Genesis 6:1–4 tells a short, enigmatic story (attributed to the J source) about the sons of god and the daughters of men. The sons of god saw the women, and took them as wives. The sons that were born from this union were “the Nephilim . . . they were the heroes of old, the men of renown” (Gen 6:4). In reaction to these deeds, God decided: “My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is /g193esh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years” (v. 3). In the immediate context of the story, God’s decision expresses his opposition to the union of earthly women with the heavenly beings. The offspring of such unions inherited their divine dimension from their fathers and their physical, human dimension from their mothers. Therefore, God established that such offspring could not live beyond 120 years. This limitation confines the Nephilim to be among mankind, and separates them from the divine realm. The determination that eternal life is a characteristic of the gods appears in Gen 3:22 (also attributed to J): “And the Lord God said, ‘Now that man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.’” In other words, the last thing that separates mankind from the divine (aside from the knowledge of good and evil) is eternal life.

This short story does not take note of any negative influence on the earthly population that can be attributed to the descent of the sons of god. God’s concern, expressed in v. 3, focuses on the reverse influence, and reflects his desire to prevent earthly beings from mixing in the divine domain. Essentially, the story of the sons of god and the daughters of men is a myth about the boundary between heaven and earth, and
it establishes in an unambiguous manner that these are two separate worlds, and that crossing this boundary is strictly forbidden.\(^3\)

This explanation of this story assumes that it exists (or existed) independently of the neighboring stories.\(^4\) But reading Gen 6 in its entirety raises the possibility of an alternative understanding of the meaning and purpose of this story. The juxtaposition of the sons of god story (vv. 1–4) with the story of the flood (vv. 5ff.) solves an exegetical problem that perplexed readers in antiquity. In the biblical narrative, there is a general description of the sins that led God to destroy the world with the flood: increase of evil in the world (ibid. 5), the corruption of the earth, and lawlessness (ibid. 11–12), and it is difficult to understand from the story which sin could have provoked the punishment of total destruction of the world. It is hard to justify this cataclysmic punishment for ordinary sins. One solution for this conundrum appears to be the proximity of the flood story to the mythic, enigmatic story about the sons of god. If one views the cohabitation of the sons of god with the women as a sin, or even (more seriously) as an assault upon the natural order of the world, then the proximity of the stories supplies the justification for the flood.

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\(^3\) Cf. also Gen 11:1–9 (the story of the Tower of Babel). Some scholars have interpreted the sons of god story as an etiology for the presence of the Nephilim on earth (they are mentioned in the spies story as giants who lived in Canaan—Num 13:33); see for example Cassuto (1943) 1973; von Rad (1953) 1972: 113–116.

\(^4\) An “independent” reading of the story of the sons of god and daughters of men apparently serves as the basis for LXX Ezek 32:27 (probably reflecting the original text of the verse): καὶ ἐκομήθησαν μετὰ τῶν γιγάντων τῶν πεπτωκότων ἀπ’ αἰώνων οἱ κατέβησαν εἰς ᾠδον ἐν ὀπλοῖς πολεμικοῖς καὶ ἔθηκαν τὰς μαχαιρὰς αὐτῶν ὑπὸ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτῶν (“And they lay down with the giants who fell from old, who descended to Hades with weapons of war, and they placed their swords under their heads...”). According to this reading, “the giants who fell from old,” the same beings present in Gen 6:4, died in battle. The prophet accuses them, in addition to other groups, of terrorizing mankind. There is no hint of the giants being punished by the flood, but rather, they perished through warfare. The brief description in Ezek 32:27 is almost identical to the basic outline of the Shemihazah tradition in 1 Enoch, which will be discussed below. The verse in Ezekiel consists of elements that recur throughout the prophetic unit in which it is found, including: the descent to Sheol, death by sword, and the terror of the inhabitants of the land. These motifs, which play a central role in the Shemihazah tradition, and afterwards in Jub 5, appear therefore to originate in this verse.