

They Might Be Giants? A Discussion of Genesis 6

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Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0 : 00] Thank you.

Thank you.

Sorry, I was reading my own email address there for a second. Today, we are going to talk about the Nephilim and Genesis 6 and the way that the New Testament handles that strange story about the sons of God and the daughters of man.

Back in the day, back when I was in, I think I was a freshman, I did go to high school a little bit. I was mostly homeschooled, but I did do a little high school. And I got kind of into the alternative scene.

I was a bit of a weirdo because I wrestled and had like all sorts of kind of, you know, like, you know, certain jock sensibilities. But a lot of my friends played Dungeons and Dragons and we listened to all sorts of weird music.

[1 : 37] And one of the bands that we loved at the time was a band called They Might Be Giants. Back in the early 90s, they were, I think, some of the funniest kind of almost, I don't know, I wouldn't say Weird Al adjacent exactly.

But they had comedic songs. One of their famous songs is Istanbul was Constantinople. Istanbul was Constantinople. And they had a profoundly existential number called Particle Man in which a man made of particles gets into a fight with Triangle Man and Triangle Man wins.

And then I think, if I'm not mistaken, they're the ones that wrote the intro music for Malcolm in the Middle and the song, You're Not the Boss of Me, You're Not the Boss of Me, You're Not the Boss of Me, You're Not So Big.

Anyway, You're Not the Boss of Me and They Might Be Giants. It just felt like an obvious overlap to what this story is in Genesis chapter 6.

Now, the reason we're talking about this, I think, is probably threefold. First of all, we just went through the book of 1 Peter. We're closing that book out this Sunday. And we touched upon this concept that Jesus preached to spirits in prison.

[2 : 48] And I said, I owe you a podcast on that. I don't want to get into it right now because it's not a fundamental point of the text. But anyway, so I wanted to cover it for that reason. Secondly, this whole discussion topic, the Nephilim and angels and potentially aliens and so on and so forth, all of this are angels, aliens as demons and so forth.

All of this is actually quite popular on YouTube and a number of podcasts and so forth. And so there's a ton of people, even at Providence, who have been listening to stuff about this for quite some time, including the Haunted Cosmos podcast, amongst others.

And I think the third reason is that, well, I'm glad that everyone's talking about, I don't really care, to be honest with you. Like, it's fine. Great. But I do think there's one important point to be made.

And I also think that I've not heard anyone give all of the potential interpretations of that passage. And I want to try to do that today. And just let you know, like, if you believe it's X, then there are some people that believe it's Y.

And here's why they believe what they believe and so on and so forth. So let me read the text first, Genesis chapter 6, verses 1 through 4. When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive.

[4 : 04] And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the Lord said, My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh. His days shall be 120 years.

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days and also afterward, when the sons of God came into the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

Okay, so we've got this strange word, Nephilim. It means, I think, in the Hebrew, something related to fallenness, fallen upon, so forth. It might also just be an adjacent or a Hebrewization of an Arabic word, which is just of another Semitic word that meant large.

And then, of course, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which is also quite old and we believe quite accurate, by the way, they just used the word giant, gigantus or whatever the Greek word is for giant.

So we don't exactly know from the word, from the Hebrew, what exactly is going on here. But it probably means either literal giant, or it could just be sort of a label describing mighty men of not necessarily stature, but of consequence, of ferocity, of power, of intellect, whatever, stuff like that.

[5 : 31] So it's something like that. And then we find, again, the descendants of the Nephilim in Numbers 13, when the spies come back from their investigation of the Promised Land, a number of the spies, the majority of the spies, report that there are Nephilim in the Promised Land and that we look like grasshoppers next to these guys.

So let's get into this passage. And I think the more interesting piece is what's going on with this description of the sons of God and daughters of men.

And it's pretty clear from the text that whoever these people were, their offspring produced heroes, titans of some kind, of varying degrees of size or ferocity or supernatural capacity.

Something came out of this that produced a particular warrior type. And typically in the Old Testament, this word often has framing of a bad dude, not just a tough dude, but a tough bad dude.

Okay. This passage has had, so we're going to look at Genesis 6. This passage has had biblical scholars arguing with each other for literally thousands of years. It's the theological equivalent, I think, of a UFO sighting.

[6 : 55] Everybody has a theory. Historically, there are three views, and there is a fourth view that I think is kind of a hybrid view. And I want to tell you about the different views.

So theory number one is the angel theory. This is the oldest view, and it was wildly popular in ancient Judaism and the early church. The idea is that the sons of God, a phrase used elsewhere in the Old Testament, as in the book of Job, for the heavenly court, were celestial beings, angels.

According to this theory, they looked down from heaven, noticed that human women were extremely attractive, I mean, come on, and decided to abandon their posts for a date. Some nerdy homeschooler with a pocket knife in his front pocket needs to figure out how to turn that into a pickup line.

Like, excuse me, ma'am, I couldn't help but notice from heaven that you were attractive. I don't know. I'll have to figure something out. In ancient Jewish literature, this is the main view, and it's expressed itself in, you know, what is the most deeply weird ancient book that I know about, which is 1 Enoch.

1 Enoch says that there are 200 of these beings called Watchers, and they came down to Mount Hermon. And there they, Mount Hermon is associated all over the ancient world with, as almost like a portal.

[8 : 18] It's associated with death. It's associated with sort of a gathering place. It would be a thin place in the Stephen King, what does he call it, a shiny place. But lots of people have talked about this concept of thin places before, liminal places.

And Mount Hermon was considered one of those. They were led by a figure named Shemihaza, Shemihaza, Shemihaza, with a lieutenant named Azelzel, whose particular contribution was teaching humanity how to forge weapons and apply cosmetics and so forth.

So the original angelic view is that there were particular angels that came down, 200 of them, to Mount Hermon, married, or, you know, slept with human women and taught humans things like war and vanity.

That's sort of the sense. They took human wives. They fathered a race of ravenous, you know, bloodthirsty giants who started by eating all the food. And then when the food ran out, they started eating people.

This is how Enoch describes this. God, understandably, gets annoyed by the whole cross species catastrophe and sends the flood to wipe out the mistake. This theory has the weight of ancient tradition behind it.

[9 : 34] Most modern people raise one main objection when they hear it. Most modern evangelicals, anyway, Jesus says in Matthew 22 that angels don't marry. But specifically, that is not a great counterpoint to the angel theory because Jesus is, first of all, Jesus is talking about

marriage, which is, I don't think, necessarily the same thing always as sexual involvement.

But also, Jesus is explicit. He says that in heaven, angels neither marry nor are given to marriage. And the whole point of the Enoch story is that these particular beings did not stay in heaven. That's the main point of this story throughout the whole Bible.

And it's very important that that always be held when we talk about this. It's like, what is the Bible actually trying to tell us versus what would we like to speculate about? What is the use of this story that God has approved?

And what are other uses of this story that we're sort of interested in that may or may not be approved by God? That's like a huge deal when it comes to reading the Bible. What is God trying to give me here versus what are all the things I'm interested in?

We've got to submit to what God's planning to do with his word, not kind of what we would like to see. Anyway, all that to say, the main point of the story is that the angels didn't stay in their position.

[10:54] They left their position and did what ought not to be done, took human women as wives, or knew them, and there you go.

It produced offspring. So the objection that, well, angels neither marry, you know, are given to marry in heaven, it doesn't really help a lot because the Genesis 6 text explicitly says they left heaven and Matthew 22 explicitly says that in heaven, angels don't do these things.

Okay. So that's theory number one, the angel theory. And, you know, if you work downstream from the angel theory, then you wind up with something like these children are something like hybrids.

These children are something like hybrids. And then you kind of lock into just sort of what we know about mythology, this sort of in-between being, born at least partially of the gods and so forth.

That's a very familiar, you know, concept throughout the world. And we find out when we read about various mythologies that there's almost always something kind of related to that concept.

[12:04] Okay. Theory number two, this would be what is known as the despot theory. Some scholars look at the angel theory and said, that's insane. Angels don't have DNA, which is a fair point.

Instead, they argue that the sons of God were ancient human beings, judges, and aristocrats. In the ancient Near East, kings routinely claimed to be divine, sons of the gods, et cetera.

So scholars like Meredith Klein, who is a serious heavyweight, also a guy named Meredith, he had no choice. You know, you name your son Meredith, they have to become a Bible scholar.

They can't like, they can't like be a welder. You know, anyway, Meredith Klein, he makes the case that these are not angels. These are despots.

These are rulers. These sons of God is a term used to describe rulers. Klein's reading is, is that these powerful men were doing what powerful men have done since the dawn of time, letting it go to their heads.

[13:03] They lust after power. They do a kind of prima nocte thing, assembled enormous royal harems, and forcibly took any women they chose. These women weren't 30 foot, the children weren't 30 foot monsters.

They were Nephilim in the sense of violent tyrants and warlords ruling the earth. Children born of the despots. It's a tidy, rational theory. The one weakness outside of this single passage, there's no evidence with, within what we would use to gather linguistic evidence that the term sons of God, as it appears in the Hebrew, is ever used to describe despots in this way, or kings, or anything like that.

We just don't have, we just don't have any linguistic evidence that that's true. Theory number three is the Sethite theory. This has been a favorite of number of people.

I've wavered back and forth between the angel theory and the Sethite theory before. Augustine and Luther and Calvin were all Sethites. They both proposed that the sons of God were the godly line of Adam's righteous son, Seth, and the daughters of men were the ungodly line of the murderous son, Cain.

So Genesis 6 becomes a kind of Romeo and Juliet love story. The good church boys stopped marrying good church girls and instead married the Canaanite hussies, the rebellious girls from the wrong side of the family, the compromise spread, the godly line rotted out, and God sent the flood.

[14:31] There you go. I mean, that's pretty tidy as well, and that makes sense of a number of other things going on at the front end of Genesis. And, you know, it does seem as though there is some attention paid to Seth's line and so on and so forth.

The trouble with that one is is that it quietly ignores that the actual weird words like nephilim and mighty men of renown, when a nice boy marries a bad girl, the usual result is not Hercules. It's just like, you know, an awkward Thanksgiving or whatever. So theory number four, I think I kind of like theory number four quite a bit, and it's rather intuitive if you think about it, and that is because of some sense that the sons of God were human despots, theory number two, but they were possessed by demons.

They were possessed by fallen spirits, theory number one. And so human tyrants with demonic horsepower building royal harems, and you get something like, very similar to theory number one, you just use possession as your sort of, your way to solve the DNA question.

And here I would say that I do think there's such, like, I think I've encountered in the spiritual world, incubus and succubus, like I feel like I've encountered like the honey trap of all, like the cosmic honey trap, honey pot kind of thing.

[16:02] I think I've, you know, especially as I've traveled, I think I've just seen people who are possessed and the manifestation of their possession is deeply sexual in nature.

And, you know, that just, it just wouldn't surprise me if that were true. Okay, so you've got the four theories, the three theories, number one, angels, number two, despots or kings, number three, the Sethites, and then number four is kind of like, well, what if it's a combination of two, of the, you know, of demonic possession of, say, kings or rulers and they go into human women and produce this offspring?

All right. Let's see. I think the next section is the most important. Let me look at this for a second. I got my Coke, Coke, Coke Zero standing by here.

Okay. I think the most important, there's two important issues. Number one, there's absolutely no room to ridicule anyone who believes any of these.

They're all reasonable positions held by reasonable people and there's enough data for each one to be conceivable, pun intended.

[17:24] Get it? Conceivable? Anyway, so I think they, you know, I think that's one big takeaway. It probably should be meaningful to us, generally speaking, that those closest to the text at the beginning of the text's origin believed that it was angels and that would be the Jews of old.

They actually changed their position in post-70 AD, I believe. Might have been second century even. They were trying to distance themselves from the Christians and the Christians were uniformly in favor of this angel theory.

But I don't know how popular, I know that I found a couple of guys that were doing theory number four, which is the, you know, the possession theory. I don't know how popular that is throughout church history.

It's certainly a minority position. It just, that one I don't know. But the first three I know have had tons of advocates, each one of them. Probably the top two would be the angels and the Sethites, just so you know what church history is saying.

But the most important thing about this passage fundamentally is how the New Testament uses it. I mean, that's really what's going to matter.

[18:42] You know, what's the enduring lesson thousands of years after this event has taken place? And I think the answer to that is probably the most important thing to grasp.

I just spent, you know, 15 minutes or something on giants and demon kings and now I'm telling you, don't worry about any of that. The apostles had a different idea in mind, but that's exactly true.

When Peter and Jude, who both mentioned this, they're not running a cryptozoology, you know, podcast. They're not interested in the height and the weight of the Nephilim.

They reach for Genesis 6 for a very specific reason. And that is to teach human beings about the danger of transgressing your God-given boundaries.

That's the main idea. That's how they use it. They're writing about this Genesis 6 passage to talk about pride. Take the book of Jude.

[19:39] Jude was probably Jesus' half-brother writing to the church that had been infiltrated by false teachers, arrogant men indulging in gross immorality, convinced that they were above the law. To warn the church, Jude lines up three case studies that show people who messed around and found out.

And that would be the Israelites who died in the wilderness, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and right in the middle, the angels of Genesis 6.

So if Genesis, if Jude is saying in verse 6, if what Jude is talking about here is Genesis 6, then all the theories are cleared up. Look at verse 6.

And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.

He's not focused on giants, not even explicitly the women. Jude zeroes in on the rebellion. These angels did not keep their position of authority. They abandoned their proper dwelling. The Greek is arkin, their domain.

[20 : 50] They left their archaic. They left their ark type. They left their domain, their place, their princehood. the word for dwelling is oikotirion, their residence.

So they left their domain, their residence, the place that God had set them. God had handed them, you know, these beings, a glorious job and a glorious home.

And they weren't content with either. They suffered from pure, undiluted arrogance. And so, one of the things to keep in mind is that I think it probably works no matter what your answer is who the sons of God are.

But I do think if it is angels, then you almost get this weird recapitulation of the garden, right?

Because the garden is Eve looking at forbidden fruit, indulging in it and causing a whole mess as a consequence. And then you get in chapter 6, the daughters of Eve are the forbidden fruit.

[22 : 01] Right? And now you have the sons of God violating their covenant with the Lord to partake of that forbidden fruit.

But the point is unbelief, God set a boundary, the boundary was broken. And this is kind of where we get back to the band I was talking about at the beginning of the podcast.

This is, you know, that they might be giants. They're famous for that song, You're Not the Boss of Me Now. You're Not the Boss of Me. That's the lyric. And that's the whole rebellion in one line. They looked at their maker and they decided that they outranked their station and walked off to chase what they wanted.

They transgressed the boundary. They abandoned their seat in the universe and they came down. Jude answers that arrogance with a brilliant piece of sarcastic wordplay. The lex telonis, the law of exact retaliation.

Because the angels did not keep their proper position, God has now kept them in darkness.

Because they would not stay where they were supposed to, they are put where they are now.

[23 : 15] Because they would not stay where they belonged, God has put them somewhere where they can never leave. Jude says they're bound in eternal chains. Don't picture a medieval dungeon with iron padlocks.

These are spiritual beings. Their chains are, you know, essentially this way of talking about escape-proof misery. Beings that were once free, spirits of light called sons of God rejoicing at the creation, the book of Job tells us, are now as low as low can be.

And how did they get there? They transgressed. They violated their station specifically through the passions of the flesh, which Peter tells us wage war against our soul and which are proclaimed throughout the New Testament as the surest way to shipwreck your faith.

Like, it's just, it couldn't get more compelling in that sense. They're not just in a holding cell. They are in the darkness until the judgment of that great day where it will get even worse for them.

We're moving from darkness to lakes of fire. A quick aside because it's kind of pretty interesting. Jude clearly knew about 1 Enoch a few verses later.

[24 : 46] He turns around and quotes it directly. So when people ask whether the New Testament authors knew the whole tradition of fallen watchers and cosmic rebellion, the answer is yes, they knew it. They're using it on purpose.

Now you get into this question of, okay, they knew about it. Were they endorsing it? Or are they simply citing it because it's a well-known story and not as an approval of the statement but simply because it was sort of loaded in the public consciousness?

I, because of what I think God's trying to do with his word, I find that difficult. The theory would be something like this, that when Jude or Peter cites this story, they're not saying it's true.

They're just appealing to it like you would say, well, remember that one time in Harry Potter when X, Y, and Z. And I, that's tough. Wouldn't rule it out entirely, but that's a tough theory that I think encroaches on some of what we need to believe about God's word.

Okay, now, we talked about Jude. Let's get into Peter. Peter mentioned something like this in the passage that we examined briefly the other day in chapter, was it four or three or four, where Jesus preaches to the spirits in prison.

[26 : 08] But later, in the second letter that Peter writes, in 2 Peter 2, verse four, he writes this, for if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.

And when Peter uses the cast into hell, it's Tataru, which he borrows from Tartarus, which is straight out of Greek mythology, the gloomy abyss, the underworld, just to make you understand how all of these concepts were floating around in the world at the time.

Peter's most famous use of this notoriously kind of confusing sense is the one that we touched on a couple weeks ago in chapter three.

Christ was put to death in the flesh, made alive in the spirit, and then went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison who formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah. That's why I think we can say with some certainty that it's obvious that Peter and Jude have a common source or they are somehow connected in some way.

They're both citing Enoch. It really seems like, yeah, this is their perspective on what is happening in Genesis 6. It really, I think, adds another point to the angel theory.

[27 : 29] For centuries, people have read that Jesus descended into hell to offer dead humans a second chance of salvation, but you need to hold on to that Genesis 6 context in the New Testament and in Jewish literature.

Spirits, like the way that they're used in 1 Peter, are flatly, like no qualifier. They always just mean supernatural beings, not deceased people. Peter is talking about fallen angels almost certainly, almost certainly from Genesis 6 as in the days of Noah.

And I think that's important to understand that it gets harder and harder to not understand this as the angel theory. Now, I will tell you, I'm not giving you, I'm not steelmanning Calvin's argument right now.

I don't agree with it and I have trouble steelmanning it for that reason, of course, but also, I just would need to do more reading on this than I think it's worth because, again, I don't think that the New Testament's point, the New Testament is telling us what we should pay attention to and why about this story and it's not the identity per se of the sons of God.

Now, geography is important. The Nephilim line runs forward into Anakim. Those are the grasshopper report giants that we talked about earlier and goes on to the Rephaim and the Rephaim are bound up with Bashan and with Og, the king of Og, King Og, and again with Mount Hermon.

[28 : 59] Remember how I talked about Mount Hermon before and how it had this sort of liminal sense, this thinness. The same Mount Hermon where the watchers came down according to the book of Enoch.

And in the ancient imagination, that region wasn't just real estate. Again, it was understood as the kind of doorway, a realm to the dead. So trace the whole Ark. The rebels descend at Hermon.

They breed a line whose road runs straight down to the underworld and then the risen Christ goes to that very prison. He doesn't stumble into it. He marches into the rebels' home turf. He plants his flag and the word preached here is just to act as a herald.

Jesus preached to spirits in prison. This is something I wish I had mentioned in my sermon, to act as a herald, to announce. Christ did not go to prison to hand out gospel tracts or to offer the watchers a fresh start.

He went as the victorious king, taking a cosmic victory lap and the announcement was roughly, your power is broken, I won, you lost. we see this reference.

[30 : 03] As I mentioned, I have regrets every time I preach and I have things I'm glad I did. One of the things I'm glad I did in that sermon was I made it a point to tell you that the New Testament writers are really celebrating the power of the cross at two axes.

Number one, it mixes right with God, but number two, it has effectual power to push back the darkness and put to shame the principalities and powers and rulers and authorities.

Those are the two storylines of the Bible starting with Genesis 3.15. The very first gospel promise is that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. You can just trace this throughout the New Testament and Revelation and so on and so forth.

That Jesus would go and proclaim his victory to those spirits seems totally like that's almost certainly what that passage means. I did quite a bit of study on that and I walked away with a very high degree of certainty relative to other things about this passage.

Now, why would Peter tell persecuted Christians this strange story about Jesus heralding to imprisoned angels? Peter was writing to boost their morale. He was writing to believers who were being bullied and harassed by their pagan neighbors and his message was, the people abusing you are only ever foot soldiers for spiritual beings, spiritual powers behind this world.

[31 : 30] Like Paul says, we do not wrestle with flesh and blood, but against principalities, powers, and so forth. And so, what Peter's saying is that the powers behind these people who are pestering you, that was a good alliteration, the powers behind these people who are pestering you, have already been, you know, they've already been squashed, they've already been put to shame.

Well, there's another P, the power of those people who are pestering you have already been put to shame. Anyway, that's what Peter seems to be doing here. Jesus has already proclaimed to the very kinds of beings who are behind all of the difficulties that Peter's audience is facing, hey, I've already won, you've lost, I did what no one else could do, the power of sin and death is broken, and praise the Lord for that.

The original rebels are sealed in a dark box, and Peter's saying the people harassing you today will either one day bend the knee to Jesus in this life or in the next and become his footstool.

Okay, so let's tie it all together. Genesis 6 is bizarre, whether it is literal angels crossing a line they were never meant to cross, or demon-driven tyrants building harems, or just the Seth line dating the wrong kinds of girls, something went historically, cosmically wrong, but Peter and Jude are emphatic, that we don't start hunting for lost giants as the point.

The main point is far too uncomfortable, and we'd rather not pay attention to it, and that is that when you get cocky, you are cruising for a bruising. When you get puffed up, and you decide to transgress God's law, whatever that is, when you leave your station, it's not going to go well for you.

[33 : 23] Not only is it not going to go well for you, but it may indeed bring judgment on other people as well. The point is pride, the point is staying in your lane, God has set moral, spiritual, physical boundaries over his creation, and when you decide arrogantly that you know better, when you abandon your proper dwelling to chase power or lust or your own appetites, you're walking the exact path of the sons of God in Genesis 6.

And that was Jude's blunt warning about the false teachers, that they are arrogant, they indulge themselves, they despise authority, do not follow them, because if God did not spare the glorious, powerful, privileged angels of heaven when they rebelled, he is certainly not going to spare a handful of arrogant human beings when they rebel.

So they might be giants, they might be angels, they might be ancient politicians, but whatever they were, they all sang the same song, they looked at the throne and decided, you're not the boss of me now, you're not the boss of me now.

And that does not work when the boss is actually the boss. There's the old saying, if you want to kill the king, you better not miss. Well, you're not going to kill God.

Every act of rebellion is just your own sentence to severe punishment, either inflicted on you or on Christ for you. So, yep, that's the story.

[34 : 45] now you know all the different perspectives on who the sons of God were, but most importantly, I think it's that you know that what the New Testament would have us think about in this passage is mostly having to do with maintaining obedience to God's set boundaries.

All right, well, that's it for this episode of the Providence Podcast. Thanks for listening. Have a wonderful rest of your The Army Blues!

The Army Blues! Woo! Thank you.