3.3. CONTRIBUTIONS TO BOOKS, FESTSCHRIFTEN AND ENCYCLOPAEDIA


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WORSHIPPING STONES: ON THE DEIFICATION OF CULT SYMBOLS

ABSTRACT

This study of the worship of standing stones shows that this practice is not merely a figment of the imagination of the biblical prophets. Ancient Near Eastern religions offer some striking examples of deified cult symbols. Four of them are studied here, namely the gods Bethel, Sakkun, Abmu, and Sulmu. A review of the written evidence for these gods is given. These stones were more than just representations of the deities; they were the manifestations of the gods themselves and the very incarnation of the sacred.

The Old Testament prophets condemned the idolatry of the Israelites by saying that they worshipped 'wood and stone' (Jer 2:27; 3:9; Zech 5:4). It is evident from the acts of worship referred to by the prophets that stone and wood were believed to incarnate gods. The formula is made explicit in Deuteronomy, where the worship of 'gods of wood and stone' is predicted to be the practice of the Israelites in exile.

And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.

Deuteronomy 4:28; see also 28:36.64

By emphasising the materials of the cult symbols, the biblical authors meant to ridicule the behaviour of their contemporaries: whereas they believed they were worshipping gods, they were in reality worshipping wood and stone. But for all the devotion they might receive, wood and stone remain inanimate; they are dead objects, according to a classic line of argument in anti-iconic polemics.

It has become fashionable in recent biblical scholarship to stress the fact that the prophetic dismissal of images as inanimate objects is merely a rhetorical device in the service of religious polemics. The prophets knew

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1 This article was completed while I was a visiting professor in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the University of Stellenbosch in May-June 1997. The financial assistance of the Centre for Scientific Development is hereby gratefully acknowledged.
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PESHITTA GENESIS 6: "SONS OF GOD" – ANGELS OR JUDGES?

ABSTRACT

The story about "the sons of God" and "the daughters of men" (Gen 6:1-4) was interpreted in various ways in antiquity. The expression "sons of God" has been taken, first, as meaning angels, but later on as judges (in Jewish circles) and as the sons of Seth (in Christian circles). The Peshitta MSS of Gen 6 present two different readings/interpretations as renderings of "the sons of God". The purpose of the article is to show how these readings/interpretations fit in the history of reception of Gen 6.

Genesis 6 contains a most intriguing story about "the sons of God" who married "the daughters of men", the result being that the children born were "giants" (vv 1-4). The expression "sons of God" (בנאים ג堕י:ו) was interpreted in various ways in antiquity (Dexinger 1966; Alexander 1972; Wickham 1974). The exegesis of "sons of God" as "angels" is the most ancient one. It is attested for instance in 1 Henoch 6-11, which constitutes the earliest datable witness to this interpretation (third century B.C. [Milik 1976:28]). It is also found in the Jewish Antiquities of Josephus (end first century A.D.):

"For many angels of God (πολλοί γὰρ ἐγγεγέλων θεοῦ) now consorted with women and begat sons who were overbearing and disdainful of every virtue, such confidence had they in their strength; in fact the deeds that tradition ascribes to them resemble the audacious exploits told by the Greeks of the giants" (Ant. I, 73).

From the second century A.D. onwards two other interpretations of the expression "sons of God" were put forward:

(a) the sons of God as "judges" or "great ones", mainly attested in Jewish sources;

2 Cf. LXX Gen 6:2,4: οἱ ἐγγεγέλων τοῦ θεοῦ (thus part of the manuscript tradition; variant: οἱ υἱοί τοῦ θεοῦ).
(b) the sons of God as "the sons of Seth" (and "the daughters of men" as "the daughters of Cain"), attested in Christian sources particularly since the fourth century A.D.

One of the sources of interest for the reception history of Gen 6:1-4 is the Peshitta version of the Old Testament. The text of Pesh Gen 6:2,4, as attested by all ancient MSS except one, reads:

\[\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \]

whereas 8/5bl offers the variant reading

\[\text{חַיָּבָן} \text{יִדְּכָה} \] ("the sons of the judges").

It is the purpose of this article to discuss, against the background of the history of the early exegesis of "sons of God", the two different renderings of this expression as found in the ancient MSS of the Peshitta of Genesis. Questions which suggest themselves are: What is the meaning of the rendering with the transliteration? Which reading is the prior one historically speaking? (It has been argued that the reading of 8/5bl is to be regarded as the primary one [Gerson 1868:105]). How do both readings fit in the history of interpretation of Gen 6:1-4?

1. **THE READING**

The reading of the Peshitta (חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה) is characterized by a transliteration of the Hebrew: \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \). This phenomenon of transliterating Hebrew words into Syriac letters, especially names or particular expressions, is found at other places in Gen and Exod as well: \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) (Gen. 1:2); \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) (Gen. 17:1 e.a.), \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) (Gen. 46:3), \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) (Exod. 3:14). In most cases these transliterations are shared by 5b1. Thus the feature of transliterated renderings is part of the picture of the early text of the Peshitta of Genesis and Exodus. This may indicate that the reading of Pesh Gen 6:2,4 (חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה [twice]) was prior to the variant of 8/5bl (חַיָּבָן), but we need more evidence to increase the probability of this idea.

1.1. **Ephrem the Syrian**

The Peshitta reading "the sons of alohim" is attested in literary sources which go back to the fourth century (i.e. about a century earlier than the earliest Pesh MS of Genesis available [5b1]): it is found in two of the Hymns composed by Ephrem the Syrian (Nat 1,22 and leium II,2). At other places, however, Ephrem offers slightly different readings, namely \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) ("the sons of the gods"; Nat I,48; Commentary on Genesis-Exodus), and \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) ("the sons of God"; Fide XLVI,8 and Parad I,11). Instead of the transliteration \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \), both variant readings have the Syriac word \(\text{חַיָּבָן קְרָּמָּה} \) in common, but they display a difference as far as the number of
is concerned: "gods" or "God". As to this aspect it is a matter of some dispute whether one should read rXnW with seyante in the Commentary on Gen-Exod, as is done by its editor (Tonneau 1955), or in the singular, as is argued by Jansma (Jansma 1972:67). The latter is of the opinion that the seyame should be deleted, because the expression "the sons of God" (and not "gods") would be more in line with the expression "the people of God" used in the argument of Ephrem himself: "Als Söhne des gerechten Seth werden sie Volk Gottes genannt" (Jansma 1972:67). Other scholars, however, argue that the plural reading in the Commentary should be preferred. Kronholm puts it this way: the plural reading "possibly represents a Syriacized reproduction of the dominant Hebraistic [...] reading: bny 'Iwhym " (Kronholm 1978:164, note 33). Hidal is of the same opinion, although on different grounds: "Meiner Ansicht nach kann und muss die pluralische Lesart in CGen beibehalten werden. Sowohl die hebräischen Worte der Peshitta wie Ephräms Text in CGen und Nat 1,48 lassen sich nämlich von einem und demselben Anliegen her erklären: eine buchstäbliche Deutung von Gen 6,2 zu vermeiden" (Hidal 1974:113).

It is well known indeed that Ephrem, together with other exegetes of the time, strongly denied the interpretation of "the sons of gods/God" as angels. He clearly opts for the view that the sons of Seth are meant, an exegetical tradition which, from the fourth century onwards, is typical of the later Syrian fathers, and of other Christian writers as well (Dexinger 1966:106ff). So it might well be, that the reading rXn (both in the plural and in the singular3) has to do with the criticism of Ephrem as far as the angels-interpretation is concerned. It is less clear, however, whether this also applies to the reading rXn.

1.2. Bardaisan of Edessa

Looking around in the early Syriac literature for attestations of the Hebraistic reading rXn, there is yet another text to be mentioned, The Book of the Laws of Countries by Bardaisan of Edessa (154-222). In this philosophical work the word rXn is found also in a quotation from the book of Genesis, although not in a citation of Gen 6:2 (or 4), but in that of another passage, Gen. 9:6b. The passage involved reads as follows:

Peshitta (all MSS, including 5b1) reads here:

For the use of the singular in HdF 46,8 and Par 1,11 see Hidal 1974:113.
the difference being רֵאָמָר instead of רֵאָמֵר. Jansma has argued that this citation reflects an older text of the Peshitta than the text attested by the ancient MSS (Jansma 1970:409-414). He is of the opinion that the reading רֵאָמָר in 9:6 is to be seen as the original one, because it agrees with Targum Onkelos of Gen. 9:6. "The form alohim, against the reading alaha of all Peshitta MSS, may be explained on the assumption that in this verse the Syriac translator was dependent upon the Targum of Onkelos" (Jansma 1970:414).

It is true that Targ Onk reads בְּצָלַת-אֱלֹהִים in Gen 9:6, but this is also the case in the related passages of Gen 1:27 and Gen. 5:1 (the last instance with(Job, cf. MT). Pesh Genesis, on the other hand, in all these places reads: בְּצָלַת (Job). So each version turns out to be consistent as far as the rendering of Hebrew בְּצָלַת in these passages is concerned. It might be that an original בְּצָלַת at these three places was changed, at a very early stage, into בְּצָלַת but I do not think this probable. It is as yet not easy to trace a specific influence from Targ Onk on Pesh Genesis, and moreover, at another place in his work Bardaisan uses the expression בְּצָלַת (נְחַבָּל) (PS 1,2 560,15), "the image of God", actually attesting the Peshitta reading (בראש) of the texts just mentioned. One could also consider the idea of some influence from Targ Onk on Bardaisan, but that is even less certain, since we do not have any indication for that. I would therefore suggest another explanation for the variant reading of Bardaisan's quotation of Gen. 9:6b.

Bardaisan cites this text in a section of his work in which he argues that man has been "made equal with the angels" (נְחַבָּל [PS 1,2 544,14]) as far as the free will is concerned. It may well be that he used the transliteration נְחַבָּל from Gen 6:2,3, understood by him in the sense of "angels", in order to give his text of Gen 9:6b the notion of the creation of man according to the image of "angels".

Be that as it may, it is further to be noted on the basis of another passage in his work that Bardaisan subscribed to the early exegesis of Gen 6:2,4, namely that the story is about angels marrying daughters of men (PS 1,2 548,7-9). Since this implies that he did not know a Syriac version of Gen 6:2,4 with the (variant) reading רְאָמָר, the only other reading we know of, i.e. רְאָמָר, might have been the version known to him. This becomes even more probable when one realizes that his interpretation of Gen 6:2 as referring to the angels is fully in line with Pesh Job 1:6 and 2:1 where,

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4 See also Merx 1863:20 (with question mark).
in view of its context, the same reading (ךָּפֶּה) clearly conveys the meaning of angels.\(^5\)

In view of the above, it can be stated that the reading ךָּפֶּה of Pesh Gen 6:2,4 appears to represent a very ancient one: it is attested by Ephrem (writings from Nisibis and Edessa) and, indirectly, by Bardaisan (Edessa). Different from Ephrem (and Aphraat as well\(^6\)) Bardaisan is still a representative of the old interpretation of the story of Gen 6:1-4, based on the equation of "sons of God" with angels.\(^7\)

Last but not least, it is to be noted that, since Pesh Job (1:6 and 2:1) and Pesh Gen (6:2,4) share the same reading (ךָּפֶּה), which in the case of Pesh Job conveys the meaning of angels, it might well be that Pesh Gen 6:2,4 itself reflects this (early) interpretation. All this supports the idea that the Hebraistic rendering represents the original form of the Peshitta version of our text.

2. THE READING ךָּפֶּה

The reading of 8/5b1 (ךָּפֶּה) reflects in fact a particular Jewish exegesis: Hebrew תֹּרֶה (ךָּפֶּה) taken as "judges". This interpretation is found, for instance, in Targ Onk of Exod 21:6; 22:7f, 27, and interestingly the Peshitta here offers the same rendering ("judges" for "gods"). The Jewish idea of assigning the meaning "judges" to the Hebrew "gods" in texts like Exod 21:6 was also known to Origen:

These men (of the law courts, ודכ) were entrusted with the responsibility of giving judgments, and because of their purity of character, surpassing human nature, they were called 'gods' by a traditional Jewish usage (Contra Celsum IV, 31 [Chadwick 1980:207f.]).

But what about Gen 6:2,4? In this instance the Targumim offer the following renderings:

Targ Onk  נכרי רגביא

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5. The four texts of Gen 6 and Job 1-2 are the only places where in the MT the expression בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (with the article) occurs, and where the Peshitta offers the reading ךָּפֶּה. Without the article it is found only in Job 38:17, where the Peshitta has חָפֵר.

6. For the exegetical view of Aphraat that the sons of Seth were intermingling with the daughters of Cain, see PS I,1 549, 17-18; 837, 16-19.

7. See also the Syriac Baruch Apokalypse 56:10-12 (Cramer 1965:24).
The underlying Hebrew (נֵכְלָיָם הַיָּוִם) seems to have been read here as the "sons of the gods", which in turn was interpreted as "the sons of the great ones" (Onk, Ps Jon), or "the sons of the judges" (Neof). This interpretation, particularly that of Onk and Ps Jon, is also attested by Symmachus: oϊ υλοι ἄνθρωπων (Salvesen 1991:31). All this reflects an exegetical view which clearly differs from the old one (sons of God as angels). A well known tradition preserved in Bereshit Rabbah 26:5 illustrates how sensitive the whole issue was, because here the reaction against the old view is given expression by R. Simeon b. Johai (Palestine, ca 150) quite strongly: he called them (i.e. בני אלְדָדִים of Gen 6) the sons of the judges (בֵּן רְאוֹי) and he cursed all who called them sons of God/the gods (בֵּן אלְדָדִים; i.e. the angels).

Since this new exegesis came up in Jewish circles, the reading of 8/5bl at Gen 6:2,4 clearly reflects Jewish influence. This is the more interesting in view of the fact that in Christian circles, from the fourth century onwards, the exegesis of "sons of God" as Sethites was to become the new interpretation.

The reading "judges", however, is not only attested by 8/51 in early Syriac sources. It is also found in Ephrem's Commentary on Gen-Exod: different from his quotation of Gen 6:2 the text of vs 4 is cited by Ephrem as follows: "because the judges came to the daughters of men"! The only difference between 8/5b1 and this citation is that the last one is without "sons" (בת). The variant reading is quite interesting, the more so since this reading is not related to his exegesis of the "sons of God" as Sethites. In a later source, the Homily on the Flood of Jacob of Sarug (ca 450-520/1), which is clearly dependent on Ephrem, both views are combined: the sons of God are equated here not only with the sons of Seth, but also with "the mighty ones, the sons of judges" (Frishman 1992:102).

3. "ANGELS" OR "JUDGES"

As to the two readings of Pesh Gen 6:2,4, "angels" or "judges", it may be clear from the above that the reading מִשְׁפָּטִים is to be seen as the older one, for this reading (transliteration) is not only attested at a very early stage (Ephrem, Bardaisan(?)), but is also in line with the old exegesis of the sons of God as angels (cf. Pesh Job 1:6 and 2:1). The reading of 8/5b1, then,

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8 Note the reading in the margin of Neof: מִשְׁפָּטִים ("angels").
9 For the question of "God", or "the gods" for מִשְׁפָּטִים, see Alexander 1972:61 (note).
does not in this case represent the original Peshitta, as this MS does in other cases, nor does it fit in with the model of revision towards the Hebrew.\textsuperscript{10} Rather, it attests a variant reading of an exegetical or theological type.

As far as we know, the first reaction against the angels-interpretation within Judaism is attested in the second century (see above), whereas within Christian circles the alternative of the Sethites-exegesis, although found for the first time in the writings of Julius Africanus (early third century)\textsuperscript{11}, became the predominant one after the fourth century. As has been noted above the interesting thing is that the variant reading of 8/5b1 is not in line with the Sethites-exegesis, which is most emphatically expressed in the writings of Ephrem (fourth century). Instead, the reading of 8/5b1 goes with the new interpretation known from Jewish sources.

Although the reading \(\text{ךָוֹלָא} \) of 8/5b1 is part of the "replacements in an VIIIth century Estrangela hand of the missing original leaves" (The Old Testament in Syriac I,1 1977:vi), it is probably a correct reproduction of the original text of this MS, dating from the year 463/4, because the fact that Ephrem cites Gen 6:4 with this reading proves that it did already exist at an earlier date (fourth century). Furthermore, the fact that the variant reading ("judges") does not play any role in Ephrem's comments on Gen 6:4 indicates that this reading dates from before his time.

Ephrem fiercely refuted the angels-interpretation in his polemics with other, heretical Christian groups, in particular the followers of Mani. It might well be that the reading attested by 8/5b1 and by Ephrem ("judges") also resulted from a similar reaction against the old view (sons of God as angels) for reasons of 'orthodoxy'. The fact that this was done by revising the original Peshitta text suggests that the scribal milieu responsible for the new reading still understood the Syriac text, \(\text{ךָוֹלָא} \), in its primary sense, i.e. as referring to angels.

The time and circumstances of this anti-angelological revision in Gen 6 are not known to us. One might think here of criticism of the dualistic ideas of Mani and his followers by 'orthodox' circles in Edessa in the second half of the third century (cf. Drijvers 1984:Ch. VI). If so, these circles would have


\textsuperscript{11} See Migne, PG 10, 66: Julius gives as his opinion (\(\omega_{\text{ς}} \text{ ou\textup{��}μαλ} \)) that the reading of LXX (\(\text{οὶ \ πᾶοι \ τοῦ \ \text{θεοῦ} \)) is to be understood as referring to the sons of Seth, whereas the other reading of LXX (\(\text{οὶ \ διγγελοι \ τοῦ \ \text{θεοῦ} \)) clearly refers to the angels. There is nothing polemical here.
done so by drawing on a rendering/interpretation which had a Jewish (Targumic) background.¹²

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Abbreviation: PS = Patrologia Syriaca.


¹² For the issue of Jewish traditions in the Peshitta tradition, see Brock 1979 and Maori 1995.


