

# SONS OF GOD, DAUGHTERS OF MEN?

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*And it came to pass when man began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God (benei elohim) saw the daughters of men that they were goodly (tovot) and they took for themselves wives from whomsoever they chose. And the Lord said, 'My spirit shall not abide in man for ever for he also is flesh therefore shall his days be 120 years.' The Nephilim were in the earth in those days and also after that when the sons of God came unto the daughters of men and they bore them children, they were the mighty men that were of old the men of renown. And the Lord saw that this wickedness of man was great upon the earth (Gen. 6:1-5).*

After this we are told God regrets He made man and decides to bring a great destruction upon the world. This has to be one of the most obscure yet tantalizing biblical narratives. It is also a very important passage. This is so because, as one can see from the above, immediately after these events, we are told that the Creator reduces the human life span to 120 years and then decides to blot out all living things from the face of the earth and start all over again with Noah and his family.

In order to gain some understanding of what it was that would generate such fateful consequences, the following questions must be dealt with:

- 1) Who are these "sons of God" and "daughters of men"?
- 2) What is meant by "goodly" and why do these sons of God seem to be surprised that these "daughters of men", as a group, are "goodly"?
- 3) There seems to be an element of surprise in "and they bore them children". Why?

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4) What is the connection between the Nephilim (a race of very tall people, see Num. 13:33) and the children born to the "sons of God" and "daughters of men"?

Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffmann in his commentary catalogues the different interpretations given over the years to these passages, as follows:

- 1) The *benei elohim* were celestial beings such as angels.<sup>1</sup>
- 2) The *benei elohim* refer to descendants of Seth about whom it is said: *And Adam lived 130 years and begot a son in his own likeness after his image (which is really the image of elohim) and called his name Seth (Gen. 5:3).* This seems to imply that in some important sense Seth reflected the "likeness and image" of God more so than Adam's other offspring.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) *Benei elohim* refers to certain people, then considered an elite class, either because of wealth or leadership qualities.<sup>3</sup>
- 4) *Benei elohim* refer to the descendants of Cain who were of impressive physical appearance and technologically advanced.<sup>4</sup>
- 5) *Benei elohim* refers to individuals who claimed to be *Nephilim*, demigods, "fallen from heaven" the abode of the gods, who ruled over others by virtue of either their physical strength or beauty or aggressive nature. These are the "tyrants" or "heroes" of mythology.<sup>5</sup>

The latter interpretation seems to be the most plausible since the phenomenon of humans claiming to be descended from the gods has been well documented as characterizing certain periods in human history. Additionally, this is consistent with the view that the intention of the text in these early chapters of Genesis is to give a theological interpretation to the conventional wisdom regarding the history of man.<sup>6</sup>

I question, however, whether any of the above interpretations really fit into the time frame of Genesis 5 which ends with God's momentous acknowledgement that His creation has been a failure. God is disappointed not only by the behavior of human beings but by all living things (Gen. 6:7, 6:17). It seems that the entire genetic process which had been designed to reproduce "after its kind" had gone awry. According to the Rabbis, creatures of one kind were mating with creatures of another kind to give birth to monstrosities of both size and predatory nature.<sup>7</sup> This could be seen as a possible way of recognizing the reality of the age of dinosaurs.<sup>8</sup> Thus, as a result of the *mabul*, the very configuration of the continents, the seasons of the year and also the

weather cycles were adjusted to become the kind of environment we are familiar with today.<sup>9</sup> In light of all this, to read the story of the *sons of god* and the *daughters of men* as simply a case of some people abusing their social status to the detriment of others seems to be too 'tame' to justify the drastic reaction of the Creator. The context of these passages, a prelude and contributing cause of the *mabul*, suggests a more radical and far reaching break in nature.

Recent discoveries regarding the fossil evidence of hominids have suggested what might be a more appropriate interpretation of Gen. 6:1-5. The general consensus holds that modern man, *homo sapiens* (the "man" *adam* that appears in Gen. 1 and 2), first appears in the fossil record in Africa and soon after that in the north of Israel some 100,000 years ago. However, fossils of earlier forms of the human, called *homo erectus* and Neanderthal Man, appeared as early as 1.5 million years ago. Until recently it was believed that *homo sapiens* evolved gradually from its earlier ancestor, Neanderthal Man, who had since become extinct. However, discoveries in 1988 in the Kebara caves on Mt. Carmel and in the Qafzeh cave near the Kinneret indicated that *homo sapiens* did not evolve from the Neanderthals but that both co-existed for a very long time. Scientists are not agreed as to what was the relationship between these two groups. Did they fight each other over available resources? Did they mate with one another?<sup>10</sup> Recent scientific evidence shows that they did interbreed, and that between one and four percent of the modern, non-African human genome is in fact derived from Neanderthals.<sup>11</sup>

I wish to suggest that Genesis 6:1-5 is referring to this pre-historical phenomenon. The *benei elohim* are the *homo sapiens* while the *benot ha-adam* (daughters of men) are the female Neanderthals. For a long time each group kept to itself, with *homo sapiens* because of their superior endowments developing rapidly from hunter gatherers to cultivators of grain and domesticators of animals. Then at one point *homo sapiens* realize that Neanderthal women are "goodly", that they can be useful in all sorts of ways and so begin rapaciously to abduct them, "to take for themselves wives from whomsoever they chose" and to mate with them. We have no idea exactly what emerged from such interbreeding but apparently in some cases it led to a sort of 'giantism', *Nephilim* and *benei anak*, who proceeded to terrorize and tyrannize others.

This interpretation brings the antediluvian human condition into line with the rabbinic perception of what had happened in the animal kingdom, a breakdown in the genetic process. Was the fraternity of the two hominid groups to continue, the progressive development of *homo sapiens* would be threatened. In any event, human society could not possibly thrive in an environment dominated by the likes of these monstrosities. And so the Creator, "regretting what He had made" decides to start over again with the best of the old human stock, a scaled down animal kingdom, and a stable and more friendly environment in the hope that this time man will get it right.

In the farewell Song of Moses, the Creator is called an *el emunah* (Deut. 32:4) translated as "a God of faithfulness", to which the Rabbis added, "He is a God of faith - He had faith in the world and therefore created it."<sup>12</sup> We might add: faith enough to try again.

#### NOTES

1. See Philo, Josephus and the Apocrypha literature such as the Book of Jubilees.
2. This is the view of Ibn Ezra, David Kimḥi and Yehudah Halevi (*Kuzari* 1:95).
3. See Rashi: "*Elohim* is often used to denote 'prominence' or 'powerful'". See Exodus 21:6, where *elohim* means 'a judge'.
4. See commentary of Shmuel David Luzatto.
5. See commentary of Meir Leibush Malbin.
6. Similarly, chapter 11 of Genesis may be seen as the Bible's interpretation of a well-documented period in Mesopotamian history in which their culture was based upon the tower-like structure called a *ziggurat*.
7. TB *Sanhedrin* 108a.
8. According to this view, one of the purposes of the *mabul* was to rid the world of those reptilian monsters. See Netziv, *Ha'amek Davar* to Genesis 7:23.
9. Genesis 8:22.
10. *Newsweek*, Oct. 16, 1989. Recent discoveries indicate that the Neanderthals were not as stupid as earlier thought. They had the grace to bury their dead and, after all, were able to survive for many thousands of years.
11. Green, Richard E. *et al.*: J; Briggs, A.W.; Maricic, T.; Stenzel, U.; Kircher, M.; Patterson, N.; Li, H. *et al.* (2010), "A Draft Sequence of the Neanderthal Genome", *Science*, 328 (5979): pp. 710–722, also reported in the *International Herald Tribune*, May 14, 2010, page 7.
12. *Sifri* on Deuteronomy 32:4