



Jonathan Edwards' Exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4

Donald Wang (Trinity International University)

Abstract: Jonathan Edwards is one of the great American Theologians in American church history. Jonathan Edwards understands the identity of the “sons of God” as the children of the church and this interpretation applies to his exegesis of Gen 6:3. His focus is not on רוחי in Gen. 6:3, but on “my Spirit shall not always strive with men”, and this phrase shows God’s patience and judgment, this understanding does shed light in the study of this passage.

Keywords: Jonathan Edwards, Genesis 6:1-4, the sons of God, the daughters of men

Introduction

Jonathan Edwards is one of the greatest theologians in American history. Stein remarks that few scholars have taken seriously the place of the Bible in Edwards’s thought, while much more attention has been directed to the philosophical side of his endeavors.¹ Likewise, Dr. Douglas Sweeney remarks that “of the thousands of publications devoted to Edwards since his death, only a few, a tiny fraction, deal at length with his biblical writings.”² However, Scripture plays a key role in the theology of Jonathan Edwards and “Edwards regarded himself

¹ Stephen J. Stein, “Quest for the Spiritual Sense: The Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan Edwards,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70(1977):100.

² Douglas A. Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete: Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8.



primarily as a man of the text and quite singular in his pursuit.”¹Genesis 6:1-4 is admittedly one of the most difficult passages in the Hebrew Old Testament to interpret.² Gen. 6:3 is perhaps the most difficult seeing as almost every word in this verse has been the subject of controversy.³ In Gen. 6:3, the third occurrence of רִיחִי is utilized in the form of רִיחִי in the Hebrew Old Testament after Gen. 1:2 and 3:8.⁴ However, the study of its usage in this passage has often been neglected.⁵ This can be contrasted with the study of the meaning of “sons of God” in Gen.6:1-4, which has received significant attention in order to deepen our understanding of its meaning.⁶ In light of this, it is of great importance to study the meaning and

¹ Doug Landrum, *Jonathan Edwards' Exegesis of Genesis: A Puritan Hermeneutic?* (Mustang, OK: Tate, 2015), 13.

² Willem A. VanGemeren, “The Sons of God in Genesis 6: 1-4,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 43, no. 2(1981): 321.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 141.

⁴ Richard E. Averbeck, “Breath, Wind, Spirit and The Holy Spirit in The Old Testament,” in *Presence, Power, and Promise: The Role of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament*, eds. David G. Firth and Paul D. Wegner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 34.

⁵ For the study of רִיחִי, there is only one article solely devoted to the study of “my spirit.” See Robin Routledge, “My Spirit in Genesis 6.1-4,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011): 232-251. Articles that touch on this topic include Averbeck, 25-37; Lyle Eslinger, “A Contextual Identification of the beneha'elohim and benothha'adam in Genesis 6: 1-4,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4.13 (1979): 65-73. Even scholars who study רִיחִי generally only devote one page length sections in the commentaries and some books to this term. These include Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1—11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 374-375; Wenham, 141-142; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 114-115; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 267; Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. Sophia Taylor (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 227; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 332-333; Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 1962), 50-56.

⁶ For example, see Philip S. Alexander, “The Targumim and Early Exegesis of “Sons of God” in Genesis 6,” *JJS* 23 (1972): 60-71; Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992); U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961); David J. Clines, “The Significance of the ‘Sons of God’ Episode (Genesis 6:1-4) in the Context of the ‘Primeval History’ (Genesis 1-11),” *JSOTSup* 13 (1979): 33-46; Eslinger, 65-73; L.R. Wickham, “The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men: Genesis VI 2 in Early Christian Exegesis,” in *Language and Meaning Studies in Hebrew Language and Biblical Exegesis*, ed. A. S. Van der Woude (Leiden:



usage of רִיחַ in Gen. 6:1-4. This paper will first give a review of Jonathan Edwards's exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4, then critique his exegesis.

Edwards's Exegesis of Gen. 6:1-4

While Edwards does not have a single commentary on any book of the Bible, his treatment of Genesis 6:1-4 is scattered among his works. Therefore, in order to have a general idea of his exegesis of Gen. 6:1-4, one needs to look at different parts of his work to figure out a whole picture of his understanding of Gen. 6:1-4. Though Edwards does not have one long portion in his works solely devoted to the study and exegesis of Gen 6:1-4, he does deal with Gen 6:1-4 or parts of this unit in his writings or sermons.¹

Edwards comments on Gen 6:1-2:

But after the days of Enos and Enoch (for Enoch was translated before Enos died), I say, after these days the church of God greatly diminished. In proportion multitudes that were of the line of Seth and had been born in the church of God fell away and joined with the wicked world principally by means of intermarriages with them, as Genesis 6:1-2 ["When men began to multiply on the face of earth ... the sons of God saw the daughters of men ... and they took them wives of all which they chose"], Genesis 6:4 ["There were

Brill, 1974), 135-47; Marc Buhot de Launay, 'Les fils du texte: Genèse 6.1-4,' *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 54, no. 147 (2009): 41-59; VanGemerén, 320-348.

¹ For example, Edwards mentions Gen. 6:1-2 in Jonathan Edwards [1739], *A History of the Work of Redemption* (WJE Online Vol. 9), ed. John F. Wilson, 147; Gen 6:3 in Jonathan Edwards [1730], *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733* (WJE Online Vol. 17), ed. Mark Valeri, 95. Gen 6:4 in Jonathan Edwards [1722], *Notes on Scripture* (WJE Online Vol. 15), ed. Stephen J. Stein, 203. Edwards quotes Gen 6:3 in his sermon "Pressing into the Kingdom of God," in *Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, 152. Edwards has quite a long treatment of Gen 6:3 in the sermon "The Dangers of Decline" in Jonathan Edwards [1730], *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733* (WJE Online Vol. 17), ed. Mark Valeri, 95-98.



giants in the earth in those days ... when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown"]. By the "sons of God" are there doubtless meant the children of the church. It is a denomination often given in Scripture. They intermarried with the wicked world and so had their hearts led away from God, and there was a great and continual defection from the church. And the church of God that used to be a restraint on the wicked world diminished exceedingly, and so wickedness went on without restraint.¹

The comment above shows that Edwards understands the "sons of God" as the children of the church, and the "daughters of men" as the wicked world. Edwards gives a more detailed explanation in the sermons and discourses that:

Thus 'tis said, in Genesis 6:2, "that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all that they chose." The sons of God were the children of the church, of the posterity of Seth. The daughters of men were those that were born out of the church and of the posterity of Cain and those that adhered to them. It was God that set up the church in the world. Those that were the first founders of the church, they were of God and were called by way of specialty, the sons of God. Seth was the seed that God appointed; Genesis 4:25, "And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel."²

¹Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, 147-148.

²Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733*, 286.



Edwards continues his way of exegesis within the context of the church and he shows that “the sons of God” are children of the church because they are the posterity of Seth. “The daughters of men” were those that were born of the posterity of Cain and those that adhered to them. These words explicitly indicate that Edwards understands “sons of God” as descendants of Seth and “children of men” as descendants of Cain. As Seth is pious and Cain is wicked, Edwards concludes that the “sons of God” are the pious children of the church and the “daughters of men” are the wicked world.

For Gen. 6:3, Edwards has quite a lot of comments on this verse. In Gen. 6:3, one translation difficulty is the Hebrew word ¹יָדָוּ. From Edwards’s quotation of this verse where this Hebrew word is translated as “strive,” one can tell that he is using the King James Version.² Edwards remarks that:

It may be proved that the day of man’s trial, and the time of God’s striving in the use of means to bring him to repentance, and waiting for his repentance under the use of means, will not be continued after this life. From those words, Genesis 6:3, “My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be 120 years.” ‘Tis as much as to say: “‘Tis not fit that the day of trial and opportunity should last always to obstinate, perverse sinners. ‘Tis fit some bounds should be set to my striving and waiting on such as abuse the day of my patience. And those merciful means and gracious calls and knocks should not be continued without limits to them that trample all means and mercies under

¹ This Hebrew word is discussed in this paper in the following part on the “translation of Gen 6:3.”

² Gen. 6:1-4 in KJV: “1 And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, 2 That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. 3 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. 4 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.



foot, and turn a deaf ear to all calls and knocks and invitations, and treat 'em with constant contempt. Therefore I will fix a certain limit. I will set his bounds to 120 years, when, if they repent not, I will put an end to all their lives, and with their lives shall be an end of my striving and waiting."

This which in Genesis is called God's Spirit's striving is by the apostle Peter expressed by "the long-suffering of God," its waiting (1 Peter 3:20). But according to the doctrine we are opposing, instead of God's striving and using means to bring those wicked men to repentance, and waiting in the use of strivings and endeavors 120 years, or to the end of their lives and no longer, he has gone on still since that for above 4000 years, striving with them in the use of more powerful means to bring 'em to repentance, and waiting on them, and will continue so afterwards for so long a time that the time is often called everlasting and represented as enduring forever and ever.¹

It is clear from his comment that Edwards does not exegete on the usage of "my spirit" (רוּחִי),² but instead his emphasis is on God's spirit's striving. His

¹ Jonathan Edwards [1740], The "Miscellanies," (Entry Nos. 1153-1360) (WJE Online Vol. 23), ed. Douglas A. Sweeney, 402-403.

² In the "Blank Bible," Edwards connects "the Spirit of Christ" in 1 Peter 3:19 with "my spirit" in Gen. 6:3. Due to the limit of this paper, this writer will not handle the issue of the New Testament quotation of Gen 6:3. Edwards states that "1 Peter 3:19: By the same Spirit by which Christ himself was quickened, he strove with the men of the old world to bring them to a spiritual resurrection, or to "live according to God," as 1 Peter 4:6. This resurrection Spirit strove to bring them to condemn and judge themselves, to judge and condemn the corrupt part, that they might live to God, and escape that awful judgment of God, whereby they were slain and cast into the prison of hell. See 1 Peter 4:6. Here the Apostle, speaking of Christ's preaching to 'em by his Spirit, has reference to that expression in Genesis, "My spirit shall not always strive," etc. [Genesis 6:3], which is quoted in other words." See Jonathan Edwards [1730], The "Blank Bible" (WJE Online Vol. 24), ed. Stephen J. Stein, 1179.



interpretation of God's spirit's striving means both God's patience and redemption for waiting for sinful humans to repent and God's judgment that God set the limit of a 120-year period for giving the room for people to repent and after the 120 years, God would send the flood to destroy the earth. Edwards has a strong emphasis on God's patience for the desire of the repentance of sinful humans while preaching Gen 6:3. He appeals:

Thus God's Spirit strove long with the old world, before he destroyed them. Genesis 6:3, "My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years." For God sent Lot, a preacher of righteousness, to turn the inhabitants of Sodom from their sins, before he destroyed them. So he did not destroy hardhearted Pharaoh, till he had used many means to make him willing to comply with God's commands.¹

Yet, this does not mean there is no limit to God's patience in that "God in his Word declares that his 'spirit shall not always strive with man' [Genesis 6:3], and that when a professing people continue cold [in religion, Christ will come and] remove [their] candlestick; and there we have instances of this nature."² The twofold nature of God's patience and judgment is also explicitly expressed in his sermon "Pressing into the Kingdom of God."³

¹ Jonathan Edwards [1734], "The Dreadful Silence of the Lord" in *Sermons and Discourses, 1734-1738* (WJE Online Vol. 19), ed. M. X. Lesser, 111.

² Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, 111.

³ Edwards preaches, "It is a great deal more likely with respect to such persons than others, that this is their last time. There will be a last time of special offer of salvation to impenitent sinners. "God's spirit shall not always strive with man" (Genesis 6:3). God sometimes continues long knocking at the doors of wicked men's hearts; but there are the last knocks, and the last call, that ever they shall have. And sometimes God's last calls are the loudest, and then if sinners don't hearken, God finally leaves them. How long has God been knocking at many of your doors that are old in sin! 'Tis a great deal more likely that these are his last knocks. You have resisted God's Spirit in times past, and have hardened your heart once and again; but God will not be thus dealt with always: there is danger, that if now, after so long a time, you won't hearken, he will utterly desert



In the sermon “The Danger of Decline” Edwards explicitly explains God’s spirit’s striving with sinful humans in two senses:

Third. God hath declared that his “spirit shall not always strive with man”(Genesis 6:3). When God is waiting upon a people under means of grace, them that neglect and misimprove those means, his spirit may be said to be striving with them in two senses. His spirit strives with them; that is, he with longsuffering bears with; he restrains and keeps back his wrath. To speak after the manner of men, there is a strife in God’s spirit to restrain his anger and to bear with their provocation. And therefore the apostle Peter expresses the striving of God’s spirit with the old world by his longsuffering waiting; *1 Peter 3:20*, “when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah.”

And God’s spirit strives another way, viz. as the influences of his spirit upon men’s minds accompany the means of grace, whereby God is, as it were, striving to bring ‘em to repent. There is always a degree of the influences of the Spirit of God goes along with the administration of gospel ordinances among a visible people of God. Now although God be longsuffering, yet his spirit will not always strive with men. When a people decline and grow cold [in religion], ‘tis his manner to warn them and to wait on them; but if they continue yet declining and don’t reform, there is great danger that he will leave a people.¹

Thus, Edwards’s preaching on Gen. 6:3 is that God’s spirit’s striving works in two senses. The first sense is that God restrains his wrath while patiently waiting for his people. The second sense is that God’s spirit works in the minds of sinful

you, and leave you to walk in your own counsels.” See *ibid.*,302.

¹*Ibid.*,95.



people to bring repentance. Edwards links the Holy Spirit with the “my spirit” in Gen. 6:3 in terms of the function of the Spirit.¹

For Gen. 6:4, Edwards explains how the “monstrous births” described in Genesis 6:4 typify what happens when holy and wicked things are joined, producing hypocrites and enemies of religion.² Edwards quotes some archeological evidence to show his belief of the existence of giants: “Genesis 6:4. ‘And there were giants in the earth in those days,’ etc. Pausanias, in his Laconics, mentions the bones of men of a more than ordinary bigness, which were shown in the temple of Aesculapius.”³

Evaluation of Edwards’ Exegesis of Gen 6:1-4

As mentioned in the introduction, Gen. 6:1-4 is a very controversial passage. However, Edwards does not overlook this passage but gives special attention to this passage in both his theological writings and sermons. Given this fact, it deserves one’s attention to understand the exegetical world of Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards’s exegesis of Gen. 6:1-4 does shed light on the interpretation of this passage. One important strength of Edwards’s exegesis is that he sharply points out that Gen. 6:3 has the double duty of showing both God’s patience of redemption and God’s judgment for unrepentance. This idea is explicitly expressed in his passionate sermons “Pressing into the Kingdom of God” and “The Danger of Decline.” Gen. 6:3 even appears in the application section of his sermon “The Danger of Decline,” whereby Edwards appeals to the congregation: “Let it be considered how agreeable the late and present threatenings of God’s providence

¹ Edwards asserts that “The Holy Spirit operates in the minds of the godly, by uniting himself to them, and living in them, exerting his own nature in the exercise of their faculty.” See Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” 13.

² Jonathan Edwards [1722], *Notes on Scripture* (WJE Online Vol. 15), ed. Stephen J. Stein, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 506.



towards this land are to the threatenings of his Holy Word. God in his Word declares that he always strives with man" [Gen. 6:3], and that when a professing people continue cold [in religion, Christ will come and] remove [their] candlestick; and there we have instances of this nature."¹

The other strength of Edwards's exegesis is that Edwards has a wide scope of Gen. 6:1-4 within the whole canon of the Hebrew Bible. As noticed above, while commenting on 1 Peter 3:19, Edwards connects it with the usage of the spirit in Gen. 6:3. In this sense, Landrum asserts that "Edwards demonstrated a thoroughgoing commitment to biblical comparison and indexing. Hence, he correspondingly evidenced a utilization of the Puritan idea of wider circumstance, securing this characteristic as a recognizable feature in his exegesis of the natural sense of Scripture."²

However, there is also a weakness in Edwards's exegesis of Gen. 6:1-4. Edwards's conclusion that the "sons of God" are descendants of Seth and, therefore, the children of the church, while the "daughters of men" are the descendants of Cain is problematic. One important reason that Edwards concludes as such is because he is influenced by Matthew Poole's interpretation of Gen 6:2.³ Poole provides several reasons to affirm that "the sons of God" are the sons of Seth and the sons of men are the sons of Cain.⁴ Poole actually claims that

¹Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses*, 96.

²Landrum, 58.

³Matthew Poole's *Synopsis* is referenced by Edwards at Gen. 6:2 in Edwards's "Blank Bible" at Gen. 6:2. See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 24, part 1, 145.

⁴ Poole states that "the sons of Seth were called the sons of God, 1.by reason of the external covenant and profession of true religion; 2. on account of holiness and other virtues; 3.because they were extraordinary with respect to form, strength, and stature: such things are said to be God. On the other hand, the sons of Cain are called the sons of men. 1. Because they have not surrendered their name to God, and thus far they were outside the church of God; 2. because they were not born of God... 3. because they only understood earthly things; 4 because they weakened the strength of the body through lust and luxury." See Matthew Poole, *The Exegetical Labors of the Reverend Matthew Poole, vol. 1, Genesis 1-9, Containing: I. A Synopsis of Interpreters, Both Critical and Otherwise, of the Sacred Scripture, II. Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, trans. Steven Dilday



“On the other hand, the sons of Cain are called *the sons of men*, 1. because they had not surrendered their name to God (Rivet), and thus far they were outside the Church of God.”¹ Apparently, Edwards borrows the language of church from Poole. For the “sons of God,” Wenham comments that three main interpretations are offered by modern commentators. First, they are nonhuman, godlike beings such as angels, demons, or spirits. Second, they are superior men such as kings or other rulers. Third, they are godly men, the descendants of Seth as opposed to the godless descendants of Cain.² This is a good summary of the main points on the identity of “sons of God.”

In the OT, the same expression occurs in Job 1:6 and 2:1. It occurs without the definite article in Job 38:2, Deut. 32:11, Ps. 29:1, and 89:6, where they refer to heavenly beings and that is the most natural understanding of the reference in Gen. 6:2, 4.³ For the second and third interpretations, VanGemenen has given solid reasons to refute these two interpretations.⁴ I agree with the traditional view that

(Culpeper, VA: Master Poole Publishing, 2007), 315.

¹ Ibid., 315.

² Wenham, 139.

³ Routledge, 238.

⁴ VanGemenen, “Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 (An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?),” *WJT* 43.2 (1981): 333-343.



this refers to the “angelic,”¹ with a slight modification that this refers to heavenly beings.²

Another weakness of Edwards’s exegesis is that he does not pay close attention to the immediate context. From Edwards’s exegesis of Gen 6:1-4, it shows that he does not refer this passage within the context of Gen. 1-11 and Edwards offers very limited evidence of immediate contextual considerations.³ This weakness is due in part to the fact that Edwards dealt this text only in miscellaneous notebooks and sermons, not in commentarial fashion.

Conclusion

Gen. 6:1-4 is a fascinating passage in the Hebrew Bible. Gen. 6:3 is even more fascinating in the whole passage. From the wide range of treatment of this passage in Edwards’s theological writings and sermons, one can have the impression that this passage plays an important role in the exegesis of Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards understands the identity of the “sons of God” as the children of the

¹ Wenham lists three main reasons for modern scholars who accept this view: Modern scholars who accept this view advance three main reasons. First, elsewhere in the OT (e.g., Ps. 29:1, Job 1:6), “sons of God” refers to heavenly, godlike creatures. Second, in 6:1-4 the contrast is between “the sons of the god” on the one hand, and “the daughters of man” on the other. The alternative interpretations presuppose that what Gen. 6 really meant was that “the sons of some men” married “the daughters of other men.” The present phrase “sons of God” is, to say the least, an obscure way of expressing such an idea. It is made the more implausible by 6:1, where “man” refers to all mankind. It is natural to assume that in v. 2 “daughters of man” has an equally broad reference, not a specific section of the human race. Finally, it is pointed out that in Ugaritic literature “sons of God” refers to members of the divine pantheon, and it is likely that Genesis is using the phrase in a similar sense. See Wenham, 139.

² “It has been objected that the ‘sons of God’ cannot be angels, since there is no indication elsewhere in Scripture of angels having sexual functions and the idea of angels marrying is ruled out by Jesus’ own words (e.g. Mt. 22.30).” See Routledge, 239.

³ Landrum, 75.



church and this interpretation applies to his exegesis of Gen 6:3. His focus is not on רוחי in Gen. 6:3, but on “my Spirit shall not always strive with men”, and this phrase shows God’s patience and judgment, this understanding does shed light in the study of this passage.

Edwards’s exegesis of Gen 6:1-4 also shows some weaknesses. One weakness is his identification of the “sons of God” as the children of the church. The other weakness is that he does not pay too much attention to the occurrence of *ruah* in Genesis 1-11, indicates that he does not pay too much attention to the immediate context of Gen 6:1-4.