

THE HUMAN NATURE OF ANGELS IN GENESIS

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Introduction

Genesis often portrays angels in very human ways. The angels described in Genesis 6:1-4 can both copulate and procreate with human women, giving them undeniably human characteristics. In Genesis 18 and 19, angels accept human hospitality and eat human food. And the angel in Genesis 32 uses a human form to wrestle with Jacob on even footing. As these three narratives show, and this paper will argue, angels in Genesis demonstrate an apparently human nature through their interactions with human beings.

Genesis 6:1-4¹

Gen 6:1-4 gives us a window to view how ancient Israelites saw angels. Within the narrative the “sons of God” see the “daughters of men” and choose to marry them and have children (Gen 6:1-2). The “sons of God” are angels while the “daughters of men” are human women. This story has traditionally been looked at as a story of angels transgressing the boundary between heaven and earth and mingling illicitly with human women, such as in *I Enoch* and *Jubilees*.

A common interpretation is that “sons of God” does not refer to angels and instead refers to minor deities under Yahweh. Early Israelite angelology can be seen as an adaptation of the polytheistic system of other Ancient Near Eastern nations.² The term “sons of gods” was used to signify minor deities on the divine council in Canaanite mythology, but these deities became the angels of Hebrew angelology.³ The angels referenced in Gen 6:1-4 could be deities that the

¹ For the sake of my argument I have ignored Gen 6:3, which is a break in the text and seems unrelated to the rest of Gen 6:1-4.

² Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis I*, 293.

³ *Ibid.*

shifting mindset and beliefs of the Israelites changed into angels. While the term angels may not have been an existent concept at the time Gen 6:1-4 was written, “the sons of God” are beings that later became known as angels.⁴ The biblical author was thinking of what we would today call angels when he used the term “sons of God.”

In contrast to the theory that the "sons of God" are angels, two alternate hypotheses interpret the “sons of God” as humans. One is that the "sons of God" are righteous men or Sethites and that this story emphasizes the importance of purity and represents the intermarriage between the righteous lineage of Seth and the daughters of the unrighteous.⁵ This interpretation assumes that when Gen 6:5 says that “The Lord saw that the wickedness of the humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually,” God is thinking about the results of the sexual intermingling between the righteous and unrighteous and the resultant impurity. This interpretation is a stretch that assumes the beginning of Gen 6 refers to the genealogy of Seth found in Gen 5, a genealogy that is not outwardly or textually linked to the verses of Gen 6:1-4. To further weaken this argument, the end of the line of Seth in Gen 5:30-32 is Noah, who Gen 6:9 refers to as a righteous man and is not linked to any type of marriage within Genesis.

The second alternate interpretation of the “sons of God” as humans says that the “sons of God” represent powerful men, nobles, and kings. The idea of divine kings was prevalent in the Ancient Near East and it is reasonable to assume that the “sons of god” within Genesis 6 could

⁴ I think this is one of the reasons why the LXX translation calls them "angels of God" instead of "sons of God." What I mean to say here is that while the author of Gen 6:1-4 may not have considered the “sons of God” to be angels, the figures he wrote about are what we, and the LXX translators, would consider angels. An analogy would be the fact that Elohim and Yahweh are both translated to mean God as a concept even though they may have different literal translations. Van Ruiten mentions that the oldest reading of the Septuagint probably read “sons of God” and was later changed into “angels of God.”

⁵ Rick Marrs, “The Sons of God,” 219.

refer to kingly figures.⁶ Some scholars believe the story of the sons of God and daughters of men actually represents the ability of powerful men within society to take any woman they want to be their brides.⁷ Westermann argues that the biblical author used angels to represent this occurrence within society because divine beings represent “a class of beings utterly superior to humans”⁸ This interpretation goes too far when it identifies kings as deities because kings may have been set apart, but they were still human. Divine kings would have been closer to the men of renown or the children of angels and humans (Gen 6:4) than the “sons of God.” Ancient heroes and kings like Gilgamesh from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* may have divine ancestry but were still mortal.⁹

The phrase "sons of God" refers to angels who felt attraction to human women and married them. Genesis 6:1 specifically mentions the increase of the human population and the resultant birth of daughters. This allows us to equate the “daughters of men” with humanity and consequently, “the sons of God’ must be beings outside humanity.”¹⁰ In Gen 6:2 there is a separation; the "sons of God" are different from the "daughters of men." The wording of Gen 6:2, “the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose” implies the sons of God look outward at the daughters of men. The verb “to see,” in the English translation of 6:2 is the past tense of “saw” which is not a reflexive verb. Consequently the angels are looking at another category of beings and selecting from this separate category of humanity. Gunkel states the “sons of God” are divine beings that execute

⁶ Meredith Kline, “Divine Kingship,” 192.

⁷ Unlike pure humans like Jacob who have to work to earn their brides and even then are forced by societal norms to do extra things like marry their beloved’s older sister to finally gain their desired prize (Gen 29:16-28).

⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 367.

⁹ David Melvin, “The Gilgamesh Traditions,” 26.

¹⁰ Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis*, 291.

the missions and commands of Yahweh.¹¹ This definition closely matches the role and definition of angels as divine messengers and servants of God. As a result, we must identify these beings as angels.

Angels, then, can be attracted to human women and see them as beautiful (Gen 6:2), implying that their standards of beauty are similar to human standards of beauty. Marriage is an intimate relationship unique to the human social structure that cannot take place between two beings that are utterly removed from each other.¹² Ancient Israelites would not permit humans to marry animals, but they allowed intermarriage with angels. Angels do not see humans as inferior animals, but as potential partners. While angels are superior to humans due to their closer relationship with God as “sons of God,” they are still close enough to humanity to see human women as beautiful, desirable beings. Angels “resemble Yahweh in essence and power”¹³ while humans were made in his image (Gen 1:27). Both humans and angels are different reflections of God, something that links them and permits marriage. The use of the terminology of “son” already implies that the “sons of God” have inherited divine traits from God, and the marriage between angels and human women means either humans share enough divine traits with angels or angels share enough earthly traits with humans to cross the bridge that divides them into separate categories. They may be separate beings, but if angels can see human women, believe they are beautiful, and marry them, then the lines between them become blurred.

Angels in Genesis 6 are separate beings from humans, but their intermarriages’ production of viable offspring exemplifies the crossing of boundaries between humans and

¹¹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 56.

¹² In *1 Enoch* 10:13 the children of angels and humans are referred to as bastards, which is clearly not true if the angels and humans were married because by definition, married parents mean a child is not a bastard. This furthers my argument that the interpretations in *1 Enoch* are not accurate accounts.

¹³ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 56.

angels. Van Ruiten calls the intercourse between the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” natural,¹⁴ and indeed the text itself does not condemn it despite later interpretations of the text that link the union between angels and humans to the flood that comes later in Gen 6.¹⁵ I disagree strongly with Sullivan’s statement that “the angels’ descent to earth was a transgression of the natural order that represented a significant problem” because the text itself holds no such condemnations.¹⁶ This contrasts with the unions between angels and humans in *Jubilees* 5:1-2 which produced giants that caused the corruption of all flesh. The interpretation of the term Nephilim is very important for determining how the biblical author regarded the union between angels and humans. The term refers to giants in Num 13:33.¹⁷ *Jubilees* 5:1 and *1 Enoch* 7:3 both also refer to the offspring of humans and angels as giants, supporting this interpretation. Yet, the text of Genesis does not explicitly state the Nephilim are the offspring of the angels and humans. Gunkel believes the intended audience of the narrative already knew the obvious fact “the giants were the angel’s children” and did not need the author to explain the origin of the Nephilim.¹⁸ Later interpreters of the text, like the authors of *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* assume that the giants were the results of human-angel marriages, but they had no more idea than we do today about the original motivations of the author. In fact, the text only says that around the same time angels and humans started marrying, Nephilim happened to be on the earth (Gen 6:4).¹⁹ This

¹⁴ Jacques van Ruiten, “Angels and Demons in the Book of Jubilees,” 596.

¹⁵ Kevin Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels*, 198.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 197.

¹⁷ Jacques van Ruiten, “Angels and Demons in the Book of Jubilees,” 595.

¹⁸ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 58.

¹⁹ I believe there is a legitimate possibility that the Nephilim have little to do with the story of angels and human women except as background information about the time period. Furthermore, if the Nephilim are still around in the book of Numbers (as Gen 6:4 states they still existed “afterward”) it decreases the chances of them

interpretation completely changes how we should view the opinion of the biblical author about the fruits of the unions between angels and humans. If their offspring are no longer identified as unnatural giants, as the writers of *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* suggest, then the unnatural stigma attached to the offspring of angel-human marriage disappears. Furthermore, the Nephilim described in Gen 6:4 are “heroes of old, men of renown.” These are clearly positive terms. While the text does not say that the Nephilim are the children of the angels and humans, it does say that at the same time that angels and humans had children together famous heroes walked the earth (Gen 6:4), implying a positive correlation between angel-human marriages and the emergence of heroes.

In Gen 6:1-4 the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” are angels and human women who marry, have sex and procreate with each other. The human characteristics of the angels enable the fluidity of boundaries between angels and humans.

Genesis 18:1-8 and 19:1-3

In Genesis 18:1-8, God appears before Abraham (Gen 18:1), who quickly offers Him and the two angels accompanying Him hospitality, which they accept (Gen 18:2-8). In a very similar narrative, Lot, Abraham’s nephew, sees the angels and offers them his hospitality, which they first refuse (Gen 19:1-2). However, they agree to stay with him and eat his food in response to Lot’s insistence (Gen 19:3). In both of these instances the angels accept human food and hospitality.

At least two of the figures in Genesis 18 and 19 that accept human hospitality and food are angels. Directly after Gen 18:1 says the “Lord appeared to Abraham,” Abraham sees three

being the offspring of angels and humans unless the “sons of God” continue to marry the “daughters of men” behind the scenes outside of the mythical background of Genesis, which seems highly unlikely.

men in Gen 18:2 who later accept his offers of rest and food.” One of these men was God and the most plausible explanation for the other two figures is that they are angels accompanying Him. The text itself is unclear on this point, but in Gen 18:16 two of the three men head towards Sodom while Abraham spends Gen 18:20-33 conversing with God.²⁰ After Abraham’s conversation with God, two angels arrive in Sodom (Gen 19:1). These two chapters form a single narrative and the men mentioned in Genesis 18 as heading towards Sodom are the angels referred to in Genesis 19 who arrive at Sodom.²¹

The angels in this narrative are seen as humans by those around them until they reveal themselves. Abraham does not know he has divine beings as guests when he first offers them hospitality.²² Similarly, it seems that Lot has the same mentality when he offers hospitality to the angels in Sodom. In fact, Lot probably believes it is his responsibility to protect the men he thinks are humans from the people of Sodom.²³ The people around the angels only see them as desirable humans. It is a perversion of the relationship between humans and angels in Gen 6:1-4. Now it is the humans who find the angels desirable, another example of how standards of beauty between humans and angels are similar, but the men of Sodom do not desire the legitimate relationship of marriage but instead a coercive sexual relationship. When the men of Sodom see the angels go into Lot’s house, they surround the house and yell out “Bring them out to us so we

²⁰ Kevin Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels*, 38.

²¹ Westermann argues that the addition of the term angel or messenger was inserted later and that originally the text simply said the two men. He also says that the stories from Genesis 18 and 19 are not linked because Hebron, where Abraham hosted the angels, was a two-day journey away from Sodom and it would be impossible for the men to arrive in Sodom on the evening of the same day they left Abraham except through supernatural means that are not intended in the text. I disagree and would say that in a story that ends with two cities being wiped out by fire and brimstone (Gen 19:24) having two men travel with supernatural speed is not surprising.

²² Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 198.

²³ He is quite willing to toss his virgin daughters to the wolves, so to speak, to protect his guests (Gen 19:8). This implies that he thinks his guests cannot defend themselves and is unaware of any supernatural power they may hold.

can have sex with them” (Gen 19:5). I doubt the people of Sodom would be so eager to gang rape Lot’s guests if they knew the guests were divine beings. When the angels strike the attempted rapists with blindness (Gen 19:11), they prove their divine powers despite their human appearance.

Angels are portrayed as beings that can eat human food in Genesis 18 and 19. Abraham “saw three men standing nearby” (Gen 18:2) and the text does not explicitly call them angels. In Genesis, “it is not always clear whether the messengers in the Bible come from God or whether they are simply human beings.”²⁴ Abraham treats them just as like he would treat any other guest and feeds them food (Gen 18:3-8). “The text explicitly states that the visitors ate what was prepared for them.”²⁵ Later interpreters claimed Abraham only thought he saw them eating, but the text explicitly says “while they ate” (Gen 18:8).²⁶ The angels eat again at Lot’s house when “they ate” (Gen 19:3). The story of Tobit represents the views of later interpreters that angels only appeared to eat food. At the end of Tobit, the angel Raphael declares he only pretended to eat after he reveals himself as an angel (Tob 12:19). In contrast to Tobit, in the text of Genesis the angels eat Abraham’s food.²⁷ Furthermore, the angels in Genesis never deny that they ate the food. Because the angels ate twice, once with Abraham and once with Lot, the chances of this being an isolated event are slim.²⁸ If angels can eat human food, then we must consider where the food actually goes. Later interpreters did not want to acknowledge that angels ate Abraham’s food due to their belief that “God-like beings, and especially the heavenly ones, do not defecate

²⁴ Matthias Köckert, “Divine Messengers and Mysterious Men in the Patriarchal Narratives of the Book of Genesis,” 51.

²⁵ Kevin Sullivan, *Wrestling With Angels*, 183.

²⁶ Pieter van der Horst, “At Abraham’s Table,” 424.

²⁷ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 196.

²⁸ David Goodman, “Do Angels Eat?” 169.

because that would impair the holiness and purity of God's heavenly dwelling."²⁹ If an entity eats and drinks then it must also urinate, defecate or do something to get rid of the substance. This brings angels far closer to a human level because few acts are as mundane as physically expelling waste. It also raises the question of whether or not angels need to eat like humans or merely can eat if the situation calls for it because "heavenly practices do not necessarily apply when angels descent to earth and otherwise appear to behave as men."³⁰

Another human feature is the angels' respect for human rules in matters of hospitality and dining. Abraham treats the angels as he would any honored human guests, offering to wash their feet and feed them (Gen 18:4-5).³¹ The angels actually accept this hospitality and eat the food that Abraham puts in front of them (Gen 18:5-8). They submit to the human social relationship of host and guest with the words "do as you say" (Gen 18:5). This concept of repeats when Lot begs the men to wash their feet at his house (Gen 19:2) and they submit to his offers and follow him (Gen 19:3). These angels had no real need to stay with Lot and Abraham, but both times they agreed to stay. In addition, the environments of both visits are vastly different because Abraham lives in a tent (Gen 18:1) while Lot has a house (Gen 19:3).³² These two angels both offer different types of hospitality that go across the sphere of human experiences and the angels accept both, proving themselves "human enough to have their feet bathed and to eat and drink."³³

²⁹ Pieter van der Horst, "At Abraham's Table," 424.

³⁰ David Goodman, "Do Angels Eat?" 166.

³¹ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 192.

³² Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 301.

³³ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 205.

The offer and acceptance show how angels can enter the human social structure even if they are separate from it.

The angels that visit Abraham and Lot in Genesis 18 and 19 seem very human as they enjoy the food and hospitality of their human hosts. Their consumption of food and its resultant implications follows rules of human etiquette and also links them to humans in the most mundane possible way. In addition, the humans around angels can desire them just as angels desired humans in Gen 6:1-4.

Genesis 32:22-32

In Genesis 32:24-29 Jacob wrestles with a mysterious divine figure that blesses and renames him after the match.³⁴ During the wrestling match the text explicitly calls this figure a man, so Jacob does not recognize anything divine about his opponent while he wrestles.³⁵ Jacob asks the mysterious attacker to bless him (Gen 32:26) as a sign the man will not assault Jacob after his release. In other words, Jacob simply wants the man to admit defeat and is at first unaware that he is asking a divine being to bless him. In addition, considering Jacob's amazement after he realizes he has wrestled with a divine figure and seen "God face to face, and yet my life was preserved" (Gen 32:30), he did not realize his opponent was divine until after the wrestling match was over.

The man who wrestles Jacob within Genesis 32 has physical characteristics that resemble those of humans while having the naming abilities of a divine figure. During the fight the man

³⁴ The reason for this wrestling match is never explained. In fact, when a rich man is left alone and an unknown man attacks him (Gen 32:24) my first assumption is that he is being robbed; in that case, Jacob turning the tables around and stealing another blessing, this time from an angel (Gen 32:26-29) instead of his father (Gen 27) takes on interesting dimensions.

³⁵ For ease of reference I will also refer to the mysterious figure interchangeably as the angel and "the man."

and Jacob are matched on equal terms, making the man seem very human.³⁶ In Gen 32:25, after the man realizes that he “did not prevail against Jacob” he strikes at and dislocates Jacob in an underhanded attempt to defeat Jacob. When this proves unsuccessful, the man asks Jacob to release him before the dawn breaks (Gen 32:26), to which Jacob replies with a request for a blessing. The man’s request that Jacob release him before the sunrise is strange because it implies the man had some reason leave before the sun rose. Scholars often use this request to argue that the man was a supernatural figure because it parallels stories of “nocturnal battles with supernatural creatures.”³⁷ In addition, the concept of a figure first being described as a man and later being revealed as an angel is found in the narrative in Genesis 18 and 19 as well.³⁸

Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel illustrates that angels can seem human physically but still possesses divine capabilities. The most common explanation is that Jacob wrestled with God,³⁹ because of Gen 32:30 when Jacob says he has seen “God face to face,” but a more likely explanation is that the man is an angel. God would not need to dislocate Jacob’s hip to win a wrestling match, but an angel using a human form that lacks supernatural strength would.⁴⁰ The mysterious figure’s need to escape before the sun come up also decreases the chances that the figure is God because God used to take walks in the Garden of Eden during the day (Gen 3:8). This decreases the likelihood that He would feel a special need to escape before the sun rose. And the man is delivering a message in a sense, the message of Jacob’s new name. “The physical touch, the name change, and the personal blessing all serve to portray the profound intimacy

³⁶ Hermann Gunkel. *Genesis*. 349.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 352.

³⁸ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*. 205.

³⁹ Esther Hammori, *When Gods Were Men*. 25.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

experienced between Jacob and the divine messenger.”⁴¹ While the figure is referred to as man while he wrestles with Jacob, the renaming is too significant to be the result of a simple match between two men. The man’s ability to rename and bless Jacob shows that although he has a physical human form, he still has divine powers. In the Old Testament, superiors name inferiors, placing the angel on a higher level than Jacob and consequently humanity, especially considering that Jacob cannot obtain the name of his opponent (Gen 32:29) even while Jacob’s opponent has the power to rename him.⁴²

Many scholars believe that the man was some type of river spirit or demon seeking to stop Jacob from crossing the river, but the evidence for this argument lacks solid support. Some scholars see the man’s desire to be released before the sunrise as proof because some spirits can only appear at night.⁴³ However, a wide variety of reasons could justify why the man wanted Jacob to release him before sunrise, such as the fact that the wrestling match was taking too long. The mention of the sunrise could simply be a marker of time. Without taking into consideration the strange request for release before the daybreak, the only other piece of evidence that the man is a river spirit is the location of the battle near the ford of Jabbok. Although the narrative does conform to narratives involving night attacks by river creatures in many ways, biblical angelology often borrowed features from Ancient Near Eastern mythologies. The supernatural nocturnal assailant was transformed into a “member of the divine retinue conforming to the monotheistic pattern of biblical angelology.”⁴⁴ In its original form this story may have recounted an attack by a river spirit, but in its biblical form it tells the story of Jacob wrestling with an

⁴¹Mark Wessner, “Toward a Literary Understanding of Face to Face,” 177.

⁴² Stephen Geller, “The Struggle at Jabbok,” 56.

⁴³ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 204.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 205.

angel, as suggested by the inter-biblical interpretation of the story which says Jacob “struggled with an angel and overcame him” (Hosea 12:4).

Jacob has shown himself to be a trickster throughout Genesis and overcomes the angel as he overcame his human brother Esau (Gen 32:28).⁴⁵ Wrestling does not require weapons and Jacob only has to physically restrain the man before the sun rises to win. His cleverness and trickster nature serve him well because he outsmarts the angel in a sport that values technique over strength. Jacob’s victory ultimately proves that, at least in the case of his angelic opponent, a divine nature does not necessarily bring superior intelligence or skill. The angel loses the match even after he wrenches Jacob’s hip (Gen 32:25) and his defeat highlights his imperfection. However, that imperfection allows Jacob to have an intimate relationship with him. The wrestling match and its results portray “a very personal relationship with the divine.”⁴⁶ Few events get more physical than a full-contact wrestling match. “Nowhere else does Jacob have such an intimate, personal interaction with a divine being.”⁴⁷ However, the most important part of this battle is that the man actually concedes the match in Gen 32:28. The angel shows human vulnerability with his defeat: a truly divine figure with no human faults could not have lost a match against a human. Nevertheless, the angel walks away from the fight with no physical markers, while Jacob as limps away (Gen 32:31). He uses a human body; however, the angel shows no sign of injury after the wrestling match, a marker of his divine nature.

⁴⁵ In fact, the first part of Gen 32 explains he crosses the river behind the rest of his household because he fears his brother, whose birthright he stole, will kill or rob him when they meet. Geller notes that some explanations of the narrative of Jacob wrestling with a divine figure believe that the divine figure was a representation of his future confrontation with Esau in the following chapter of Genesis.

⁴⁶ Kevin Sullivan, *Wrestling With Angels*, 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

The angel who wrestles Jacob in Genesis 32 utilizes a human form and his divine ability to rename mortals. His imperfection and intimate connection with Jacob intertwine with his divine aspects to make him appear human.

Conclusion

In Genesis, angels have divine aspects but simultaneously show an almost human nature. They can have sex with human women, eat human food, and wrestle with human men. Popular belief and religious interpreters may see angels as explicitly divine, but this view often conflicts with the text within Genesis as my analysis of Gen 6:1-4, 18:1-8, 19:1-3 and 32:22-32 has shown. These angels are so human that the boundary between human beings and divine beings becomes blurred. When those lines blur then those boundaries are crossed in concrete ways. In light of increasing representations of angels in fantasy and science fiction literature, television and movies, better understanding the pivotal sources of our angelic knowledge becomes more and more important.

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