

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 65 (2009)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The Divine-Human Marriages (Genesis 6:1-4) and the Greek Framing of the Primeval History
Autor: Schüle, Andreas
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877634>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 25.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Divine-Human Marriages (Genesis 6:1–4) and the Greek Framing of the Primeval History¹

1. Introduction

One genre or form that is never really mentioned in exegetical textbooks but that plays a significant role in the life of every exegete is that of a «stubborn text»—meaning a text that has the nasty habit of outmaneuvering the exegete’s best efforts to classify it properly and incorporate it in an interpretative scheme. Despite their stubbornness, or precisely because of it, these texts are the ones that challenge our favorite theories and sometimes even unhinge them. As such, they play an important role in reminding us that our theories about the biblical texts are never quite as complex and deep as the biblical texts themselves.

Looking at Gen 1–11, the episode of the so-called angel marriages in ch. 6:1–4 certainly falls under this rubric of a stubborn text. It has been called a «torso» or «fragment»² that, for some unknown reason, ended up in the Primeval History. During the reign of the documentary hypothesis, 6:1–4 was usually associated with the «J»³ source and, as such, aligned with the Eden narratives in chs. 2–4, the non-priestly parts of the flood narrative, and the Tower of Babel story. The assumption was that all these different materials were brought together by the «J» author because of their focus on human depravity and sin.⁴ The Primeval History of the J source was seen as a subtle description of the human inability to find their place in creation and to submit to the sovereign will of the creator. Instead, humans aspire to becoming like God as the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel stories seem to demonstrate. The key metaphor for this wrong-headed ambition is found in the flood narrative: human beings have an «evil heart», which renders all their thoughts, plans, and desires to be correspondingly wicked.

Viewed in this perspective, the limitation of the human lifespan to 120 years in 6:3 appears as a punishment of humankind for their hubris that expresses itself in the marriages of the daughters of Adam to the sons of god. Here, we find just another attempt of humankind to divinize themselves and

¹ This is a slightly enlarged version of a paper presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, Massachusetts.

² H. Gunkel: *Genesis*, Göttingen ⁹1977, 59.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. G. von Rad: *Das erste Buch Moses. Genesis (ATD 2–4)*, Göttingen ⁹1972, 85; C. Westermann: *Genesis*, vol. 1/2 (BK I/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn ⁴1999, 517.

eventually to acquire what was denied them in the garden of Eden, namely immortality.

The problem with this interpretation seems to be that it is quite eclectic in its perception of the text. It highlights certain aspects (like the limitation of the human lifespan) but downplays or even ignores others—like the fact that 6:1–4 depicts a time when there was not only God and humans but a number of intermediary creatures like the sons of God, the giants, and the heroes. The biggest problem, however, with turning 6:1–4 into an account of human sin is that there is no mention whatsoever of any sinful activity on the part of the daughters of Adam. There is no signal in the text that suggests that they «seduced» the sons of God into having sexual intercourse with them.⁵ The emphasis is on what the sons of God do: they «see» (רָאָה) that the human women are «beautiful» (טִיבוֹת) and they «take» them (לָקַח) for wives.

It is not clear, if one has to think of these liaisons between humans and gods as sexual adventures or as marriage-like relationships. The text does not put any emphasis on this particular aspect. Also, no moral judgment is passed onto the situation. All that the text suggests is that there was a time in the early history of the world and of humankind when the boundaries between the divine and the human spheres were still fluid.⁶ The result of this mixing and mingling is the emergence of a new generation of beings, the *gibborim*, or, as the term usually gets translated, the *heroes*.⁷

If one approaches the text without a preconceived notion of what it should say in the context of the Primeval History in general or a smaller part of it (like the «J» stratum), it turns out that it gives us an image of the world and its inhabitants that is characteristically different especially from the one of the creation account in Gen 1. There, the world already has clear-cut boundaries between humankind and their creator. God creates human beings in an initial act that determines what and who human beings are. Also, the world of Gen 1 and also of Gen 2 recognizes one God and one human species, but no other beings that fill the hiatus between the two, like semi-gods, super-hu-

⁵ For a discussion if and to what extent the «sin» of the human daughters should be understood as «fate» cf. M. Oeming: Sünde als Verhängnis. Gen 6,1–4 im Rahmen der Urgeschichte des Jahwisten, TThZ 102 (1993) 34–50, and M. Vervenne: All they need is love. Once more Genesis 6:1–4, in: J. Davies (ed.): Words remembered, texts renewed (JSOT.S 195), Sheffield 1995, 19–40.

⁶ Cf. W. Schlisske: Gottessöhne und Gottessohn im Alten Testament. Phasen der Entmythologisierung im Alten Testament (BWANT 97), Stuttgart 1973, 15–32.

⁷ The question of the identity of the «sons of God» as well as of the «heroes» has triggered much debate among scholars. For a detailed review of the solution that have been proposed cf. A. Schüle: Der Prolog der hebräischen Bibel. Der literar- und theologiegeschichtliche Diskurs der Urgeschichte (Genesis 1–11) (AThANT 86), Zürich 2006, 222–225.

mans, or humanoids. What makes 6:1–4 a seemingly awkward and, on the exegetical level, a stubborn text is that it depicts mixing and mingling between gods and humans and the subsequent emergence of new types of beings as characteristics of the primeval world before the flood.

This begs the question that should be the starting point for interpreting this text: Why was this peculiar worldview included in the flow of the primeval narratives? To give my answer right away: 6:1–4 appears to be a text that aims at appropriating and at the same time critically evaluating elements of *Greek* mythology. It is a text that gives reason to assume that its original audience was exposed to and familiar with certain themes that one finds primarily in myths originating from the Aegean.⁸

2. *The Text*

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them,² the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.³ Then the LORD said, «My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.»

⁴The Nephilim were on the earth in those days. And when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, they bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

While the text-critical problems of this passage are mostly insignificant, the text presents one translation issue with far-reaching consequences for its interpretation. V. 4 introduces the Nephilim by mentioning that they were on earth during «those days» (בִּימֵי הָהֵם). Obviously, this refers back to V. 1: «those days» were the time when the sons of God came down to take women for themselves. According to the translation given above, V. 4aα is a complete sentence. Its purpose is to mention yet another group of beings that wandered the earth, in addition to the humans, the sons of God, and eventually the heroes/warriors who emerged from the divine-human encounters. This of course means that there is no explanation of who or what those Nephilim are; they are just thrown into the mix, which is one reason why several Bible translations seek to connect them to the «heroes» in V. 4b: «Those [i.e. the Nephilim] were the heroes of old ... »⁹ However, in this case the mention of the children who were born to the sons of God and the human women would seem rather pointless. So the question is whether V. 1–3 should be seen as a closed unit, with V. 4 as an appendix, or whether V. 1–4 should be taken to-

⁸ Cf. along the same lines especially R.S. Hendel: Of Demigods and the Deluge. Towards an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4, JBL 106 (1987) 13–26.

⁹ This line of interpretation goes back to Sir 16:8 and also 1 Enoch, where the Nephilim are identified as the «heroes that were of old.»

gether with V. 4aα as an interlude. The answer, it seems to me, lies in the somewhat complicated grammar of the phrase **וְגַם אַחֲרֵי כֵן אֲשֶׁר**. Three different analyses have been offered, but only two of them seem sustainable both linguistically and in terms of content:

1. The words **וְגַם אַחֲרֵי כֵן** should be taken together meaning «and also afterwards», with the following **אֲשֶׁר** introducing an adverbial clause. This, in context, would translate as follows: «In those days, the Nephilim were on earth, and also afterwards, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of Adam and they bore children to them.»¹⁰ The problem here is that an adverbial clauses referring to **כֵּן אַחֲרֵי** would strike one as awkward if not impossible in Biblical Hebrew. Also, the timeline of the events would contradict itself: Whereas the first half of the sentence says that the Nephilim were on earth *at the time* when the sons of God had their liaisons with the human women, the second half would suggest that those liaisons occurred sometime *after* the Nephilim had set foot on the ground of the earth.

2. In this case the assumption is that **וְגַם אַחֲרֵי כֵן** closes the sentences that commences in V. 4a and that **אֲשֶׁר** opens a sub-clause with the following **וַיֵּלְדוּ לָהֶם** as a main clause: «In those days, the Nephilim were on earth and also afterwards. When the sons of God went in to the daughters of Adam, they bore them children.»¹¹ This has considerably greater grammatical plausibility than the solution above. Only the content presents a certain problem, since the «also afterwards» suggests that the Nephilim were on earth for a longer period of time, certainly beyond the intermezzo of the divine-human marriages. However, what follows in the storyline of the Primeval History is the flood narrative, which of course suggests that every living being, except for those in Noah's ark, vanished from the face of the earth. The major difference is that, here, the children that are born to the human women are identified as the «heroes.»

3. Finally, it is possible to see **וְגַם** as the beginning of a new clause «And also» with **אֲשֶׁר כֵּן אַחֲרֵי** as a conjunction that introduces a sub-clause, building up to **וַיֵּלְדוּ לָהֶם** as the main clause: «The Nephilim were on earth in those days. And also, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of Adam, they bore them children.» This avoids the content issue outlined for 2., although it needs to be mentioned that, while **אֲשֶׁר אַחֲרֵי** is a common temporal conjunction, **אֲשֶׁר כֵּן** would be more unusual in this role.

¹⁰ Cf. most of the major English Bible translations (New Revised Standard Version, New King James, English Standard Version).

¹¹ Cf. JPS Tanakh and, among the German translations, the Lutherbibel (1912). Note, however, that the Lutherbibel (1984) identifies the «heroes» as the «giants.»

While the linguistic analysis of Gen 6:4 will continue to be debated, it seems safe to assume that in terms of its content this verse sees the children that emerge from the divine-human encounters as the generation of heroes that inhabited the world before the flood. As will be shown below, this assumption receives further support from a religious-historical interpretation of Gen 6:1–4.

3. The Text in its Literary Context

Perhaps the most significant argument against the assumption that 6:1–4 should be seen as some mythic fragment that, for unknown reasons, was washed into the Primeval History is its interconnectedness with some of the preceding texts. In the genealogy of Adam (Gen 5) we are told that the ancestral fathers begot sons and daughters. But while the genealogy of early humankind is traced through the lineage of fathers and sons, there is no mention of whatever happened with the daughters of Adam. The formulaic phrase reads as follows:

When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he became the father of Seth were eight hundred years; and he had sons and daughters.

This is precisely where 6:1–2a picks up the thread from ch. 5:

When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that they were fair... .

So it seems safe to say that we are supposed to understand 6:1–4 as a parallel track to the genealogy of Adam that complements the picture of the early history of humankind. As such, 6:1–4 is not intended to open a new chapter of the Primeval History, we are still in the time of the first ten generations of humankind between Adam and Noah.

Another intertextual reference that ties 6:1–4 to its preceding context is the mention of the *רוח אלהים*, the «spirit» or «breath of God.» In V. 3 God decides that his spirit shall not abide in human beings for more than 120 years.¹² This of course reminds the reader of the scene in Gen 2:7 where God breathes the breath of life into Adam's nostrils. But whereas the mental image

¹² For an overview of the controversial discussion about this particular detail cf. D.J. Clines: The Significance of the Sons of God Episode (Genesis 6:1–4) in the Context of the Primeval History (Genesis 1–11), JSOT 13 (1973) 33–46; D.L. Petersen: Genesis 6:1–4. Yahweh and the Organization of the Cosmos, JSOT 13 (1979) 47–64.

of God's own breath indwelling in humans connects these texts, the terminology itself is actually different: Gen 2:7 uses the term נשמת חיים «breath of life», 6:3 on the other hand talks about God's רוח «ruah». This term «ruah», however, is no stranger to the reader of the Primeval History. It is introduced right at the outset in Gen 1:3 where the רוח אלהים, the «Spirit of God», moves about above the primordial chaos. By using this particular word רוח and associating it with the image of God breathing the breath of life into Adam, 6:1–4 not only alludes to these previous texts, it offers an exegetical synthesis, suggesting that it was in fact this «ruah» from the beginning that also enlivened Adam and that is the breath of life in all of us. In other words, 6:1–4 participates in the intra-textual exegesis of the Primeval History.

Something very similar could be demonstrated for the flood narrative: Gen 7:22 summarizes that everything died that had, literally translated, the «breath of the spirit of life» in their nostrils. This seems to be another way of synthesizing the terminologies of Gen 1:3 and 2:7, suggesting that God's own spirit is the life force in every living being. Just as an aside: it has not always been recognized that the Primeval History hosts a rich and diverse discourse about the nature of life itself, about what constitutes a living being, and what distinguishes something that's alive from something that's dead.

1:1–3a When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and the spirit (רוח) of God sweeping over the water—God said ...

2:7 Then the LORD God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (נשמת חיים); and Adam became a living being.

6:3 Then the LORD said, «My spirit (רוח) shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.»

7:22 Everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life (נשמת רוח חיים) died.

Our text, Gen 6:1–4, is firmly woven into this discourse, which is why there is no reason to downplay its role for the literary shape as well as the theological message of the Primeval History.

4. *The Mythic Elements of 6:1–4*

Intertwined with this exegetical discourse about the conditions of life is 6:1–4s peculiar view that along with humankind there were also other kinds of beings inhabiting the predeluvian world: the sons of God, the heroes, and the even more peculiar Nephilim, sometimes translated as «giants». When it comes to exploring mythic elements like these, exegetes typically look for parallels in the great Mesopotamian epics, assuming that it was Babylonian and

Assyrian culture in the first place that had a profound impact on the shaping of biblical texts. With regard to Gen 6:1–4, a recent, substantive attempt to interpret this text along the lines of Mesopotamian mythology has been provided by Helge Kvanvig.¹³ Kvanvig argues that the Mesopotamian myths, especially Atrahasis, depict the early world as one with still uncertain boundaries between the human and the divine spheres. It is only gradually that these spheres materialize as strictly separate and that certain rules are established between them. However, as Kvanvig himself notices, the most «erratic» details in 6:1–4—the mixing and mingling between humans and gods as a result of sexual intercourse and also the emergence of heroes and giants—have no parallels in Mesopotamia. As a matter of fact, one might say these appear rather alien in the Ancient Near Eastern context. If I may add a little anecdote: When I presented the episode of the «Angel Marriages» to a colleague of mine in the Ancient Near Eastern Department of the University of Heidelberg and asked him to comment on it from his point of view, he wrinkled his nose, picked up the copy with noticeable distaste and said to me: «Perhaps you should take this to the Classics department.»

As a matter of fact, 6:1–4 looks a lot less «awkward» if one holds this text against the backdrop of Greek mythology. Especially the idea of intermarriages between gods and humans from which generations of super-humans or semi-gods emerge has plenty of precedent here, although in several cases, unlike in Gen 6:1–4, the fathers are actually human, whereas the divine bloodline comes in through the mothers: Achilles, the hero of the Trojan War, is the son of the goddess Thetis and Peleus, king of the Myrmidons. In his *Theogony*, Hesiod mentions that the goddesses Circe and Calypso had sons with Odysseus and that those sons were called «heroes.» With regard to the combination of divine fathers and human mothers it is Zeus, the highest god, himself who proves to be the most active and outgoing of all the gods. If one takes the various texts together that mention Zeus's amorous conquests among mortal women, he is the father of some forty children both sons (for example Heracles and Perseus) and daughters (Helen of Sparta).

If we follow especially Hesiod's account in «*Works and Days*», it is interesting to note how he synchronizes the development of humankind and the emergence of the semi-divine heroes. Hesiod famously depicts four stages of humankind: first a golden, then a silver, a bronze, and finally an iron age. As the decline in their preciousness suggests, the metals symbolize a process in which humankind loses its original splendor and carefree, paradisiacal life. Thus, in its iron form, humankind finds itself subdued to the necessity of toil, hard work, as well as to mortality and death. Needless to say that it is this iron form that, according to Hesiod, characterizes human life as we know it:

¹³ H. Kvanvig: Genesis 6,1–4 as an Antediluvian Event, *JSOT* 16 (2002) 79–112.

«Would that I were not then among the fifth men, but either dead earlier or born later! For now it is a race of iron; and they will never cease from toil and misery by day or night, in constant distress, and the gods will give them harsh troubles. Nevertheless, even they shall have good mixed with ill.» (Works and Days, 173–178)

By depicting a more glorious past, Hesiod highlights some of the misery of humankind in its iron form. But he also admits that, despite their dire fortunes, there is dignity to the existence of humankind and a chance for everyone to receive their share in life as well as a quantum of solace («the good mixed with ill»). «Works and Days» is a wonderful text also to compare with the Eden narrative in Gen 2–3, because in both cases (and one might in fact add some of the Mesopotamian materials as well) the challenge is to understand why hard work and death are humankind's lot in life and why this is a mixed blessing—but, at least to some extent, a blessing after all.

Interestingly, Hesiod integrates another age into his scheme, an age that is not associated with any kind of metal and that also doesn't really fit into the scheme of humankind's quadruple incarnation. Between the bronze and the iron ages, Hesiod places the time of the great «heroes» of the past:

«After the earth covered up this (the bronze) race, too, Zeus son of Kronos made yet a fourth one upon the rich-pastured earth, a more righteous and noble one, the godly race of the heroes who are called demigods, our predecessors on the boundless earth. As for them, ugly war and fearful fighting destroyed them, some below seven-gated Thebes, the Cadmean country, as they battled for Oedipus' flocks, and others it led in ships over the great abyss of the sea to Troy on account of lovely-haired Helen. There some of them were engulfed by the consummation of death, but to some Zeus the father, son of Kronos, granted a life and home apart from men, and settled them at the ends of the earth.» (Works and Days, 158–170)

There seems to be agreement among experts that what Hesiod attempts here is to locate the heroic age as described in Greek mythology (especially in the work of Hesiod's assumed contemporary Homer) on the timeline of the history of humankind. It also seems safe to assume that the heroes themselves, whom Hesiod describes as «a godly race» and as «demigods», are men like Achilles, Hercules, and Perseus with both human and divine parents.

Now if we return to Gen 6:1–4 a structural parallel becomes immediately apparent: just as in Hesiod's account the biblical text talks about a particular era in the history of humankind in which semi-divine beings inhabited the earth. The Hebrew text calls them *gibborim*, a term that can be rendered «warrior», «hero», «strong one», or even «man of violence.» This brings us to the question whether the term *gibborim* in 6:4 is meant as a translation of or at least an allusion to the Greek term «heroes.» I think the answer should be yes, for two reasons in particular. As I have already mentioned, the motif of sexual relationships between gods and humans is not found in Mesopotamian literature but is well attested in Greek sources. Further, it is the way in which the

gibborim are introduced that suggests that they were popular mythic figures with whom the originally intended audience was well acquainted. «They are the heroes of old, the men of renown.» (V. 4) And again, apart from Gilgamesh and Enkidu, there are not many traces of mythic tales about heroes in Mesopotamian sources, whereas the heroic age is a key subject in Greek mythology.¹⁴ The rhetoric of our text presupposes that its audience was able to associate certain stories and tales with the «renowned heroes of old», and it seems to be the very purpose of 6:1–4 to put those characters and their stories on the map of the biblical Primeval History.

A similar argument could be made for the identity of the Nephilim, although things seem even more complicated in their case. The fact that the text mentions only «in passing» that the Nephilim, too, were on earth in those days suggests that the original audience knew mythic tales that included the Nephilim. However, given that, apart from Gen 6:4, there is only little textual evidence for the Nephilim in the Hebrew Bible, one can only guess as to their role in Greek mythology. In Num 13:33 the term is used for the native inhabitants of the land of Canaan. The storyline is revealing: Intimidated by the strength of the Canaanites, the Israelite spies decide to turn around and give a fake report of what they had allegedly seen when they scoured the land. So they describe the Canaanites as giants who also «devoured» their children (Num 13:32). If the latter means «cannibalism» or if this is a more general reference to violent behaviors among the inhabitants of the land remains open. Num 13:33 goes on to mention that the spies (also) saw the Nephilim in the land of Canaan and that, next to them, they appeared like grasshoppers. It is conceivable that, as part of their fake report, the spies claim that they had seen the «infamous» Nephilim that their audience knew only from mythic tales. It is conceivable that those were tales about «fallen» divine beings similar to the Titans and Cyclops in Greek mythology, but this must remain speculative.

This obviously begs the question: what, beyond the biblical text itself, might suggest that Greek mythology was known in Syria-Palestine and thus on the horizon of the biblical authors? As with most of our assumptions about cultural transfers, hard evidence is oftentimes difficult to come by. However, recent archeology has provided us with a fairly comprehensive picture of Greek presence along the coast of Syria-Palestine long before the age of Hellenism. There seems to be consensus among historians that the Greeks used the infrastructure of the Neo-Assyrian and later especially of the Persian empires for trade in the Ancient Near East, with Cyprus and Phoenicia as hubs. As a matter of fact, it seems that under Persian rule the Near East was also integrated in Mediterranean trade and cultural exchange. Thus it is no surprise that one finds elements of Greek mythology on artifacts from Cyprus. Espe-

¹⁴ Cf. R. Bartelmus: *Heroentum in Israel und seiner Umwelt* (ATHANT 65), Zurich 1979.

cially the stories of Heracles, who was for some time even identified with the God Melqart, as well as of Perseus assume a prominent role in Cypriot art.¹⁵



Illustration 1: Slab with scene of Heracles stealing the cattle of Geryon, late 6th cent. B.C., catalogue no. 192



Illustration 2: Statue of Geryon, 2nd half of 6th cent B.C., catalogue no. 193

¹⁵ The following illustrations are taken from V. Karageorghis: *Ancient Art from Cyprus. The Cesnola Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 2000.



Illustration 3: Detail of catalogue no. 193

The first image depicts Heracles stealing the cattle of Geryon—one of the tasks Heracles was given after slaying his own children. The second image shows three scenes, located on three shields that are part of a statue of Geryon. In the middle and to the right there are again scenes involving Heracles, whereas the left shield shows Perseus beheading Medusa. Most of these and other artifacts date from the early seventh down to the late fifth centuries BCE, which is no proof but certainly intriguing evidence that elements of Greek mythology were known in the Near East and—again no surprise—that it was the heroic epics in the first place that seem to have found their way into pieces of art well beyond the borders of the Aegean.

Coming back to Gen 6:1–4, it seems safe to say that historical-archeological evidence does not contradict but rather supports the assumption that the text's original audience was familiar with the Greek heroes or their respective local incarnations. The question then becomes what might have led the biblical authors to appropriate this material in the context of the Primeval History? There are two answers that I would like to contemplate in concluding this paper.

1. As noted at the outset, Greek mythology challenges the biblical view of creation, since it depicts the early world as one that has no clear boundaries between the human and the divine spheres and thus leads to the mixing and mingling between gods and humans that characterizes the mythic age of the world. The world has not yet materialized in the way we know it and thus allows for the emergence of heroes and other beings that are both human and divine. There is a certain melancholia in Hesiod and also in Homer about the end of the heroic age and about the fact that all that's left of its splendor are the mythic tales that open a window for «iron age humans» back into a time long gone. It seems that the biblical account engages this view of the primordial world by putting a critical spin on it. The emergence of heroes as semi-

human and semi-divine beings is really more of an episode or an accident that had to be overcome in order for humankind to finally become what the creator wanted it to be. The limitation of the human lifespan to 120 years is not so much a punishment for humans as it is the insurance that no one who is born of a human mother will live beyond the measure of a human lifetime. This means that 6:1–4 should in fact be counted among the creation texts of the Primeval History, because it adds the final piece to the accounts of the creation of humankind in Gen 1 and Gen 2–3. In this perspective, the way in which the biblical authors appropriated Greek mythology seems to have been no different from how they adopted literary traditions from Mesopotamia. Gen 6:1–4 is not just a piece patched into the larger tapestry of the Primeval History. It gives witness to the same kind of critical—as well as creative and inventive—reworking of ancient mythology that one also finds in the creation narratives and the flood story. This just presupposes that the mythic materials to which the biblical authors and their audience had access (or to which they were exposed) were more diverse and variegated than we sometimes tend to think.¹⁶ Even some recent publications on Gen 1–11 still seem to follow the rule of thumb that the Greeks only entered the biblical world with Alexander the Great.

2. The other point that seems to have triggered the interest and certainly also the suspicion of the biblical authors regarding Greek heroic tales pertains to the role of God in the mixing and mingling between divine and human beings. As mentioned above, in Greek literature, Zeus himself is heavily involved in numerous liaisons with human women—as a matter of fact, he is the most notorious flirt among all the gods. By contrast, 6:1–4 makes it plain that YHWH (only the Tetragrammaton is used in this text) has nothing to do with the amorous conquests of the «sons of god» (בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים). As a matter of fact, he has to interfere in order to correct the «damage» that the sons of god caused by getting involved with human women. The grammar matters here, because the Hebrew definite article does in fact suggest that it wasn't just some divine beings that entered the human sphere but really the sons of god himself. So there is the idea of a pantheon with the high god as the father of all the other gods—very much in the same way one finds it throughout the world of antiquity. However, by using the Tetragrammaton instead of *elohim* the text dissociates YHWH from the role as head of the pantheon, suggesting that there is no connection whatsoever between the biblical creator god and what goes on between the sons of god and the daughters of Adam. God is

¹⁶ For an important contribution on the impact of Greek mythology on the Primeval History cf. M. Witte: *Die biblische Urgeschichte* (BZAW 265), Berlin/New York 1998.

just as independent of and sovereign over the created world and its inhabitants as he is in Gen 1. Gen 6:1–4 is a text that engages Greek mythology precisely to prevent any identification of YHWH with Zeus. This, however, happens not so much by making a «dogmatic» statement but simply by alluding to Greek heroic tales against the backdrop of the biblical creation narratives.

Abstract

Die vielfach als Fremdkörper empfundene Episode der sog «Engelhehen» in Gen 6,1–4 wird im vorliegenden Beitrag vor dem Hintergrund griechischer Mythologie interpretiert. Mit der Erwähnung eines Geschlechts von «Helden» (נַבְרִיִּים), das aus der Vereinigung von Menschen und Göttern hervorgeht, spielt Gen 6,1–4 auf die in der griechischen Antike zentrale Heldenmythologie an und integriert diese in das urgeschichtliche Bild von der Erschaffung und Ausbreitung der Menschen. Die Kernaussage ist dabei, dass in der Frühphase der Menschheit die Grenzen zwischen göttlicher und menschlicher Sphäre noch fließend waren. Dem setzt YHWH ein Ende, indem er die Lebensspanne der Menschen auf 120 Jahre begrenzt.

Andreas Schüle, Richmond VA (USA)