

# The Striving Spirit

## PROBLEM TEXTS (1)

F. F. Bruce

According to the A.V. of *Gen. 6:3*, the Lord said in the days before the Flood, 'My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.'

In evangelical preaching there has been a tradition which saw in the first clause a reference to the Spirit's convicting work in the soul. If a proper response of repentance and faith is made, forgiveness of sins and newness of life will be the outcome; if, on the other hand, a deaf ear is turned to the Spirit, his convicting voice will become fainter, until at last the desire, and perhaps even the ability, to repent and believe will die, and the last state of that person will be worse than the first.

True as this fact of experience is, it is probably not implied in *Gen. 6:3*. The main argument against interpreting the text in this way is that the interpretation is not supported by the context. The sense of the A.V. rendering is reproduced in N.I.V.: 'My Spirit will not contend with man for ever' (the capitalized 'Spirit' may point to the interpretation just mentioned). Another sense is given in R.S.V., 'My spirit shall not abide in man for ever', N.E.B., 'My life-giving spirit shall not remain in man for ever' (where the adjective 'life-giving' is an exegetical gloss), and G.N.B. (paraphrastically), 'I will not allow people to live for ever'. The Hebrew is indecisive: it has also been rendered 'My spirit must not for ever be disgraced in man' (Jerusalem Bible) or 'My spirit shall not shield man for ever' (Anchor Bible).

The following clause, 'for indeed he is flesh' (or 'for, after all, he is flesh'), gives a clue to the meaning. (I think we can forget the marginal alternative offered in R.V.: 'in their going astray they are flesh'.) The sense then is: 'My spirit (the creative breath of life, as in *Gen. 2:7*) will not remain in man for ever (or 'indefinitely') because, after all, he is but flesh' (and therefore mortal, not immortal). His life-span, accordingly, is to be limited to 120 years. It is held by some that the material in *Gen. 6:1-4* existed independently before the author of Genesis

incorporated the passage at this point in his narrative. But after he did so, its meaning had to be related to the context in which it now appeared. It might be said that the life-span of chapter 5 (900+ years in several cases) might be described in terms of living 'indefinitely' (or 'for a very long time', a permissible interpretation of Heb. *le'ôlām*), and that when the edict limiting the human life-span to (a maximum of) 120 years was uttered, an easing-off process was allowed (as shown by the genealogy in *Gen. 11:10-32*), so that the transition from the longevity of the antediluvian patriarchs should not be too abrupt. (In saying, 'It might be said . . .', I don't necessarily imply that I myself should say it.)

### The 'sons of God'

The divine edict cannot properly be considered, of course, without reference to its immediate context—that is, the rest of *Gen. 6:1-4*. The identity of the 'sons of God' and of the 'daughters of man' whose beauty was appreciated by them has for long been a problem in its own right. The problem is greatly eased if the 'sons of God' are men of one human family or race and the 'daughters of man' women of another family or race. Ancient and more recent history provides examples of a 'superior' race living alongside an 'inferior' race without inter-marriage until some bolder members of the 'superior' race crossed the forbidden frontier. But a difficulty in the way of this explanation here is that the 'daughters of man' do not seem to belong to one particular human family; the phrase is simply 'daughters of Adam'—i.e. women in general. (The theory of pre-Adamite or non-Adamite man is foreign to the thinking of the biblical writers.)

Much more difficult (to the twentieth-century mind) is the interpretation which seems to be given in some of the later books of the New Testament—that the 'sons of God' here are the spirits of *1 Pet. 3:19f.*, imprisoned because of their disobedience in Noah's days, to whom Christ 'in spirit' made proclamation (which

need not imply the preaching of the gospel); that they are the sinful angels of *2 Pet. 2:4*, whom God 'cast down to Tartarus, committing them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment'; that they are, as Jude puts it, making their sin more explicit, 'the angels that did not keep their own domain but left their proper dwelling' and are therefore kept 'in everlasting chains in nether gloom until the judgment of the great day' (*verse 6*). This interpretation, nevertheless, I believe to be the right one. But there is no place for dogmatism in the interpretation of such enigmatic texts.

But if it be asked what the trespass of the sons of God into the human domain has to do with God's proclamation that his spirit will not remain in man indefinitely, the answer may be that their union with the 'daughters of Adam' infused an immortal element into our mortal race, so that a divine decree was called for that, even so, mortality and not immortality was to remain the human lot. This, at least, is how it appears to me: no more is claimed for any explanation that may be given in this series on problem texts.

### Medicine and the Bible

BERNARD PALMER (Ed.)

Published in association with The Christian Medical Fellowship, this symposium begins with two masterly essays of general interest. Professor D. J. Wiseman writes on *Medicine in the Old Testament* and Dr. C. J. Hemer on *Medicine in the New Testament* World.

0 85364 423 3 272pp £7.95 net

The Paternoster Press  
Paternoster House  
3 Mount Radford Crescent,  
EXETER, Devon EX2 4JW