

GENESIS VI-IX

THE “SONS OF GOD”, THE “GIANTS” AND THE FLOOD

Genesis 6:1-4 has a strange, or at least an uncommon story, which looks like taken from a pagan folk tale:

וַיְהִי כִּי־הִחֵל הָאָדָם לָרֵב עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּבָנוּת יָלֵד
 וּלְהֵם:
 וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם כִּי טֹבֹת הֵנָּה
 וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ:
 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לֹא־יִדּוֹן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעַלְמָם כִּשְׁגָם הוּא
 בָּשָׂר וְהָיוּ יָמָיו מֵאָה וָעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה:
 הַנְּפִלִים הָיוּ בָאָרֶץ בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם וְגַם אַחֲרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר
 יָבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים אֶל־בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם וַיִּלְדוּ לָהֶם הַמָּה
 הַגִּבּוֹרִים אֲשֶׁר מְעוֹלָם אָנָּשִׁי הַשָּׁמַיִם

This is translated into English in a quite satisfactory way by KJV as:

“And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown”.

One may wonder about the marital intermingling of divine beings with mortal females, which recalls Greek mythology, if not polytheistic tales. Indeed, the expression “sons of God” has produced a great deal of embarrassment, which led to various evading translations. It is rendered literally by the Septuagint, according to the major editions: οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ. May be because the expression is not unique; it occurs in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7, in Daniel 3:25 (in Aramaic: בר אלהין). However, codex Alexandrinus of the Septuagint has οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ, “the angels of God”, a perception whose old age is confirmed by Philo’s quotation: ἰδόντες δὲ οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ τὰς θυγατέρας τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅτι καλαί εἰσιν (*Gigantes* 6) and by Joseph: πολλοὶ γὰρ ἄγγελοι θεοῦ γυναιξὶ συνιόντες ὑβριστὰς ἐγέννησαν παῖδας καὶ παντὸς ὑπερόπτας καλοῦ διὰ τὴν ἐπὶ τῇ δυνάμει πεποιθήσιν ὅμοια τοῖς ὑπὸ γιγάντων τετολμηῆσθαι λεγομένοις ὑφ’ Ἑλλήνων καὶ οὗτοι δράσαι παραδίδονται, “for many angels of God accompanied with women, and begat sons that proved unjust, and despisers of all that was good, on account of the confidence they had in their own strength; for the tradition is, That these men did what resembled the acts of those whom the Grecians call giants”.

(*Antiquities* 1:73). Aquila too translates as ‘sons’: οἱ υἱοὶ, but the plural τῶν θεῶν “of the gods”, unmasks its relation to the meaning “judges” attributed to אלהים. Very much in line with Jerome’s translation of אלהים in the following case. The Book of Enoch describes the coupling of “the angels of the heavens” with the daughters of “the children of men”, as the source of every evil in the earthly world, since it fathered the giants who taught men all wickedness.¹

Ex 21:6 rules in the case of a slave who refuses to be freed after the sixth year of slavery. The procedure that makes him a permanent slave is: וְהִגִּישׁוּ אֹדְנָיו אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים, translated by NRSV as: “then his master shall bring him before God”. The Septuagint renders the passage with a noticeable expansion: προσάξει αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸ κριτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ, “his master shall lead him to *the tribunal of God*”. A hint to a similar interpretation may lie within Jerome’s rendering in the plural: *offeret eum dominus diis*, “his master shall present him to the gods”, which is in Luther’s translation: “so bringe ihn sein Herr vor die Götter” (1912 edition). Clearly, Jewish exegesis could not tolerate the slightest allusion to anthropomorphism. Accordingly, the old Halakhic Midrash *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael* (sect. Mishpatim, ch. 2) says: אל האלהים (means) אצל הדיינים “before the judges”.

A similar occurrence is Exod 22:6-7, in cases of alleged dishonesty, when entrusted property is lost or stolen: כִּי־יִתֵּן אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ

וְכִסֹּף או־כֶּלִים לְשֹׁמֵר וְגָנַב מִבֵּית הָאִישׁ אִם־יִמָּצָא הַגָּנֵב יִשְׁלַם שְׁנַיִם: אִם־לֹא יִמָּצָא הַגָּנֵב וְנִקְרַב בְּעַל־הַבַּיִת אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים אִם־לֹא שָׁלַח יָדוֹ בְּמִלְאֲכַת רֵעֵהוּ. NRSV translates wordly: “When someone delivers to a neighbor money or goods for safekeeping, and they are stolen from the neighbor’s house, then the thief, if caught, shall pay double. If the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall be brought *before God*, to determine whether or not the owner had laid hands on the neighbor’s goods” (NRSV). Apparently, one cannot determine whether by “before God” a tribunal is meant or a religious institution. In any case, the Septuagint has a similar wording: ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ, though it makes matters clearer by adding καὶ ὀμεῖται, “and shall swear”, which implies judicial procedure. This is followed by the Vulgate’s plural: *ad deos*, with the same addition: *et iurabit*. KJV, however, is explicit: “the master of the house shall be brought unto *the judges*”. This legal process is still further extended in v. 9: עַל־כָּל־דְּבַר־פְּשָׁע, “upon every matter of trespass” (*i.e.*, unjust appropriation of the property of another person), עַד הָאֱלֹהִים, יבא דבר־שְׁנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר יִרְשִׁיעַן אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁלַם שְׁנַיִם לְרֵעֵהוּ, “the cause of both (parties) shall come to the court; and he whom the court shall pronounce guilty shall give double (compensation) to his neighbour”. *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael* (same section) interprets האלהים in the same way in other cases of suspicion of theft too.

In Gen 6 the rendering “judges” is shared by codex Neofiti of the Aramaic Targum: בני דייניא, in accord with *Genesis Rabba* sect. 26, which quotes R. Simeon bar

Yohay: רבי שמעון בר יוחי קרי להון בני דייניא. ר' שמעון בר יוחי מקלל לכל מן דקרי להון בני ר. אלהיא “R. Simeon bar Yohay called them ‘the sons of the judges’, and cursed those who call them ‘the sons of gods’.”

In the same spirit, Onqelos renders בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים as בני רברביא, “the sons of the rulers”, which is related to the concept of non-divine greatness, and is followed by Symmachus’ translation: οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν δυναστευόντων, “the sons of the rulers”. It is also the reading of a later manuscript of the Samaritan Aramaic Targum: ברי שלטניה. Jerome sees no offense in translating *filii Dei*, as he invokes Psalms 82:1: אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁפֹּט, “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment”. This personification of the celestial company allows him to accept בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים literally. Significantly, Peshitta uses the Hebrew form בני אלהים instead of the Aramaic אלהא, perhaps trying to escape the plain anthropomorphic meaning. Various explanations for the collocation are offered by Jewish medieval commentators.

The reason I made this long journey into the realm of interpretations and translations of אלהים in the juridic parts of Exodus is to show how they permit the interpretation of בני האלהים in Genesis away from its literal meaning.

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Obviously, God is not satisfied with the coupling related in Gen. 6. After all, he created mankind “male and and female”:

זָכַר וּנְקָבָה בְּרָא אֹתָם (ch. 1:27) in order to procreate and “to fill up the earth”: וּפְרוּ וּמָלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ (ch. 1:28), without the interference of הַבְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים in the process. He therefore expressed His indignation: לֹא־יָדוֹן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעֹלָם בְּשֹׁגֵם הוּא בְּשָׂר׃

This sentence has the aspect of a riddle. What exactly does יָדוֹן mean? The Septuagint apparently reads ἵδωρ, “shall abide”, rendering the word as καταμείνη. So does the Vulgate: *permanebit*, and the Peshitta: ܝܘܕܘܢܐ. The same is attested in Jubilees 5:8 and in a paraphrastic fragment 4Q252 from Qumran which says clearly: ואלהים אמר לא ידור רוחי באדם לעולם, “and God said ‘My spirit will not reside in man forever’.” In his *Quaestiones in Genesim* Jerome is aware of יָדוֹן, meaning “to judge”, and makes efforts to put forward the idea that the judgment implies divine mercy and accepts “repent” (by reference to Hosea 4:14 and Ps 89:32-35). Nevertheless, he does not overlook “endurance”, which he not only put in his translation, but also hinted at in his *Quaestiones*. The other interpretation attributes the word to the root דון, “to judge”, which is mirrored in Symmachus’ rendering κρινεῖ. It reflects the interpretation of e.g., Rabbi Yudan B. Betera (2nd century): עוד איני דן כדין הזה: “I shall never again punish by this punishment”, which connects this passage with Gen 9:8-12 (*Genesis Rabba*, sect. 26). In fact, the rabbis are aware of the two interpretations, and, having in mind the story of the generation of the Flood, which follows the episode immediately, they yield homilies in both senses: יָדוֹן, “shall

punish” and ידור, “shall abide” (*ibid.*, and Jerusalem Talmud, tract. Sanhedrin, 10:3).

Onqelos interprets the word in a similar way, but shifts the subject of the verb from God to the the generation and extends it: וַאֲמַר יְיָ לֹא יִתְקַיֵּים דְרָא בִישָׁא הַדִּין קִדְמִי לְעֵלָם בְּדִיל דְאַנּוּן בְּסָרָא וְעוֹבְדֵיהוֹן בִּישׁוֹן אַרְכָּא יְהִיב לְהוֹן מְאָה “The Lord said: this evil generation shall never subsist before me, because they are flesh and their deeds are corrupt; (however) prolongation is given to them, one hundred and twenty years, if they repent”. Thus, Onqelos stresses: “this” (הַדִּין) connecting the passage with the following narrative on the corruption of mankind, but specifies that it does not concern future generations, therefore, repentance may abolish punishment. Codex Neofiti of the Targum phrased this perception in a much expanded way, combining דִּין, “judgment” and רוּחִי יִהְיֶה בָּךְ, “I placed My spirit” in one homily, after the model of the midrash. To be sure, Samaritan sources attest to two competing versions in their Aramaic Targum. The medieval Samaritan Aramaic glossary, *Hammeliß*, juxtaposes יִטְמַר, “will hide”, and יִכְנַס, “will assemble”, both equivalents of ידור (its *lemmata* are collected from manuscripts of the Samaritan Targum, which its compiler had before his eyes).² On the other hand, *Hammeliß* also features in the same place יִתְקַנַּס, “will be punished”, which is paired by Luther’s *strafen lassen*, both reflecting the Masoretic Text. However, one may be inclined to admit that לֹא יִדּוּר רוּחִי בְּאָדָם, “My spirit shall not abide in man”, is a better alternative, considering God’s disgust in the presence

of the undesirable coupling of humans with semi-divine creatures.

At any rate, this important case shows that various forms co-existed, even if not “officially” recognized.

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Now we are faced with the נְפִילִים, creatures issued from the alliance of the humans with the superhuman “sons of God” (v. 4). In the same verse they are surnamed גְּבוּרִים, “heroes” and even אֲנָשֵׁי הַשָּׁמַיִם, “renowned” (Luther: berühmte Männer). They appear again in the negative account given by the spies whom Joshua sent to scout the land. In Num 13:33 they are depicted as huge creatures: וַשָּׁמַיִם רָאִינוּ אֶת־הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עֲנָק מֶן־הַנְּפִילִים וַנְּהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחַגְבִּים וְכֹן הָיִינוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם: “And 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”.

Arguably, this has prompted the Septuagint and the Vulgate to render נְפִילִים as “giants”: γίγαντες and *gigantes* respectively. It is noteworthy to mention that the Septuagint uses the same γίγαντες for rendering רַפְּאִים, the people כְּדָרְלֵעוּמַר struck down in Genesis 14:5. The translations of Symmachus, οἱ βίαιοι, “the violent ones”, of Peshitta גְּבֻרָא and of the Targumim גִּיבְרִיא, “strong ones” do not differ basically, although they do not necessarily imply immensity.

Early medieval hermeneutics asserts that נְפִילִים, the frightening creatures of gigantesque dimensions, hurled down from heavens, bear seven names, as

Genesis Rabba (sect 26, §7) puts it: שבעה שמות נקראו להם: נפילים, אימים, רפאים, גיבורים, זמזומים, ענקים, עוים. אימים שאימתן נופלת על הכל. רפאים, שכל מי שרואה אותן נרפה כשעווה. גיבורים... קוליתו שלאחד מהם היתה י"ח אמה. זמזומים... מיגיסטי מלחמה. ענקים רבנין... שהיו מרובין ענקים על גבי ענקים... עוים שהיזדו את העולם "They were named by seven names: (Deut 2:10)..., for their dread falls on everyone,³ (Deut 2:11), for anyone seeing them becomes weak like wax,⁴ (Gen 6:4 etc.) ..., for the femur of one of them is 18 cubits long, זמזומים... because they are great in war (= μέγιστοι ?), (Deut 1:28) rulers, adorned, for they were adorned with many necklaces...,⁵ (Deut 2:23) because they devastated the world".⁶

Aquila too resorts to etymology: ἐπιπίπτοντες, "the fallen ones", following a homily that plays on the root "נפל, to fall", very popular in the Jewish hermeneutics : נפילים שהיפילו את העולם ונפלו מן העולם : ושמלאו את העולם נפלים מן הזנות שלהם they are named נפילים (because they let the world fall (into immorality), and fell off the world, and filled the world fetuses (נפלים) by their harlotry" (*Genesis Rabba*, *ibid.*). The Samaritan Pentateuch has a conjunction והנפילים, and so has the Syriac Peshitta, ܘܗܢܦܝܠܝܡ, apparently to explicitly connect the passage with the previous verse (δὲ in the Septuagint), joined implicitly by the Masoretic Text. It is probably intended to emphasize the connection between these creatures and the immoral conduct previously narrated, and condemned in v. 3: the appearance of the "giants" is the result of the intercourse with

the "sons of God" with human females. This is in accord with the aversion towards them, as expressed in the Jewish midrash.

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The position of the "giants" story at the head of the narrative of the Flood gives the impression that it was placed here as a transitional piece between chapter 5, which describes the implementation of God's blessing: פרו ורבו, "be fruitful and multiply" (1:28), and the destruction of the outcome of human multiplication. Thus, verses 1-4 exhibit the cause of the destruction: improper intercourse of humans with non-humans, which strays from the universal rule: וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד, "and he cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). The result of this transgression was human wickedness and corruption: וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי רָבָה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ, "And the Lord saw that the wickedness of the man was great on the earth" (Gen 6:5). And so he decided to do away with the evil by a radical action: אֶמְחָה אֶת-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר-בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם, עַד-בְּהֵמָה עַד-רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the sky" (v. 7). Not only humans deserve capital punishment, but also all living creatures. This is somewhat embarrassing, because no blameful behavior has been attributed to animals previously. Perhaps one may find an allusion to predation in Gen 9:5: וְאֶת-דַּמְכֶם לִנְפֹשֹׁתֵיכֶם אֶדְרֹשׁ מִיַּד כָּל-חַיָּה אֲדָרְשׁוּנוּ, "For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it".

In spite of this extreme plan, God made one exception because: וְנֹחַ מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה, “but Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 8). Attention should be paid to the structure of the previous sequence. Our sentence comes after three sentences which open with a verb connected to a *waw consecutivum*, the habitual Hebrew narrative instrument to express the predicate, which precedes the noun:

- v. 5: וירא יהוה, ”the Lord saw“,
- v. 6: וינחם יהוה the Lord regretted“,
- v. 7: ויאמר יהוה “the Lord said“.

Then verse 8 starts with the subject connected to the *waw adversativum*: וְנֹחַ מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה.

Of course, a non-semitic language has no *waw adversativum*, therefore the translators, who understood the intention of the different word-order, rendered properly: The Septuagint placed the conjunctive δὲ after Noah: Νωε δὲ εὖρεν χάριν. The use of δὲ reveals the difference. And so did Jerome: *Noe vero invenit gratiam*, and so the modern translations: “*But* Noah found favour”. And Luther: “*Aber* Noah fand Genade”.

And why did Noah find favour in the eyes of the Lord? The answer is given in the following verse: וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו. The Septuagint seems to divide the verse the same way, though with a shadow of ambiguity: Νωε ἄνθρωπος δίκαιος, τέλειος ὢν ἐν τῇ γενεᾷ αὐτοῦ, “Noe was a just man; being perfect in his era” (NETS). The Vulgate puts a conjunction between the two

adjectives: *Noe vir iustus atque perfectus fuit in generationibus suis*. “Noah was a just and perfect man in his generations”, making clear the close connection between the two adjectives. The Peshitta is even more explicit, adding a *waw conjunctivum*: וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק וְתָמִים הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו, “Noah was a just *and* a blameless man in his generations.“

As the Masoretic Text has no conjunction, and, according to its punctuation and cantillation marks (accents) the entire phrase is divided into two members, וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק and תָּמִים are formally unconnected adjectives that refer to Noah: “Noah was a righteous man [comma] blameless (was he) in his generation”. The difference lies in the structure of the statement. For the Septuagint, the Vulgate and the Peshitta וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק and תָּמִים are two qualities that qualified Noah to be saved from destruction: “righteous” and “perfect”,⁷ while according to the Masoretic Text תָּמִים “perfect” is separated from וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק “righteous” by the disjunctive accent *tevir*.⁸ Thus, תָּמִים belongs to a second segment of the hemistich: וְנֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק הָיָה בְּדֹרֹתָיו, as JPS translates: “he was blameless in his age”. As far as Noah is concerned, אִישׁ צַדִּיק is undoubtedly, a very flattering title for a human being, though limited by הָיָה תָּמִים בְּדֹרֹתָיו, “perfect within his generations”. *I.e.*, not within eternity, but “perfect” within his own environment, which, as the story says, was totally corrupt.

Naturally, the Jewish Aramaic Targumim are committed to the Masoretic Text, and therefore have no conjunction. For example

Onqelos says: נח גבר זכי שלים הוה בדרוהי. Pseudo Jonathan is slightly expanded: נח גבר צדיק שלם בעבדין טבין הוה בדרוהי, “Noah was a righteous man; perfect in good deeds was he in his generations”, and so is the Targum of Cod. Neofiti 1. The latter even expands the previous verse, rendering ונח על דלא הוה צדיק בדרהּ as מְצָא חַן בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה ונח על דלא הוה צדיק בדרהּ, “but Noah, because there was no (other) righteous man in his generation, found favour in the eyes of the Lord”. Thus, the limited righteousness of Noah is established *d’a capo*.

It is this understanding of the verse, that the Masoretic system of accents intends to convey.

Indeed, the following chapter opens with the recompense granted to Noah. God announces him that he and his family will be spared from the imminent flood. Moreover, God gives him the reason: כִּי צַדִּיק אַתָּה לְפָנַי בְּדוֹר הַזֶּה, “for I have seen that you are righteous before me *in this generation*”. צַדִּיק alone, without תְּמִים, as the Bible characterized Noah in 6:9. Why is God less generous here in characterizing Noah? Jewish homiletics has the answer: מְצִינוּ שְׂאוֹמְרִים מִקְצַת שְׂבַח הָאָדָם בְּפָנָיו וְכוּלּוֹ שְׂלֵא בְּפָנָיו, “One praises somebody only partly in his presence, and fully in his absence” (*Genesis Rabba* sect. 32, §1). When the Bible praised Noah (6:9) he wasn’t present, therefore his full praise is told: צַדִּיק תְּמִים. When God spoke to Noah directly, He limited the praise. To prevent arrogance.

ENDNOTES

1 G.H. Schroode, *The Book of Enoch*, Translated from the Ethiopic with Introduction and Notes. Andover: Warren Draper, 1882, II, 6-12.

2 Z. Ben-Hayyim, *The Literary and Orel Tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic Amongst the Samaritans*. Jerusalem: Bialik institute, 1957, vol 2, p, 446.

3 Cf. Exod 15:16: תִּפְּל עֲלֵיהֶם אִימָתָה וְפַחַד, “terror and dread fell upon them”.

4 Cf. Num 13:18: הֲחֹזֵק הוּא הֶרְפָּה, “is he strong or weak?”

5 Cf. Prov 1:9: כִּי לִוְיַת חֵן הֵם לְרֵאשֻׁף וְעֲנָקִים, לְגַרְגְּרֵתֶיךָ, “for they are a fair garland to your head and pendants for your head”.

6 Cf. Ezek 21:32: עוֹה עוֹה עוֹה אֲשִׁימְנָה, “A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make it (Jerusalem)”.

7 Very much like צַדִּיק תְּמִים in Job 12:4, as understood by the Peshitta: כֹּהֵל בְּלֹא מַגְרָם, “a righteous (man) without blemish”.

8 Joüon-Muraoka, § 15.