

This is a pre-edited chapter from my book, *The Unseen Realm*. That book has several other chapters on the Nephilim and giant clans where various questions concerning them are discussed. The book will be available for purchase via Amazon.com as of Sept 1, 2015.

## CHAPTER 13

# The Bad Seed

In the last chapter we learned that New Testament writers partook of the intellectual climate of their own Jewish community, a community that flourished in the period between the Old and New Testament. It might seem unnecessary to mention this, given the enthusiasm many Bible readers have today for tapping into the Jewish mind to understand the words of Jesus and the apostles. When it comes to Genesis 6:1–4, though, that enthusiasm often sours, since the result doesn't support the most comfortable modern Christian interpretation.

The truth is that the writers of the New Testament knew nothing of the Sethite view, nor of any view that makes the sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4 humans. Our goal in this chapter is to revisit the passage and dig deeper. When we take it on its own terms, we can determine its character and meaning.

## THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

That Genesis 1–11 has many connections to Mesopotamian literature is not disputed by scholars, evangelical or otherwise. The story of creation, the genealogies before the flood, the flood itself, and the tower of Babel incident all have secure connections to Mesopotamian material that is much older than the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

Genesis 6:1–4, too, has deep Mesopotamian roots that, until very recently, have not been fully recognized or appreciated.<sup>2</sup> Jewish literature like *1 Enoch* that retold the story shows a keen

---

<sup>1</sup> The literature on these connections is voluminous. Mesopotamian epics such as *Enuma Elish* (“The Epic of Creation”), the *Eridu Genesis*, the *Tale of Adapa*, the Sumerian King List, *Atrahasis*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* all contain close parallels to what we read in Gen 1–11. There are many more texts that do as well, including texts from Egypt and Canaan. To learn about these connections, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), and Bill Arnold and Brian Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002). A more scholarly volume is Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura, eds., *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, SBTS 4 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The single best study in this regard is Amar Annus, “On the Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 19.4 (2010): 277–

awareness of that Mesopotamian context. This awareness shows us that Jewish thinkers of the Second Temple period understood, correctly, that the story involved divine beings and giant offspring.<sup>3</sup> That understanding is essential to grasping what the biblical writers were trying to communicate.

Genesis 6:1–4 is a polemic; it is a literary and theological effort to undermine the credibility of Mesopotamian gods and other aspects of that culture’s worldview. Biblical writers do this frequently. The strategy often involves borrowing lines and motifs from the literature of the target civilization to articulate correct theology about Yahweh and to show contempt for other gods. Genesis 6:1–4 is a case study in this technique.

Mesopotamia had several versions of the story of a catastrophic flood, complete with a large boat that saves animals and humans.<sup>4</sup> They include mention of a group of sages (the *apkallus*), possessors of great knowledge, in the period before the flood. These *apkallus* were divine beings. Many *apkallus* were considered evil; those *apkallus* are integral to Mesopotamian demonology. After the flood, offspring of the *apkallus* were said to be human in descent (i.e., having a human parent) and “two-thirds *apkallu*.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, the *apkallus* mated with human women and produced quasi-divine offspring.

The parallels to Gen 6:1–4 are impossible to miss. The “two-thirds divine” description is especially noteworthy, since it precisely matches the description of the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh. Recent critical work on the cuneiform tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has revealed that Gilgamesh was considered a giant who retained knowledge from before the flood.<sup>6</sup>

Other connections: In the Mesopotamian flood story found in a text now known as the *Erra Epic*, the Babylonian high god Marduk punishes the evil *apkallus* with banishment to the subterranean waters deep inside the earth, which were known as Apsu.<sup>7</sup> The Apsu was also considered part of the

---

320. Other works that deserve accolades include Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and the Son of Man* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 61; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988); Kvanvig, *Primeval History: Babylonian, Biblical, and Enochic* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 149; Leiden: Brill, 2011); and S. Bhayro, *The Shemihazah and Asael Narrative of 1 Enoch 6-11: Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary with Reference to Ancient Near Eastern Antecedents* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 322; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> *First Enoch* is witnessed in other manuscripts besides those known from Qumran. The Qumran material is in part important because it was held in high regard by certain Jewish sects. See George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Scripture in *1 Enoch* and *1 Enoch* as Scripture,” in *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts: Essays in Honor of Lars Hartman* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 333-54.

<sup>4</sup> See Victor Matthews, *Old Testament Parallels* (rev. and exp. ed.; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 21–42, and Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). The standard scholarly discussion is Alan Millard and W. G. Lambert, *Atra-Hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood with the Sumerian Flood Story* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the last of the postflood *apkallus* in Mesopotamian tradition (Lu-Nanna) was only two-thirds *apkallu* (see Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, “The Mesopotamian Counterparts of the Biblical Nephilim,” in *Perspectives on Language and Text: Essays and Poems in Honor of Francis I. Andersen’s Sixtieth Birthday, July 28, 1985* (ed. Edgar W. Conrad and Edward G. Newing; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987): 39–44 (esp. 41). Annus (“Origin of the Watchers,” 282) notes that this description “exactly matches the status of Gilgamesh in the post-diluvian world, as he also was ‘two-thirds divine, and one-third human.’”

<sup>6</sup> See Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); George, “The Gilgamesh Epic at Ugarit,” *Aula Orientalis* 25 (2007): 237–54. The relevant lines in the *Gilgamesh Epic* are tablet 1, lines 8, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Annus is unclear on this issue, as is his wording regarding the *apkallu* and the Apsu. In some places he has the *apkallu* sages sent to the Apsu; in others he refers to this assertion as a speculation (e.g., pp. 309-10). The line from the *Erra Epic* confirms the *apkallu* sages were sent to the Apsu. Marduk says: “I made those (original) Craftsmen [the seven sages] go down to the Apsu, and I said they were not to come back up” (William W. Hallo and K.

underworld.<sup>8</sup> Marduk commanded that they never come up again. The parallels are clear and unmistakable. The banishment of these sinister divine beings to beneath the earth is significant. In the last chapter, I noted that this element of the story, found in 2 Peter and Jude, is not found in the Old Testament. The presence of this item in books like *1 Enoch* and, subsequently, in the New Testament, is a clear indication that Jewish writers between the testaments were aware of the Mesopotamian context of Genesis 6:1–4.<sup>9</sup>

There are two other features to highlight in our discussion before we discuss what it all means.

### *THE SONS OF GOD: WATCHERS, SONS OF HEAVEN, HOLY ONES*

The divine transgression before the flood is retold in several Jewish texts from the intertestamental period. At least one has the divine offenders coming to earth to “fix” the mess that was humankind—to provide direction and leadership through their knowledge. They were trying to help, but once they had assumed flesh, they failed to resist its urges.<sup>10</sup> The more common version of events, one with a more sinister flavor, is found in *1 Enoch* 6–11. This is the reading that informed Peter and Jude. The story begins very much like Genesis 6:

And when the sons of men had multiplied, in those days, beautiful and comely daughters were born to them. And the watchers, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them. And they said to one another, “Come, let us choose for ourselves wives from the daughters of men, and let us beget for ourselves children.”

The account has the Watchers descending to Mount Hermon, a site that will factor into the biblical epic in unexpected ways. *Watcher*, the English translation of Aramaic *ʾîr*, is not new to us. In an earlier chapter about how God and his council participate together in decision making, we looked at part of Daniel 4, one of the sections of Daniel written in Aramaic, not Hebrew. Daniel 4 is the only biblical passage to specifically use the term *watcher* to describe the divine “holy ones” of Yahweh’s council.<sup>11</sup> The geographical context of Daniel is of course Babylon (Dan 1:1–7), which is in Mesopotamia.

The offspring of the Watchers (sons of God) in *1 Enoch* were giants (*1 Enoch* 7). Some fragments of *1 Enoch* among the Dead Sea Scrolls give names for some of the giants. Other texts that retell the story and are thus related to *1 Enoch* do the same. The most startling of these is known today by scholars as *The Book of Giants*. It exists only in fragments, but names of several giants, offspring of the

---

Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture* [Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997–], 1:407. See footnote 19 at the end of the line from *Erra* for the identification of the craftsmen as the *apkallu* sages).

<sup>8</sup> See Wayne Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 342–44.

<sup>9</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, 2 Pet 2:4 has the guilty divine beings imprisoned in “Tartarus.” This Greek word is the precise term used in classical Greek myths of ancient Titans and giants. The two groups are different but also conflated by classical Greek writers. However, both groups *were divine in origin* in Greek mythology. For our purposes, Peter’s word choice here points very specifically to the divine nature of the sons of God in Gen 6:1–4.

<sup>10</sup> The best scholarly survey of Second Temple retellings of Gen 6 is Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “The ‘Angels’ and ‘Giants’ of Genesis 6:1–4 in Second and Third Century BCE Jewish Interpretation: Reflections on the Posture of Early Apocalyptic Traditions,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7.3 (2000): 354–77.

<sup>11</sup> In Jewish literature from the era of Daniel through the Second Temple period, *watcher* is a common term for the heavenly sons of God. See John C. Collins, “Watcher,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst; Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1999).

Watchers, have survived. One of the names is Gilgamesh, the main character of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*.<sup>12</sup>

Figurines of *apkallus*, the Mesopotamian counterparts to the sons of God, are known through the work of Mesopotamian archaeologists. They were buried in rows of boxes as parts of foundation walls for Mesopotamian buildings to ward off evil powers.<sup>13</sup> These boxes were referred to by Mesopotamians as *mats-tsarey*, which means “watchers.”<sup>14</sup> The connection is explicit and direct.

## THE NEPHILIM

One of the great debates over Genesis 6:1–4 is the meaning of the word *nephilim*. We’ve seen from the Mesopotamian context that the *apkallus* were divine, mated with human women, and produced giant offspring. We’ve also seen that Jewish thinkers in the Second Temple period viewed the offspring of Genesis 6:1–4 in the same way—as giants. Any analysis of the term *nephilim* must account for, not ignore or violate, these contexts.

Interpretation of the term *nephilim* must also account for another Jewish phenomenon between the testaments—translation of the Old Testament into Greek. I speak here of the Septuagint. The word *nephilim* occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 6:4; Num 13:33). In both cases the Septuagint translated the term with *gigas* (“giant”).<sup>15</sup>

Given the backdrop we’ve covered, it would seem obvious that *nephilim* ought to be understood as “giants.” But many commentators resist the rendering, arguing that it should be read as “fallen ones” or “those who fall upon” (a battle expression). These options are based on the idea that the word derives from the Hebrew verb *n-p-l* (*naphal*, “to fall”). More importantly, those who argue that *nephilim* should be translated with one of these expressions rather than “giants” do so to avoid the quasi-divine nature of the Nephilim. That in turn makes it easier for them to argue that the sons of God were human.

In reality, it doesn’t matter whether “fallen ones” is the translation. In both the Mesopotamian context and the context of later Second Temple Jewish thought, their fathers are divine and the *nephilim* (however translated) *are still described as giants*.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, insisting that the name means “fallen” produces no argument to counter a supernatural interpretation.

Despite the uselessness of the argument, I’m not inclined to concede the point. I don’t think *nephilim* means “fallen ones.”<sup>17</sup> Jewish writers and translators habitually think “giants” when they

---

<sup>12</sup> Humbaba (Aramaic: *Chobabish*) and Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, are others. Scholars of this material believe that Utnapishtim is the name from which a third giant’s name (Atambish) is derived. See J. C. Reeves, “Utnapishtim in the Book of the Giants?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 110-15; Matthew Goff, “Gilgamesh the Giant: The Qumran *Book of Giants*’ Appropriation of Gilgamesh Motifs,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 16 (2009): 221-53.

<sup>13</sup> As is the case with biblical *elohim*, some *apkallus* were good and fought against the demonic powers.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion in Annus, “On the Watchers.”

<sup>15</sup> The plural forms in context are, respectively, *gigantes* and *gigantas*.

<sup>16</sup> As was the case with the Septuagint, the Greek manuscripts of 1 Enoch use *gigas* (“giant”) when describing the offspring of the Watchers. See 1 Enoch 7:2, 4; 9:9.

<sup>17</sup> The translation “fallen ones” is based on a characterization of the behavior of the giants, not on any passage that informs us this is what *nephilim* means. One Dead Sea Scrolls text says that the Watchers “fell” from right standing with God and that their offspring followed in their footsteps (CD [*Damascus Document*] II:19–19). Note that while the verb *naphal* appears in this verse, the word *nephilim* does not. That is, the “fallen state” is not attributed to the name itself. The word *nephilim* occurs only twice in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Neither instance makes a connection to any behavior. In fact, no explanation of the term is ever offered. Certain English translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls will occasionally have this “fallen” language elsewhere, but such instances are bracketed—they have been supplied

use or translate the term. I think there's a reason for that.

Explaining my own view of what the term means involves Hebrew morphology, the way words are spelled or formed in Hebrew. Since that discussion gets technical very quickly, I've elected to put those details elsewhere, at least for the most part.<sup>18</sup> But since I don't like to leave questions unanswered, we need to devote some attention to it here.

The spelling of the word *nephilim* provides a clue to what root word the term is derived from. *Nephilim* is spelled two different ways in the Hebrew Bible: *nephilim* and *nephiylim*. The difference between them is the "y" in the second spelling. Hebrew originally had no vowels. All words were written with consonants only. As time went on, Hebrew scribes started to use some of the consonants to mark long vowel sounds. English does this with the "y" consonant—sometimes it's a vowel. Hebrew does that with its "y" letter, too (the *yod*).

The takeaway is that the second spelling (*nephiylim*) tells us that the root behind the term had a long-i (y) in it before the plural ending (-im) was added. That in turn helps us determine that the word does not mean "those who fall." If that were the case, the word would have been spelled *nophelim*. A translation of "fallen" from the verb *naphal* is also weakened by the "y" spelling form. If the word came from the verb *naphal*, we'd expect a spelling of *nephulim* for "fallen."

However, there's another possible defense for the meaning "fallen." Instead of coming from the verb *naphal*, the word might come from a noun that has a long-i vowel in the second syllable. This kind of noun is called a *qatiyl* noun. Although there is no such noun as *naphiyl* in the Hebrew Bible, the hypothetical plural form would be *nephiylim*, which is the long spelling we see in Numbers 13:33.

This option solves the spelling problem, but it fails to explain everything else: the Mesopotamian context, the Second Temple Jewish recognition of that context, the connection of the term to Anakim giants (Num 13:33; Deut 2–3), and the fact that the Septuagint translators interpreted the word as "giants."

So where does the spelling *nephiylim* come from? Is there an answer that would simultaneously explain why the translators were consistently thinking "giants"?

There is indeed.

Recall that the Old Testament tells us that Jewish intellectuals were taken to Babylon. During those seventy years, the Jews learned to speak Aramaic. They later brought it back to Judah. This is how Aramaic became the primary language in Judea by the time of Jesus.

The point of Genesis 6:1–4 was to express contempt for the divine Mesopotamian *apkallus* and their giant offspring. Biblical writers had an easy choice of vocabulary for divine beings: sons of God. Their readers would know that the phrase pointed to divine beings, and other passages in the Torah (Deut 32:17) labeled other divine beings as demons (*shedim*). But these writers needed a good word to villainize the giant offspring. "Fallen ones" doesn't telegraph giantism, so that didn't help them make the point.

My view is that, to solve this messaging problem, the Jewish scribes adopted an Aramaic noun:

---

by translators but without any manuscript support (e.g., 4Q266 Frag. 2 ii:18). The most recent scholarly work on the Nephilim and the later giant clans is the recent Harvard dissertation by Brian Doak (published as *The Last of the Rephaim: Conquest and Cataclysm in the Heroic Ages of Ancient Israel*, Ilex Series 7 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013]). Despite its many merits, Doak's book on the giants fails with respect to the meaning of *nephilim*. Annus's ground-breaking article does not appear in either Doak's dissertation bibliography or that of his book. The article likely appeared after Doak had finished his dissertation work. See the companion website for some discussion of Doak's work.

<sup>18</sup> See the companion website.

*naphiyla*—which means “giant.” When you import that word and pluralize it for Hebrew, you get *nephiylim*, just what we see in Numbers 13:33. This is the only explanation to the meaning of the word that accounts for all the contexts and all the details.