1-4): A Model Text for Interpretive Method

CHRISTOPHER ROLLSTON

Confessional Jewish and Christian communities since the Renaissance and Enlightenment have been quite assiduous in their attempts (1) to interpret the “original meaning(s)” of texts within the Hebrew Bible and (2) to understand contemporary functions of Holy Writ within these confessional communities. Methods for discerning “original meaning(s)” varied within these communities, but within most, the use of hermeneutical methods that were anchored in the original languages, the best manuscripts, and an assessment of the cultural settings of the texts, were considered the most tenable. Indeed, proper hermeneutical method was understood to function as a “control” on interpretation, a benchmark for discussion. All interpretations were *not* considered equal. Some were understood to deviate too far from plausible semantic domains.

Alexander Campbell synthesized various seminal aspects of (his) biblical hermeneutics in *The Christian System*. For example, regarding methodology, he noted that “the same philological principles, deduced from the nature of language, or the same laws of interpretation which are applied to the language of other books, are to be applied to the language of the Bible.” Moreover, he also argued that the “historical circumstances of the book” (e.g., date, authorship, the historical context) must be considered.

Of course, Campbell was keenly aware of the fact that texts sometimes are quite enigmatic and that very different interpretations can sometimes be considered quite tenable. However, he ultimately still averred that interpreters must strive to “come within the understanding distance.”¹ Moreover, based upon such statements, it is readily apparent that Campbell believed that ancient texts did have *discernible semantic domains*, that is, “meaning(s),” and it is readily apparent he believed it was possible for the sage modern interpreter often to discern ancient meaning(s).

For Campbell, though, there is a caveat: the use of proper method is an imperative. Without the *lighthouse of proper method*, the interpreter is simply *lost at sea*.²

Gen 6:1-4 constitutes a paradigmatic text for the assessment of hermeneutical methods because of the divergent interpretations associated with this pericope and relevant new data from the ancient Near Eastern world. My translation of this text is:

(1) When humankind began to multiply upon the face of the earth and daughters were born to them, (2) the sons of the god noticed the daughters of men, because they were beautiful, and they took for themselves wives from all whom they chose. (3) And Yahweh said, “My spirit shall not remain with humankind forever, for they are flesh, and the days of their (lives) shall be one hundred and twenty years.” (4) The nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also later—when the sons of the god went in to the daughters of humankind, and they produced progeny for themselves. They were the valiant men who were from of old, men of renown.

For centuries, confessional communities had frequently considered this text to be enigmatic, an interpretive morass. Various divergent interpretations were espoused, but none was completely convincing, as none could account for all of the biblical data. During recent decades, however, this pericope has been subjected to penetrating analyses, on the basis of archaeological finds in various regions of the ancient Near East and epigraphic finds in various ancient Near Eastern languages. The basic import of this text is now soluble, and this is the result of good data and reliable methods.

Moreover, because of the supreme importance that confessional communities place upon interpreting the biblical text, I would suggest that these communities must be *au courant* with regard to recent discoveries and the progress that has been made in interpretive methodologies. The result will be more reliable interpretations of sacred literature.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this discussion, Gen 6: 1-4 permits the showcasing of the relevance of recent discoveries and progress in hermeneutical method. Nevertheless, before turning to the passage, a general discussion of certain contemporary methodologies is necessary.

RECENT DISCOVERIES AND PROGRESS IN METHOD

Since the time of Alexander Campbell (d. 1866), the field of Old Testament studies has been impacted by various factors, and the hermeneutical methods employed have evolved. Some of those areas will be examined here.

Knowledge of Cultural Context

For example, during the late 19th and 20th centuries, the fields of Old Testament and Semitic studies were radically transformed by textual and archaeological discoveries that have revealed much about the religion and culture of the ancient Near Eastern world of which Israel was a part.

Tens of thousands of texts from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in various languages (Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, and various dialects thereof) have been found and translated. In addition, thousands of texts from ancient Syria-Palestine have been found and translated as well, in Northwest Semitic languages such as Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Hebrew. The relevance of textual materials in ancient Hittite (from the Hittite empire of Anatolia) has also become apparent as well.³ Therefore, the contemporary interpreter of the biblical text is capable of understanding an enormous amount about the historical and cultural context of ancient Israel.

It should be noted in this connection that throughout much of Jewish and Christian history, there has often been a strong inclination to assume that there was a distinct cultural discontinuity between ancient Israel and the ancient Near Eastern cultures surrounding it. Ancient Israel was understood as very unique, a complete cultural aberration. For example, Israel was assumed to be as an oasis of monotheism and historiographic sophistication in an ocean of ancient Near Eastern polytheism and primitive historiography. However, along with the majority of modern interpreters, J. J. M. Roberts has argued that such broad generalizations are not tenable and are even detrimental for the interpreter of the biblical text.⁴ The point is that contemporary interpreters of texts will discover elements of cultural (including religious) continuity and elements of cultural (including religious) discontinuity. Ancient Israel did not exist in a vacuum but rather in a complicated nexus of reciprocal influence, confluences, and cognate origins.

Study of Semitic languages

Because the languages of the Hebrew Bible (Hebrew and Aramaic) are Semitic, and because the vocabulary of these languages possesses many features that are Common Semitic, modern interpreters of the text should attempt to analyze the etymology and semantic domains of the biblical languages not only on the basis of the Hebrew Bible but also on the basis of various Semitic languages (e.g., Ugaritic, Phoenician, Akkadian, Arabic).

The vocabulary of the Hebrew Bible is very limited, and Comparative Semitic data can be of substantial help in determining the essential meaning and nuances of a word in biblical Hebrew and biblical Aramaic. Serious Old Testament scholarship simply cannot afford to confine its study of Semitic languages to the Aramaic and Hebrew of the Old Testament.⁵

It is perhaps most useful to demonstrate this point by referring to a well-known word: the divine name *shaddai* (as in *'el shaddai*). This name occurs numerous times within the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 49:15; Exod 6:3; Num 24:4,16; Ruth 1:20,21; Job 5:17; Ps 68:15). The Septuagint sometimes translated the name *shaddai* as *pantokratōr*, that is, "Almighty." This interpretation of the etymology is often touted. However, based on an analysis of the word *shaddai* in various ancient Near Eastern languages (including Akkadian and Ugaritic, as well as Hebrew itself), it has recently been argued convincingly and widely accepted that the preferable etymological meaning of *shaddai* is "mountain," not "almighty."⁶ Thus, *'el shaddai* is best understood as meaning "God of the Mountain." Old interpretations must be analyzed against new data.

Analyses of Texts

Analyses of textual finds such as the great uncials of the Septuagint (e.g., Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) and the Dead Sea Scrolls have substantially augmented and nuanced our understanding of the text and transmission of the Hebrew Bible. That is, the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible reigned supreme for centuries within the field of Old Testament studies. However, the scrolls from region of the Dead Sea (i.e., Khirbet Qumran, Nahal Hever, Nahal Se'elim, Wadi Murabba'at) have demonstrated that the transmission-history of the Hebrew Bible is very complex and that Septuagint manuscripts and Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts frequently agree together *against* the Masoretic Text and it is the Septuagint and the Scrolls that often contain the preferable reading.⁷

For example, the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible indicates that the height of Goliath was "six cubits and a span" (1 Sam 17:4). However, the Hebrew manuscript from Qumran referred to as 4QSam^a, which predates the Masoretic Text by more than a millennium, states that Goliath was "four cubits and a span." Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, recounts David's duel with Goliath and also refers to Goliath's height as being "four cubits and a span." The great Septuagint uncial Vaticanus also reads "four cubits and a span." Based on the extant textual data, Goliath was indeed "four cubits and a span" (about six feet and six inches, an enormous height for that period), not "six cubits and a span," as the Masoretic Text reads.

Moreover, sometimes the differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint are of far more significance. For example, the Septuagint manuscripts of Jeremiah and Job preserve a textual tradition that is very different from, and considerably shorter than, the Masoretic Text. Significantly, the Septuagint is supported by some of the scrolls. The point is that at this juncture in Old Testament scholarship, the Masoretic Text should be viewed as a witness to the text of the Hebrew Bible but not necessarily as more authoritative than the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Septuagint. Recent discoveries mandate this.

Progress of Criticism

Classical "biblical criticism" has progressed during the past century, and the modern interpreter should attempt to be *au courante* with regard to such progress. For example, women biblical scholars have been of fundamental importance recently in demonstrating and emphasizing obvious patriarchal component often present in biblical texts. A number of other interpreters have emphasized the deft and nuanced literary artistry of biblical narrative. Source criticism continues to be an important component in Old Testament research, as do form criticism, redaction criticism, and literary criticism. Canonical criticism commands substantial attention in certain circles.⁸

Numerous other studies and foci could be noted, but it is readily apparent that the contemporary interpreter of the text has numerous sophisticated tools for "excavating the text." The fact that these valuable

interpretive tools are readily available suggests that the contemporary interpreter of the text has an obligation to use them as much as possible.

These few examples demonstrate how archaeological and epigraphic finds have revolutionized the field since Campbell's era. Furthermore, classical biblical criticism has progressed rapidly since the time period of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement. However, I should note that a substantial portion of Campbell's essential hermeneutic remains: cogent interpretations are the result of the use of the most authoritative manuscripts, rigorous philology, and solid data about the cultural context of the text. With this foundation in mind, it is now appropriate to subject a problematic text to modern methods and new data.

GENESIS 6:1-4: DOMINANT INTERPRETATIONS

That this pericope is located precisely before the narratives about the flood is of critical importance. It seems to function as the *casus belli*, as it were, for after this pericope, Yahweh makes pronouncements about the depravity of humankind, his regret regarding its creation, and his intent to destroy the world by releasing the waters of chaos. This is all quite clear; however, within both Christianity and Judaism, Genesis 6:1-4 has historically been considered an enigmatic text because of the divergent interpretations of *bēnē hā 'ēlōhîm*, that is, "the sons of the god."

During Second Temple Judaism, some considered the *bēnē hā 'ēlōhîm* to be "angels," that is, "non-divine celestial beings." For this reason, the pseudepigraphal book of 1 Enoch reflects the notion that Genesis 6:1-4 refers to fallen "angels." Moreover, the Septuagint often translates this phrase as *oi angeloi tou theou*, that is, "the angels of God."⁹ Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, considered to be among the most important Patristic writers, accepted this view as well.

Some argued that the phrase "the sons of the god" was actually a means of referring to the children of Seth, and that this text is to be understood as a reference to the intercourse or marriage of the Sethites with the Canaanites.¹⁰

Within Rabbinic Judaism, it was argued that the "sons of the god" were distinguished human beings. For example, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai considered them to be the "sons of nobles." Significantly, he cursed all who called them "sons of God."¹¹ Within Christian circles, some have argued that the "sons of the god" are terrestrial princes. For example, Walter Kaiser stated that this text refers to ancient Near Eastern kings with stunning harems.¹²

Such attempts to explain this phrase, however, are not ultimately convincing for the following reasons.

1. The Hebrew term *bēnē hā 'ēlōhîm* literally means, "the sons of the god," nothing more, nothing less. Biblical Hebrew has a word for "angel," "messenger," (*mal'āk*), and although it is quite common in the Hebrew Bible and even in Genesis (e.g., Gen 16:7, 9, 10; 21:17; 22:11; 48:16), it is not used in Gen 6:1-4.¹³
2. Seth is not referred to in Genesis 6:1-4, and although the text indicates that after the birth of Seth people "began to call upon the name of Yahweh" (Gen 4:26), the descendants of Seth are never referred to as "the sons of the god." In addition, "the sons of the god" are said to be present at the time of creation (Job 38:7), something that severely undermines the Sethite interpretation of the term "the sons of the god."
3. Furthermore, neither the Masoretic Text of Gen 6:1-4 nor the evidence from the field of comparative Semitics, suggests that *bēnē hā 'ēlōhîm* are ancient Near Eastern elites with majestic wives or large harems.¹⁴ In the final analysis it can be affirmed that some of these interpretations are quite clever, but none can command much confidence.

Significantly, there are numerous occurrences of the term "the sons of the god" in other ancient Near Eastern literature, and the essential meaning of the term in this literature is readily apparent and certain. For

example, within the extensive corpus of Ugaritic literature, this term occurs a number of times. There are references to the “assembly of the gods” (*phr ’lm*), “the assembly of the sons of the gods” (*phr bn ’lm*), and “the circle of the sons of god.” (*dr bn ’Il*). Within Phoenician texts, there is reference to the “the whole circle of the sons of the gods” (*kl dr bn ’lm*). Within Akkadian texts, there are references to the divine assembly as well. For example, within the Babylonian creation account known as *Enūma Eliš*, there are references to the “assembly of the gods” (*puḥur ilāni*). The point is that within the ancient Semitic world, it was believed that there was a divine assembly, consisting of the head of the pantheon as well as secondary members of the pantheon (often understood to be descendants of the heads of the pantheon). The male secondary members of the pantheon, the “junior gods,” were referred to within the ancient Semitic literature as the “sons of the god(s).”¹⁵

Based on the textual data from the ancient Near East, it is now possible to understand the basic import of Gen 6:1-4: younger male gods are said to have come to earth, seen human women, and had conjugal relations with them. This interpretation may seem quite difficult for some. The reason for this is simply that we bring certain presuppositions to the biblical text.

One of the strongest and most common presuppositions is that “orthodox,” ancient Israelite religion was always monotheistic, even from the earliest periods of Israelite religion. The veracity of monotheism is indeed something that was affirmed in 7th century Judaeen religion (Jer 10:3-6) and Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaeen religion (e.g. Isa 44:14-20). It was the norm in Late Second Temple Judaism.¹⁶ Moreover, Christianity is an heir to the monotheism of late Second Temple Judaism. However, the extant evidence does not suggest that earliest Israelite religion was monotheistic. For this reason, vestiges of earliest Israelite religion are present in certain archaic (or archaizing) biblical texts (Exod 15:11; Ps 29:1, 89:7; Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7).

A second common presupposition is that “events” described in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 6:1-4) are necessarily historical in all their details. Gen 6:1-4 is troublesome because the text employs the nomenclature (and worldview) of the polytheistic Semitic world. Such texts are difficult and raise complex issues within certain confessional communities in both Judaism and Christianity.

A fine example of a confessional community’s discomfort with the content of Scripture is the textual tradition of Deuteronomy 32. The Masoretic Text reads as follows: “When the Most High (*‘elyōn, nwył*) established the inheritance of each nation, when he divided humankind. He established the boundaries of the peoples, according to the number of the sons of Israel. For Yahweh’s portion was his people, Jacob was his allotted inheritance.” However, 4QDeut^a, a Dead Sea Scroll manuscript antedating the Masoretic Text by more than a millennium, reads as follows: “When the Most High established the inheritance of each nation, when he divided humankind. He established the boundaries of the peoples, according to the number of the sons of the god (*bēnē hā ’ēlōhīm*).”

Significantly, the reading of the Septuagint does not reflect a Hebrew *Vorlage* with “sons of Israel.” Rather, it reads “angels of God.” Obviously, the Septuagint translation reflects the tradition that the “sons of the god” were “angels,” however the main point is that its Hebrew *Vorlage* certainly did not have “sons of Israel,” but rather it had the same reading as 4QDeut^a. That is, based on the textual evidence from Qumran and the Septuagint, *bēnē hā ’ēlōhīm* is the original reading of Deut 32:8-9. The Masoretic Text’s “sons of Israel” is a secondary revision resulting from post-biblical scribal objections to the original reading (that is, “sons of Israel” is a “pseudo-correction”).

Perhaps we sympathize with the scribes that changed the text, making it read “sons of Israel” instead of “the sons of the god.” However, ultimately it is imperative that we as interpreters permit the voices of the text to be heard rather than changing it or reading it through a modern interpretive lens that severely distorts the content of the text.

In sum, the biblical text must be “excavated.” That is, the best tools should be brought to the text, namely, the best philology, the best manuscript evidence, the most current information about the ancient

Near Eastern world of the Old Testament, and the most tenable modern methods of biblical criticism. Gen 6:1-4 constitutes a model text for showcasing some of the tools available to the contemporary interpreter. Obviously, this means that interpreting a text requires certain abilities, specialized knowledge, and diligence.

For nonspecialists, moreover, the interpretive task may seem particularly daunting. However, there are resources available. *Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* is a multivolume commentary series, written by good scholars but designed for those that do not specialize in biblical studies. The more detailed *Anchor Bible Commentary Series* contains a wealth of information that will be very helpful as well. Moreover, single volume “study Bibles” such as the *Harper Collins Study Bible* and the *Oxford Annotated Bible* (both using the NRSV as the base text, and both available with, or without, the Old Testament Apocrypha) contain notes written by specialists for nonspecialists.

Of course, of similar importance is the fact that specialists within confessional communities must strive to equip congregants with interpretive tools as well. The point is that rigor and persistence are essential for the interpreter of sacred literature, but it is the most convincing interpretations that will result from such diligence.¹⁷

CHRISTOPHER ROLLSTON

Dr. Rollston teaches Old Testament and Semitic Studies at Emmanuel School of Religion, Johnson City, Tennessee.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1980 reprint).
- 2 Some interpreters in the 20th and 21st century have argued that interpreting texts “correctly” is ultimately impossible and that there are no discernible semantic domains inherent in a text. I cannot concur. Language and writing are semantic symbols in cultures, and—in spite of the difficulties in discerning semantic domains in writing and language and the various obvious caveats regarding interpretations—I concur with Campbell and affirm that interpreters can often come within an “understanding distance.” Note that within literate cultures, documents such as law codes, constitutions, treaties are read in order to discern intended import. Texts have meaning. In sum, neither the nihilistic foundation of certain contemporary epistemological movements, nor the simplistic positivism of other epistemological movements, seems convincing.
- 3 For translations of some of the primary sources, see especially the following: Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols., rev. ed; Bethesda: CDL Press, 1996); Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976-1980); Michael David Coogan, *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville: Westminster, 1978).
- 4 J. J. M. Roberts, “Myth Versus History: Relaying the Comparative Foundations,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 1-13. This article has been republished in a volume consisting of the collected writings of Roberts titled *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2002). See G. Ernest Wright’s *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM, 1950) for an example of older scholarship, which argued that Israel’s religion exhibited a modicum of cultural continuity with the cultures surrounding it.
- 5 For fine examples of the relevance of certain Semitic languages for the study of the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament, see James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament, With Additions and Corrections* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987); Chaim (Harold) R. Cohen, *Biblical Hapax Legomena in the Light of Akkadian and Ugaritic* (SBLDS, no. 37; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977); Paul V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (HSS, no. 47 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000).
- 6 See Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1973), 48-60. Note that the divine name shaddai occurs outside the Bible, for example in the Deir Allā Plaster Texts referring to Balaam son of Beor. See Rollston’s article “Balaam” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v.
- 7 For discussions of these issues, see Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) and the following two volumes by Emmanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research*, (2nd ed. Jerusalem: Simor, 1997); and *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, (2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).
- 8 A convenient summary of these methods is contained in the following volume: Odil Hannes Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Guide to the Methodology*, SBL RBS 33, trans. James D. Nogalski (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995). For an example of a recent, superb treatment, of the gender issues and the text of the Old Testament, see Susan Askerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
- 9 See LXX Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7. Note that in Gen 6:1-4 the Septuagint has *oi uioui tou theou*, that is, “the sons of the God.”
- 10 For example, C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), vol. 1, 127.
- 11 See *Midrash Rabbah* on Genesis for this interpretation.

- 12 Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 80.
- 13 The precise semantic nuance(s) of *mal'āk* ("angel") in the Hebrew Bible is an important subject to consider but is beyond the scope of the present article.
- 14 Texts such as Ps 73:15 and 80:17 are sometimes cited to suggest that the biblical Hebrew term "sons of the god" can be used with reference to people; however, the Hebrew term does not occur in these contexts, and so these citations cannot bear the weight placed upon them. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Rollston's article, "The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence" in *Stone-Campbell Journal*, 6 (2003): 104, note 26.
- 15 Ugaritic is a Northwest Semitic language (as are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Phoenician). Several thousand Ugaritic tablets have been excavated and translated. These texts date to the late Bronze Age, that is, the late second millennium B.C. Phoenician is the language of ancient Phoenicia, and the text cited (Karatepe) dates to the 8th century B.C. Akkadian is a language of ancient Mesopotamia and was used for more than two millennia. Several hundred thousand Akkadian are extant, with more found every year. For a long discussion of the relevant biblical and ancient Near Eastern data, see Rollston, "The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel," 95-115.
- 16 One of the finest lengthy treatments of these issues is Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, (2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).
- 17 This article is written in honor of Vernon and Mildred Rollston.

