Neil O'Hara

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge
Neil.O'Hara@aru.ac.uk
ORCID: 0000-0002-6871-5884

DOI: https://doi.org/10.12775/BPTh.2025.021

Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia

18 (2025) 4: 437–455

ISSN (print) 1689-5150
ISSN (online) 2450-7059

Sin, Immortality and Genesis 6:1–4

Grzech, nieśmiertelność i Księga Rodzaju 6:1–4

Abstract. The incident in Gen 6:1–4, has proved an alluring and disturbing mystery for exegetes. There are two broad explanatory strategies I will argue against here. Firstly, that Gen 6:1–4 is a *Schuld und Strafe* story, one of sin and punishment. Secondly, that the incident provides a motivation for the Flood. I will conclude that Gen 6:1–4 is not a story about sin and punishment. Instead, it is a story about death, or more precisely about shutting down an opportunity for human immortality.

Streszczenie. Incydent opisany w Gen 6,1–4 okazał się dla egzegetów intrygującą i niepokojącą zagadką. Sprzeciwię się tu dwóm szerokim strategiom wyjaśniającym. Po pierwsze, Gen 6,1–4 to opowieść typu *Schuld und Strafe*, czyli o grzechu i karze. Po drugie, incydent ten stanowi przyczynę potopu. Dojdę do wniosku, że Gen 6,1–4 nie jest opowieścią o grzechu i karze. Jest to raczej opowieść o śmierci, a dokładniej o zatrzymaniu szansy na ludzką nieśmiertelność.

Keywords: Sons of God, Daughters of Men, Genesis 6, immortality, death, Pentateuch.

Słowa kluczowe: Synowie Boga, Córki ludzi, Księga Rodzaju 6, nieśmiertelność, śmierć, Pięcioksiąg.

Introduction

The incident with the 'sons of god' (*bene ha-elohim*) and the 'daughters of men' in Gen 6:1-4, has proved an alluring and disturbing mystery for exegetes. There are hints of polytheism, there is the flavour of legend and myth, it sticks out like sore thumb (classically is a 'cracked erratic boulder' [Wellhausen 2013 {1885}], 317) or disembodied 'torso' [Gunkel 1997 {1901}, 59]). There are two key readings of this text I will argue against here. Firstly, and primarily, against those that take

Gen 6:1–4 to be, in Westermann's phrase, a '*Schuld-Strafe*' tale (Westermann 1994 [1974]), 263 and *passim*) – one of sin and punishment. Secondly, the view that follows from this, that the incident provides a motivation for the Flood (see Hendel 1987, 13–26; 1992, 167–77; 2004).

1. Gen 6:1–4 as a *Schuld-Strafe* narrative

The view that Gen 6:1–4 is a story of sin and punishment is by far the dominant one, and has been throughout the history of its exegesis. A *Schuld-Strafe* reading is standard in the early Church Fathers, being given by, for example, Clement, Ephraim the Syrian, Augustine (Louth 2001, 123–126), and Theodoret of Cyrus (see Louth 2001, 123–126; also Theodoret of Cyrus 2007, 99). Both Luther and Calvin saw sin in the story (Luther 1960, 10; Calvin, 2009, 167–168. For a comprehensive summary of ancient and medieval responses to Gen 6:1–4 see Doedens 2019). And is fair to say it is the dominant reading among modern commentators (cf. for example, Arnold 2009, 90; Davidson 1973, 70–71; Day 2013, 81; Goldingay 2020, 111; Hendel 2024, 264; Kidner 1967, 83; Rogerson, Moberly & Johnstone 2001, 85; Von Rad 1963, 109–112; Wenham 1987, 141), though few important scholars, like D. M. Carr, disagree.[1]

As many modern exegetes point back to Westermann as a touchstone (cf. for example Brodie 2001, 125; Clines 1979), 34 and *passim*; Kaminski 2008), 458; Kvanvig 2002, 87; Petersen 1979, 49 and *passim*), and he explicitly lays out the '*Schuld-Strafe*' model, it will be worth looking at his position in some detail first.

[1] For Carr, the text 'expresses no negative judgment of actions by either the male divine beings or the daughters of humanity' (2021, 213). Nahum Sarna also pulls away from the idea that humans had done wrong here. He says that 'the story is immediately followed by God's verdict on human wickedness, and the impression is created, even if not made explicit, that it illustrates the magnitude and the universality of evil in the world. Even the celestial host is corrupted. True, mankind is not condemned here for the acts of angels, but the effect is that the world order has been disturbed' (2001, 45). Alter (2004, 38–39) can perhaps be read in support as well.

2. Westermann on Gen 6:1–4

How does Westermann establish Gen 6:1–4 as a *Schuld-Strafe* tale? The core of his argument is his drawing an analogy between Gen 6:1–4 and two other biblical narratives – those in Gen 12:10–20 (Pharaoh takes Sarai) and 2 Samuel 11 (David takes Bathsheba).

> Common to both [Gen 12:10–20 and 2 Sam 11] is the sequence "they saw – they took." The action in both begins with the discovery of the beauty of the woman (women). On both occasions the one who observes the beauty of a woman is the one who has the power, and so the opportunity, to take as a wife whom his fancy chooses … This motif is found in the primeval history, Gen 6:1–4 … It is said of the sons of the gods that "they took wives for themselves … just as their fancy chose." (Westermann 1994 [1974], 366–367)

And he goes on to conclude that 'in all three examples therefore the first two stages, seeing and taking, are followed by a third – the intervention of God." (Westermann 1994 [1974], 367). Westermann characterises this third stage in the story in terms of punishment – 'direct punishment of those who have transgressed' (Westermann 1994 [1974], 367). The difficulty is that 'the course of events has been disturbed in Gen 6:1–4; there is no sign of any direct punishment of those who have transgressed' (Westermann 1994 [1974], 367–368). This proves 'with certainty that there was once in place of v.3 a direct intervention of God which punished the transgressors.' (Westermann 1994 [1974], 368). And so 'the conclusion is unavoidable – the narrative here cannot be intact.' (Westermann 1994 [1974], 373).

So we may summarise his position like this:

> By analogy with two other biblical texts, we know the motif used in Gen 6:1–4 contains three elements i) seeing a beautiful woman/women, ii) taking them, and iii) God's punishing the deed. iii) is missing in the current form of the text. Therefore, the text is not intact.

We need not take Westermann too much to task for the immoderate language with which he makes his claims (he has 'proved with certainty', and 'the conclusion is unavoidable'). But there are some problems with his argument. As he himself points out (Westermann 1994 [1974], 366), there is at least one

biblical example of a man 'seeing and taking' without sinning or incurring divine punishment – that of Jacob and Rachel in Gen 29. It is true though that this story does not have an element important for Westermann's argument – 'one who has the *power* … to take a wife' (Westermann 1994 [1974], 367, emphasis mine). Jacob is not in a position of power in Gen 29, and so the analogy is less close with Gen 12:10–20 and 2 Samuel 11, and potentially Gen 6:1–4. Wenham, too, points to a problem with Westermann's argument here. He reminds us that 'Pharoah and David were condemned because they had committed adultery with other men's wives; there is no hint of that [in Gen 6:1–4]' (Wenham 1987, 141). It remains the case though that the analogy of any of these texts with Gen 6:1–4, relies on an assumption – that Gen 6:1–4 is not intact. If the text could be explained as a unity without the assumption of a lost act of punishment, then Westermann's argument from analogy would not be necessary.

So the case for an analogy between Gen 6:1–4 and both Gen 12:10–20 and 2 Samuel 11 is weak on at least two counts: in the latter there is *adultery*, in the former there is not; in the latter *punishment* is narrated, in the former it is not (more on this below). And further, the *motivation* for the analogy is removed in that, as Westermann himself admits, 'seeing and taking' does not always involve sin in the biblical narratives.

A question of Gunkel's which Westermann cites cannot help here either. Gunkel asks 'Is it perhaps that too much of the mythological has been eliminated?' (Wenham 1987, 373–374). Can the assumed loss of material be explained by saying that, the Genesis editors have garbled the sense of the passage through demythologising? This assumes that 'there lay behind 6.3 a version of the story that has been deliberately obscured' (Wenham 1987, 374) – obscured that is, in line with the generally demythologising tendency of the Genesis editors. But this cannot help Westermann's position, because the story has not been demythologised in a sense relevant to his reading. He is trying to explain why human sin, and the punishment thereof, has been lost from the story. But this is the least 'mythological' part, it is the human side. It is the content about supernatural beings (the *bene ha-elohim*) which has been kept.

So for Westermann himself the text as it stands is not a *Schuld-Strafe* tale ('in Gen 6:1–4 [,] there is no sign of any direct punishment of those who have transgressed' [Wenham 1987, 367–368]). And he has not given us sufficient reasons to think an act of punishment (or an act of sin) has fallen out of the text as we have it. Therefore, cannot we call it (or a hypothesised alternative version) a *Schuld-Strafe* tale.

2.1. The ('angelic') *bene ha-elohim* sinned

Those supporting a *Schuld-Strafe* reading need to say who sinned (and ideally what the sin was). That means making a commitment as to the identity of the *bene ha-elohim* (and the *benoth ha-adam*). As Rita F. Cefalu puts it, regarding the identity of *bene ha-elohim*, 'three main views have been advanced'. They are either '(1) The [human] line stemming from Seth, (2) angelic beings, [or] (3) dynastic rulers. The consensus of modern scholarly opinion favors the second interpretation' (Cefalu 2014, 351).[2] Indeed, John Day considers the question almost settled in that,

> there is now widespread, though not universal, agreement [on] the identity of the sons of God. It is now generally held that they denote God's heavenly court, what were originally seen as gods but later, with the emergence of absolute monotheism, became regarded as angels. (Day 2013, 77)

On this very plausible view 'angels' is an interpretative translation – at least in the primeval history in which there are no *malakhim* (angels) but only a single appearance of *cherubim* (Gen 3:24). The *bene ha-elohim* are established, if shadowy, characters in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. at Deut 32:8 and Ps. 29:1 and Ps. 82); and in tradition-history terms they are genetically related to angels.

This identification of the *bene ha-elohim* with angels is early. As Dariusz Iwański notes, it 'is clearly reflected in the myth of the fallen watchers (angels), which we find in first book belonging to *Corpus Henochicum*, namely in the Book of Watchers.' (Iwański 2011, 30). And,

---

[2] Commentators who follow a *Schuld-Strafe* reading can also be classified in the following way, depending on who they take to be the *bene ha-elohim* to be: those who say they are supernatural beings (e.g. Hendel 2024; Kaminski 2008; Von Rad 1963; Wenham 1987; Westermann 1994 [1974])); and those who think they refer to a human group, for example Augustine (in Louth, 2001); Calvin 2009 [1578]; Eslinger 1979; Fockner 2008, 435–456; Kline 1962, 187–204. It should also be noted that some commentators argue that the 'daughters of men' are the guilty ones in the story, e.g. Pseudo Jonathon (in Bowker 1969). Kidner, discussing previous examples in Genesis of human 'presumption', comes close to blaming the human party, saying 'the present episode [Gen 6:1–4] could well belong to the series as an attempt, this time on angelic initiative, to bring supernatural power, or even immortality, illicitly to earth' (1967, 85).

> it is undeniable… 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 passage. (Iwański 2011, 32)

Thereafter, the identification is taken up in the New Testament (cf. 2 Pet 2:4–5 and Jude 6), and most of the early Church Fathers. For the composer of Genesis, however, we are dealing not with angels but with the *bene ha-elohim*. For the editors of Genesis, their status seems to be in transition, as yet undecided. They sit somewhere between the lesser members of the Canaanite pantheon, and the angels of later ontologies.[3]

If we take the *bene ha-elohim* to be supernatural beings, what is their sin and why does it lead to the limiting of human life-spans? The dominant view, expressed since antiquity, is that the sin of the *bene ha-elohim* was lust, or at least too great a focus on the physical. An early exponent of this view, Clement of Alexandria says,

> The mind is led astray by pleasure, and the virgin center of the mind, if not disciplined by the Word, degenerates into licentiousness and reaps disintegration as reward for its transgressions. An example of this for you is the angels who forsook the beauty of God for perishable beauty and fell as far as heaven is from the earth. (Louth 2001, 124)

Among modern exegetes (see for example Brodie 2001, 172), Hendel has a similar view,

> the Sons of God—divine beings subservient to Yahweh—gaze upon "the daughters of humans" and desire them. This desiring gaze motivates their sexual transgression of the metaphysical boundary of divine/human. (Hendel 2024, 266)

A variant of this view is given by Carol M. Kaminski. In her reading the problem is not lust but bad judgement (Kaminski 2008). Focusing on the proper

---

[3] I suspect that modern identification of the sons of God with angels is the result of trying to fit these beings into an acceptable modern ontology. That is to say, religious believers (including many contemporary theologians and exegetes) can still speak coherently of angels, but not of lesser divine beings. Whether or not they are right to do so leads into a discussion of the contemporary uses of the text which is beyond the scope of this paper. For the writers of Genesis, we are dealing not with angels but with the sons of God.

meaning of the term '*tov*' in 6:2, she argues for strong verbal echoes with Eve's sin in Gen 3.

> Genesis 6.2 is not only reminiscent of the 'judgment' or 'approval' formula in the creation story, but also Eve's actions in 3.6 where the same three terms appear: ראה, 'see', ,טוב 'good', and לקח, 'take'. While the verb can also mean 'marry' (this seems to be its meaning in 6.2), the presence of these three terms clearly recalls 3.6 where Eve 'sees' (ראה) that the tree was 'good' (טוב) for food…and 'takes' (לקח). (Kaminski 2008, 467)

These verbal echoes have been noted before, as has the reading of '*tov*' as 'good' without reference to physical beauty. The novelty of Kaminski's claim is in seeing the *judgement* of the *bene ha-elohim* as faulty – they judge the daughters of men to be *tov* when they are not. This is made clear, for Kaminski, in 6.5 where YHWH declare all humanity as evil. The verbal echoes, then, are meant to set up a conflict between God's correct judgement, and the faulty judgement of the *bene ha-elohim*.

> That the daughters of humankind are destroyed in the flood testifies to the fact that the sons of God are incorrect in their 'good' verdict—just as Eve was incorrect in her judgment that the tree was good for eating. (Kaminski 2008, 471)

A strength of this view is the identification of the verbal echoes. There does seem to be a reference to the seeing and taking in Gen 3. However, as we have seen in discussing Westermann's position, seeing and taking does not always mean sin in the Hebrew Bible. A similar diction can be used to express different positions. Add to this the fact that, if there is a condemnation of sin here it is very circumspect indeed. In the very next verses, at 6:5–6, the writer is extraordinarily clear in expressing human wickedness and the result.

> The LORD saw that the *wickedness of humankind was great* in the earth, and that *every* inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was *only evil continually*. And the LORD was sorry he had made mankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart.

This clarity makes the 'condemnation' in 6:3 subtle to the point of unrecognizability as a condemnation. At 6:5–6 a clear link is made between universal sin and universal judgement. Verbal echoes alone are not enough to identify something similar in v.1–4.

Some add content to the condemnation by saying the *bene ha-elohim* do wrong by crossing 'the metaphysical boundary of divine/human' (Hendel 2024, 266). The main problem with this view is that, even if this were considered a sin,[4] the wrong party gets punished (and this problem applies whether the *bene ha-elohim* are supernatural or human). The daughters of men clearly play a subordinate role in the incident. It is the *bene ha-elohim* who 'see' and 'take' and 'choose'[5]. The women are passive party to male agency here. Why then is it the humans in the story (represented by the daughters of men and their offspring) who bear the 'punishment'? What was their sin? That is hard to see. To be sure, casting the women in the story as sinners or temptresses is an old tendency. Ps. Jonathan for example had them 'beautiful, with painted eyes and curled hair, walking in nakedness of flesh' (Bowker 1969, 151). But the logic of the story as it stands, if it is about punishment, would demand that the *bene ha-elohim* be punished not the (offspring) of the daughters of men, who in our text are innocent and passive.

One creative response to this difficulty comes from David L. Petersen. He argues that the wrong party get punished because the story is meant to be ironic, 'a situation in which what we expect is reversed totally' (Petersen 1979, 49). He argues that,

> the ironic tone is conveyed by Yahweh's punishing humanity rather than the gods whereas the ironic form is created by having Yahweh punish humanity even before the daughters of men give births to the demi-gods. Gen 6:1–4 therefore becomes, by dint of the reversal of the standard narrative elements, an ironic version of a Schuld-Strafe story. (Petersen 1979, 49)

This position would be strengthened by appeal to some similar examples of ironic reversal in the Hebrew Bible, though Petersen does not give them here. In any case, the main problem with this reading is theological. The picture of YHWH's character it relies on is inconsistent with much else in Genesis. For

---

[4] Christian readers of the text may find some tension between this and commitments about the Incarnation of Christ.

[5] Cefalu cites Lyle Eslinger who notes the similarity with Eve's 'taking of the forbidden fruit. 'Both Eve and the sons of God "see" something, consider it "good," and "take" it. This allusion to Gen 3:6 in Gen 6:2 shows the correspondence between two actions that are regarded as sinful' (2014, 364). It is hard to deny a similarity in terminology. But as just noted, if the sons of God were being cast, subtly, as sinners then the wrong party gets punished. This stronger theological reason trumps the terminological similarity.

this reading of Gen 6:1–4 to work YHWH must be arbitrary and indifferent towards the concerns of justice. But this would make a nonsense of the *Schuld-Strafe* narratives that do appear in Genesis. Petersen accepts that his reading makes YHWH's actions arbitrary. The Genesis editor, he says, 'depicts Yahweh as acting arbitrarily so as to emphasize his godness in contradistinction to humanity' (ibid. 59). But the distorting effect here seems too great to justify the method, especially considering YHWH's extreme concern with justice in the Flood story which follows.

The readings of Gen 6:1–4 then, that have supernatural *bene ha-elohim* as transgressors, face serious problems.

2.2. The (human) *bene ha-elohim* sinned

What of interpretations of the text which identify the *bene ha-elohim* with certain human groups? The view that the *bene ha-elohim* are descendants of Seth was endorsed by 'church fathers such as Augustine, and Reformers such as John Calvin' (Cefalu 2014, 353), (indeed by the majority of ancient commentators) and so should be taken seriously. In Calvin's view, the sons of God in Gen 6 are the 'posterity of Seth', while the daughters of men represent 'the children of Cain'. This reading has at least two advantages. Firstly, it demythologises the text, understanding the parties involved in purely human terms. This offers greater ontological simplicity (though there is no *a priori* reason why this is an advantage here)[6]. The second advantage is that it identifies the sin in this purported story of sin and punishment. As Calvin puts it,

> it was, therefore, base ingratitude in the posterity of Seth, to mingle themselves with the children of Cain, and with other profane races; because they voluntarily deprived themselves of the inestimable grace of God. For it was an intolerable profanation, to pervert, and to confound, the order appointed by God. (Calvin 2009 [1578] 238)

The Sethites, as the pure line through which God would accomplish his salvation, did wrong by mixing with the Cainites, in the same way that the Israelites would later do wrong by entering into marriages with non-Israelites (cf. Ezra

---

[6] See Van Gemeren 1981, 320–348, for a useful discussion of what he terms 'evangelical demythologization' of this text.

10:2–5). Therefore, God announces his judgement, the limiting of human life. Note though that for Calvin, this judgment 'refers not to the private life of any one, but to a time of repentance to be granted to the whole world' before the coming of the flood (Calvin 2009 [1578] 243).[7]

However, problems with this kind of view have been noted before. Cefalu summarises two such problems.

> [One] weakness, according to Meredith Kline, is the reference to the "Nephilim-Gibborim" of Gen 6:4. He asserts that these are the offspring of the intermarriage between the sons of God and the daughters of men. The problem for Kline is that it is not clear why believers marrying unbelievers should produce the "Nephilim-Gibborim."
> [Another] weakness with the Sethite view, as David Clines notes, is that the phrase "does not appear as a collective term for the Sethites, either in these chapters or elsewhere." (Cefalu 2014, 353–354)

We could add, further, that the God-established order of holy Sethites and unholy Cainites too, is foreign to the text as it stands. These problems make the Sethite interpretation unlikely to be correct.

Similar problems arise for the other popular means of interpreting the sons of God as a class of humans – seeing them as (human) dynastic rulers. Meredith G. Kline asks rhetorically,

> is not the key to the identity of the בני–האלהים provided by the sacral kings who are so much in the center of interest in current studies of ancient Near Eastern life and culture? From the several great kingdoms which formed the setting of Old Testament history the evidence has been amassed, showing that kings were often regarded as in one sense or another divine and that they were indeed called sons of the various gods. (Kline 1962, 191–192)

And though Kline relies heavily on ancient West Asian parallels, he also appeals to Ps. 82 and David's being named as God's son in 2 Sam 7:14, as biblical support for his view. Indeed, Cefalu also regards this Psalm as referring to earthly rulers 'who are vested with this God-like dignity and authority, even though they are misusing it' (Kline 1962, 355).

---

[7] This view, that the 120 years of Gen 6:4 refers to the time between the *bene ha-elohim* marriages and the Flood, is at least as old as the *Genesis Florilegium* from Qumran.

But this reading seems hard to maintain. Firstly, these sons of God (in Ps. 82) are threatened with something that is against their nature – death – 'I say you are gods … Nevertheless, like man you will die.' The opposition does not make sense if speaking to human beings, rulers or otherwise, who are already destined for death. Cefalu also complains, against the angelic/divine interpretation, that the sons of God in this Psalm are given responsibility for the widow and orphan, duties of rulers. But these responsibilities fit very neatly with the picture of the sons of God given in Deut 32:8,[8] rulers to whom God apportioned the peoples of the earth.

And so, like the Sethite interpretation, the divine kingship reading lacks biblical support, relying in the main on analogous ancient West Asian material. This fact counts seriously against it. The main motivation for pursuing such interpretations seems to be, as previously mentioned, the ontological simplicity it brings. It eliminates, or redefines, these mysterious, seemingly mythical beings – the sons of God – out of the biblical text. This, though, is a move we should resist. Instead, we should see the sons of God as characters from a stock of tradition that the Genesis editors are using, with all their shades of literary and mythical meaning, to make an important theological point. I will discuss what I suggest this could be in section 6.

3. No *Schuld*, no *Strafe*: Life Limiting and Punishment

A more general objection we might anticipate is that because the story is about death, or at least concludes with a 'sentence' of death, it must be about punishment. But this thought is not as persuasive as it might at first seem. We can look to the book of Job to loosen the link between death and punishment. In brief, to argue that because there is death there must be sin, is to argue as Job's friends do – 'Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?' (Job 4:7). Now of course this line of reasoning is repudiated, through YHWH's responses, by the writer

[8] I follow Hendel in taking 'sons of God', rather than the MT 'sons of Israel' to be the original. Hendel bases this on 'a fragmentary text from the Dead Sea Scrolls…found to contain Deuteronomy 32:8.' This text, written 'in late Herodian script (late first century B.C. to late first century A.D.), is now our earliest Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 32:8…[and] the last phrase in this verse in this fragment clearly reads "the sons of God", not "the sons of Israel"'. Hendel concludes that '[t]his reading, preserved in Greek in the Septuagint but not in the received Hebrew text, seems rather clearly to be the authentic original.' (1987, 9–10)

of Job. Job is an innocent man, and though no explicit reason for his suffering is given, the negative answer that it was not due to sin is made clear. The very first verse insists that Job 'was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil', an assessment YHWH himself presents twice to Satan (1:8 and 2:3); and YHWH drives the point home saying Job 'still persists in his integrity, although you [Satan] incited me against him, to destroy him *for no reason*." (2:3, emphasis mine). Job's suffering was not due to sin. The writer of Job takes Job's suffering as no definitive indicator of sin, and so we cannot assume the writer of Gen 6:1–4 takes death as such.

To be sure, death often is a result of sin, is often a punishment in the Hebrew Bible. Examples are ubiquitous. But this does not mean there are no other biblical opinions about death.[9] Nor does it follow that in every instance death follows from sin.

Another key problem with *Schuld-Strafe* readings of Gen 6:1–4 in general is that the punishment does not fit the crime. That is to say, the universality of the punishment does not fit the particularity of the 'sin'. The sons of God took wives 'of all that they chose', not of all *simpliciter*. So only a part of humanity is implicated. It seems particularly unjust then that all humanity be judged on their behalf. This is especially odd given the lengths the writer goes to a few verses later, at 6:5–6, to express the universality of the wickedness that leads to God's universal punishment in the Flood.

> The LORD saw that the *wickedness of humankind was great* in the earth, and that *every* inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was *only evil continually*. And the LORD was sorry he had made mankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart.

---

[9] The case could be made that Gen 3:22, rather than announcing punishment on humanity, actually reports a decision motivated by mercy. The rationale for death given at 3:22 is that 'the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil'. Why would this sorry state of affairs require punishment? It does not. Instead, humanity's post-curse existence would be cruel if endured forever. Therefore 'the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden' away from the tree of life, from which they would eat and live (indefinitely).

It might be objected that 'knowing evil' here is a gloss for 'doing evil'. But this is unlikely given that God himself (and his council) are said to have the same knowledge ('the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil'). If 'knowing' here meant 'doing' God would be condemning himself (and his heavenly counsel). Though I think this 'death as mercy' reading of Gen 3:22 is correct, it is not necessary for my argument here, so I will not defend it any further.

At 6:5–6 a clear link is made between universal sin and universal judgement. No such link is made in 6:1–4. Indeed, no sin or wickedness is explicitly mentioned.

Indeed, as Carr points out, far from being a punishment, as lifespan of 120 years is often seen a blessed long life. This is the case in both the Hebrew Bible, with a figure as august as Moses, and in ancient West Asian traditions and beyond (Carr 2020, 213–215).

A final way to read sin into the story might be by saying it was the *offspring* who were the guilty party. We could say that the offspring of the marriages being named *gibborim* implies a negative moral assessment.[10] At least one famous *gibbor* in Genesis, Nimrod, is said to suffer from a negative assessment of his character. His description by the Genesis composer is said to evoke 'an impression of corruption and immorality' (Hom 2010, 67). It might be argued, then, that the term *gibborim* necessarily implies a violent, immoral nature. So this sinners in the story are the Nephilim, identified in Gen 6:4 as *gibborim*.[11] However, even if Hom is correct about her reading of Nimrod, this is far from establishing '*gibborim*' as a necessarily negative descriptor. Famously, David's *gibborim* are heroic figures and are listed with honour (2 Sam 23:8–39). And even if the Nephilim were being described negatively in this general way, no specific sin of theirs is mentioned, so no punishment makes sense. So we cannot find the sin of the offspring of the unions by pointing to their identity as *gibborim*.

4. Gen 6:1–4 and the Flood

If Gen 6:1–4 is not a *Schuld-Strafe* tale, it cannot be the motivation for the Flood. Hendel provides, in my view, the best version of this position, so I will take some time to outline his version.[12]

In brief, Hendel's view is that 'in the original version of the mating story in Genesis 6:1–4, the Nephilim were destroyed by the Flood; indeed they were the cause of the Flood' (Hendel 1992, 174). He then goes on to relate this to the

[10] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this reading.

[11] Also, while not charging them with sin, Davidson does characterise the offspring in somewhat loaded terms as well, calling them a 'strange, bastard race' (1973, 70).

[12] It is unclear whether or not Hendel still holds this view, as he expresses no explicit support for it in his 2024 Anchor commentary.

version of the Flood story preserved in the Old Babylonian Atrahasis myth. In that myth,

> the human world is overpopulated with humans, and the gods cannot sleep because of the noise'. [And so after] 'other efforts at population control fail, Enlil decrees the flood, which will kill all humans and take care of the noise problem – Enlil's final solution. (Hendel 1992, 174)

After the Flood, as a means of stopping human overpopulation in the future, it is decreed that 'people will henceforth die natural deaths' (ibid.). In the Genesis story then 'the divine response to the cosmic imbalance represented by the Sons of God mating with the daughters of men is likewise to limit human lifespan' (Hendel 1992, 175). This leads to the conclusion that 'originally, in the early Israelite tradition, the motive for the Flood was the destruction of the Nephilim' (Hendel 1992, 175).

The main strengths of Hendel's account are that, firstly, it explains the placing of the sons of God incident next to the Flood story – the Flood story was originally *motivated* by the sons of God incident, though in Genesis the motivation is replaced with humanity's universal wickedness. Secondly, it recovers a precedent for linking the limiting of human lifespan with the ending of human life in the Flood. It is indeed odd that a story about the limiting of human life should motivate the complete annihilation of human life. This is quite literally overkill. But in the Atrahasis epic outright annihilation is commuted to limited lifespan. In Genesis 6:1–8 the logic of the commuting is retained, but somewhat out of place in its new context and only as an echo.

These are good reasons to agree with Hendel, but there remain some problems to be solved. First, Hendel's position makes the final form of the text incoherent. And if we can explain his text in a way that gives it greater sense and coherence, that will be a reason in favour of that explanation. Secondly, the need, acknowledged by Hendel[13], to posit a hypothetical intermediate story, or take Gen 6:1–4 as the original, imperfect combining of these themes. We do not have extant any such intermediate story, so if we can explain the text with a logic of its own, rather than that of a hypothetical predecessor, this will be a step forward. Thirdly, as with other readings discussed above, in Hendel's account the wrong

[13] He speaks of 'the original version of the mating story' (1992, 174).

party gets punished, both in the limiting of lifespan, and in the Flood itself. For these reasons we cannot read Gen 6:1–4 as a motivation for the Flood.

5. If not sin and punishment then what?

If Gen 6:1–4 is not a *Schuld-Strafe* tale, what is it? It is an etiological story about human mortality. By mating with the *bene ha-elohim* it is assumed that humanity (at least the offspring of their union) would be immortal. Though immortality is not explicitly stated as the result, God's concluding decree assumes it – 'My spirit shall not abide in man forever'. The word *l'olam* is the same used in Ex 3:5 where God says that 'YHWH' is 'my name forever (*l'olam*), and this my title for all generations'; and it is used to describe the length of the duration of God's kingdom in Ex 15:18. In these verses it means a permanent state, lasting indefinitely. So it seems fair to assume that in Gen 6:3, God is here limiting what would otherwise be a permanent state, lasting forever. So Gen 6:1–4 is a story about the shutting down of an avenue towards humans immortality.

That the Genesis editors would address this theme also makes sense given its ancient West Asian context. The theme was famously broached in the *Gilgamesh* epic, by the tavern-keeper Siduri who says that,

> when the gods created mankind,
> death they dispensed to mankind,
> life they kept for themselves. (George 1999, 124)

The story of Adapa similarly tells of a tragic failure to gain immortality, for Adapa at least. And in the Atrahasis myth, humans were naturally immortal, and the human lifespan had to be limited by the gods. As Hendel says, discussing *Atrahasis*, in the primeval era

> according to Babylonian understanding, humans live forever; this is what created the overpopulation [that disturbed the gods]. People can still die from violence or starvation, but natural death has not yet been instituted. (Hendel 1992, 174)

The situation envisaged by the Gensis editor is roughly similar – human beings are originally immortal. Hence the key theme in Gen 3 of the warning of, then the coming of, death to the original human couple. However, we should say

more precisely that, in the story, the original humans had *access to* immortality, through eating from the tree of life. And it was the taking away of this means to (immortal) life that led to *de facto* mortality.[14] This fits well with other ancient West Asian stories because the 'loss *of the chance* to become immortal, and not the loss of an original immortality, is a traditional element in [that] mythology' (Schmid, 2008, 10).

This *topos*, the search for, or possibility of attaining, immortality also appears 'closer to home' in the Ugaritic corpus. In the Aqhat poem, Anat offers immortality to the poem's eponymous hero, in exchange for his magnificent bow:

> Ask for life, Aqhat the Hero,
> Ask for life, and I'll give it,
> Deathlessness – I'll endow you. (Parker 1997, 61)

In this story too though the outcome is not immortality – Aqhat's murder follows soon after this offer and its rejection. Of course the Gilgamesh epic offer the most well-known example of a fruitless search for immortality. Only Uta-Napishtim has attained it, but he cannot help others get it as the circumstances under which he gained it are unrepeatable.

So it would make perfect sense to find this theme treated in Genesis 1–11. Gen 6:1–4 is another such story about the thwarted attempt of humans to become immortal.[15]

Conclusion

Most commentators take Gen 6:1–4 as a *Schuld-Strafe* tale. I have given some reasons to think this is not the correct reading. Firstly, there is no discernible sin in it. Secondly, if there was the wrong party are punished. Third, even the 'punishment', a 120 year life-span, can plausibly be read as either mercy, or the guarantee of a blessedly long life, not a punishment. One outcome of this is that,

---

[14] See Schmid's insightful discussion of original immortality for the Genesis couple, and the post-Biblical reception of this theme (2008, 58–78).

[15] As Kvanvig puts it, '[t]he everlasting lives of the primordial race cannot continue within the established cosmic order, therefore the lives have to be shortened. But this decision is not lifted into moral categories' (2002, 89).

again against the majority of commentators, Gen 6:1–4 cannot be a motivation for the Flood story.

The explanation suggested here, that the story is about death and immortality, explains the text of Gen 6:1–4 as it stands. That is to say, we can understand the story as it is, rather than positing possible earlier versions to explain it. It is a myth about a potential route to human immortality being closed off, a common *topos* is ancient West Asian myth. That is, it is about death being decreed, and immortality denied for humanity for a second time.

References

Alter, Robert. 2004. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Arnold, Bill T. 2009. *Genesis: The New Cambridge Bible Commentary*. Cambridge University Press.

Bowker, John. 1969. *The Targums & Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture*. Cambridge University Press.

Brodie, Thomas L. 2001. *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary*. Oxford University Press.

Calvin, John. 2009 [1578]. *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*. Translated by Rev. John King. Baker Books.

Carr, David M. 2020. *The Formation of Genesis 1–11: Biblical and Other Precursors*. Oxford University Press.

Carr, David M. 2021. *Genesis 1–11 (International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament)*. W. Kohlhammer.

Cefalu, Rita F. 2014. "Royal Priestly heirs to the restoration promise of Genesis 3:15: A biblical theological perspective on the sons of god in Genesis 6", *Westminster Theological Journal* 76.2: 351–370. EBSCOhost.

Clines, David J. A. 1979. "The significance of the 'sons of god' episode (Genesis 6:1–4) in the context of the 'primeval history' (Genesis 1–11)". *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13: 33–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/030908927900401304.

Clifford, Richard J. 2016. "The Divine Assembly in Genesis 1–11." In *Sibyls, Scriptures and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism: 175)*, edited by Joel Baden, Hindy Najman & Eibert Tigchelaar. Brill. 276–292.

Cohen, Yoram. 2013. *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age*. Society of Biblical Literature.

Davidson, R. 1973. *Genesis 1–11*. Cambridge University Press.

Day, John. 2013. *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11*. Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Doedens, Jaap. 2019. *The Sons of God in Genesis 6:14: Analysis and History of Exegesis: 76 (Oudtestamentische Studiën, Old Testament Studies)*. Brill.

Eisenman, Robert H. and Wise, Michael Owen. 1992. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered: The First Complete Translation and Interpretation of 50 Key Documents Withheld for Over 35 Years*. Penguin Books.

Eslinger, Lyle M. 1979. "A Contextual Identification of the bene ha'elohim and benoth ha'adam in Genesis 6.1–4." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13: 65–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/030908927900401306.

Fockner, Sven. 2008. "Reopening the Discussion: Another Contextual Look at the Sons of God." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32.4: 435–456, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089208092140.

George, Andrew. 1999. *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation*. Allen Lane at the Penguin Press.

Goldingay, John. 2020. *Genesis (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Pentateuch)*. Baker Academic.

Gunkel, Hermann. 1997 [1901]. *Genesis: Translated and Interpreted*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Mercer University Press.

Hendel, Ronald. 1987. "Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106.1: 13–26.

Hendel, Ronald. 1992. "When the Sons of God Cavorted with the Daughters of Men", in *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by Hershel Shanks. Vintage Books. 167–77.

Hendel, Ronald. 2004. "The Nephilim Were on the Earth: Genesis 6:1–4 and its Ancient Near Eastern Context", in *The Fall of the Angels*, edited by Christoph Auffarth & Loren T. Stuckenbruck. Brill.

Hendel, Ronald. 2024. *Genesis 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Yale University Press.

Hom, Mary Katherine Y. H., 2010. ""A Mighty Hunter before YHWH": Genesis 10:9 and the Moral-Theological Evaluation of Nimrod." *Vetus Testamentum* 60: 63–68.

Iwański, Dariusz, 2011. "The identity of the sons of God in Gen 6:1–4 – brief survey of the interpretation." *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 4: 27–36. https://doi.org/10.12775/BPTh.2011.002.

Kaminski, Carol M. 2008. "Beautiful Women or 'False Judgment'? Interpreting Genesis 6.2 in the Context of the Primaeval History." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32.4: 457–473, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089208092142

Kidner, Derek. 1967. *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*. The Tyndale Press.

Klein, Jacob. 1990. "The 'Bane' of Humanity: A Lifespan of One Hundred and Twenty Years." *Acta Sumerologica* 12: 57–70.

Kline, Meredith G. 1962. "Divine kingship and Genesis 6:1–4." *Westminster Theological Journal* 24.2: 187–204.

Kvanvig, Helge S. 2002. "Gen 6,1–4 as an antediluvian event." *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 16.1: 79–112, https://doi.org/10.1080/09018320210000365.

Louth, Andrew. 2001. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture I. Old Testament. Genesis 1–11*. InterVarsity Press.

Luther, M. 1960. *Luther's Works, vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6–14*, translated by George V. Schick, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan & Daniel E. Poellot. Concordia Publishing House.

Parker, Simon B. 1997. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*. Society of Biblical Literature at the Scholars Press.

Petersen, David L. 1979. "Genesis 6:1–4, Yahweh and the organization of the cosmos." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13: 47–64.

Rogerson, John W., Moberly R. W. L., & Johnstone, William. 2001. *Genesis and Exodus*. Sheffield Academic Press.

Sarna, Nahum. 2001. *Genesis: The JPS Torah Commentary*. The Jewish Publication Society.

Schmid, Konrad. 2008. "Loss of Immortality? Hermeneutical Aspects of Genesis 2–3 and Its Early Receptions." In *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise and Its Reception History*, edited by Konrad Schmid and Christoph Riedweg. Mohr Siebeck. 58–78.

Theodoret of Cyrus. 2007. *Questions on the Octoteuch: Volume One – Genesis and Exodus*, translated by Robert C. Hill. Catholic University of America Press.

Van Gemeren, Willem A. 1981 "The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4: (An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?)." *Westminster Theological Journal* 43.2: 320–348.

Von Rad, Gerhard. 1963. *Genesis: A Commentary*. Translated by John H. Marks. SCM Press.

Von Rad, Gerhard. 1966. *Deuteronomy*. Translated by Dorothea Barton. SCM Press.

Wellhausen, Julius. 2013 [1885]. *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*. Translated by J. Sutherland Black & Allen Menzies. Cambridge University Press.

Wenham, Gordon J. 1987. *Genesis 1–15: Volume One (Word Biblical Commentary)*. Zondervan.

Westermann, Claus. 1994 [1974]). *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary*, translated by & S. J. Scullion & J. John. Fortress Press.