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THE NEPHILIM OF GENESIS 6:1-4

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CONTENTS

Chapter

1.	INTRODUCTION	1
	The Objective	
	The Procedure	
	The Significance	
2.	HISTORICAL CONTEXT	2
	The Basic Assumptions	
	The Original Reader	
3.	EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 6:1-4	3
	The English Translation	
	The Structural Analysis	
	The Outline	
	The Semantics	
	Comparison with Numbers 13:33	
	Analysis of Viewpoints	
4.	CONCLUSION	15
	Summation	
	Significance	
5.	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	18

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Objective

The word “Nephilim,” found only in Gen. 6:1-4 and again in Num. 13:33, is translated as “giants” in the Scofield Reference Edition of the King James Bible (KJV) and in the Nelson Study Bible of the New King James Version (NKJV). However, it is transliterated into English as “Nephilim” in the New International Version of the Holy Bible (NIV) and in the New American Standard Bible (NASB). The purpose of this paper will be to determine, if possible, who or what the “Nephilim” were.

The Procedure

To determine the meaning of the term “Nephilim,” the author will examine the etymology of this Hebrew word, exegete Gen. 6:1-4, compare Num. 13:33, and examine the various viewpoints held on this passage. Due to the brevity of this paper only the most reasonable viewpoints will be examined.

The Significance

Since this word is found only three times in the Bible, and only in the Old Testament, its importance to the immediate contexts and its relative importance to the overall plan of God will be postulated.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIC IMPACT

The Basic Assumptions

Foundational to the entire discussion is the presupposition that God exists, and that He revealed objective propositional truth accurately in the Bible. The two contexts in which “Nephilim” is found are both historical accounts; however, Gen. 6:1-4 is set in the pre-flood era, in the enigmatic pre-historic past, before written records began. It is the assumption of this author that Moses wrote these passages under inspiration from God, and although Moses was not an eye witness to these events, he recorded them exactly as God intended. It is also assumed that the flood which follows in Genesis chapter 7 was a world wide flood.

The Original Readers

Moses wrote this scripture under inspiration for the children of Israel who were part of the Exodus generation. In his writing, Moses gave the pre-historic background and the genealogical record from creation to the flood, Gen. 1:1 to Gen. 9:14, and from the flood to the time when he became an adult, Gen. 9:15 to Exod. 2:10. The context of Num. 13:33 is included in the actual history of the children of Israel during the life of Moses prior to their failed attempt to conquer the land of Canaan, Num. 14:40-45.

CHAPTER 3

EXEGESIS OF GEN. 6:1-4

The English Translations

Although the exegesis is difficult and much debated, the text is relatively short and deceptively straightforward as it appears in the New International Version:

⁶When men began to increase in numbers on the earth and daughters were born to them, ²the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. ³Then the Lord said, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; and his days will be a hundred and twenty years.”

⁴The Nephilim were on the earth in those days - and also afterwards - when the sons of God went into the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.

Several clear statements emerge from the facts in the narrative. Mankind began to multiply on the earth. As the human race increased in number, a group called the “sons of God” took notice of the daughters of men and took any of them they wanted for wives. In response to this union the Lord pronounced a judgment on mankind. (Gen. 6:3 with 6:5,6,7) The offspring of this union were known as “Gibborim,” mighty men or heroes of old. A final group of beings known as the “Nephilim” were on the earth during the time of these events.

There are several significant features found in the English translations. First, the Contemporary English Version of the Holy Bible (CEV) and the NIV both divide the context into two paragraphs, verses 1-3, and verse 4. The clear implication here seems to be that the “Nephilim” were, in fact, the *children* of the daughters of men and the “sons of God.” These

same “Nephilim,” then, were the heroes of old , the men of renoun. Second, the CEV uses “supernatural beings” rather than “the sons of God,” found in the NIV. Third, the CEV actually equates the “Nephilim” with the progeny of the supernatural beings and the daughters of men. The New English Bible (NEB) also seems to imply this connection. Fourth, there is a division among translations as to whether “Nephilim” should be translated as “giants,” as derived from its later use in Num. 13:33 or simply transliterated from the Hebrew because of its uncertain etymology. The former is found in both the KJV and the NKJV, and the latter is found in the NIV, the NEB, and the NASB.

The Structural Analysis of Genesis. 6:1-4

[1] And it came about that

- a **mankind** began to multiply
on the face of the earth
- b and **daughters** were born to them.

[2] And (*or* Then)

- c **the sons of God** saw the daughters of mankind
that they *were* beautiful
and **they** took for themselves wives
from all whom they chose.

[3] And (*or* Then)

- d **the Lord** said,
“**My Spirit** shall not strive
with **mankind** always in his erring;

he *is* flesh;

and his days shall be 120 years.

[4] e The Nephilim were on the earth

in those days,

and also afterwards,

when **the sons of God**

came in to the daughters of mankind

and they bore *children* to them;

they *were* (*or these were*) the heroes (*or mighty men*)

who *were* from long ago,

men of the name.

The Outline

The context of Gen. 6:1-4 is included in the succession from Adam, Gen. 5:1-6:8. The following outline is offered to examine the components of that passage from the NIV:

I. The genealogy from Adam to Noah 5:1-32

II. The corruption of the human race 6:1-8

A. **Mankind** began to multiply 6:1a

B. **Daughters** were born to men 6:1b

C. **The sons of god** came in 6:2

1. They saw the daughters of men 6:2a

2. They took wives for themselves, whomever they chose 6:2b

D. **The Lord** spoke 6:3

1. My Spirit shall not contend with man always 6:3a
2. Man is mortal 6:3b
3. Man's days shall be 120 years 6:3c

E. **The Nephilim** *appeared* Gen. 6:4

1. They were on the earth in those days 6:4a
2. They were on the earth also afterwards 6:4b
 - a) When the sons of God came into the daughters of men
 - b) When the sons of God bore children to them
 - (1) They were the mighty men of old 6:4c
 - (2) They were the men of renown 6:4c

F. **The Lord** judged 6:5-7

1. He saw that the wickedness of man was great 6:5a
2. He saw that the evil thoughts of man were continual 6:5b
3. He was sorry that He had made man 6:6a
4. He was grieved in His heart Gen. 6:6b
5. He said, "I will blot out mankind, animals, creeping things and birds 6:7

G. **Noah** found favor with God 6:8

The Semantics

The grammar in Gen. 6:1-4 is straightforward, with the possible exception that the term may or may not be synonymous with the progeny of the sons of God and the daughters of mankind. The possibility exists that the Nephilim refer to some other men or creatures on earth at this same time. The five terms that are crucial to the interpretation of

this passage are men, daughters of men, sons of God, heroes, and Nephilim.

1. The meaning of “men” from the Hebrew word אָדָם (HaAdam - “the man”).

This Hebrew word means “the man” or “mankind,” in its collective sense; and it is also the name of the first man, “Adam.” Since there are no indicators restricting its meaning in this context, “men” most certainly means “mankind” in general, referring to the entire human race, rather than to any one segment of the population, such as only men of the line of Cain.

Therefore, if the word “men” refers to mankind in verse 1, it is unlikely that its meaning would change without a grammatical indicator for such a change.

2. The meaning of “the daughters of men” from the Hebrew words בְּנוֹת־הָאָדָם (Benoth HaAdam - “the daughters of mankind”).

There is no contextual reason to assume any other meaning for “daughters” than its literal sense, female offspring of human parents. In this context, “daughters of men” must be a collective term referring to a number of beautiful women on the earth.

3. The meaning of “the sons of God” from the Hebrew words בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים (Bene HaElohim - “the sons of God”).

There are basically three opinions as to who the sons of God are: (1) angels (a class of supernatural beings), (2) human judges or rulers, and (3) the descendants of Seth.¹

(1) The strongest evidence for the “the sons of God” meaning angels, supernatural beings, is found in Job 1:6 and 2:1. These verses are also part of a narrative passage which this author believes is an exact parallel to Gen. 6:2,4. In the poetry of Job 38:7 “the sons of God,” meaning angels, is found with the definite article omitted in the Hebrew. Ps. 138:1 uses

¹ E. Ray Clendenen, ed., *The New American Commentary*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-11:26*, by Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 325.

“Elohim” alone to refer to angels, and Pss. 8:5 and 97:7 both have “Elohim” with the New Testament defining the term as “angels” in Heb. 2:7-9 and Heb. 1:6.

Without strong evidence to the contrary from the context, this Old Testament usage seems to favor strongly the conclusion that the combination of the divine name, “Elohim,” plus “Bene” means angels or divine beings. The term “*Bene HaElohim*” is never used anywhere else in scripture to refer to anything but angels. This author believes that the meaning of “Bene HaElohim” is critical to an understanding of who the offspring of Gen. 6:4 are, who the Nephilim are, and why God pronounced a judgment and subsequently brought a flood upon the whole earth.

(2) Another interpretation of “the sons of God” is that they are human rulers and judges. This is based on such passages as Ps. 82:1,6-7, where “the sons of the Most High” refers clearly to human beings. This meaning is confirmed by Jesus Christ in John 10:34. One such view interprets “the sons of God” as antediluvian kings whom ancient peoples believed were divine.²

(3) A third interpretation of “the sons of God” is that they are “godly men” of the lineage of Seth. This idea is based on the texts of Genesis 4, which follows the lineage of Cain, and Genesis 5, which traces the lineage of Seth. The logic of this interpretation then equates the “daughters of men” with the lineage of Cain.³

4. The meaning of “the heroes” from the Hebrew word הַגִּבּוֹרִים (Ha Gibborim - “the heroes”).

This Hebrew word means a mighty, strong, and valiant man or warrior; a hero or

² Ibid., 328.

³ Ibid., 329-332.

champion in battle. In this context it refers to the offspring of the union of the sons of God and the daughters of men. The “Gibborim” are from ancient time, or from ages past, and are also called “the men of the name,” that is, men who had a great reputation.

5. The meaning of “the Nephilim” from the Hebrew word הַנְּפִלִים - (Ha Nephilim - “the Nephilim”).

The meaning of “Nephilim” is obscure, but it is possible that it comes from the Hebrew verb נָפַל - (Naphal - to fall, to lie; figurative: to go to ruin, to perish). “The Nephilim” may therefore mean “the Fallen ones.”⁴ Another possibility is that it is related to the Hebrew noun נֶפֶל - (Nephel - miscarriage {Job 3:16; Ps 58:8[9]; Eccl. 6:3}, untimely birth). In which case, the Nephilim may have been unusual in appearance, possibly because of some genetic mutation.⁵

The KJV and the NKJV translates “Nephilim” as “giants” following the Septuagint (LXX), which translates γίγαντες - (gigantes - giants) for this Hebrew term. While this translation is most likely influenced by the account in Num. 13:33, we cannot conclude with certainty that it is the original meaning of “Nephilim” in Gen. 6:4.⁶ The Nephilim may be any of these four creatures: (1) dinosaurs, (2) human beings, possibly of giant stature, (3) fallen angels, or (4) the half-angel and half-human offspring of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men.”

⁴ Ibid., 336.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Comparison with Numbers 13:33

The spies sent into the land of Canaan, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, gave a negative report about the possibility of fighting the inhabitants, the sons of Anak, and defeating them. These inhabitants are said to be of *great* stature and “from the Nephilim.” In fact, the spies said, “There also we saw the Nephilim...” (NASB). However, if the Nephilim from Num. 13:33 are the descendants of those found in Gen. 6:4, then people other than Noah and his family survived the flood. Since this is impossible, according to the Biblical record, it seems best to this author to interpret this reference to the Nephilim as figurative, related by the spies to strengthen their case. The story of the Nephilim, their reputation, and possible great size was apparently well known to the Exodus Generation. Also, it is important to note that the Nephilim are never mentioned elsewhere with the inhabitants of Canaan. Finally, none of the possible meanings for Nephilim fit in this passage: (1) dinosaurs were not human, but the sons of Anak were, (2) human beings, even a race of giants, would have perished in the flood, (3) fallen angels are not human, but the sons of Anak were, and (4) half-angel and half-human offspring would almost certainly have perished in the flood.

Analysis of Viewpoints

In order to determine who or what the Nephilim were, it must first be determined how they relate to the context. The Nephilim are not grammatically connected to verses 1-3, but they are contemporaries with the events described in these verses, as clarified by the remainder of verse 4. There must be some significant reason why the Nephilim are mentioned at this point in the narrative just prior to the flood. While it cannot be determined with certainty, this author believes it is reasonable to postulate that the Nephilim were part of the reason for the

judgment God pronounced and subsequently brought upon the earth through the flood.

1. The Nephilim as dinosaurs viewpoint.

This viewpoint, postulated by the author, found no scholarship to support it. Also, the possibility that these Nephilim are dinosaurs has no contextual basis whatever. Furthermore, the Num. 13:33 passage implies that the Nephilim, even used in a figurative sense, are rational beings and not animals.

2. The Nephilim as human beings viewpoint.

If the Nephilim were people, even a race of giants, then they had to be part of the lineage of Cain (unbelievers), the “daughters of men,” or part of the lineage of Seth (believers), the “sons of God,” or else they had to be the progeny of one parent from each lineage.⁷ For the latter to be true, the Nephilim would be the heroes of old, the men of renown. This is the position held by many conservative Christians today. A variation of this view sees the “sons of God” as being “controlled (indwelt) by fallen angels.”⁸ The basis for their giant stature comes from only the reference to them in Num. 13:33. The notion of genetic mutations seems to fit better with the half-angel and half-human viewpoint, although this author believes that the genetic characteristic for giantism has always been present in the human race, which might account for the reference in Num. 13:33.

3. The Nephilim as fallen angels viewpoint.

It is possible to see the Nephilim in Gen. 6:4 as “fallen angels,” based on the Hebrew verb, *Naphal*, meaning “to fall”(cf. Isa.14:12; Ezek. 28:16). Therefore the Nephilim could be

⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1922; reprint, Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 93 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁸ John F. Walvoord and Roy A. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures: Old Testament*, by Dallas Seminary Faculty (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publication, Inc., 1985), 36.

“the Fallen Ones.” While it is certainly true that fallen angels “were on the earth in those days and also afterwards;” nevertheless, in Num. 13:33, the only other place in the Bible where Nephilim is found, it does not refer to angelic beings. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Nephilim are fallen angels.

4. The Nephilim as the half-angel and half-human offspring of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” viewpoint.

This view is postulated upon the “sons of God” being fallen angels who cohabited with the “daughters of men” to produce the “Gibborim,” heroes or mighty men of old, men of reputation. This view, which sees the Nephilim and the Gibborim as one and the same, is rejected by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck,⁹ J. Vernon McGee,¹⁰ and C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch.¹¹ Others, such as James Montgomery Boice¹² and Arthur W. Pink,¹³ who hold this view, appeal to the grammar of Jude 6-7 as offering evidence of this cohabitation (unnatural fornication). Therefore, Jude 7 shows a parallel theme with Jude 6. This idea comes out in the NASB, namely, “...since **they** (the angels of Jude 6) in the same way as **these** (the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them) indulged in gross immorality (*or* fornication) and went after strange flesh (*or* another of a different kind of (flesh),...”. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that of “going after strange flesh,” that is, sodomy,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible, vol. 1, Genesis -Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1981), 37.

¹¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1, The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 137.

¹² James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary, vol. 1, Genesis 1:1-11:32* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 347.

¹³ Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, 94.

homosexuality, and possibly even bestiality (Jude 7; cf. Gen. 19:1-22). Another reference to these events is found in the parallel passage II Pet. 2:4-5, which interestingly precedes the condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah in verse 6 of its context.

The non-canonical book of I Enoch, while not inspired and probably wrong in many places, nevertheless is quoted by Jude in verses 14 and 15. In fact, Jude uses the phrase, “seventh from Adam,” which is found in I Enoch 60:8, and “The prophecy itself, containing the fourfold repetition of the word ‘ungodly,’ is found in 1:9.”¹⁴ Since Jude used these quotes, he was obviously familiar with I Enoch, chapters 6-8, where God’s judgment is against the fallen angels who fornicated with the daughters of men and begat children, “great giants,” to them.¹⁵ It is more than likely that Jude is referring to this same episode in verse 6, just eight verses before.¹⁶ Peter must have understood this angelic infiltration and their judgment because he mentions it not only in II Pet. 2:4-5 but also in I Pet. 3:18-20.¹⁷

Also, while Num. 13:33 most likely is not referring to the literal Nephilim of Gen. 6:4;¹⁸ nevertheless, the sons of Anak, who were giants, are said to be “of the Nephilim;” and there are apparently some characteristics which these two groups have in common, such as large size and a deviation from normal people in both appearance and power. Such unusual appearance and power would fit well with the notion of a race of half-angel and half-human creatures called Nephilim.

¹⁴ Boice, *Genesis*, 246.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁸ Clendenen, *New American Commentary*, 337.

The fact that judgment is part of the contexts in Gen. 6:1-7, II Pet. 2:4-6, and Jude 6-7 gives credence to the idea that the judgment in Genesis, at least in part, was related in some way to the presence of the Nephilim. It is possible that these creatures of human and angelic parentage had so polluted the human race, in a Satanic attempt to undermine God's plan for salvation of the "human race," that only a few true human beings remained, perhaps only Noah and his family. These eight people God delivered through the flood.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Summation

While there is disagreement among scholars as to the identity of the Nephilim; nevertheless, this author believes that there is sufficient evidence to support the theory of an angelic infiltration of the human race via intermarriage. This author agrees with Arthur Pink, who states that the “sons of God” are clearly angels.¹⁹ Therefore, this angelic infiltration is part of Satan’s attempt to frustrate the purpose of God as stated in Gen. 3:15, where God passed judgment on the serpent, who is Satan in Rev. 20:2. God declares that the “seed” of the woman shall bruise the “serpent” on the head. Plainly, this is a Satanic attempt “to destroy the human race,” that is “to destroy the channel through which the Lord Jesus was to come.”²⁰ His near success is demonstrated in that only one family of true human beings was left on the earth, “all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (Gen. 6:12) in the NASB.

Therefore, this author believes that the “Nephilim” of Gen. 6:4 are a monstrous half-angel and half-human race, who were the mighty men of old, the men of renown. They were born of the unnatural union between the “sons of God” (fallen angels) and the “daughters of men.” This unnatural union and its judgment by God is recounted briefly in Gen. 6:5-6,11-13,

¹⁹ Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

Jude 6, and II Pet. 2:4. This activity is most likely reflected in many ancient mythologies such as those of the Greek and Roman pantheons of gods and demigods, which embellished the Biblical antediluvian story of the Nephilim.²¹ This connection with ancient mythologies goes beyond the scope of this paper and must be left to another study.

Finally, Gen. 6:1-4 holds a firm position in the narrative of Genesis, chapter 6, since it gives the explanation for the occasion of the flood. God's judgment of mankind for its sin of disobedience and subsequent violence is contrasted with His deliverance of Noah and his family for their faithfulness and obedience to God (Gen. 6:9). This same pattern of judgment and deliverance is found in Matt. 24:37-39 and in Matt. 25:31 "when the Son of Man comes in His glory" (NASB) and also in Rev. 20:11-15.

Significance

In addition to the theology of God's judgment as contrasted with His deliverance and subsequent redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ, this passage also focuses on God's divine order for species as found in Genesis, chapter 1, in the phrase, "after its kind." God's order for species is for procreation between male and female within each species. God's order forbids all unnatural sexual union within and without species such as homosexuality (Gen. 19:4-7; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; II Pet. 2:6-8; Jude 7), bestiality (Lev. 18:23; 20:15, possibly Jude 7), or angel and human cohabitation (Gen. 6:2,4; II Pet. 2:4-5; Jude 6).

From this passage we understand that God desires for us to be faithful and obedient servants and to abstain from every unnatural sexual union. Implicit in this passage is the

²¹ Ibid.

concept of an angelic conflict which is ongoing in the Bible, having begun in Genesis, chapter 3, with the serpent, being developed more fully in the New Testament in Eph. 6:11-12 and I Pet. 5:8, and culminating in Matt. 25:41 and Rev. 20:10. Therefore, we must not become overly occupied or fascinated with angels, but we must test every spirit “to see whether they are from God” (I John 4:1 and Col. 2:18).

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