

Who were the “Nephilim” of Genesis 6?

Introduction

One of the more intriguing passages in Genesis is located in the first few verses of chapter 6. Here is that passage:

Genesis 6:1-4 (ESV):

¹When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, ²the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. ³Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.”

⁴The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

Genesis 6 then continues on, to describe the events of Noah and the flood.

The above passage raises a number of questions, of course. Probably the central question is: **who**, exactly, were the “Nephilim” that are mentioned? (Note that some Bibles render the Hebrew word Nephilim as “giants”.)

Unfortunately, Scripture does not provide a completely *explicit* answer to that question. The Hebrew word Nephilim basically means “fallen ones”; but that does not provide any obvious identification of them, either.

As a result, it is necessary to try to *infer* the identity of the Nephilim, from *other* passages in Scripture.

One doctrine about the Nephilim

First, Genesis 6 tells us that the Nephilim are the children of the “sons of God”, and the “daughters of man”. The term “daughters of man” is relatively self-explanatory – it refers to human women. However, the term “sons of God” is used several *different* ways in Scripture; so the meaning of that term in Genesis 6 is not immediately obvious.

In at least *some* cases, though, the term “sons of God” definitely refers to angelic spirit beings – i.e., angels who live with God, in heaven. Consider the following passage, in which God talks to Job:

Job 38:4-7 (ESV):

⁴“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
⁶On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷when the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

As noted above, the “sons of God” shouted for joy, *while* God was creating the earth. Since God was in the process of *creating* the earth at that time, that indicates that no humans existed at that time. (How could there be any humans then – since the *earth* was not even complete yet?)

So, in this case (as well as in a number of other cases) the term “sons of God” definitely refers to angelic *spirit beings* – rather than to human beings.

Another item to note is that both the Old and New Testaments indicate that some angelic spirit beings will be *punished* by God. In other words, those passages indicate that some angels disobeyed God – and as a result, those angels will be held accountable for their actions. Consider these passages:

Isaiah 24:21-22 (ESV):

²¹On that day the LORD will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.
²²They will be gathered together
as prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after many days they will be punished.

1 Peter 3:18-20 (ESV):

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

2 Peter 2:4-5,9-10 (ESV):

⁴For 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; ⁵if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁹then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, ¹⁰and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

All of the above passages state that angelic spirit beings will be punished by God – because they sinned. Those spirit beings are evidently being kept “imprisoned” in some way, until the day of judgment.

In addition, the passages in 1 Peter and 2 Peter indicate that at least some angels sinned during the time of Noah – i.e., during the time period immediately prior to the flood. Of course, the events described in Genesis 6:1-4 *also* occurred during the time period immediately prior to the flood.

Finally, the following passage gives us an indication of **what**, exactly, some angels did, when they *disobeyed* God:

Jude 1:6-7 (ESV):

⁶And 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— ⁷just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

The passage above makes the following points:

- The angels did not “stay within their own position of authority”. This indicates that the angels did things that they were not *authorized* to do.
- The angels “left their proper dwelling”. It occurs to me that the “proper” dwelling place for an angel is *heaven*. So, since these angels *left* their proper dwelling place, that seems to indicate that the angels went to the *earth*.
- The passage “links” the sin of the angels to the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah. The passage discusses the sin of the angels – and then it states that Sodom and Gomorrah “**likewise** indulged in sexual immorality”, and “pursued **unnatural** desire”. That certainly seems to indicate that the angels committed the sin of unnatural sexual relations.

All of the above information *appears* to state the following: Angelic spirit beings came down to the earth, took on physical forms, and had sexual relations with human women. If that is the case, then that could certainly explain why the resulting children were called the Nephilim – or “fallen ones” – and why they were “the mighty men of old, the men of renown”.

Basically, this doctrine holds that the Nephilim were a **genetically corrupted** race of **superhuman bullies** – the children of fallen angels and human women.

Can angels physically interact with humans?

Many people claim that the above doctrine *cannot* be correct; because they state that since angels are spirit beings, that means that it is *not possible* for angels to physically interact with humans. Of course, if angels are not capable of any physical interaction with humans, then that would prevent them from having children with humans. However, does Scripture actually state that angels are *incapable* of physical interaction with humans?

In almost every case in Scripture, when angels deal with humans, the angels look like **men**. So, the question is: are angels just *appearing* as men – i.e., are angels just projecting “images” of men, when they deal with humans? Or, do angels actually take on *physical bodies*, when they deal with people?

Let’s take a look at some examples of angels dealing with humans, to try to determine the answer to that question:

Genesis 19:15-16 (ESV):

¹⁵As morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be swept away in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶But he lingered. So the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city.

The passage above describes angels urging Lot to flee from Sodom, before Sodom gets destroyed. However, Lot took his own sweet time getting ready to leave – i.e., he dawdled.

So, the angels *grabbed* Lot by the hand, and **dragged** him out of the city. That certainly seems to indicate that the angels physically interacted with Lot!

Also note that that passage initially refers to “angels”, but then later refers to them as “men”. This is very common in Scripture – and it seems to indicate that the angels look (and feel!) exactly like normal human men.

Here is another example:

Genesis 32:1-2,24-25,30 (ESV):

¹Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. ²And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

²⁴And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”

The above passage states that Jacob wrestled with a “man”; however, the context of the passage indicates that this man was actually an angelic spirit being, who *looked* like a man. Hosea 12 appears to confirm this:

Hosea 12:3-4 (ESV):

³ In the womb he [Jacob] took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God.

⁴He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.

Since this angel **wrestled** with Jacob – and even dislocated Jacob’s hip – that certainly seems to indicate that the angel physically interacted with Jacob!

Of course, the above passages do not say anything about having children. In other words, even if angels can physically touch humans, that does not *necessarily* mean that angels can *reproduce* with humans.

Nevertheless, the above passages definitely appear to *contradict* the idea that angels **cannot** physically interact with humans at all.

Is it possible for angels to “marry”?

Another objection to this doctrine has to do with the concept of angels getting married. Jesus told the Sadducees that when people get resurrected, they do not marry – and then he compared resurrected people to angels in heaven:

Matthew 22:30 (ESV):

³⁰For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Mark 12:25 (ESV):

²⁵For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Of course, Genesis 6:2 states that the sons of God “took as their wives any they chose”. So, some people compare Genesis 6:2 to the above two verses, and conclude that the sons of God *cannot* be angelic spirit beings – because the above verses indicate that angels in heaven do not get married.

There is an issue with that conclusion, though. Notice that the above two verses refer to angels in heaven. Presumably, while angels are in *heaven*, they do not have physical bodies. That is, while angels are residing in heaven, they are immaterial spirit beings – and while they are in **that** state, they certainly cannot physically interact with humans.

In other words, in order for an angel to interact with humans, the angel needs to *leave* heaven – and come to the *earth*.

So, the above verses certainly state that an angel in heaven is not able to marry. However, those verses do not say anything about an angel who has come to the earth. Of course, this doctrine of the Nephilim states that fallen angels came to the *earth* – and as a result, the above verses would *not apply* to those angels.

Why is this issue important?

If the Nephilim mentioned in Genesis 6 *are* actually the children of fallen angels and humans, then that can lead to several interesting ramifications.

For one thing, many ancient cultures contain myths about pagan gods mating with humans – and the resulting children becoming superhuman warriors. Take a look at some examples:

- In Greek mythology, the superhuman warrior Hercules is the son of the pagan god Zeus and the human woman Alcmena.

- In Indian mythology, the superhuman warrior Karna is the son of the pagan god Surya and the human woman Kunti.

- In Celtic mythology, the superhuman warrior Cu Chulainn is the son of the pagan god Lugh and the human woman Deichtine.

- There are some variations: In Babylonian mythology, the superhuman warrior Gilgamesh is the son of the pagan *goddess* Ninsun and the human *man* Lugalbanda.

So, if the Nephilim in Genesis 6 are actually the children of fallen angels and humans, then it may be that the above myths were *based upon* ancient memories of the Nephilim. For example, the mythological stories of Hercules might be based upon the *actual* son of a fallen angel, who lived in ancient times.

There is also another, more important item to note about the Nephilim, though. First of all, Genesis 6 states that the Nephilim were on the earth “in those days, and **also afterward**“. That certainly seems to imply that Nephilim were on the earth both *before* the flood, **and** *after* the flood.

The fact that there were Nephilim present after the flood is verified by Numbers chapter 13. That chapter describes the reports that the 12 spies brought back, after they had scouted out the land of Canaan. Here is what the spies stated about Canaan, in verse 33:

Numbers 13:33 (ESV):

³³And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Also, as noted above, this doctrine holds that the Nephilim were **genetically corrupt**. In other words, the Nephilim possessed DNA which was significantly *different* than that of normal humans. If that is true, then presumably the Nephilim would pass on that corrupted DNA to their *own* children.

So, a summary of the above information is as follows: the Nephilim were present both before and after the flood; and the Nephilim possessed corrupted DNA. If those points are true, then that could provide an explanation for some rather “difficult” passages in the Old Testament.

Here are two examples of “difficult” passages: First, in Genesis chapter 7, God sent the flood, which killed *everyone* on the entire earth – every man, woman and child. (Only Noah’s family was spared.) Similarly, in Joshua chapter 6, the Israelites (with God’s help) killed *everyone* in the city of Jericho – every man, woman and child. (Only Rahab’s family was spared.)

Those passages have always been rather troubling to me – especially Joshua chapter 6. It is understandable that the *men* of Jericho would be killed, because they would be the soldiers of the city. One could make a case that the *women* would need to be killed as well; because if they were left alive, they might have lured the Israelites into worshiping pagan gods. (In fact, that very type of issue occurred in Numbers chapter 25.) However, why would the *children* need to be killed? It is quite troubling to me that even *newborn babies* were put to the sword.

However, those two passages make sense, *if* the Nephilim were present – and *if* they were genetically corrupted beings. For example, if the entire earth was overrun by Nephilim in Genesis chapter 7, and if the city of Jericho was populated by Nephilim in Joshua chapter 6, then it would make sense that all of those Nephilim would need to be killed. This is because if *any* of them had survived, then they would have passed along their corrupted DNA to their offspring – and that would eventually have caused another entire *tribe* of Nephilim to arise.

So, this doctrine of the Nephilim provides at least a *plausible* explanation for some “difficult” passages.

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, Scripture does not *explicitly* define the identity of the Nephilim; and as a result, all we can do is try to *infer* their identity.

There is another item to note, however. One of the passages listed above is contained in the book of Jude – Jude 1:6-7. As it turns out, the book of Jude uses quotes from *another* book – the book of Enoch. The book of Enoch is not part of the accepted Biblical canon today – i.e., it is not considered an inspired book of the Bible now. However, Enoch evidently was a part of the Bible in the *past* – it was considered a true book of the Bible by many early Christians, until about 300 AD.

In other words, the book of Enoch apparently *was* considered part of the Bible, *while* the apostles were alive! This is presumably one reason why Jude was comfortable quoting from it.

As it turns out, the book of Enoch has *quite a bit* to say about the Nephilim. Here is an excerpt from Enoch:

And it came to pass when the children of men had multiplied that in those days were born unto them beautiful and comely daughters. And the angels, the children of the heaven, saw and lusted after them, and said to one another: 'Come, let us choose us wives from among the children of men and beget us children.'

And they were in all two hundred; who descended in the days of Jared on the summit of Mount Hermon, and they called it Mount Hermon, because they had sworn and bound themselves by mutual imprecations upon it. And these are the names of their leaders: Samîazâz, their leader, Arâkîba, Râmêêl, Kôkabîêl, Tâmîêl, Râmîêl, Dânêl, Êzêqêêl, Barâqjâl, Asâêl, Armârôs, Batârêl, Anânêl, Zaqîêl, Samsâpêel, Satarêl, Tûrêl, Jômjâêl, Sariêl. These are their chiefs of tens.

And all the others together with them took unto themselves wives, and each chose for himself one, and they began to go in unto them and to defile themselves with them, and they taught them charms and enchantments, and the cutting of roots, and made them acquainted with plants. And they became pregnant, and they bare great giants, whose height was three thousand ells: Who consumed all the acquisitions of men.

If the above passage from Enoch is true, then of course that would verify the identity of the Nephilim as children of fallen angels and humans.