

The seed of Seth: John Cassian's conferences and the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4

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Boston College School of Theology and Ministry

The Seed of Seth:

John Cassian's Conferences and the Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4

A thesis by

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Introduction

Literature on John Cassian is largely devoted to either Cassian's place in the development of monasticism in the West, Cassian's importation of Eastern ideas into a Western context, or the controversy between Cassian and Prosper of Aquitaine. There is little written on Cassian's method of Biblical interpretation. Columba Stewart, in the most comprehensive modern study of John Cassian, writes:

A study of Cassian's own use of the Bible in his monastic writings would be a book in itself.¹

At present, writing on Cassian's interpretation of the Bible is extremely limited. The purpose of this thesis is to gather insight into Cassian's method of interpreting Scripture via focusing on Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4.

Genesis 6:1-4 has a complex interpretative history in Christianity. The passage details the apparent sexual union of the sons of God/angels of God and human women and the production of a monstrous offspring (the Nephilim), resulting in the corruption of the earth and leading to the flood. In the first centuries of Christianity, the tendency was towards a literal interpretation of the narrative, however, by the fourth century a notable shift emerged in orthodox Christian churches. The tendency arose to interpret the passage in a "demythologized" manner, seeing the sons of God as symbolic for the sons of Seth who began to intermarry with the descendents of Cain. Cassian follows the new line of interpretive thought, interpreting the sons of God as the "seed of Seth." The incorporation of the "seed of Seth" however, makes Cassian's interpretation stand out

¹ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 94.

from other interpretations of the passage. The phrase “seed of Seth” has parallels in both Philo and Gnostic writings leading to the question of whether or not Cassian knew of either Philo’s writings or the Gnostic material. Cassian’s interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 takes place in a larger work, *The Conferences*, in which Cassian presents his theory of Biblical interpretation, leading us to ask questions regarding Cassian’s application of Scripture to his system of asceticism.

This thesis seeks to answer three questions. Where does Cassian’s interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 fall in the history of Christian interpretation of the passage? What are Cassian’s principles for biblical interpretation? What purpose does the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 serve and why does Cassian include it?

Chapter 1 analyzes Cassian’s interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 in *Conference VIII, On Principalities*. Chapter 2 takes an overview of traditions surrounding the figure of Seth in both orthodox and Gnostic Christianity as well as Philo of Alexandria. Chapter three takes a similar overview of the myth of the fallen sons of God and its reception and eventual reinterpretation in early Christianity. Chapter four explores Cassian’s principles for Biblical interpretation. Chapter five concludes by returning to Cassian’s original interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and attempts a deeper reading of the text in the hope of understanding how the interpretation relates to his principles for biblical interpretation and what importance it has for the *Conferences*.

For this thesis, Boniface Ramsey’s English translation of the *Conferences* is utilized for most of the English translations of the work. At times where I disagree with Ramsey’s translation I have, depending upon the degree of disagreement, either amended his translation, translated the text entirely, or supplied the Latin text with my translation for some perspective. It is worth noting here, as it will become prevalent in the last two chapters of this thesis, that I have followed Ramsey’s interpretation of *πρακτική* and *θεωρητική*. *Πρακτική* and *θεωρητική* are,

properly speaking adjectives, however, Cassian does not appear to always use the terms as adjectives but treats them as proper nouns in their own right for his Latin speaking audience in *Conference XIV*,

There are indeed as many kinds of knowledge in this world as there are different sorts of arts and disciplines. But, although all are either completely useless or contribute something of value only to the present life, still there is not one that does not have its own order and method of instruction by which it can be grasped by those who are interested in it. If, then, those arts follow their own defined principles when they are taught, how much more does the teaching and profession of our religion, which is directed to contemplating the secrets of invisible mysteries rather than to present gain and which seeks instead the reward of eternal prizes, consist in a defined order and method. Its knowledge is in fact twofold. The first kind is *πρακτική*, that is practical (*id est actualis*), which is perfected by emendation of habits and purgation of vices (*quae emendatione morum et vitiorum purgatione perficitur*).² The second is *θεωρητική*, which consists in contemplation of divine things and cognition of the most sacred of senses.³

Cassian uses *πρακτική* and *θεωρητική* to indicate two distinct types of knowledge in and of themselves. This can be seen in his description of *θεωρητική* as consisting of contemplation of divine things and cognition of the most sacred senses. At XIV.II.1, Cassian uses *πρακτική* and *θεωρητική* as objects themselves, as opposed to adjectives, presenting both *πρακτική* and *θεωρητική* as something to be acquired.⁴

Where the Latin text is utilized, I have made use of the edition produced by Michael Petschenig in the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. This is the edition followed by Ramsey in his translation and it is still considered to be the standard Latin text of the *Conferences*. Other editions of the Latin text were consulted for perspective's sake, in particular

² John Cassian, *The Conferences*, translated by Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press 1997). Ramsey's translation reads: "...or practical, which reaches its fulfillment in correction of behavior and in cleansing from vice." XIV.I.3

³ John Cassian. *The Conferences*. XIV.I.3. *Altera θεωρητική, quae in contemplatione divinarum rerum et sacratissimorum sensuum cognitione consistit*. Ramsey's text reads: The other is *θεωρητική*, which consists in the contemplation of divine things and in the understanding of most sacred meanings."

⁴ *Con.* XIV.I.3. "Whoever, therefore, wishes to attain to the *θεωρητική* must first pursue practical knowledge with all his strength and power. For the *πρακτική* can be possessed without the theoretical, but the theoretical can never be seized without the practical."

Alard Gazet's now dated edition of the *Conferences* from 1617 reprinted in the *Patralogia Latina* series (PL.49.477-1328). Pichery's edition in the *Sources Chrétiennes* has also been consulted and verifies Ramsey's observation regarding the close proximity of Pichery's text to that of Petschenig.⁵

Cassian's Context

John Cassian was likely born in the early 360s C.E. In Conference XXIV, Cassian alludes to his home as comprised of large family estates and makes an additional allusion to his *patria* as being wooded or significantly forest; fruitful, but of a colder climate. There is, as yet, no clear consensus as to the exact location of Cassian's birth and upbringing. Stewart notes that Gaul and Dobradja are the main postulates; however, Ramsey identifies Dacia in what is now Romania.⁶ The appellation "*Cassianus*" seems to have been given to him by his contemporaries, otherwise, Cassian refers to himself only as "*Iohannes*" in the pages of the *Conferences*.⁷

Cassian alludes to having received a classic Roman education although it is uncertain if he acquired knowledge of Greek during his education.⁸ His native tongue is thought to be Latin, yet, he demonstrates ample knowledge of Greek; Cassian likely used Greek for 25 years in Bethlehem, Egypt and Constantinople before settling in Marseilles.⁹ Certainly, the pages of the *Conferences* demonstrate his knowledge of Greek. Cassian frequently uses terms and phraseology in Greek and provides a Latin translation in the *Conferences* as well as utilizes the

⁵ Boniface Ramsey, "Introduction", *The Conferences*. 2

⁶ Stewart. 5; Ramsey. 5

⁷ Stewart. 4

⁸ Ramsey.

⁹ Stewart.

Septuagint in place of the Latin biblical text. The importance of these tendencies in the *Conferences* cannot be underestimated. Cassian's conceptualization of monasticism is thoroughly formed by Greek Christianity as opposed to the Latin West. Cassian was, as Stewart notes, "at home" in Greek Christianity as well as Latin Christianity.¹⁰ Cassian and his older friend Germanus traveled to Bethlehem around 380 C.E. and, interestingly, he does not seem to make any pilgrim tour of Jerusalem.¹¹ Around the mid-380s, Cassian and Germanus travel to Egypt before going to Constantinople, where they remain until the expulsion of John Chrysostom in 403/404 C.E.¹² While in Constantinople, Cassian was ordained to the diaconate by John Chrysostom himself.¹³ According to Ramsey, Cassian is ordained to the presbyterate in Rome after the expulsion of Chrysostom from Antioch before eventually settling in Marseilles.¹⁴

Goodrich has argued that, inasmuch as Greek monasticism is Cassian's inspiration, the Gallican context is essential for his written works. This context is both ecclesiastical and sociological. Goodrich argues that Cassian's two ascetic works, the *Conferences* and the *Institutes*, are intended to correct the dominant trends of Gallican asceticism.¹⁵ Gallican asceticism was often led by "untrained" men who established themselves as abbots and founded monasteries.¹⁶ These men often had no prior experience of having lived as a monk or having received instruction from an elder monk more experienced in the ascetic life.¹⁷ The lack of experience on the part of self-made abbots was accompanied by a lack of consistent ascetic

¹⁰ Stewart. 6

¹¹ Stewart.

¹² Stewart. 13

¹³ Richard J Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007), 4.

¹⁴ Ramsey. 6

¹⁵ Richard J Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 4-6; 32-64.

¹⁶ Goodrich. 4-6, 49

¹⁷ Goodrich. 49

practice; the abbots often did not follow any “rule” but rather based their “discipline” on their own transitory whim.¹⁸

Cassian offers his experience of Egyptian monasticism as the counterpoint to Gallican practice. The Egyptian system of elder-student monasticism assured a long period of ascetic education, wherein the student would acquire proper knowledge in the monastic life and ascetic practice and be properly prepared to one day pass on what he has received.¹⁹ By having undergone training in the desert by experienced monks, Cassian can claim an actual authority in all matters concerning the monastic life and ascetic discipline. In Cassian’s understanding of monasticism, monasteries ought not and cannot be founded based upon the will of any individual. Rather, according to the tradition among the Egyptian elders, monasteries must “remain through a succession of elders and their traditions.”²⁰ Goodrich goes so far as to argue that Cassian’s writings subtly reject his contemporary ascetic authors, such as Jerome and Basil, on account of their lack of direct experience with the desert monks and their resultant lack of proper ascetic training.²¹

Sociologically, Cassian’s activity in Gaul takes place during the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and, for all practical purposes, the transitus of one social order to the tenuous beginnings of another. Cassian’s Gallican audience primarily consisted of Roman-Gallican aristocrats during a period in which the social order that benefited the aristocracy was fading away.²² During this same time, Gallican aristocrats looked towards the Church for new career opportunities and, presumably, transfer of social distinctions.²³ Christian authors in Gaul

¹⁸ Goodrich. 49,50

¹⁹ Goodrich. 51

²⁰ John Cassian, *The Institutes*, translated by Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press 2000) II.III.1

²¹ Goodrich.

²² Goodrich. 11

²³ Goodrich. 11, 21

frequently exhorted the aristocracy to pursue ecclesiastical office and, in the process of so doing, assured their readers that acceptance of ecclesiastical office would not necessitate that they renounce the privilege they had acquired or, more likely, been born into.²⁴ While ecclesiastical office may have entailed renouncing certain material possessions, it did not require renouncing the *quality* of the life of an aristocrat.²⁵ Furthermore, Gallican authors frequently pointed their readers towards contemporary illustrations that demonstrated the transitory nature of the material quantity of an aristocrat's life amid the period of social collapse.²⁶

The origin of Cassian's *Conferences* is in the collection of sayings of the desert fathers of Egypt known as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The "sayings" were predicated upon a disciple of the elder monk approaching him for guidance. The main body of the *Apophthegmata* seems to date from between 350 CE – 450 CE.²⁷ The term *Apophthegmata* indicates the origins of the literature, meaning "speak a word, father."²⁸ The Abba was believed to possess authority based upon his ascetic experience in the desert, through which he acquired knowledge of God and possessed a type of intercessory power for his disciple.²⁹ This is the general format of Cassian's *Conferences*. Cassian and his friend Germanus approach one of fifteen desert elders seeking illumination on particular topics.³⁰

The literary setting raises questions with regard to the historical accuracy of the dialogues presented in the *Conferences*. The portrayal of a young Cassian and Germanus seeking conferences with a multitude of monks seems to violate the exclusive disciple to Abba

²⁴ Goodrich 21

²⁵ Goodrich. 22

²⁶ Goodrich.

²⁷ Edwin C Tappert, "Desert Wisdom: Sayings of the Anchorites," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 9 no.2 (May 1957) 156

²⁸ Benedicta Ward, "Forward", *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, translated and edited by Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications 2006) xx.

²⁹ Benedicta Ward, xix.

³⁰ Boniface Ramsey, "Introduction," 9.

relationship described by Ward.³¹ Additionally, there is an estimated twenty-five year lapse between the time the *Conferences* were composed and the events they purport to recount.³² Ramsey notes that ancient dialogical genre, which the *Conferences* are an example, incorporated such degrees of elaboration so as to make the original historical event nearly unrecognizable.³³ Cassian's *Conferences* could be considered an elaboration of the genre. The *Conferences* follow in the pattern of embellishing the monastic account established by Athanasius' *Life of Antony*.³⁴ This being the case, this thesis holds to the perspective that, in general, the content of the *Conferences* is, ultimately, Cassian's own, even if based upon historical conferences with monks in the Egyptian desert. I have worked from this perspective due to the indications that embellishment of the original events is possible and even part of the literary convention behind the dialogue genre and the apparent passage of time from the original historical events. However, it is also to be noted that we cannot determine to what degree Cassian embellished the original desert conferences he and Germanus participated in nor to what degree his memory correctly recalls said conferences. I assume that the material in the *Conferences* is Cassian's. When mention is made of another figure participating in the conferences, for example, "Abba Serenus then tells Cassian and Germanus", I interpret this as a literary device on Cassian's part, not an authentic record of a historical exchange involving said figure.

Cassian's literary output was invaluable to popularizing Egyptian monasticism in the West; however, to do so required some adaptation of the monastic material. Ward observes that Cassian systematized and interpreted monastic tradition as he understood it, for a western

³¹ Ward, xix

³² Ramsey, 10

³³ Ramsey.

³⁴ Ward, xviii

audience.³⁵ Cassian's reputation among western monastic authors was solidified by the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, written circa 540 C.E. Benedict's rule suggests the *Conferences* for evening reading, leaving room for any other appropriate reading in its place.³⁶ Later in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the *Conferences* and *Institutes*, along with the (longer) rule of Basil are lauded as tools for the acquisition of virtue by the aspiring monk, indicating the unique esteem these writings held for the author.³⁷

³⁵ Ward. xviii

³⁶ Benedict of Norcia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, edited by Bruce L. Venarde (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2011), 42.

³⁷ *The Rule of Saint Benedict* 73

Chapter One: Cassian's Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4

Powers and Principalities in Early Monastic Literature

Given the setting of the *Conferences* in Egyptian monasticism and the claim of its author to purportedly recall an actual exchange with some of the leading monks in the desert, it is worth investigating if *Conference VIII* has any precedent in monastic literature. In this section of chapter 1 I argue that there is *some* precedent for discussion of the Principalities in early monastic literature written by or about Antony, the “father” of Egyptian monasticism.

Cassian includes his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and the seed of Seth in the context of a conference concerned with the biblical theme of the Principalities. Principalities are mentioned in Ephesians 6:12 and Colossians 1:16. Ephesians, however, provides the conceptual framework for powers and principalities in early monastic literature,

Τοῦ λοιποῦ ἐνδυναμοῦσθε ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ ἐν τῷ κράτει τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ. ἐνδύσασθε τὴν πανοπλίαν τοῦ θεοῦ πρὸς τὸ δύνασθαι ὑμᾶς στῆναι πρὸς τὰς μεθοδίας τοῦ διαβόλου: ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ἡμῖν ἡ πάλη πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὰς ἀρχάς, πρὸς τὰς ἐξουσίας, πρὸς τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τούτου, πρὸς τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις¹

¹ Ephesians 6:10-12; “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.”

The text of the Vulgate reads: “*De cetero fratres conformatini in Domino et in potentia virtutis eius. Induite vos arma Dei ut possitis stare adversus insidias diaboli. Quia non est nobis conluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem sed adversus principes et potestates adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritalia nequitiae in caelestibus.*”

The text actually cited by Cassian reads: *Non est nobis colluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem, sed adversus principatus, adversus potestates, adversus mundi rectores tenebrarum harum, contra spiritalia nequitiae in caelestibus.* The text cited by Cassian appears to be slightly closer to the Greek text of Ephesians. *Principatus*, a beginning or origin, more literally translates the Greek ἀρχάς than *principes*,

Antony (c.251-356 C.E.) seems to be the origin for consideration of the principalities in monastic literature. The topic is addressed both in Antony's letters and during his speech as recorded in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, written around 360 C.E. Antony's letters comprise a collection of seven letters believed to have been written by the desert monk to the community of monastics that had developed around his desert sojourn. The authenticity of Antony's letters has been subject to varied assessments. Jerome is the first patristic author to record Antony as having written seven letters.² The previous century of patristic studies has questioned the authenticity of Antony's letters, largely on the basis of the author's apparent familiarity with Greek philosophy and the Greek language, both of which are repudiated by Athanasius' *Life of Antony*.³ Samuel Rubenson has summarized the arguments in favor of Antony's authorship of the seven extant letters attributed to him. Among the arguments for Antony's authorship are: 1) in the manuscript tradition, no one other than Antony has ever been attributed the authorship of the letters, this despite the fact that Pachomeus suspected Antony's brand of monasticism of heresy; 2) passages from the letters appear in the *Apophthegmata*; 3) there are numerous theological affinities between the letters and the content of Athanasius' *Life of Antony* - that Athanasius would portray Antony as being able to dialogue with philosophers implies some knowledge of the subject on his part; 4) there is a growing consensus that Athanasius was not seeking to present an accurate life of Antony so much as he was attempting to build a theological argument based around the figure of Antony; 5) the presence of Origenist theology portrays the author as a forerunner to Origen's influence among Egyptian monastics; 6) finally, there is additional patristic evidence that Antony actually wrote letters – a short letter of Antony is included in the Greek translation

² Jerome, *Illustrious Men*, translated by Thomas P. Halton (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1999), 88.

³ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint*, translated and edited by Samuel Rubenson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2005), 35-37.

of the fourth century Letter of Ammon and two letters of Antony are mentioned in the *Vita Pachomii*.⁴

The primary manuscript tradition of the letters of Antony is in the Coptic language. The translation utilized for this thesis was produced by Samuel Rubenson. Rubenson's translation does not confine itself into any one manuscript tradition, but tries to assemble a definitive text by comparing the Coptic, Latin, Georgian, Syriac, Arabic, and Greek texts. The sixth letter of Antony treats of the principalities in a discussion of angelology and demonology,

Therefore all these names have been imposed on them after the deeds of each one. Some of them are called archangels, some thrones and dominions, principalities, powers and cherubim. These names were given to them since they kept the will of their creator. But due to the wickedness of the conduct of others it was necessary to name them devil and satan, after their own evil conduct. Others are called demons, evil and impure spirits, spirits of seduction and powers of this world, and there are many other varieties among them.⁵

This passage occurs in a discussion of the visible manifestation of benevolent and malevolent spirits. Briefly, Antony contends that no angel or demon is able to simply materialize itself. Rather, angels and demons are manifested through human behavior.⁶ It is interesting to note that term principalities, as it appears in the letters of Antony, is not an appellation for demonic beings or beings otherwise hostile to the aspiring monk.

Antony's sermon in Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* demonstrates greater conceptual affinity with Cassian's treatment of principalities in the eighth conference. Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* was composed anywhere from 357, within a year of Antony's death, to 365 CE.⁷ The Greek text can be found in the *Patrologia Graeca* 26 (1887) and the French series *Sources Chrétien's* volume 400. The English translation used herein is the edition by Robert T. Meyers.

⁴ Samuel Rubenson, 36-37.

⁵ Rubenson, *Letters of St. Antony*, Letter Six, 220.

⁶ Rubenson, *Letters of St. Antony*. Letter Six. 219-220

⁷ Saint Athanasius, *The Life of St. Antony*, translated by Robert T Meyers, Introduction (New York: Newman Press 1950), 8.

Antony's sermon in the *Life of St. Antony* identifies the principalities as demonic beings related to the struggles of the monk in the desert. Antony exhorts his followers to hold fast to virtue. In particular, Antony advises the aspiring monk to never succumb to anger (θυμὸν) or desire (ἐπιθυμία).⁸ He continues,

For we have enemies, powerful and crafty – the wicked demons; and it is against these that our wrestling is, as the Apostle said-not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. Great is the number of them in the air around us, and they are not far from us.⁹

This selection from the *Life of St. Antony* has a notable parallel to John Cassian's conference *On Principalities*. A correlation is made between succumbing to desire and the influence of the principalities on human beings.

Cassian's Interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4

Cassian's treatment of the seed of Seth occurs in conference VIII, *On the Principalities*. The literary setting of the eighth conference begins with Cassian and his companion Germanus receiving instruction from the elder Serenus. The eighth conference addresses the question "where such a variety and diversity of powers opposed to man come from?"¹⁰ Two concerns underlie this question. The first is the demonology of the desert monastic tradition. In Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, for example, we find the legendary monk in battle with various demonic forces and entities in the desert. Evagrius of Pontus treats the various intellectual and

⁸ *Life of St. Antony*. 21

⁹ *Life of St. Antony*. 21

¹⁰ *The Conferences*. VIII.II.

emotional maladies troubling the desert monk as demonic. Cassian's earlier work on the *Institutes* (written circa 415 C.E.) describes the struggle between vice and virtue as one predominately between grace and demonic influence. In the *Conferences*, Cassian treats the subject of demonic influences through the myth of the fallen angels,

Then Germanus said: "Where we want to know, have such a variety and diversity of powers opposed to man come from, which the blessed Apostle enumerates as follows? 'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spirits of evil in heavenly places.'¹¹

The image of spiritual warfare in Ephesians supplies Cassian with a divine explanation for the struggles afflicting the monk in the desert. The struggle between vice and virtue is the concrete manifestation of an invisible battle between the human being and malevolent spiritual entities. The afflictions of the monk in the desert, then, are forewarned in Scripture and the monk in turn lives out the true Christian conflict. This still leaves, however, the crux of the question beginning the eighth conference, "Where, then, has so malicious an adversary, who is opposed to us, come from?"¹² This question constrains Cassian to address the further question of whether or not demons were created by God and for what purpose.¹³ Cassian distinguishes the nature of his inquiry, "Should it be believed that these powers were created by the Lord for the purpose of warring against human beings in grades and ranks?"¹⁴ Cassian's inquiry concerns the ascetic struggle, the battle taking place in the desert.

Cassian begins the response to the origin of demonic beings with a discussion of the nature of Scripture itself,

¹¹ *Con*, VIII.II.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

The authority of Holy Scripture has said some things so lucidly and clearly for our instruction, even to those of limited intelligence, that not only are they not veiled in the obscurity of a hidden meaning but they do not even need to be explained, and they offer intelligibility and meaning at first glance. Some others, however, are so covered over and obscured by mystery that in examining and understanding them there lies open before us an immense field of toil and concern.¹⁵

Some things contained in Scripture are readily understandable, while other passages are obscure and defy immediate understanding. Cassian continues,

It is clear that God has arranged matters thus for several reasons: first, lest if the divine sacraments had no veil of spiritual understanding covering them, they would be equally intelligible and comprehensible to everyone, to both the faithful and the profane, and thus there would be no distinction between the lazy and the zealous as regards virtue and prudence; then, so that even among those of the household of the faith the slothfulness of the lazy might be reproached and the ardor and effort of the zealous might be proved.¹⁶

The distinction between the readily comprehensible and the obscure passages of Scripture separates the believer from the non-believer, and, still more, the lazy believer from the zealous believer. With echoes of Paul's notion of food in due season, Cassian sees that obscure passages of Scripture are not open to anyone who inquires into them. The spiritual fervor on the part of the individual affects what access he or she has to Scripture; however, there are additional qualifications. Comparing Scripture to the produce harvested from a field, some passages are readily digestible in their raw (literal) form.¹⁷ Other produce needs heating by the fire of allegorical interpretation and a "probing spiritual fire."¹⁸ These passages are appropriate only for

¹⁵ *Con*, VIII. III. 1.

¹⁶ *Con*, VIII. III. 2

¹⁷ *Con*, VIII. III. 3

¹⁸ *Con*, VIII. III. 4

the “inner man” and, as a consequence, they must be read and interpreted in a more spiritual way less “in eating them there would be more harm than good.”¹⁹

All of the above serves as a forewarning to the reader with regard to the question beginning the eighth conference. There are mysteries contained in the pages of Scripture that are not open to everyone, even everyone in the Church. The access one may have to these obscure passages in Scripture is mitigated by two additional criteria: applying the correct interpretative method, (literal, allegorical or spiritual) and one’s personal spiritual state. The method of interpretation and one’s spiritual state affect the reception of the text; texts better suited for the “inner man” ought to be received by the “inner man,” the aspect of the human person most capable of processing Scriptural material that appears illogical or obscure when read at a literal level. Cassian illustrates his distinctions by alluding to his previous conference on discernment when recollecting the literal interpretation of “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”,

Some of the strictest monks, having indeed “zeal for God, but not according to knowledge,” understood this literally. They made themselves wooden crosses and carried them constantly on their shoulders, evoking not edification but rather derision in all who saw them.²⁰

Cassian alludes to his previous conference on discernment. The “inner man” works in an individual when he or she engages in discernment. Discernment of Scripture, Cassian argues, plays a crucial role if one wishes to answer the question posed at the beginning of the eighth conference. In order to answer the question at the heart of the eighth conference, one must know how to read and interpret scripture. The existence of malevolent spiritual entities, entities that

¹⁹ *Con*, VIII.III.4

²⁰ *Con*, VIII.III.5

come alive in the experience of the desert monk, could potentially impinge upon one's interpretation or belief in the being of God.²¹

Far be it from us, then, to confess that God created anything that is substantially bad. As Scripture says: 'everything that God made was very good.' For if we said that these beings had been created such by God and had been made so that they would occupy these grades of wickedness and always be ready to deceive and destroy human beings, we would, contrary to the teaching of the aforementioned Scripture, be faulting God by calling him the creator and author of evil. That is, we would be saying that he himself brought evil wills and natures into being, creating them such that they would always persevere in wickedness and never be able to pass over the disposition of a good will.²²

Cassian locates the creation of what will become demonic forces outside of the temporal creation and outside of the chronology of Genesis,

Before, I say, that temporal beginning of Genesis there is no doubt that God created all those heavenly powers and forces. The Apostle enumerates them according to rank and sets them out thus: 'In Christ were created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether angels archangels or thrones or dominations or principalities or powers.'²³

Cassian next cites the text of Revelation,

Yet Scripture does not recall only those who fell from that pinnacle of blessedness; it speaks of the dragon that pulled down a third of the stars along with him. One of the apostles says more clearly, 'the angels who did not submit to his rule but who left their dwelling he has kept in eternal chains, in darkness, until the judgment of the great day.'²⁴

²¹ For a literal description of demonic entities attacking ascetics in the desert, see *Life of Antony*. Origen's treatment of the role of principalities and powers seems to influence Cassian's description of Germanus's question. See *De Principiis* IV.1

²² Once again, Origen phrases essentially the same question earlier in *De Principiis* IV.3

²³ *Con*, VIII.VII.3-4

²⁴ *Con*, VIII.VIII.3

The Problem: the Comingling of Natures

The tradition of the fall of the angels is an ancient one in Christianity. By the fourth century, the philosophical currents in Christianity come into conflict with a long standing tradition in the Church. The problem, attested to in Cassian, stemmed from the notion that human women and angels could engage in sexual activity and create a hybrid offspring. Cassian must wrestle with an apparently literal understanding of the comingling of human and angelic natures in Scripture itself. Cassian states the problem in these terms,

Since by God's design a reading from Genesis was produced a little while ago which made such a significant impression on us that now we can pursue properly what we have always wanted to learn, we also wish to know what should be thought about those apostate angels that are said to have had intercourse with the daughters of men. Understood literally, would this be possible for a spiritual nature?²⁵

Cassian's first response to the problem posed by Genesis 6:1-4 challenges the historical veracity of the narrative if accepted literally,

By no means should it be believed that spiritual natures can have carnal relations with women. But if this could ever have happened in a literal sense, why does it not occur now, at least occasionally, and why do we not see some people born of women without sexual intercourse, having been conceived by demons?²⁶

In Cassian's analysis of the narrative contained in Genesis 6:1-4, a literal interpretation cannot be supported based upon the absence of evidence pointing to the possibility of such a comingling of natures taking place. While dismissing the possibility of a literal interpretation, Cassian seems to entertain the possibility of human actors.²⁷ Cassian utilizes the motif of the

²⁵ VIII. XX.

²⁶ VIII. XXI. 1

²⁷ Ibid.

seed of Seth as the means of solving the problem of human-angel mixture of natures.²⁸ Cassian begins with the origin of Seth himself. Seth is conceived by Adam and Eve as a replacement for Abel. Cassian sees this as necessary or else all of humanity would descend from the stalk of a fratricide.²⁹ Cassian interprets Seth as succeeding Abel's righteousness and goodness.³⁰ This righteousness was passed on to Seth's seed, in comparison to the inherited irreligiousness passed on through Cain's progeny. So long as Seth's seed never comingled with Cain's line, Seth's line would be protected from the inherent deficiency of Cain.³¹ Cassian appeals to the separate genealogies of Seth and Cain to demonstrate that the two lines were kept apart and there was no mingling of either line's inherited tendencies with the other. Due to the preservation of innate sanctity, the line of Seth was called angels of God or sons of God. Meanwhile, due to innate depravity, the line of Cain was called sons of men. This division of humanity between the innately holy and innately wicked continued, Cassian argues, until the time of the events described in Genesis six,

Although this beneficial and holy division between them existed up until that time, when afterward the sons of Seth – who were sons of God – saw the daughters of those who were born of the offspring of Cain, they were inflamed by desire for their beauty and took wives from them for themselves. They imparted their parents' wickedness to their husbands and from the very first turned them away from their inborn holiness and ancestral simplicity.³²

Cassian's interpretation advocates a myth of a once pure seed among humanity existing simultaneously with a corrupted seed. Furthermore, this interpretation explicitly divides ancient

²⁸ There will be a more detailed discussion of the figure of Seth and the concept of Seth as fathering a "race" or "seed" among humanity as it occurs in Jewish and Christian sources in chapter 2.

²⁹ VIII. XXI. 2

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ VIII. XXI. 2,3

³² VIII. XXI. 4

humanity, on genealogical grounds, into a race innately connected to God and one predisposed to exclusion on account of innate depravity.

Cassian interprets the seed of Seth as having an inborn knowledge of divine wisdom. He understands this inborn knowledge to be passed on through all the generations of Seth's progeny. However, Cassian appears uncertain as to *how* the transference of divine wisdom among the seed of Seth actually occurs. In *Conference VIII. XXI.6*, he attributes the knowledge of divine wisdom initially to the propagation of an ancestral tradition based primarily upon worship of the true God and the common good. In this sense, the divine wisdom inherent in the seed of Seth is defined as the pedagogy practiced amongst Seth's decedents. In the next sentence, Cassian continues to espouse a pedagogical understanding of the transference of divine wisdom through a comparative interpretation of the traditions of the seed of Cain,

But when it intermingled with the wicked generation it fell into profane and harmful deeds that it had dutifully learned at the instigation of demons, and thereupon it boldly instituted the strange arts of wizards, sleights and magic tricks, teaching its descendents that they should abandon the sacred cult of the Divinity and worship and adore the elements of fire and the demons of the air.³³

As clearly as Cassian portrayed the divine wisdom of Seth's seed as being the result of pedagogy among Seth's descendents, so too the wickedness/irreligiousness among Cain's descendents results from teaching as opposed to the nature of a segment of humanity. Seth's seed had taught the worship of the true God and maintained a functional society concerned with the welfare of the whole. Through intermarrying with Cain's descendants, Seth's seed adopted their teaching and praxis.

The implication running through Cassian's treatment of the seed of Seth at this point is that the separation between the descendents of Seth and Cain, and the presumed sanctity of Seth's seed was not the result of *theo sperma*, but rather the mastery of will and the practice of

³³ VIII. XXI. 6

virtue among Seth's seed until they were presented with a temptation they could not resist. The reason for the intermarriage between Seth and Cain's descendents stemmed from, in Cassian's words, wanton desire.³⁴ That Seth's seed can succumb to vice and receive punitive action from God indicates Cassian's rejection of the seed of Seth's immutability and perennial gnosis, two motifs that surrounded Seth's offspring and will be discussed in chapter 2.

³⁴ VIII. XXI. 7

Chapter Two: Background – Traditions of Seth

Seth in the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint

The figure of Seth receives scarce mention in the Hebrew Bible. Seth first appears as the third son of Adam, both in the Masoretic text and Septuagint. A play on the etymology of Seth's name appears in the Hebrew text of Genesis 4:25,

וַיֵּדַע אָדָם עוֹד, אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ, וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן, וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שֵׁת: כִּי שֵׁת-לִי אֱלֹהִים¹

The play on etymology emerges in Eve's declaration at Seth's birth between the proper name Seth and the verb to plant שֵׁת-לִי אֱלֹהִים: וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שֵׁת. The watering/planting/cultivation imagery continues as Eve describes God as having planted "another seed" in place of Abel. While the play on etymology does not appear in the Septuagint, the Greek text of Genesis 4:25 does include the mention of a new seed in place of the fallen Abel,

ἔγνω δὲ Ἀδὰμ Ἐβαν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ συλλαβοῦσα ἔτεκεν υἱὸν καὶ ἐπωνόμασεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Σηθ λέγουσα ἐξανέστησεν γάρ μοι ὁ θεὸς σπέρμα ἕτερον ἀντὶ Ἀβελ ὃν ἀπέκτεινεν Καὶν²

The clause ἐξανέστησεν γάρ μοι ὁ θεὸς σπέρμα ἕτερον, for God has raised up another seed (σπέρμα ἕτερον), will give rise to later speculation of a separate human seed among humanity, most especially in later Gnostic speculations. The text of Genesis 4:24 may have well contributed additional speculative fodder to later readers of the text. Genesis continues by chronicling Seth's own posterity, Enosh, in Genesis 4:26

¹ Adam knew his wife again and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another man instead of Abel.

² And Adam knew Eve his wife and she bore up another son and gave to him the name of Seth saying, for God has raised up for me another seed instead of Abel whom Cain slew/killed.

וְלִשְׁתַּגְּמֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים דְּלִדְדָּבָר, וְיִקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ אֶנֶשׁ; אִזְ הוּחַל, לְקָרָא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה.³

καὶ τῷ Σηθ ἐγένετο υἱός ἐπωνόμασεν δὲ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐνωσ οὗτος ἤλπισεν
ἐπικαλεῖσθαι τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ⁴

Seth is mentioned again in passing in Genesis 5:4. There is no further mention of Seth in the canon of the Hebrew Bible until I Chronicles, which restates the genealogy of Genesis. Jesus Ben Sira makes mention of Seth in his list of men of righteousness.⁵ Despite receiving little mention in the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint, Seth becomes a figure of great interest in extra-canonical texts and traditions among Jews and Christians. Although Seth is not a major figure in the Genesis narrative, a close reading of the text as demonstrates how Seth could have been seen as not only a σπέρμα ἕτερον but indeed a σπέρμα θεοῦ. The Genesis narrative attributes the origin of both Abel and Cain exclusively to an action of Adam.⁶ Conversely, the account of Seth's birth, though acknowledging Adam's role in the procreative act, appears to establish Seth's ultimate origin from the action of God.⁷ The distinction between Cain and Abel's exclusively human origin and the apparent divine action (and perhaps quasi divine origin) of Seth is seen in Eve's exclamation at Seth's birth, *God has raised up for me another seed*.⁸ The subtle differentiation between Cain and Abel's origin and that of Seth having been considered, this chapter will now attempt a concise survey of the Jewish and Christian materials that develop a mythology around the figure of Seth with the hope of gaining some sense of the mythologized

³ To Seth also was a son born, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began calling upon the name of Yahweh.

⁴ And Seth brought into being a son and he gave him the name of Enosh; this man hoped to have been called/summoned (by) the name of the Lord God.

⁵ Tigchelaar has proposed an alternate construction of Ben Sira 49:16 on the basis of the Massada Ben Sira scroll. In his interpretation, Ben Sira's mention of Seth refers to Seth's enrollment in an antediluvian priesthood. See also James K. Aitken, "The semantics of "glory" in Ben Sira : traces of the development in post-Biblical Hebrew?", *Sirach, Scrolls, and Sages* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1999).

⁶ See Gen. 4:1-2

⁷ See Gen. 4:25

⁸ Ibid.

figure that may have been represented in various texts and traditions at the time Cassian composed the *Conferences*.

Seth in Non Canonical Jewish Literature.

The most substantial treatment of Seth in non-canonical Jewish literature occurs in the *Life of Adam and Eve*, a text commonly included in the collection of Pseudepigrapha.⁹ Originally composed between 100 B.C.E and 200 C.E., the textual history of the *Life of Adam and Eve* diverges into Greek and Latin manuscript traditions beginning around the year 400 C.E.¹⁰ The Greek text begins with a recounting of the death of Abel and birth of Seth. With Adam close to death, Seth journeys back to Eden to find oil from a tree to anoint Adam in the hope of easing the pain of his death. In the Greek text, Eve delivers a detailed account of the Fall. The Latin text has Satan deliver the information of the Fall, omitting Eve's story, and concluding with an account of Adam's assumption into heaven.

Seth's first appearance in Latin version occurs at the same juncture as in the canonical Genesis, after the murder of Abel by Cain. The Latin *Life of Adam and Eve* then segues into an account given to Seth of Adam's vision of a fiery chariot after the expulsion from paradise given. This account runs from *Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 25-29. Implied, though never explicated in the text, is Seth's possession of arcane knowledge of Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise. In *Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 30-31 Adam is afflicted with a final illness. Seth volunteers to return to paradise in penance for Adam and Eve's expulsion in the hope the God will open the gates to

⁹ The English translation utilized for the *Life of Adam and Eve* is that by M.D. Johnson in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Volume 2, edited by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Double Day&Co. 1985). The Greek text consulted was that of Tischendorf, *Apocalypses Apocryphae* (Hildesheim 1966)

¹⁰ *Life of Adam and Eve*, "Introduction," 252.

paradise and allow him to retrieve fruit. Adam responds by stating that he suffers great pain in his illness and commands Seth and Eve to return to paradise for oil from the tree of mercy to relieve his pain. Along the way (*Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 37-39) Seth is attacked by a serpent, presumably, the same serpent in Genesis. Seth proceeds to rebuke the serpent, saying,

May the Lord God rebuke you. Stop; be quiet; close your mouth, cursed enemy of truth, chaotic destroyer. Stand back from the image of God until the day when the Lord God shall order you to be brought to judgment.

Seth is referred to as the *image of God* three times in this portion of the narrative, by Eve, Seth himself and the serpent respectively. The designation may indicate that, like Adam, Seth has been uniquely created by the act of God, however this is uncertain. Seth and Eve reach paradise and mourn. The angel Michael appears to them and addresses Seth as the son of man and instructs him to go back to Adam, his span of life being completed and the oil of the tree of mercy being reserved for the last days. (*Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 40-44). In *Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 46-48, Seth witnesses the hand of God holding the body of Adam before turning it over to Michael's custody. As Eve approaches her own death (*Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 49-51), she instructs her children to design two tablets, one of stone and one of clay, recording the life of Adam and Eve. Seth mourns the loss of Eve before being instructed by Michael to mourn only for six days because the seventh day is the day of the resurrection,

Then when they had mourned for four days, the archangel Michael appeared to them and said to Seth, 'Man of God, do not prolong mourning your dead more than six days, because the seventh day is a sign of the resurrection, the rest of the coming age, and on the seventh day the Lord rested from all his works. Then Seth made the tablets.'¹¹

¹¹ *Lt. Life of Adam and Eve* 51

Philo of Alexandria's treatise *De Posteritate Caini*

Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E. – 50 C.E.) gives the progeny of Cain and Seth substantial treatment in his *De Posteritate Caini*.¹² The treatise largely comments on the text found in the Septuagint. Philo begins by addressing Cain's exile and the apparent anthropomorphism of God in the LXX's text, ἐξῆλθεν δὲ καιν ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ὤκησεν ἐν γῆ ναιδ κατέναντι Εδεμ.¹³ Philo rejects a literal understanding of ἐξῆλθεν δὲ καιν ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ θεοῦ, finding it incompatible with God's transcendence. Philo proceeds to address another hermeneutical tendency that he sees as violating the Deity's distinctiveness from humanity, namely, the notion that Cain could physically depart from God at all.¹⁴ Philo writes,

Ἐξέρχεται δὲ πόθεν; ἢ ἐκ τῶν βασιλείων τοῦ πανηγεμόνος; Θεοῦ δὲ οἶκος αἰσθητὸς τίς ἄν εἶη πλὴν ὅδε ὁ κόσμος, ὃν καταλείπειν ἀμήχανόν τε καὶ ἀδύνατον;¹⁵

Philo's question highlights a theological problem if the text is interpreted literally. Is there some geological delineation of the presence of God? If Cain was able to physically depart from God's presence then two consequences would result. Were God's presence truly enclosed in certain geological parameters, then God would essentially have the properties of created beings that are defined, in part, by the physical boundaries.¹⁶ Additionally, this would leave some portion of the universe without God. Rather, departing from God's face must be interpreted metaphorically as the capability of the human spirit to see the transcendent and spirit God.¹⁷

¹² The Greek text utilized is from Colson and Whitaker's edition in the Loeb Classical Library. Philo. Volume II. LCL 227

¹³ And Cain departed from the face of God and dwelled in the land of Nod opposite Eden.

¹⁴ Philo of Alexandria, *De Posteritate Caini*. I.1, II.1

¹⁵ And to where does Cain go out? From the palace of the Lord of all? But what dwelling apparent to the senses could God have, save this world, for the quitting of which no power of advice avails?

¹⁶ *De Posteritate Caini*, II.5

¹⁷ *De Posteritate Caini*, II.8,9

Of concern to Philo when discussing the exile of Cain is the ability of the human being to close off his spiritual faculties to the vision of God. Philo identifies two actions leading to the loss of the soul's vision of God, involuntary and voluntary (Greek: ἐκούσιόν and ἀκούσιον). Adam's expulsion from Eden is illustrative of the latter, although Philo does not indicate why Adam's expulsion is the result of involuntary moral failure. Presumably, the interaction with either the serpent or Eve exculpates Adam from a voluntary action – Adam does not choose to sin per se but rather to listen to Eve or the serpent. Cain, conversely, illustrates a voluntary moral failure, committed freely and without the motivation of any additional party.¹⁸ The involuntary moral failure of Adam allows God to restore the vision lost to the soul, or, as Philo describes it, “healing.” (Gk: ἴασιν) This healing for Adam comes in the form of Seth as a replacement for Abel.¹⁹ Philo sees this as allegory for the soul, ψυχῆ τῆ μη παρ' εαυτῆς τραπέιση, γέννημα ἄρρεν, Σῆθ τὸν ποτισμὸν.²⁰

Should a soul be guilty of involuntary moral failure, there is the possibility God may raise up Seth in the soul. Philo keeps a tension between the literal and allegorical interpretation of the passage in his interpretation. Seth, as a type, is treated as a sign of divine restoration of the soul's vision of God. A voluntary moral failure, by comparison, is excluded from divine healing on account of forethought undertaken prior to the act.²¹

Philo detects significance in Cain's migration to the land of Nod (Gk: Νοῖδ). Philo identifies this significance in relation to his etymology of Eden (Gk: Ἐδέμ),

¹⁸ *De Posteritate Caini*. III.10

¹⁹ *De Posteritate Caini*. III.10

²⁰ This seed is a male offspring, Seth or “watering,” raised up to the soul whose fall did not originate in itself.

²¹ *De Posteritate Caini*. III. 11

Eden is symbolic of right and divine reason (ὀρθὸς καὶ θεῖος λόγος) and its literal interpretation is “delight” (τρυφήν), right reason above other things delights in good things pure and undiluted.²²

Conversely, Philo interprets Nod as τὸν κλόνον, literally confused motion or turmoil, and highlights the description of Nod’s location as κατέναντι Ἐδεμ, “opposite Eden.” Cain settles in confusion or turmoil as opposed to right reason, φησὶ γὰρ Ναίδ, τὸν κλόνον, εἰς ὃν ἡ ψυχὴ μετωκίσσατο, ἀπέναντι Ἐδέμ.²³ Philo’s description of Nod is significant; he interprets Nod as *opposite from* Eden and rather than identify Nod as a specific geographic location, he sees it as an orientation of the soul in relation to right and divine reason. Cain appears in Philo’s hermeneutic as a type of soul, the soul that has moved over and against the λόγος in favor of tumult. As we progress further in Philo’s exegesis, the mythic nature of Cain in Philo’s mind becomes readily apparent. When addressing the potential incest between Cain and a female relative, Philo interprets γυναικῶνα (woman) as the resultant thought or opinion (ἀσεβοῦς λογισμοῦ; literally, ungodly calculations, thoughts) of the soul that has willingly turned away from God and now is in direct opposition to its creator.²⁴ Philo then poses the inevitable question of the reader, τίς οὖν ἐστὶν ἀσεβοῦς δόξα;²⁵ Philo defines the thought of the ungodly as the presumption that the human mind is the measure of all created things (μέτρον εἶναι πάντων χρημάτων τὸν ἀνθρώπινον νοῦν).²⁶ Philo argues that this presumption leads to a perception of reality devoid of the recognition of God; belief in the faculties of reason as purely the result of human thought processes is a consequence of believing that the mind of man is the measure of all created things. Philo writes,

²² *De Posteritate Caini*, X.32

²³ *De Posteritate Caini*, X.32, Nod, the confusion in which the soul migrates opposite from Eden.

²⁴ *De Posteritate Caini*, XI.34

²⁵ What then is the ungodly man’s thought?

²⁶ *De Posteritate Caini*, XI.35

εἰ γὰρ πάντων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, χάρις ἐστὶ καὶ δωρεὰ τοῦ νοῦ τὰ πάντα, ὥστε ὀφθαλμῷ μὲν κεχάρισται τὸ βλέπειν, ὡσὶ δὲ τὸ ἀκούειν, ἐκάστη δὲ τῶν ἄλλων αἰσθήσεων τὸ αἰσθάνεσθαι, καὶ τῷ κατὰ τὴν προφορὰν μέντοι λόγῳ τὸ λέγειν, εἰ δὲ καὶ ταῦτα, καὶ αὐτὸ δῆπου τὸ νοεῖν, ἐν ᾧ μυρία ἐννοήματα, διανοήσεις, βουλαί, προμήθειαι, καταλήψεις, ἐπιστῆμαι, τέχναι, διαθέσεις, ἄλλων ἀριθμὸς δυνάμεων ἀδιεξίτητος.²⁷

Philo contends that ability to reason (λόγος) is a gift from God to the human being. Philo draws this out through his etymology of Enoch, Cain's posterity, as χάρις σοῦ, "your gift". Cain enters into a spiritual union with ἀσεβοῦς λογισμοῦ and produces χάρις σοῦ the effect of which leads one to view all products of the human mind as resultant from the gift of reason emanating solely from the mind of man.

Philo's *logos* represents God's indwelling in the human person down to some very concrete actions such as seeing or hearing. The *logos* acts in the human person, leading to the higher levels of reason. This understanding supplies Philo with evidence for God's interaction in history in terms of the processes of an individual soul. The concept of Cain represents for Philo the soul that has rejected the infusion of divine reason from God. We must recall Philo's basic exegesis of this portion of the Genesis narrative: Cain departs from the face of God by an action of his own volition into a land of tumult opposed to *logos*. As Cain represents a soul that has withdrawn from the face of God via opposing the infusion of divine reason in favor of his or her own understandings, there is also a type who follows the injunction of Moses to love, hearken and cleave to God. Philo begins addressing this second type of soul when turning his attention to

²⁷ *De Posteritate Caini*, XI.36-37; For if man is the measure of all things, all things are a present and the gift of the mind. The mind has bestowed on the eye seeing as a favor, on the ears hearing, on each of the other senses the power of perception, yes and speech on the faculty of thought-utterance. But if all these things are gifts, so too is thinking, including in itself countless products of thought, resolves, counsels, forethought, comprehension, acquisition of knowledge, skill in arts and in organizing, other faculties too many to recount.

the shared names in the progeny of Cain and Seth. As much as Enoch denoted “your gift” as the perception that the human mind itself is the source of reason, so too Enoch in Seth’s line denotes “your gift” as an acknowledgment of God’s active infusion of divine reason into the human person,

ἐρμηνευεται δ’ ὁ μὲν Ἐνώχ, καθάπερ εἶπον, χάρις σοῦ ,
Μαθουσαλά δ’ ἐξαποστολή θανάτου, ὁ δ’ αὖ Λάμεξ ταπεινώσις. τὸ
μὲν οὖν χάρις σοῦ λέγεται μὲν πρὸς τὸν ἐν ἡμῖν νοῦν ὑπ’ ἐνίων,
λέγεται δὲ καὶ πρὸς τὸν τῶν ὄλων ὑπὸ τῶν ἀμεινόνων.²⁸

Philo follows by explicitly stating that those who affirm reason as a product of the human mind itself fall into the race of Cain (γένει τῷ Κάιν) while those persons who acknowledge reason as given to the human mind by God belong to the genus of Seth. Philo immediately qualifies the nature of this seed of Seth,

οἱ δ’ ὅσα ἐν γενέσει καλὰ μὴ σφετεριζόμενοι, χάρισι δὲ ταῖς
θείαις ἐπιγράπλουσιων, εὐγενεῖς πρὸς ἀλήθειαν οὐκ ἐκ παλαιπλουσίων ἀλλ’
ἐκ φιλαπέτων φύντες, ὑπὸ ἀρχηγέτη τῷ Σῆθ τετάχθωσαν.²⁹

Those belonging to Seth’s seed are not considered biological descendants in Philo’s thought but rather are brought into the line of Seth’s progeny through the love of virtue. Philo advocates the idea that the gift of *logos* by God into the human mind facilitates an active pursuit of virtue opposed to vice and undesirable behavior.³⁰ The pursuit of virtue guided by divinely infused *logos* transfers a human being to an immortal race away separate from the multitude pursue vice,

²⁸ *De Posteritate Caini*, XII.41; Enoch, as I have already said, is interpreted, “your gift.” Methuselah “a sending forth of death,” and Lamech, “humiliation.” To some, it speaks to the mind within us, and to the better (men) it speaks to the mind of the whole (the universal mind).

²⁹ *De Posteritate Caini*, XII.42; Those who do not claim as their own the beautiful things of creation, (but acknowledge) from divine grace they are patronized/given, they are truly well born, not from nobility but naturally loving truth; they are to be ranked under the leadership of Seth.

³⁰ *De Posteritate Caini*, XII. 43

οὓς γὰρ ὁ θεὸς εὐαρεστήσαντας αὐτῷ μετεβίβασε καὶ μετέθηκεν ἐκ φθαρτῶν εἰς ἀθάνατα γένη, παρὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς οὐκέθ' εὐρίσκονται.³¹

When Philo reaches the thorny issue of potential incest among Eve's children, he finds additional grist to his interpretative mill. Philo had interpreted the wife of Cain as the resulting perspective of a soul who sets itself opposed to God. Similarly, wife may function in a positive sense, indicating the perspective of the soul that has followed the injunction of Moses and cleaved to God, the Seth-soul.

Philo's argument concerning the wife of the Seth-soul begins with the proposition that the *logos* of God is the source from which the virtues wisdom, courage, temperance and justice emerge in the soul cleaving to God.³² Rebecca and Leah function as types of the mind infused with virtues from the word of God. Leah is hated in Genesis 29:31, according to Philo's thought, because she represents the mind that detests material distractions, "for Leah, who is above the passions, cannot tolerate those who are attracted by the spells of the pleasures that accord with Rachel, who is sense perception."³³ Leah represents the type of mind for whom removal from material concerns facilitates union with God. Rebecca represents the infusion of the virtue of humility,

Ἡ δὲ Ῥεβέκκα κατέβη, φησίν, ἐπὶ τὴν πηγὴν πληῖσαι τὴν ὑδίαν, καὶ ἀνέβη. πόθεν γὰρ τὴν φρονήσεως διψῶσαν διάνοιαν εἰκός ἐστι πληροῦσθαι πλὴν ἀπὸ σοφίας θεοῦ, τῆς ἀνελλιποῦς πηγῆς, εἰς ἣν κατιοῦσα ἀναβαίνει κατὰ τι συγγενὲς σπουδαίου μαθητοῦ; τοὺς γὰρ ἀπ' οἰήσεως χαύνου κατελθόντας ὁ ἀρετῆς ἐκδεξάμενος καὶ ὑπολαβὼν δι' εὐκλείας εἰς ὕψος αἶρει λόγος.³⁴

³¹ *De Posteritate Caini*, XII.44; For those being well pleasing to God, God has transferred them and removed them from a destructible race/destructibility into an immortal race; they are no longer found among the many.

³² *De Posteritate Caini*, XXXVII.128

³³ *De Posteritate Caini*, XL. 135

³⁴ *De Posteritate Caini*, XLI. 136

Rebecca exemplifies the need of the soul to accept humility and go towards God. The divine, according to Philo's thought in *De Posteritate Caini*, does not come to the human being. Rather, the human being must take the initiative to approach God. Philo pays extraordinary attention to Rebecca's offer of water to Isaac's servant. This episode, I believe, supplies Philo with a model of praxis that should be observable in the soul following in the line of Seth. Rebecca's offer of water demonstrates a concrete action of hospitality, however, Philo, interpreting the water as wisdom drawn from the spring of the word of God, interprets Rebecca/humility as an act of teaching. He writes,

Rebecca is to be therefore commended for following the ordinances of the father of all and letting down from a higher position the vessel which contains wisdom, called the pitcher, on to her arm, and for holding out to the learner the teaching which he is able to receive.³⁵

Rebecca (a type of humility) will compel a person engaged in divine wisdom to instruct others in the same, approaching those persons beginning their study. Additionally, Philo remarks upon Rebecca/humility's lavishness – she continues instructing until she has satiated the desire of the inquirer.³⁶ Philo draws a connection between the action of Rebecca giving water to Isaac's servant and his animals and the etymology of Seth proposed earlier in the treatise. Philo interprets Seth as meaning "watering".³⁷ "Rebecca" then "waters" those seeking wisdom. Philo teases out this imagery of 'watering wisdom' further when discussing the σπέρμα ἕτερον in the Septuagint text of Genesis.³⁸ God appears as a farmer or gardener cultivating his planted crop, with Philo noting that none of God's seed falls to the ground but ascends upwards, for God sows

³⁵ *De Posteritate Caini*, XLIV. 147

³⁶ *De Posteritate Caini*,

³⁸ See also Hindy Najman, "Cain and Abel as Character Traits," *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 2003) Najman contends the patriarchs mentioned in *De Posteritate Caini* can only reasonably read as types for Philo and not as persons, mythic or otherwise.

in souls bountiful seeds yielding fruit appropriate to each soul.³⁹ Philo interprets Seth as the seed of human virtue - the person from which all subsequent virtuous persons derive. Seth, as the seed or originator of human virtue, remains with the human race, ὁ δὲ Σήθ ἄτε σπέρμα ὄν ἀνθρωπίνης ἀρετῆς οὐδέποτε τὸ ἀνθρώπων ἀπολείπει γένος.⁴⁰ Philo appeals to the subsequent descents of Seth and argues that each descendent increases the virtue begun with in Seth himself. The virtue of Seth is the starting point for the virtue of Noah while Abraham's virtue begins at the zenith of Noah's.⁴¹ This having been said, Philo does not confine virtue to Seth's biological lineage. The progression of virtue culminates in the teaching of Moses. At this point, one must recall Philo's broader interpretation of Moses as maintaining a teaching proscribed for the whole of the people of Israel and, in Philo's interpretation, any one interested in true philosophy.

Seth in Christian Literature

Seth appears as figure of interest in both orthodox and Gnostic sources. The fourth century Coptic *Gospel of the Egyptians*, found among the Nag Hammadi codices, is a Christian-Gnostic text extrapolating on the figure of Seth.⁴² Bohlig and Wisse, in their critical edition of the text in Brill's edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices, note the possibility of the ancient Egyptian pantheon influencing the portrayal of Seth in the text. Bohlig and Wisse hypothesize

³⁹ *De Posteritate Caini*, XLIX.171

⁴⁰ *De Posteritate Caini*, L.173; And just as Seth is the seed of human goodness/virtue, he will never abandon the human race.

⁴¹ *De Posteritate Caini*, LI.175

⁴² Layton argues for a likely compositional date prior to 350 CE, the approximate date of the manuscript current critical editions and translations are based off of.

that the Gnostic tendency to find an esoteric good in an exoteric evil figure.⁴³ They presuppose that there is a possibility that Seth's character in the Gospel of the Egyptian's is meant to correspond to the Egyptian god Set/Seth, the traditionally evil god being reinterpreted by the third son of Adam.⁴⁴ Bohlig and Wisse appeal to evidence of attempts to rehabilitate Set among the Egyptian pantheon of gods in Egyptian magical texts and note that where Set was associated with sodomy in Egyptian religion, the seed of Seth are said to dwell in the "holy" city of Sodom.⁴⁵

As Layton notes, the *Gospel of the Egyptians* recounts the standard Gnostic creation myth, expanding upon the role of the invisible spirit as progenitor of a separate Gnostic universe and the establishment of the Gnostic church.⁴⁶ The great Seth, the pre-existent savior, manifests in human history three times, culminating in Jesus' adoption by Seth.⁴⁷ Seth of the Hebrew Bible appears as a son of the great Seth, the pre-existent savior. Earthly Seth's primary role in the text is as the source of an incorruptible race of celestial origins. Adamas prays for a son who will become "the father of the immovable and incorruptible race and because of it the silence and the voice may appear and that because of it the dead aeon may raise itself so that it may dissolve."⁴⁸ The Logos descends from the invisible spirit and begins the series of heavenly processions to the

⁴³ Bohlig and Wisse, *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, Nag Hammadi Codices. 35 Wekel has also advanced a similar view, Konrad Wekel, "Die drei Stelen des Seth," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (100 no 8 Ag 1975) It should be noted, however, that Pearson strongly criticizes this view, noting that if Seth and the Egyptian God Set are meant to be identifiable in the Gnostic texts, there should have been some assimilation of Set's tendencies unto the character of Seth. See Birger Pearson, "Egyptian Seth and Gnostic Seth," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (no 11 1977) and Birger Pearson, "The Figure of Seth in Gnostic Literature," *Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol 2 (Leiden : Brill 1981)

⁴⁴ Bohlig and Wisse. 35

⁴⁵ Bohlig and Wisse. 35

⁴⁶ Bentley Layton. *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit, The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Double Day & Co. 1985), 101. The tractate concludes with an account of the Gnostic baptism and thus reception into the Gnostic church.

⁴⁷ Layton.

⁴⁸ *Gospel of the Egyptians*, III:51:9-10

material world leading to the creation of the earthly Seth and his eventual progeny.⁴⁹ Seth is the product of a cosmic union; the great invisible Seth copulated with the earthly aeons of Sodom and Gomorrah, producing the incarnation of his seed.⁵⁰ Seth's line is a link between the natural world and the supernatural world, directly produced by the emanations of the original invisible spirit.

Seth is also seen as the guardian of sacred knowledge in the Gnostic tradition. The *Three Tablets of Seth* purport to be the record of the great Patriarch's witness to the Gnostic myth. Layton notes the notion of "tablets" or "steles" has the connotation of a gigantic stone slab set up in the city and containing public records. Seth's transmission of primordial sacred knowledge is found in the *Lt. Life of Adam and Eve*. Eve instructs her surviving children to record all they have seen and heard of their parents' lives for their future offspring. After Eve's death, Seth commits himself to the task of constructing the tablets requested by Eve. Seth makes the tablets in both stone and clay to survive the various punishments God may send upon the earth. According to the *Life of Adam and Eve*, the arcane sacred knowledge passed on from Seth formed the basis of the Solomon's wisdom.⁵¹

The *Secret Book of John* (written no later than 350 C.E., the date of the extant manuscript) briefly describes Seth as the offspring produced by Adam and his essence, Eve.⁵² The probable product of a Gnostic school in Alexandria, *Secret Book of John* describes Seth as the result of a divine human union, the Mother having sent the Spirit down to awaken Adam's essence in Eve.⁵³ The end result is the text's affirmation that Seth is the seed according to an

⁴⁹ *Gospel of the Egyptians*, III:53:12-III:54:10

⁵⁰ *Gospel of the Egyptians*, III:71:9

⁵¹ *Lt. Life of Adam and Eve*, 51:3-7

⁵² *Secret Book of John* 63:12-64:3 Two English editions of this book have been consulted for this writing, that found in *The Gnostic Scriptures* edited by Bentley Layton and Karen King's latest translation. See Karen King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2006).

⁵³ King, *The Secret Revelation of John*, 10.

eternal race.⁵⁴ The *Hypostases of the Archons* (written before 350 C.E., the date of the manuscript) parallels the notion of Seth's being produced by a human-divine union, going so far as to claim Seth is not the offspring of Eve, but of Eve's spiritual and superior counterpart who had originally been present in Adam as a heavenly androgenen but fled when the lower material powers were preparing to corrupt Adam.⁵⁵ Throughout the surviving Sethian Gnostic texts the theme of Seth as the source of a separate (Gnostic) and quasi-divine race is apparent.⁵⁶ Another theme frequently explored by these same texts is Seth as an illuminator of secret knowledge. In the *Apocalypse of Adam*, Seth is portrayed as receiving revelations from his father Adam which he is then charged with passing on to his seed.⁵⁷ Seth's role as a revelator of secret knowledge may also be depicted in the Three Steles of Seth, upon which Seth writes praises of the true God.

Orthodox Christian speculation on the person of Seth was largely reserved to the Syrian church. Jurgen Tubach has presented a fine summary of the Syrian evidence in his article "Seth and the Sethites in Early Syriac Literature." Ephrem's commentary on Genesis attests to a tradition in which Seth and his seed originally lived in a region separate from the offspring of Cain.⁵⁸ Seth had originally bound his descendents to a promise to never leave their dwelling. Eventually, Seth's descendents break this promise, and enter the lands of Cain's descendents, where, enticed by the inventions of Jubal and the produce of Jabal, eventually settle and marry

⁵⁴ Pearson, "Seth in Gnostic Literature," 481.

⁵⁵ *Hypostases of the Archons* 89,7. The English text consulted for this writing is that of Bentley Layton in *The Gnostic Scriptures*. New York. 1985

⁵⁶ Pearson, "Seth in Gnostic Literature," 481. Pearson sees the concept of Seth as the progenitor of the Gnostic race as having affinity with Philo's thought in *De Post. Caini*: "Again, commenting on the term ἕτερον σπέρμα in Gen 4:25, Philo says that Seth is the 'seed of human virtues sown from God.' For Philo, therefore, all virtuous men are of the race of Seth."

⁵⁷ *Apocalypse of Adam*, 85:19-24. Pearson argues that this theme of Seth passing on secret knowledge to his seed is depicted in the Gospel of the Egyptians' narrative of Seth hiding away a secret book atop a mountain. (III 68:1-3)

⁵⁸ For an English translation of Ephrem's *Commentary on Genesis*, see St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Selected Prose Works*, Translated by Edward G. Matthews, JR. and Joseph P. Amar, Edited by Kathleen McVey (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1994)

with Cain's descendents.⁵⁹ Ephrem identifies the sons of God as the descendents of Seth and the daughters of man as the descendents of Cain. Ephrem does not completely reject a literal interpretation of the Genesis 6 narrative. Ephrem attests to a belief in human beings of extraordinary size resulting from the sexual relations between the Sethite and Cainite lines. Ephrem interprets Cain's line as having lived off of the food from "cursed" ground and therefore unable to acquire proper nutrition. Seth's line, meanwhile, enjoyed better yield from the land and better nutrition. The sons of Seth possessed a natural physical prowess over the sons of Cain and pass this trait onto the progeny between the two lines.⁶⁰

The *Spelunca thesaurum*, the *Cave of Treasures*, is, according to Tubach, a compilation of early Syriac traditions concerning Seth predating the writings of Ephrem.⁶¹ The *Cave of Treasures* describes Seth as perfect as Adam, which Tubach interprets as indicating that Adam's likeness to God was passed on to Seth.⁶² This description of Seth as possessing Adam's likeness to God is then complicated by the affirmation that Seth and all of his descendents were giants.⁶³ Seth receives burial instructions from Adam as well as a warning to never marry into Cain's line.⁶⁴ After Adam's death and burial, the Cainites migrate to live on the plains and the Sethites migrate to a mountain adjacent to Eden where they live a life pleasing to God.⁶⁵ The Sethites engage in morning lauds, climbing to the summit of the mountain to sing with the angels of God.⁶⁶ Eventually, Seth's descendents migrate down from the mountain to the plains inhabited

⁵⁹ Jurgen Tubach, "Seth and Sethites in Early Syriac Literature," *Eve's Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Boston: E.J. Brill 2003), 190.

⁶⁰ Tubach.190

⁶¹ Tubach.194

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Tubach. 196

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

by Cain's line and are enticed into leaving their segregated life by the innovations of the Cainites.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Tubach. 197

Chapter Three: Background – Christian interpretation of the sons of God in Genesis 6

The critical apparatus of the Septuagint demonstrates the redaction history of Genesis 6 in Greek. Aquila and Symmachus followed a Masoretic text type, translating the extant Hebrew text faithfully as οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ. Codex Alexandrinus (circa 5th century C.E.), however, presents us with ἀγγέλοι τοῦ θεοῦ. Whether or not this is an example of mistranslation, interpretation, or an instance of Codex Alexandrinus following a different Hebrew manuscript tradition is uncertain. Attempts at critical reconstruction of the earliest Septuagint text largely side with οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, noting the textual tradition contained in Codex Alexandrinus. It is worth noting that the topic of the Sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 and the motif of the fall of the angels is expansive enough to constitute a separate thesis. I will restrict myself only to the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 that falls within the general trajectory of the orthodox or catholic Christian tradition. Gnostic materials utilized the myth of the fall of the angels in a very different manner and there are many sources available on the Gnostic materials.¹

I Enoch

1 Enoch (written circa 200 C.E.) possibly represents the earliest and certainly most detailed explication of the account of the sons of God and the daughters of man in Genesis 6. The account of the fall of the angels begins at 1 Enoch chapter 6, “In those days, when the children of man had multiplied, it happened that there were born unto them handsome and beautiful daughters. And the angels, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them; and they said to one

¹ The fall of the angels in Gnostic literature is represented in the complexity of the Gnostic creation myth. See, for instance, Gedaliahu Stroumsa, “The Archons as Seducers” and “Unde Malum,” *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1984)

another, “Come, let us choose wives for ourselves from among the daughters of man and beget us children.”² Comparing the Greek fragments of 1 Enoch 6 (Gizeh fragments) to the Greek text of Genesis 6, we can note some lexical affinity between the two:

καὶ ἐγένετο ἡνίκα ἤρξαντο οἱ ἄνθρωποι πολλοὶ γίνεσθαι ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ θυγατέρες ἐγενήθησαν αὐτοῖς ἰδόντες δὲ οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ τὰς θυγατέρας τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὅτι καλαὶ εἰσιν ἔλαβον ἑαυτοῖς γυναῖκας ἀπὸ πασῶν ὧν ἐξελέξαντο . (Gen 6:1)

And it came to be that men became many (multiplied) upon the earth and the begat daughters and the sons of God seeing that the daughters of man were beautiful took to/for themselves women from all that they chose.

Καὶ ἐγένετο οὗ ἂν ἐπληθύνθησαν οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐγενήθησαν θυγατέρες ὠραῖαι καὶ καλαί. καὶ ἐθεάσαντο αὐτὰς οἱ ἄγγελοι υἱοὶ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἐπεθύμησαν αὐτάς, καὶ εἶπαν πρὸς ἀλλήλους Δεῦτε ἐκλεξώμεθα ἑαυτοῖς γυναῖκας ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ γεννήσομεν ἑαυτοῖς τέκνα.

And it was when the sons of men had multiplied, in this day they begat ripe and beautiful daughters and the angels, the sons of heaven, beheld them and desired them, and one to another they said, ‘come, let us take for ourselves women from the men and they will bring into being children for us.

The lexical affinities between the two texts, although marred by changes of tense, offer the possibility of some form literary dependency. In particular, the Gizeh fragment of 1 Enoch appears to take off from the Greek text of Genesis. The justification for utilizing the Greek texts over Hebrew, Aramaic, or Ge’ez texts is largely derived from a combination of missing data and chronology. The Aramaic texts found at Qumran suffer from too many lacunae. Additionally, the Ge’ez texts, both of Genesis and 1 Enoch, are largely the product of the fifth century at the earliest. By the fifth century, Christianity had been firmly established in Ethiopia; however, almost all of our surviving Ge’ez manuscripts are products of the tenth century C.E.

² 1 Enoch 6:1-2. The English translation of 1 Enoch is taken from E. Isaac’s translation in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Volume One, Edited by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Double Day & Co. 1983) For the Greek fragments see Charles, R.H. *The Book of Enoch*. Oxford. 1893. See also, <http://ocp.tyndale.ca/1-ethiopic-apocalypse-of-enoch#1-1> (accessed 04/06/2012) for an online presentation of the original texts.

Additionally, the Ge'ez text, following the translation tradition of the Septuagint, is likely the product of Greek originals. Thus, the Greek fragments, when they supply a substantial amount of material, are invaluable when discussing the relationship between Genesis 6 and I Enoch 6.

Syncellus records a major variant of I Enoch 6 that should be noted in this discussion:

Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐγεννήθησαν αὐτοῖς θυγατέρες ὠραῖαι. καὶ ἐπεθύμησαν αὐτάς οἱ ἐγρήγοροι καὶ εἶπον πρὸς ἀλλήλους· ἐκλεξώμεθα ἑαυτοῖς γυναῖκας ἀπὸ τῶν θυγατέρων τῶν ἀνθρώπων τῆς γῆς.

And it came to be that they begat themselves ripe daughters. And the Gregori (lit. the watchers) beheld them and said to one another, 'let us take for ourselves women from the daughters of men upon the earth.'

Syncellus' recording of I Enoch 6 contains lexical affinity with both the text of Genesis as well as the text of Gizeh fragment. The parallels to the Genesis narrative have, as with the Gizeh fragment, been underlined above. However, Syncellus also records lexical parallels with the expansions in the Gizeh fragment. Syncellus' reference also provides a Greek translation of the proper name of the group of angels found in the Aramaic fragments in the form of οἱ ἐγρήγοροι.

The narrative of I Enoch continues by describing the fall of the angels of God. The impetus for the fall of the angels stems from the machinations of two figures, Shemyaza, the figure who encourages the other angels to take human wives, and Azazel whom the text identifies as the figure responsible for revealing previously hidden knowledge to humanity, these include the arts of seduction/beautification for women as well as alchemy.³ Additional angels teach humanity incantation and witchcraft and astrology.⁴ As the narrative continues, the consequences of Shemyaza and Azazel's actions are explored. The consequences are recorded in two distinct text units, those of Shemyaza in 7:1-6 and 9:8 and those of Azazel in 9:6-7. I Enoch 7:1-6 details the general fall of angels and states many of the charges leveled against Azazel in

³ I Enoch 6:3, 8:1

⁴ I Enoch 8:3

the following section as well as provides an account of the origin of the Nephilim. The knowledge revealed by Azazel is later defined in 9:6-7 as the knowledge of every form of oppression according to the Ge'ez text. The Greek text in the Gizeh fragments preserves a variant description of the arcane knowledge revealed by Azazel, *καὶ πάντα σὺ ὄραξ ἃ ἐποίησεν Ἀζαήλ, ὃς ἐδίδαξεν πάσας τὰς ἀδικίας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐδήλωσεν τὰ μυστήρια τοῦ αἰῶνος τὰ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ἃ ἐπιτηδεύουσιν καὶ ἔγνωσαν ἄνθρωποι.*⁵ 1 Enoch eventually distinguishes the two levels of sin comprising the fall of the angels. Shemyaza is guilty of leading the angels to sin against themselves by copulating with women while Azazel is guilty for corrupting humanity with previously hidden celestial knowledge.

The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs.

The author of the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* (written in approximately the second century B.C.E.) presumes the authenticity and authority of I Enoch. Simeon addresses his sons with the prophetic and apocalyptic warning: “For I have seen in a copy of the book of Enoch that your sons will be ruined by promiscuity, and they shall injure with a sword the sons of Levi.”⁶ As Kee notes, the citation from what the author refers to as the book of Enoch does not appear explicitly in I Enoch, although a similar strain of thought is found 2 Enoch or the Slavonic Enoch.⁷

The Testament of Levi includes the following mention of the book of Enoch, “You shall be scattered as captives among the nations, where you will be a disgrace and a curse. For the

⁵ “and see all that Azazel has done, how he has taught all unrighteousness upon the earth and made visible the mysteries of the ages in heaven, how they pursued and knew men.”

⁶ *Testament of Simeon* 5:4. The English translation utilized for this thesis is that of H.C. Kee in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Vol. 1.

⁷ See editorial notes to *The Testament of Twelve Patriarchs* 786

house which the Lord shall choose shall be called Jerusalem, as the book of Enoch the Righteous maintains.”⁸ As with the reference to the book of Enoch in the Testament of Simeon, there is no correspondence between this reference and the extant Enoch material. It must be noted that the Testament of Levi demonstrates the likely Christian redaction of the final form of the text of the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* as we have it today. We find signs of this redaction at 10:2, “See, I am free of responsibility for your impiety or for any transgression which you may commit until the consummation of the ages, against Christ, the Savior of the world, in leading Israel astray and fomenting great evils against the Lord.”

The sons of God myth in the New Testament

Various portions of the New Testament display knowledge of the sons of God myth, most especially in the manner interpreted by I Enoch. The spirits in prison in I Peter 3:19 refers to I Enoch 10:4-6 and its account of the subsequent punishment given to the angels who sinned. II Peter is more explicit in its evocation of the sons of God myth, εἰ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἀγγέλων ἀμαρτησάντων οὐκ ἐφείσατο, ἀλλὰ σειροῖς ζόφου ταρταρώσας παρέδωκεν εἰς κρίσιν τηρουμένους.⁹ II Peter’s allusion to the sons of God myth avoids an explicit citation of I Enoch and appears to refer to a broader interpretative tradition. Conversely, the Epistle of Jude makes explicit citation of I Enoch in its text,

Ἐπροφήτευσεν δὲ καὶ τούτοις ἑβδομος ἀπὸ Ἀδὰμ Ἐνώχ λέγων Ἴδου ἦλθον Κύριος ἐν ἀγίαις μυριάσιν αὐτοῦ, ποιῆσαι κρίσιν κατὰ πάντων καὶ ἐλέγξει πάντας τοὺς ἀσεβεῖς περὶ πάντων τῶν ἔργων ἀσεβείας αὐτῶν ὧν ἠσέβησαν καὶ περιπάντων τῶν σκληρῶν ὧν ἐλάλησαν κατ’ αὐτοῦ ἀμαρτωλοὶ ἀσεβεῖς.¹⁰

⁸ *Testament of Levi* 10:5

⁹ “For God did not spare the angels who sinned, but handed them over bound to the darkness of Tartarus into the awaiting judgment.”

ὅτι ἔρχεται σὺν ταῖς μυριάσιν αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, ποιῆσαι κρίσιν κατὰ πάντων, καὶ ἀπολέσει πάντας τοὺς ἀσεβεῖς, καὶ ἐλέγξει πᾶσαν σάρκα περὶ πάντων ἔργων τῆς ἀσεβείας αὐτῶν ὧν ἠσέβησαν καὶ σκληρῶν ὧν ἐλάλησαν λόγων, καὶ περὶ πάντων ὧν κατελάλησαν κατ' αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἀσεβεῖς.¹¹

Jude makes a comparatively complete citation of I Enoch 1:9, with minor changes from the Greek text found in the Gizeh fragments. Whereas both of the Petrine allusions leave some room for interpretation as to whether or not the authors are appealing to I Enoch or a general myth of the sons of God popular in Jewish interpretations of Scripture, Jude appears to have either possessed a copy of or memorized I Enoch and appeals to its rendition of the sons of God/fallen angels myth as authoritative.

Early Christian Reception

Justin Martyr (c.100 – 165 C.E.) is, so far as can be determined, the earliest Christian author outside of the New Testament to write on the sons of God myth. Two writings are of interest for the topic at hand: the *Second Apology* and the *Dialogue with Trypho*.¹² As observed by Reed, Justin does not seem to utilize Genesis 6:1-4 for his use of the myth, but rather 1 Enoch.¹³ Justin's preference for 1 Enoch as the source of the fallen celestial sons of God is notable in the *Second Apology*, written anywhere between 140 – 161 C.E. and addressed to the

¹⁰ Jude 1:14-15, "And concerning these Enoch, the seventh (generation) from Adam, prophesied, saying 'Behold, the Lord comes a number of his saints, to make judgment upon all and to convict all of the deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in an ungodly way and all the harsh things the ungodly sinners have spoken against him.'"

¹¹ I Enoch 1:9, "For he will come with his number of saints, he will make judgment upon all, and he will utterly destroy all of the ungodly, and he will rebuke all flesh for all their ungodly works being ungodly and the harsh words they had spoken, and concerning all the talk of ungodly sinners against him."

¹² The text of Justin's *First* and *Second Apologies* are taken from Saint Justin Martyr, *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, translated by Thomas B. Falls (New York: Christian Heritage, Inc. 1948)

¹³ Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of the Enochic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2005), 162.

Roman senate. In Justin's use of the sons of God myth, God had originally placed the angels in charge of the care of humanity.¹⁴ The angels of God succumb to sexual desire for the daughters of men and produce a race of demons from their copulation.¹⁵ Following *I Enoch* 8:1-3, Justin attributes the revelation of forbidden knowledge among humanity and the resulting wickedness to the work of the fallen angels.¹⁶ Justin makes an adjustment to the myth of the fallen sons of God by equating the pantheon of Roman gods with the fallen angels and charging the Romans with mistakenly identifying the deeds of the fallen angels (or the gods) with God himself.¹⁷ In the *First Apology*, Justin makes allusion to the angelic descent myth, although only briefly. In chapter five of the *First Apology*, Justin ascribes demonic influence to the decisions of the Roman Empire regarding Christians and implies it is the latest of a long history of demonic manifestation in human history, including the seduction of women, the corruption of boys and terrifying visions.¹⁸ It is uncertain from which source Justin utilizes the myth of the fallen angels in the *First Apology*. Justin's source for the angelic descent myth is clearer, but equally as brief, in the *Dialogue with Trypho*. In chapter 79, Trypho accuses Justin of holding the blasphemous position that angels apostatized and fornicated with women.¹⁹ Justin defends the belief in apostate angels on the grounds of scriptural passages that denote angels as having abandoned service to the Most High. Reed has noted that Justin's two *Apologies* and his *Dialogue with Trypho* are directed at two very different audiences. The *Apologies* are directed to a Roman audience, particularly those persons with socio-political influence whereas the *Dialogue with*

¹⁴ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 5:2

¹⁵ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*

¹⁶ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 5.4

¹⁷ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 5.5

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 5

¹⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Translated by Thomas B. Falls, Revised by Thomas P. Halton (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2003), 79.

Trypho is directed to a Jewish audience.²⁰ The variance in audience may explain the choice between *I Enoch* in the *Apologies* and Genesis 6:1-4 in the *Dialogue with Trypho*.²¹

Irenaeus of Lyon cites the sons of God myth in his treatise, *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus writes at 1.15.6,

Marcus, maker of idols, observer of portents, skilled in astrology and in all arts of magic, whereby you confirm your erroneous doctrines. Showing wonders to whomever you lead into error, showing the works of the apostate Power, marvels which Satan, your father, teaches you always to perform through the power of angelic Azazel, using you as the precursor of godless evil.²²

The citation in Irenaeus is thought to be from a poem against Marcus written by bishop Pothinus. The poem explicitly portrays Azazel as the agent through whom astrology and magic may be performed by a human being. This portrayal of Azazel follows the character's appearance in *I Enoch* closely. Irenaeus' most extensive citation of the sons of God myth occurs in his, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*. Existing only in Armenian and discovered only in the twentieth century, the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* is designed to be a catechetical treatise, expressing the doctrine of the Church under the authority of the bishop. The following is citation from the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, containing Irenaeus' on the fall of the angels,

And wickedness very long-continued and widespread pervaded all the race of men, until very little seed of justice was in them. For unlawful unions came about on earth, as angels linked themselves with offspring of the daughters of men, who bore to them sons, who, on account of their exceeding great size were called Giants. The angels, then, brought to their wives as gifts teachings of evil, for they taught them the virtues of roots and herbs, and dyeing and cosmetics and discoveries of precious materials, love-philtres, hatreds, amours, passions,

²⁰ Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity*, 166-167.

²¹ Reed has pursued this line of thought in relation to the origin of evil and the position of pagans and Jews in relation to the Christian concept of salvation. See Reed, 166-167.

²² Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against the Heresies*, Book 1, translated by Dominic J. Unger, textual notes (New York: Newman Press 1992), 214.

constraints of love, the bonds of witchcraft, every sorcery and idolatry, hateful to God.²³

This citation from the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* provides us with Irenaeus' most detailed appropriation of the sons of God myth. Irenaeus follows an expansion of the account in Genesis 6:1-4, including a literal interpretation of angelic descent, procreation with women and production of an offspring of giants. The mention of the sons of God providing humanity with "the virtues of roots and herbs, and dyeing and cosmetics and discoveries of precious materials, love-philtres, hatreds, amours, passions, constraints of love, the bonds of witchcraft, every sorcery and idolatry, hateful to God," seems to confirm Irenaeus' use of 1 Enoch in addition to Genesis 6:1-4.

Tertullian is most explicit in his belief in the literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. Born in about the middle of the second century in Carthage to pagan parents, Tertullian converted to Christianity, presumably as an adult, as professed by the Carthagian church though he would convert to Montanism in about 205 C.E.²⁴ Tertullian was well versed in both Latin and Greek and history has largely deemed him to be the first major Christian author to write in the Latin language.²⁵ Tertullian's *Apology* and *On the Ornamentation of Women* explicitly utilizes the myth of the fallen sons of God. The *Apology* was likely written at the end of 197 C.E. and was modeled on the apologetic literature circulating in the Greek language.²⁶ The *Apology* is framed as an address to the officials of the Roman Empire, designed to demonstrate the injustice of the

²³ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 18, translated by Joseph P. Smith (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press 1952)

²⁴ Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*. Translated by Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain. Introduction. Vii-viii. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1950)

²⁵ Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*. Viii.

²⁶ Tertullian, *The Apology*. Translated by Emily Joseph Daly. Introduction. 3

Empire's treatment of Christians.²⁷ The English translation of the *Apology* utilized for this writing is that of Emily Joseph Daly in the Fathers of the Church series (volume 10). The Latin text consulted for comparison is that of H. Hoppe in the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* series (volume 69). In chapter 22 of the *Apology*, Tertullian writes,

And so, we say that there exist certain spiritual natures. The term is not new; the philosophers know of evil spirits, like Socrates himself awaiting the will of his *daimon*. Why not; since it is said that a *daimon* was attached to him from the days of his childhood, which obviously held him back from the path of goodness. All the poets know of them; even the unlettered man of the street makes frequent use of a curse, for in the same tone of execration he pronounces the name of Satan, the leader of this wicked race – and does this as a result of the soul's instinctive knowledge. Again, Plato did not deny the existence of angels. As witnesses to the names of both good and evil spirits, the magicians are at hand. As for the details of how some of the angels, of their own accord, were perverted and then constituted the source of the even more corrupt race of devils, a race damned by God together with the originators of the race and him whom we have mentioned as their leader, the account is found in Sacred Scripture.

Tertullian appears to utilize a literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 in which the sons of God are identified as angelic beings. The most telling indicator that Tertullian is referring to Genesis 6:1-4 is his allusion to a race of beings that are the descendents of the fallen angels. There is the distinct possibility that Tertullian alludes to both Genesis 6:1-4 and 1 Enoch. Genesis 6:5 indicates the flood was sent as a punishment primarily for human wickedness. 1 Enoch, by comparison, interprets the flood as a punishment for the fallen angels and their offspring. In this citation, the sons of God myth, in the form of a possible combination of Genesis 6:1-4 and 1 Enoch, is utilized by Tertullian to ascribe a demonic origin to both Greco-Roman philosophy and Greco-Roman religion. The fallen sons of God are the entities who inspire philosophical thought and are behind the names invoked in pagan religious observance.

²⁷ Tertullian, *The Apology*. Introduction. 3. In Chapter 1.1, Tertullian writes, "Magistrates of the Roman Empire, seated as you are before the eyes of all, in almost the highest position in the state to pronounce judgment."

Tertullian's *On the Apparel of Women* features further utilization of the sons of God myth and an increasing reliance on the myth as presented in 1 Enoch as opposed to Genesis 6:1-4. *On the Apparel of Women* is written prior to Tertullian's conversion to Montanism and exhorts the reader to abandon any cultural connection to the Greco-Roman world.²⁸ Tertullian writes,

For those, too, who invented these things are condemned to the penalty of death, namely, those angels who rushed from heaven upon the daughters of men so that this ignominy is also attached to woman. For when these fallen angels had revealed certain well-hidden material substances, and numerous other arts that we only faintly revealed, to an age much more ignorant than ours – for surely they are the ones who disclosed the secrets of metallurgy, discovered the natural properties of herbs, made known the power of charms, and aroused the desire to pry into everything, including the interpretation of the stars – they granted to women as their special and, as it were, personal property these means of feminine vanity: the radiance of precious stones with which necklaces are decorated in different colors, the bracelets of gold which they wrap around their arms, the colored preparations which are used to dye wool, and that black powder which they use to enhance the beauty of their eyes. If you want to know that kind of things these are, you can easily learn from the character of those who taught these arts. Have sinners ever been able to show and provide anything conducive to holiness, unlawful lovers anything contributing to chastity, rebel angels anything promoting the fear of God?²⁹

Tertullian argues the angels saw the beauty of women and left heaven to copulate with them. The angels revealed numerous hidden arts and sciences that had, at that point in history, not yet been revealed to humanity. The list of arts, including metallurgy, is taken from 1 Enoch 8:1-3. Among these arts is the ornamentation of women. The ornamentation of women is, by its nature derived from angels who had abandoned God to satisfy sexual temptation, facilitative of both seduction and apostasy.³⁰ It is these same angels who, according to Tertullian, Paul says Christian's are to judge at the end of the age in 1 Corinthians 6:3.³¹

²⁸ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women, Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*. Fathers of the Church. Vol. 40. Introduction.

²⁹ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. Translated by Edwin A. Quain.

³⁰ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. II

³¹ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. 2.4

In the course of Tertullian's utilization of the fallen angels myth one finds early indications that the myth was not universally accepted in the early centuries of Christianity. The early skepticism of the myth seems to derive from suspicion surrounding the myth's relationship to 1 Enoch. Tertullian writes,

I am aware that the book of Enoch which assigns this role to the angels is not accepted because it is not admitted into the Jewish canon. I suppose it is not accepted because they did not think that a book written before the flood could have survived that catastrophe which destroyed the whole world.³²

After acknowledging the objection towards 1 Enoch on account of the Jewish canon, Tertullian proceeds to argue for the book's inspiration on account of its authenticity, if not through Enoch himself (the supposed antiquity of the book being a major stumbling block towards its universal acceptance) than through Noah, who Tertullian presumes would have naturally preserved the traditions of his great-grandfather for his posterity after the Flood.³³ The main purpose behind the composition of 1 Enoch, as contended by the majority of scholarship, was to provide an authoritative interpretation of the enigmatic verses comprising Genesis 6:1-4. Following Tertullian's argument, the myth, as recorded in 1 Enoch, of a sexual union between humans and angels has the authority of antiquity.³⁴

Writing around roughly 180 C.E., Clement of Alexandria (c.150 C.E.- 216 C.E.) utilizes the sons of God myth in his *Stromata*, although some of the references are subject to a great deal of interpretation.³⁵ Reed, for instance, identified *Stromata* I.XVI as containing an allusion to the

³² Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. 3.1

³³ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. 3.1-2

³⁴ Tertullian concludes this section of *On the Apparel of Women* by defending the 1 Enoch via Christological interpretation. In so far as the book has content that may be interpreted as referring to Jesus Christ, the book pertains to the Church and should be read by the Church. Additionally, Tertullian cites the authority of Epistle of Jude as verifying 1 Enoch's inspiration.

³⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, translated by John Ferguson (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1980)

sons of God myth. The passage discusses the supposed divine origins of Greek philosophy, commenting that certain persons have argued that Greek philosophy was delivered by “certain powers descending from heaven.”³⁶ Reed’s interpretation presumes philosophy may be considered part of the forbidden knowledge imparted by the sons of God. This interpretation gains more support when considering *Stromata* V.I where Clement offers his most detailed treatment of the sons of God myth. According to Clement, the angels who descended and took wives imparted to them secret knowledge. This knowledge was spread amongst humanity, though without the guidance of divine revelation there could be no assurance that philosophers would discover true doctrine.³⁷

Athenagoras treats of the myth in his *Embassy for Christians*, likely written between 176 and 177 C.E.³⁸ Athenagoras affirms a literal interpretation of the sons of God and daughters of man myth. There are no appeals to Enoch as an authoritative source and, when offering an account of the myth, there are none of the Enochian expansions in his writing. Before addressing the myth of the sons of God, Athenagoras proceeds with a philosophical exposition on the nature of angels. Athenagoras distinguishes God (the Father) from matter, the Son as the intelligence, reason and wisdom of the Father, and the Spirit as an effluence of the Father, “as light from fire.”³⁹ Angels, conversely, are created in closer proximity to matter, created for the purpose of controlling matter and the forms of matter.⁴⁰ Athenagoras conceives of a transcendent God, impregnable by material creation. For the sustenance of the creation, angels are more immediately related to material creation, being themselves created beings. This distinction permits Athenagoras to interpret the sons of God myth literally. God, being totally outside of

³⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* I.XVI

³⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* V.I

³⁸ *Early Christian Fathers*, edited by Cyril C. Richardson. (New York: Touchstone 1996) 291

³⁹ Athenagoras, *Embassy for Christians* 24

⁴⁰ Athenagoras, *Embassy for Christians* 24

matter, cannot commingle with material creation. The angels, however, have been created for the purpose of intimate interaction with matter. The sons of God are angels who abandoned the purpose of their creation,

And just as with men who have power to choose good or evil – for you would not honor the virtuous and punish evildoers if vice and virtue were not within their free choice – some are found zealous for what they are entrusted with by you, and others remiss, so it is with these angels too: some remained at the task for which they were created and to which they were appointed by God (for they received free will from God), while others acted wantonly towards their own nature and their charge.⁴¹

Athenagoras distinguishes between the fall of an angel dubbed the prince of matter (Satan) and a subsequent fall of angels who were enticed by women. His reference to the giants lacks the elaboration of 1 Enoch, meaning, there is no account of these angels having imparted previously undisclosed knowledge.⁴² He does, however, make a passing reference to the traditions of the giants that circulated among Greco-Roman poets with the objective of utilizing pagan sources to vouch for the “historicity” of his claims.⁴³ For the purpose of connecting the sons of God of Genesis 6:1-4, Athenagoras supplies us with a passing allusion to Ephesians 6:12,

These angels, then, that fell from heaven, dwell about our earth and sky and can no longer stretch upwards into the regions that are above the heavens. The souls of the giants are those spirits that wander about the world, and both classes are productive of motions, the spirits producing motions akin to the natures they have received, and the angels of such desires as those to which they fell victims.⁴⁴

Athenagoras describes the angels who fell as remaining on earth and *dwelling in the air and the earth*, unable to return to heaven and, perhaps in an allusion to the punishment of the offspring of

⁴¹ Athenagoras, *Embassy for Christians* 24 The English translation utilized for this writing is that Joseph Hugh Crehan in the Ancient Christian Writers Series, volume 23. 1956

⁴² Cf. 1 Enoch 8:1-3

⁴³ Athenagoras writes, “That even the poets have something to say about the giants should not surprise you. For worldly wisdom differs from divine just to the measure that truth differs from plausibility. While one is of heaven, the other is of earth; yet, according to the prince of matter himself, ‘we know how to tell many lies that resemble the truth.’” *Embassy for Christians* 24. Citing, Hesiod, *Theogony*. 27

⁴⁴ Athenagoras, *Embassy for Christians* 25

the fallen angels, the souls of the giants are transformed into demons.⁴⁵ The description of the fallen angels dwelling in the air recalls the description of the heavenly powers with whom the Christian wars as πρὸς τὰ πνευματικά (from πνευματικός, literally, *of the wind*, adjective of πνεῦμα, wind) τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις. I would argue that Athenagoras plays upon the nuances of meaning of πνευματικά/ πνεῦμα in a Greek-Christian context.

Julius Africanus (c.160 – c.240 C.E.) included the sons of God myth in his *Chronographiai*. The *Chronographiai*, as its title suggests, chronicles the history of the world up until 221 C.E. Julius is the first Christian author in the ante-Nicene period to record a Sethite/Cainite interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4, however, he does not reject a literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 completely. Rather, Julius provides several qualifiers that need to be factored into one's reading of the text in order for a literal interpretation to be possible. Julius attests to the variant readings of the Greek text between sons of God and angels of God.⁴⁶ Julius himself advocates for interpreting the passage as referring to marriage between the tribe of Seth and the tribe of Cain. Seth's seed are the sons of God due to the lineage of humanity springing from them, eventually climaxing in the birth of Jesus. Cain's seed, meanwhile, represents the daughters of man on account of their irrelevance to the lineage of Jesus and presumed extermination with the flood.⁴⁷ Julius is the first known Christian interpretation of the sons of God myth that identifies the narrative as concerning the comingling of two different human lines. This being said, Julius does not reject the literal interpretation of the myth as a viable interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. Rather, Julius advises that a literal interpretation must qualify which angels took wives from the daughters of men,

⁴⁵ Athenagoras, *Embassy for Christians*. Athenagoras' greek text reads: περὶ τὸν ἀέρα ἔχοντες καὶ τὴν γῆν, *dwelling in the air and earth*. The Greek text is taken from J. Geffcken's edition, *Zwei griechische Apologeten*. Leipzig-Berlin. 1907.

⁴⁶ Julius Africanus, *Chronographiai* II

⁴⁷ Julius Africanus, *Chronographiai* II

But if it is thought that these refer to angels, we must take them to be those who deal with magic and jewelry, who taught the women the notions of the stars and the knowledge of things celestial, by whose power the conceived giants as children.

Julius' allowance of the literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 is the last hospitable reference to such an interpretation in Western Christianity. Among the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers there is a substantial rejection of such an interpretation. Ecclesial writers of the fourth century would prefer a less literal interpretation of the passage in question.

Origen (c.184 – c.254 C.E.), while never disregarding 1 Enoch as spurious, heretical or uninspired, gradually wavers in his enthusiasm for the book. *De Principiis*, written in Alexandria around 212 – 215 C.E., contains Origen's most unambiguous citation of 1 Enoch as authentic Scripture. In the fourth chapter of *De Principiis*, Origen quotes directly from the text of 1 Enoch 21:1 and 1 Enoch 19:3 in that order. As with the earlier citation of Enoch from *De Principiis*, Enoch is appealed to in the context of books considered Scripture. However, Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* displays his increasing hesitancy to ascribe full canonicity to 1 Enoch. The *Commentary on the Gospel of John* was initiated at the incipit of Origen's literary career in Alexandria.⁴⁸ However, it would not be until later during his time in Caesarea (circa 234 C.E.) that the work was completed, most probably in 235 C.E.⁴⁹ The composition of the work likely coincided with the arrest of its patron, Origen's friend Ambrose.⁵⁰

Let us look at the words of the Gospel now before us. Jordan means their going down. The name Jared is etymologically akin to it, if I may say so; it also yields the meaning going down; for Jared was born to Maleleel, as it is written in the Book of Enoch – if anyone cares to accept that book as sacred – in the days when the sons of God came down to the daughters of men. Under this descent some

⁴⁸ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, translated by Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1989), 4.

⁴⁹ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, v.1, 4; *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, v.2, 12.

⁵⁰ Origen, *Commentary of the Gospel of John*, vol.2, translated by Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1993), 13.

have supposed that there is an enigmatical reference to the descent of souls into bodies, taking the phrase daughters of men as a tropical expression for this earthly tabernacle.⁵¹

Origen's reference to the Book of Enoch attests to a development in his own use of the sons of God myth. Origen demonstrates knowledge of an allegorical interpretation of the sons of God myth circulating at the time the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* was composed. Origen does not specify in what circles this interpretation circulates, Jewish or Christian. In this interpretation, however, the sons of God represent human souls descending from heaven and becoming incarnate in human bodies (the daughters of man). Aside from the apparent hesitancy to advocate for the canonicity of I Enoch, Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* is notable for presenting us with the first example of his interpretation of the sons of God myth. It is notable that he refers to the sons of God and not the angels of God, following the original text of the Septuagint and the Masoretic text in this reading, rather than the angels of God in later redaction of the Greek text or the angels of 1 Enoch. I believe this indicates the possibility that Origen may have primarily utilized Genesis 6:1-4 as the basis for his reading of the angelic descent myth.

Origen's *Contra Celsum* (written c. 248 C.E. in response to Celsus' polemic against Christianity – *The True Word* – written in 177 C.E. in reply to Justin's *First Apology*) marks the point at which Origen expresses most of his reservations regarding the inspiration of 1 Enoch. In the quotations from his work found in *Contra Celsum*, Celsus disputes the uniqueness of Jesus on account of the numerous accounts of angels having descended to earth. He argues that even according to the books Christians hold as sacred, Jesus is not the only celestial being to have descended.⁵² It would, in Celsus' estimation, be impossible to proclaim Jesus as the only one sent

⁵¹ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 25.

⁵² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.53.

from God if there are in Scripture other accounts of angels.⁵³ Origen argues that Celsus has both misinterpreted the books believed inspired by all the churches and also misidentified a book as inspired in all the churches. Origen notes that 1 Enoch is not universally accepted, therefore removing it from consideration of what constitutes Christian doctrine.⁵⁴ Origen also refers to the narrative contained in Genesis 6:1-4 when interpreting the myth of angelic descent on account of Genesis universal acceptance. He then reprises the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 stated in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*,

We shall nevertheless even on this point persuade those who are capable of understanding the meaning of the prophet, that even before us there was one who referred this narrative to the doctrine of souls, which became possessed with a desire for the corporeal life of men, and in this metaphorical language, he said, was termed daughters of men.⁵⁵

Origen's interpretation of the sons of God in *Contra Celsum* offers three points to consider. 1) When concluding this segment of the work, Origen implies there is still some room for interpretation of the meaning behind the narrative in Genesis 6:1-4.⁵⁶ 2) Origen understands 1 Enoch itself to be an interpretation of the text of Genesis 6:1-4, "that even before us there was one who referred this narrative to the doctrine of souls." 3) Origen utilizes an allegorical interpretation of the myth when the veracity of the incarnation is threatened. Origen adopts the allegorical interpretation to refute Celsus' rejection of the affirmation that Jesus is really the Son of God descended to earth.

John Chrysostom (347 – 407 C.E.) offers perhaps the most erudite argument for rejecting a literal interpretation of the sons of God myth, one that retains its merits in light of biblical scholarship. Chrysostom provides this interpretation in his 22nd homily on Genesis. Chrysostom

⁵³ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.54.

⁵⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.54.

⁵⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.55.

⁵⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.55.

begins by rejecting the identification of the sons of God with angels on textual grounds. While the term “sons of God” appears in other parts of Scripture, at no point is there an *explicit* identification of the sons of God with the angels of heaven or with the fallen angels.⁵⁷ He continues to refute the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 as an account of angelic descent on the grounds of canonical intertextuality. By Chrysostom’s time, the canon of Scripture is largely set. The canonical account of the fall of angels recorded in the *Apocalypse of John* implies a fall of the angels before the advent of man in Chrysostom’s interpretation.⁵⁸ Finally, Chrysostom dismisses the angelic descent interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 on the grounds that a being created incorporeal cannot become corporal for the sake of having intercourse with a corporal being.⁵⁹ He identifies the sons of God with the descendents of Seth on the grounds of the use of the term sons of God in other parts of Scripture. When exegeting the passage in his homilies on Genesis, Chrysostom notes that Scripture applies the term sons of God to human beings.⁶⁰ Chrysostom alludes Psalm 29:1, “give to the Lord, o sons of God, glory and power,” and Psalm 82:6-7, “I say to you, you are as gods, you are all sons of God the most high, but you will die like men,” in addition to John 1:23 and explains the term γίγαντες as denoting men of considerable physical stature and ability.⁶¹ Thus, for Chrysostom, the myth of the sons of God is explainable in entirely human terms.

Augustine (354-430 C.E.) rejects a literal interpretation of the sons of God myth in *De Civitate Dei* book XV. The composition of *De Civitate Dei* was influenced by the collapse of the Roman Empire in west at the hand of various “barbaric” invaders. The collapse of the Roman

⁵⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, translated by Robert C. Hill (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press 1990), 22.6.

⁵⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 22.7.

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 22.7.

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 22.8.

⁶¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 22.12.

Empire in the west came after decades of decline and during the period of the empire's Christianization. The composition of books 1-10 of *De Civitate Dei* was, as Augustine himself states, inspired by the collapse of Rome and, in particular, offered a response to the critique that Christianity or rather the institution of Christianity in the Roman Empire was the cause of the barbarian invasions.⁶² In the pages of books 1-10 the history of Rome is treated whereas books 11-22 properly treat of the concept of the earthly city and heavenly city and progress of the city of God.⁶³ Augustine sees the narrative of Genesis 6:1-4 as the original account of the mingling of the heavenly and earthly cities, when those who had previously organized a society around divine morality and the greater good lapsed into the lesser morality of earthly desire.⁶⁴ Augustine is aware of a number of textual issues that arise when comparing the Hebrew text, which he deems to be ambiguous, and the Septuagint, which, in his time, had manuscripts that read both οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ and ἀγγελοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ.⁶⁵ Augustine appeals to texts in the Bible in which righteous human beings were referred to as angels, thereby providing grounds for a metaphorical interpretation of the text.⁶⁶ He identifies the sons of God or angels of God with the line of Seth although he does not provide a rationale for this identification.⁶⁷ The description, according to the LXX and old Latin text, of the offspring of the sons of God and daughters of man as giants does not denote any spiritual or otherwise otherworldly character to their fathers. Augustine points to the frequent occurrence of human beings with well above average height.⁶⁸

⁶² Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, II.2.

⁶³ Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson, introduction by G.R. Evans (London: Penguin Books 2003), Xliii-xlvi.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XV.22.

⁶⁵ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XV.23. Augustine also makes note of Aquila's translation that read "sons of the gods."

⁶⁶ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XV.23.

⁶⁷ Augustine appears to find some significance in the etymology of Seth's name as it appears in the Biblical text. Augustine describes Seth as a "son of the resurrection," which appears to play with Eve's exclamation after his birth in the LXX, ἐξανάστησεν γάρ μοι ὁ θεὸς σπέρμα ἕτερον.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XV.23.

A point of convergence exists between Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus (393 – 460 C.E.). Chrysostom at one point states that the descendents of Seth were identifiable with the sons of God in virtue of Enosh (Seth’s first born) having started the tradition of calling upon God by name.⁶⁹ Chrysostom, however, only makes mention of this interpretation of Seth’s line in passing. Theodoret, however, supplies us with more complete illustration of this argument.

Theodoret begins with a detailed exegesis of the text of Genesis 6:1-4 that explicitly identifies the sons of God with human beings. The instance in question can be found in Genesis 6:3. He observes that after the sons of God copulate with the daughters of man, God responds, “my spirit shall not abide in these men forever, for they are flesh; their life span will be one hundred and twenty years.” For Theodoret, this text demonstrates the purely human identity of the sons of God in the Genesis narrative. Had the sons of God been angels, the text would have pointed towards angelic antagonists, rather than specifically mentioning “these men.”⁷⁰ Theodoret argues that God’s establishment of a set life-span is only appropriate to human beings, angels being immortal spirits and not subject to a finite duration.⁷¹ Additionally, He argues that if the narrative recorded a primordial instance of angelic descent, then the narrative would implicitly implicate God with injustice.⁷² The narrative, if taken to indicate an instance of angelic dissent, would present the angels as the causative agents of sin resulting in the deluge. Indeed, to Theodoret’s mind, if the sons of God were angels who had descended from heaven, the general evil that grew in God’s sight would have been the result of the angels raping the daughters of man.⁷³ As such, God would have punished human beings for the transgression of

⁶⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 22.8.

⁷⁰ Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Genesis, Questions on the Octateuch*, translated by Robert C. Hill (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2007) Question XLVII. 20-25. The Greek text is taken from the same volume.

⁷¹ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 10

⁷² Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 20-25

⁷³ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 20-25

angels creating an instance of divine injustice.⁷⁴ Like Chrysostom, Theodoret also points to the instances in Scripture where sons of God is used as an appellation for human beings. In particular, Theodoret interprets Psalm 82:1-2 with its divine council imagery as referring to human beings in its use of the term sons of God,

This is the title he gives to rulers, as indicated by what follows: ‘how long will you deliver unjust judgments and take the part of sinners? Judge in favor of the orphan and the poor, give justice to the lowly and the needy.’⁷⁵

After having treated of the question regarding the nature of the sons of God, Theodoret progresses to establish the identity of the sons of God via the narrative of Genesis. Theodoret’s identification largely rests upon the variances between the LXX and Masoretic revisions of the text at Genesis 4:26. The Septuagint reads, *καὶ τῷ Σηθ ἐγένετο υἱός ἐπωνόμασεν δὲ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐνωσ ὄτος ἤλπισεν ἐπικαλεῖσθαι τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ* (hoped to be called by the name of the Lord).⁷⁶ Whereas the Masoretic text has the more familiar “at that time to invoke/call upon the name of Yahweh.” Theodoret knows of Aquila’s translation of the text, which follows closer to the Masoretic text, although he dismisses Aquila’s translation as a puzzling manner of expressing the same concept as that of the LXX.⁷⁷ Following the Septuagint, Theodoret argues that Enosh lived virtuously and was known as “God” among his contemporaries and his offspring were known as sons of God.⁷⁸ At this point in his exegesis, the Syriac traditions surrounding the figure of Seth begin to influence his thought. Theodoret presents Seth’s lineage as having isolated itself from the line of Cain until such time as Seth’s progeny found Cain’s line attractive and was lured by their technological innovation.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 20-25

⁷⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 45-50

⁷⁶ And Seth begat a son and called his name Enosh, who hoped to be called by the name of the Lord.

⁷⁷ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 35-40

⁷⁸ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 40

⁷⁹ Theodoret of Cyrus, XLVII. 60-65

Chapters 2 and 3 have attempted to situate Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4, both in his invocation of the seed of Seth and his rejection of a literal interpretation of the text, into the history of Christian interpretation of the passage. When examining, however briefly, the history of the Christian interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and the sons of God myth one sees a noticeable change in interpretive tendencies. For the first three centuries or so a basically literal interpretation is followed, although Julius Africanus notes that early on an alternative and less literal interpretation was circulating in Christian circles. Origen's gradual distancing of himself from the text of 1 Enoch may offer some explanation as to why a literal interpretation falls out of favor among fourth century Christian authors. The apparent incarnation of angels would argue against the uniqueness of Christ's incarnation. By the fourth century, Christian interpretation heavily favors a less literal interpretation of the passage, one in which the sons of God functions as an appellation of the sons of Seth. The earliest example of this reinterpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 appears to come out of the Antiochian school of exegesis, beginning with John Chrysostom. Chrysostom, at the very least, links the revised interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 to Theodoret of Cyrus and John Cassian, in virtue of Cassian's time spent in Constantinople, although the amount of interaction he had with Chrysostom, outside of ordination to the diaconate, is unknown.

Chapter Four: Biblical Interpretation and the Conversion to Virtue

Before the flood each human being had a natural understanding of law infused by God.¹ Cain's line had continually chosen to follow their ancestor by choosing the exercise of vice. The eventual corruption of Seth's line, as Cassian writes, "by the freedom to sin and by the practice of sinning," necessitates the development of the Mosaic Torah in later generations.² Seth's line represents the last group of humanity to give way to the practice of sin. Seth's progeny utilize the freedom to sin to give into, as Cassian terms it, "wanton desire." Earlier in the same conference, He defines the initial sin as an inflammation of desire for the beauty of the daughters of Cain.³ He uses the seed of Seth motif to communicate the concept of the loss of a society constituted by divine knowledge of the law through submission to the vice of lust. One of ways in which Cassian wants the reader to interpret the Seed of Seth is through an ascetic parallel. The seed of Seth once naturally practiced virtue and worshipped the true God according to a well established ancestral tradition. The monk pursues something similar, that is, the conversion to a habitual practice of virtue leading eventually to contemplation. To understand this connection in Cassian's thought requires a treatment of the *scopos* and *telos* of the monk.

The *scopos* (goal) in Cassian's writings is purity of heart leading to the *telos* (end) of the kingdom of God.⁴ Ascetic praxis, which Cassian defines as "tools of perfection," consists of fasts, vigils, meditation, voluntary poverty by which the *scopos* of purity of heart is accomplished.⁵ The kingdom of God is largely eschatological for Cassian. This being said, Stewart correctly observes that Cassian at times seems to blur the distinction between the

¹ *Con.* VIII. XXIII. 1

² *Con.* VIII. XXIII. 1

³ *Con.* VIII. XXI. 4

⁴ I. I-IV.3

⁵ I. V.2-VII.4

eschatological kingdom of God (*telos*) and the experience of beatitude during earthly life.⁶ I will first examine the principles of purity of heart in Cassian's thought, followed by a similar examination of the Kingdom of God (*telos*). The decision to do this is based upon the order in which Cassian unfolds his ascetic schema in the pages of the *Conferences*. The purpose of this chapter is to describe Cassian's ascetic schema and its relationship to proper biblical interpretation. To do so, I will trace his thought in the order in which it unfolds.

The Goal: Purity of Heart

The accomplishment of purity of heart comes through a process of renunciation of all things that would lead to attachment to the created order before God. The first renunciation is that of material things. Cassian advises his readers that for the sake of purity of heart, one's connections to country, one's estate in life, family, wealth, the comforts of life, are abdicated so as to eliminate any material distraction from the purity of heart leading to the kingdom of God.⁷ The second renunciation involves a careful temperance towards the tools of purification themselves. Cassian detects a danger in the tools for purification being treated as the *telos* itself, without any cognizance of the real end toward which one's goals are directed.⁸ Following ancient Christian convention, Cassian sees the account of Martha and Mary as providing an illustration of distraction by the tools for purification. Martha exemplifies the work of purification/salvation but cannot cease her work while Mary stops to focus upon divine

⁶ Stewart. Cassian the Monk. pp.55-61

⁷ *Con.* I. V.3

⁸ I. VII.3

contemplation.⁹ The work, that is, exercising the tools of purification, must not become one's point of focus or else they may distract one from divine contemplation/*theoria*.

Renunciation requires the ascetic complete a three-tiered abdication of all things that could possibly distract from the contemplation – *theoria* – of God. Seeking to attain *theoria*, the ascetic renounces first the material comforts (family, estate, wealth), followed by a rejection of the principle vices, and concluded by the orientation of the mind to contemplation of the divine.¹⁰ The third renunciation is crucial to acquiring what Cassian interprets the seed of Seth as having eventually lost, divinely infused knowledge of God's law. The third renunciation produces an orientation in the mind which transcends the physical, both the distracting material comforts and the vices, and contemplates the eternal.¹¹ This is the orientation of mind that leads the ascetic to see himself as a citizen of heaven, a sojourner upon the earth waiting his savior.¹² This being said, the orientation of the mind to God does not divorce the individual from fulfilling the first and second renunciations. Cassian adamantly contends that the three renunciations are dependent upon one another to be fulfilled.¹³ Treating the tools of purification as an end in and of themselves prevents one from being able to engage in divine *theoria*, the contemplative vision of God. Conversely, regression in one of the first two renunciations removes one from divine contemplation as one effectively becomes “stuck” on whichever renunciation one can no longer sustain.

The process of renunciation is, all the while, directed by God's divine help. Renunciation leading to *theoria* cannot be undertaken on the basis of human will alone. Cassian understands God as offering innumerable opportunities to direct one's will to the divine, however, the human

⁹ I. VIII.1-2

¹⁰ III. VI.1

¹¹ III. VI.4

¹² III. VII.1-2

¹³ III. VII.1-2, 8-9

being has the responsibility to choose whether or not to respond to said opportunities.¹⁴ Cassian sees divine aid as active throughout the process of renunciation. The mastery of virtue cannot be accomplished by human effort alone, but requires the constant intervention of God to guide the human heart towards *theoria*,

Yet we should be certain that, even if we practice every virtue with unflagging effort, it is by no means thanks to our own diligence and application that we are able to attain perfection.¹⁵

At the point of reaching divine contemplation, the ascetic does not cease needing divine aid. In the process of renunciation, there is a quest to receive the direct infusion of divine knowledge,

They also long every day to arrive at knowledge of the law itself not through the effort of reading but with God as their teacher and enlightener as they say to him: ‘Show me, O Lord, your ways and teach me your paths.’¹⁶

The End: The Kingdom of God

Cassian uses *theoria* as the fulfillment of the goal of the monk (purity of heart). Cassian utilizes the term *theoria* to convey a precise meaning to contemplation. Cassian’s interpretation of the episode of Martha and Mary from Luke 10:41-42 helps illustrate this point as Cassian describes “the better part” chosen by Mary,

You see, then, that the Lord considered the chief good to reside in *theoria* alone – that is, in divine contemplation...For when the Lord said: ‘you are concerned and troubled about many things, but few things are necessary, or even one’ he placed the highest good not in carrying out some work, however praiseworthy, but in the truly simple and unified contemplation of him, declaring that ‘few things’ are

¹⁴ III. XII.1

¹⁵ III. XII.2

¹⁶ III. XIV.

necessary for perfect blessedness – namely, that *theoria* which is first established by reflecting on a few holy persons.¹⁷

Cassian's use of the episode of Martha and Mary from Luke 10:41-42 in order to elucidate the meaning of divine contemplation demonstrates his aptitude with the Greek language and his ability to utilize literary allusion for theological teaching. In Luke 10:41-42, there is an implied visual image of Mary sitting and looking at Jesus. The Greek term *theoria* (θεωρία) derives from the verb θεωρεῖν, from θέα (a view) + ὁρᾶν (to see), meaning to consider, to speculate, to see.¹⁸ *Theoria* or divine contemplation, then, indicates a vision of the divine, this vision, however, is transitory. *Theoria*/contemplation only offers a glimpse of the *telos* of the monk, the kingdom of God. Yet, as Stewart notes, Cassian seems to vacillate between a purely eschatological kingdom of God and the kingdom of God as realized through contemplation. Cassian allows for access to the divine while living while noting the limitations of the flesh. Cassian writes,

To cling to God unceasingly and to remain inseparably united to him in contemplation is indeed, as you say, impossible for the person who is enclosed in perishable flesh.¹⁹

Access to the kingdom of God, through *theoria* or contemplation, is transitory in the mortal life. Yet, Cassian believes the monk should focus his mind upon the kingdom of God. He reasons that focusing the mind upon the kingdom of God captures the kingdom of God mentally. Stewart has argued that this portion of the *Conferences* has traditionally been seen as confused or inconsistent. In his comprehensive overview of Cassian, Stewart does not believe Cassian necessarily contradicts himself; rather Cassian always makes a distinction between the transitory

¹⁷ I.VIII.2-3

¹⁸ See http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=theoria&searchmode=none (accessed 04/08/2012); see also, Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. "Contemplation, Contemplative Life."; Brown 501-502 and Phillips, 63-96 also discuss the etymology of θεωρεῖν. The Latin term *contemplatio* has a similar derivation, deriving from the verb *contemplare* (to survey, behold, consider, to contemplate), meaning look at, view, to contemplate. From *com* + *templum* (sacred sight or, more specifically, place for taking auguries). See http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=contemplation&searchmode=none (accessed 04/08/2012)

¹⁹ I.XIII.1

realization of the kingdom of God through contemplation/*theoria* and the perfect (and eschatological) realization of the kingdom of God.²⁰ While I do not necessarily disagree with Stewart, I would like to add what I consider to be the distinctive characteristic that separates the realization of the kingdom of God in this life and the eschatological realization. The distinction can be found in Cassian's "language of mind." I would like to return to the quote cited above, plus a few of the lines following it. Cassian writes,

But we ought to know where we should fix our mind's attention and to what goal we should always recall in our soul's gaze. And when our mind has been able to seize it, it should rejoice, and when it is distracted from it, it should mourn and sigh.²¹

The goal to which the mind's attention must be fixed and the object which our mind ought to seize is contemplation of God, *theoria*, which brings temporal, though not eternal, realization of the kingdom of God.²² The mind should, according to Cassian, so rejoice in the temporary moments of *theoria* in this life that it will regard any distraction from contemplation/*theoria* as equivalent to fornication.²³ The individual should focus the mind's attention again to God and return its attention to contemplation of God.

Scripture and the Two Ways of Knowledge

Cassian's theory of biblical interpretation is related to his conception of knowledge. Scripture, according to Cassian, can only be understood after one masters the virtues and successfully begun the process of contemplation and acquired spiritual knowledge. It is

²⁰ Stewart. 60. Stewart notes that the one of the means of temporarily realizing the kingdom is through the transformative power of chastity.

²¹ I.XIII.1

²² I.XIII.2

²³ I.XIII.1

contemplative knowledge that reveals to the person reading Scripture the different categories or senses of Scripture. The following pages discuss this material in some detail with hope that they will illustrate the connection between biblical interpretation and asceticism in the *Conferences*.

Before interpreting Scripture, Cassian claims one must remember that some passages are purposefully designed for immediate comprehension while others are purposefully obscure in their composition and thus more difficult to interpret.²⁴ The distinction between these basic types of passages in Scripture, the obvious and the obscure, results from the will of God to distinguish between the faithful and the profane among human beings. Spiritual understanding is required to comprehend the obscure and this type of understanding can only be possessed by the faithful.²⁵ Cassian's affirmation that faith determines one's ability to comprehend more obscure passages of Scripture and thus master biblical interpretation can be seen in the fifteenth conference on divine healing. Therein he proposes that, when the faith of the petitioner is lacking, even the most renowned monk in possession of a healing charism would be unable to heal the petitioner.²⁶

According to Cassian, Scripture is not an entirely open book. As much as it is capable of consoling or edifying, if not interpreted under guidance, Scripture may also leave the reader with a negative reaction to the content of divine revelation,

Holy Scripture is very aptly compared to an abundant and fertile field which, although it brings forth and produces many things that do not need to be cooked in order to serve as food for human beings, brings forth other things that would be unsuited or harmful for human use if their raw bitterness were not gotten rid of and if they did not become tender and digestible through cooking.²⁷

Cassian, however, does not base access to Scripture upon intelligence. Notably, he believes that the basic historical narrative of Scripture is designed for, "simple folk and those who are less

²⁴ VIII.III.1

²⁵ VIII.III.2

²⁶ XV.I.3

²⁷ VIII.III.3

capable of perfect and integral reasoning.”²⁸ Some passages of Scripture are readily comprehensible and edifying when read at the literal level, others require going beyond the literal level and looking for the spiritual meaning, and finally some may be read either way. Cassian’s concern that the reader be aware of the spiritual sense of Scripture stems from the possibility of an improper praxis resulting from a literal reading of the written text. He provides the example of numerous monks who, upon reading the words, “whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me,” fashioned themselves large wooden crosses and carried them constantly on their shoulders.²⁹ Cassian allows for multiple interpretations of Scripture’s more opaque passages. The passages whose meaning can only be discerned through engaging the spiritual sense permit the acceptance of “differing opinions” without impinging upon the deposit of faith.³⁰

Cassian observes there are many types of knowledge, yet only the knowledge derived from Scripture leads to the “contemplation of the invisible mysteries.”³¹ Scriptural knowledge is in fact twofold, consisting of *πρακτική* and *θεωρητική*, the practical and the spiritual/contemplative. *πρακτική*, or purifying knowledge, consists in the correction of behavior and displacing of the vices in one’s soul. *πρακτική* gradually makes the practice of virtue habitual; one practices virtue because virtue has become one’s natural response to situations of potential temptation. *θεωρητική* or contemplative meanwhile, results when one has begun contemplating divinity and eventually acquires an understanding of “most sacred meanings.”³² *θεωρητική* or contemplative knowledge cannot be acquired until *πρακτική* or purifying knowledge is mastered. Cassian conceives of a virtue based ascent to contemplation

²⁸ VIII.III.6

²⁹ VIII. III.5

³⁰ VIII.IV.2

³¹ XIV.I.2

³² XIV.I.3

and the acquisition of understanding of the sacred. A note must be made on the difference between *theoria* and θεωρητική in Cassian's thought. *Theoria* is contemplation or the contemplative vision that results from the fulfillment of purity of heart (see above). Θεωρητική is, as mentioned, contemplative knowledge that Cassian uses specifically in relation to the proper interpretation of Scripture; the term does not occur in Cassian's writings in any other context.³³ Thus, when discussing contemplative knowledge or θεωρητική, I am referring only to the proper interpretation of the Bible in Cassian's thought qualified by him as contemplative knowledge (of scripture) and not to Cassian's larger concept of *theoria*/contemplation.

The person who masters πρακτική or purifying knowledge acquires an understanding of the vices and the corresponding virtue one must acquire to overcome them.³⁴ In addition to understanding the remedy of the vices, πρακτική/purifying knowledge also requires the individual to understand the proper sequence of the virtues.³⁵ Virtues that correspond to lesser vices need to be mastered before one may progress to the virtues that correspond to the more aggressive vices. However, virtue cannot be relegated merely to one's actions. One must, according to Cassian, interiorize the virtues until they form the human mind "by their perfection."³⁶ By so internalizing the virtues, thinking and acting according to the virtues becomes one's natural inclination. Cassian makes a distinction between the expulsion of vice and acquisition of virtue in this process. Expelling the vices of one's life demands a greater effort than the acquisition of virtue. Cassian uses an allegorical interpretation of Jeremiah 1:10 to provide a divine justification for this system of purification,

³³ John Cassian, *The Conferences*, translated by Boniface Ramsey, Conference XIV, translator's introduction, 499-501. See also Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, pp.90-94

³⁴ XIV.III.1

³⁵ XIV.III.1

³⁶ XIV.III.1

We do not come to this by our own guesswork, but we are taught by the words of him who alone knows the ability and intelligence of what he has made: ‘Behold,’ he says, ‘today I have set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root up and to pull down and to disperse and scatter and to build and to plant.’ He has pointed out that four things are necessary for expelling what is harmful – namely, rooting up, pulling down, dispersing, and scattering. But for perfecting the virtues and for acquiring what pertains to righteousness there are only building and planting.³⁷

Πρακτικη or purifying knowledge is diffused among the array of professions, however, Cassian is not entirely clear if this diffusion spans the breadth of the monastic modes of life or if non-monastics are capable of πρακτικη too. He sees the figures of Elijah and Elisha as well as Antony of the Desert as exemplars of mastery of πρακτικη or purifying knowledge in addition to a figure named Macarius who presided over a hostel in Alexandria. Cassian describes Macarius as a man of extraordinary patience who was in no manner inferior to those who pursue asceticism in the desert.³⁸ In section V.1, he seems to imply that the pursuit of virtue in order to attain θεωρητικη or contemplative knowledge is available to all types of persons and vocations in the Church, though modified according to one’s state in life,

Therefore it is beneficial and proper for each person, in accordance with the orientation that he has chosen and the grace that he has received, to strive most zealously and diligently to attain to perfection in the work that he has undertaken. He may praise and admire the virtues of others, but he should never depart from the profession that he has once chosen, knowing that, according to the Apostle, the body of the Church is indeed one, although its members are many, and that it has ‘gifts differing according to the grace which has been given to us...’³⁹

Cassian exhorts the person in pursuit of virtue for the sake of contemplative knowledge to hold fast to his chosen profession in life. Profession, in Cassian’s thought, is the manifestation of virtue. Cassian argues that the fallacy of one wanting to change one’s profession based upon the

³⁷ XIV.III.3

³⁸ XIV.IV.2

³⁹ XIV.V.1

progress one sees someone else of another profession achieve, stating it would be impossible to fulfill all of the virtues listed in *Conference XIV.V*. If we return to XIV.V, we find that he has in mind several professions that ought to be prevalent in the Church: prophecy, ministry in ministering, teaching, exhorting, charity, “presiding in carefulness,” or works of mercy.⁴⁰ Cassian bases this list of professions on Paul’s list of charisms in the Church. It would be impossible, he asserts, for any one person to fulfill all of these professions/charisms/virtues simultaneously.⁴¹ Confusion of charism/virtues/professions risks, according to Cassian, the loss of what progress one has made in one’s chosen ecclesiastical profession.⁴² The fulfillment of *πρακτική*/purifying knowledge is accomplished through the practice of virtue. Cassian, however, maintains that the acquisition of contemplative knowledge is achieved through the interpretation of Scripture. He divides *θεωρητική* into two primary forms of knowledge (of Scripture), historical and spiritual and further divides contemplative or spiritual knowledge into three categories of tropology, allegory, and anagogy.⁴³

Cassian’s fullest explication of his method for Biblical interpretation is contained in the fourteenth conference, *On Spiritual Knowledge*. There are, according to Cassian, two type of knowledge, practical and contemplation or *θεωρητική*. Contemplation or *θεωρητική* follows *πρακτική*, “Whoever, therefore, wishes to attain to the *θεωρητική* must first pursue practical

⁴⁰ XIV. V.1

⁴¹ XIV.VI.1

⁴² XIV.VI.1

⁴³ Historical understanding of Scripture comprises knowledge of past events and the visible world. Anagogy progresses from physical stimulation to spiritual mystery. The city of Jerusalem, while a historical place, should always point towards the celestial Jerusalem depicted in prophetic and apocalyptic literature. The tropological interpretation concerns itself with the moral interpretation of Scripture. Cassian understands the moral quality of tropological interpretation as supplying the interpreter with the knowledge to correct one’s life as well as practical instruction. In this respect, the tropological interpretation of Scripture directly relates to the process of the acquiring practical knowledge outlined above, namely, the abolition of vice and acquisition of virtue in the human soul.

knowledge with all his strength and power.”⁴⁴ Cassian argues for the existence of various steps of ascension in the acquisition of contemplative knowledge and, ultimately, correct interpretation of scripture. Πρακτική is divided into two types of practical knowledge. The first type of knowledge is the knowledge of the nature of vices and the means capable of remedying them.⁴⁵ The second type is knowledge of the ascending steps of the virtues and the conversion of the mind so that fulfillment of virtue is not an onus one must undertake but rather a genuine source of one’s happiness.⁴⁶ Πρακτική, Cassian implies, is dispersed among varied professions and ventures – every mode of life has the potential of fully attaining practical knowledge and, as a consequence, leads towards the pursuit of contemplation.⁴⁷ However, the diffusion of πρακτική through various profession and ventures requires stability of life, including profession and ventures. Each individual should, Cassian states, finish the profession or venture he or she has initiated, to whatever is its natural course of duration, and thereby perfect his profession.⁴⁸ It may be argued that πρακτική is concerned largely with action and deliberation concerning vice and the ascension through the steps of virtue. Ultimately, it may be said, the two types of πρακτική are summed up by the conversion of mind to virtue, wherein practicing virtue is a natural expression of oneself, as opposed to a conscientious decision to avoid vice. Only when one’s heart has been converted to virtue can one progress to contemplative knowledge, θεωρητική, which, for Cassian, is identifiable with the proper interpretation and understanding of Scripture.

⁴⁴ XIV. II.1 *Quisquis igitur ad θεωρητικην voluerit prevenire, necesse est ut omni studio atque virtute actualem primum scientiam consequatur.*

⁴⁵ XIV.III.1

⁴⁶ XIV.III.1

⁴⁷ XIV.IV.1

⁴⁸ XIV.VI.1

One cannot, then, begin to read scripture until the conversion to virtue as a natural expression of self has been accomplished. Indeed, Cassian writes of the attainment of contemplative knowledge/ θεωρητική,

The only people who attain it, possessing it as a reward after the expenditure of much toil and labor, are those who have found perfection not in the words of other teachers but in the virtuousness of their own acts. Obtaining this understanding not from meditating on the law but as a result of their toil, they sing with the psalmist ‘from your commandments I have understood.’...For the one who is singing the psalm, who is moving forward in the undefiled way with the stride of a pure heart, will understand what is sung.⁴⁹

This passage supplies us with a bridge between purifying and contemplative knowledge. Cassian makes allusion to the singing of the Psalter in the monastic discipline. The conversion to virtue as a natural expression of self leads to the proper understanding of the psalms as sung in the monastic community, the action of liturgical worship. Although only alluded to in passing, this passage expresses a notion of liturgy as the bridge between the full conversion to virtue and contemplative knowledge; understanding liturgical praxis is the first indication that practical knowledge is complete and that one may begin to acquire contemplative knowledge, the proper understanding of Scripture. Indeed, the succeeding passage continues to explore Cassian’s liturgical allusions,

Therefore, if you wish to prepare a sacred tabernacle of spiritual knowledge in your heart, cleanse yourselves from the contagion of every vice and strip yourselves of the cares of the present world. For it is impossible for the soul which is even slightly taken up with worldly distractions to deserve the gift of knowledge or to beget spiritual understanding or to remember sacred readings.⁵⁰

Once again, Cassian emphasizes the necessity of completing the acquisition of practical knowledge before the Scriptures can be properly understood. Cassian makes interesting use of liturgical imagery in the form of “a sacred tabernacle in your heart”. The human person in

⁴⁹ XIV. IX.2

⁵⁰ XIV. IX.3

himself must become a liturgical vessel. Θεωρητική facilitates this transformation of the human person into a liturgical vessel via purification from vice.

Contemplative knowledge, θεωρητική, is similarly divided into two types, historical interpretation of Scripture and spiritual understanding of Scripture.⁵¹ The historical interpretation of Scripture has no deeper meaning to the text, and is readily understood by a *prima facie* reading of the text.⁵² The historical interpretation, Cassian writes, encompasses the knowledge of past and visible things. Spiritual knowledge of Scripture, however, is divided into three types of understanding: tropology, allegory and anagogy. Tropology is the type of spiritual knowledge closest to practical knowledge and functions as the first step in the attainment of spiritual knowledge. Cassian defines tropology as the “moral explanation pertaining to correction of life and to practical instruction, as if we understood these same two covenants as πρακτικη and as theoretical discipline.”⁵³ In an example of tropological interpretation, Cassian interprets “praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion,” as an exhortation to the human soul as opposed to an exhortation to the ancient Jews, which, as Cassian observes, is the proper historical interpretation of the passage.⁵⁴ By tropological interpretation the person encountering Scripture learns the art of discernment of the scriptural texts pertaining to praxis.⁵⁵ Allegory is an interpretative method which, according to Cassian, leads to a revelatory experience as the historical narrative gives way to previously hidden things in the text.⁵⁶ Anagogy is the final interpretive step in acquiring full spiritual knowledge of the Scriptures. Anagogy begins with spiritual mysteries but progresses higher to, in Cassian’s words, “more sublime and heavenly

⁵¹ XIV.VIII.1

⁵² XIV.VIII.7

⁵³ XIV.VIII.3

⁵⁴ XIV.VIII.4

⁵⁵ XIV.VIII.6

⁵⁶ XIV.VIII.5

secrets.”⁵⁷ Prophecy is a result of anagogy and helps us flesh out what Cassian means by “sublime and heavenly secrets” in so far as prophecy concerns future events hidden in God’s manifestation in human history.⁵⁸

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate the connection between conversion to virtue in Cassian’s thought and its connection to proper biblical interpretation. The conversion to virtue occurs in the context of the monk’s pursuit of purity of heart. It finds its expression in the idea of *πρακτική*, practical knowledge that involves first the expulsion of vice and then acquisition of virtue. *Πρακτική* (or practical knowledge), leads to *θεωρητική*. *Θεωρητική* is contemplative knowledge and, as Cassian defines it, is constituted by the proper understanding of Scripture. The proper understanding of Scripture is dependent upon Cassian’s four categories of Scripture: history, tropology, allegory and anagogy. *Θεωρητική* or contemplative knowledge leads one to discover the variant meanings of Scripture, including those that point towards heavenly mysteries. All of this is along the way to *theoria*, contemplation or the contemplative vision of God. We can now return to Cassian’s interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and examine it in greater detail.

⁵⁷ XIV.VIII.3

⁵⁸ XIV.VIII.6

Chapter Five: Understanding the Biblical Interpretation of Conference VIII

Having explicated Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 and where it falls in the spectrum of early Christian biblical interpretation of the passage, we showed how, for Cassian, proper biblical interpretation is based upon contemplative knowledge (θεωρητική). Θεωρητική or contemplative knowledge is contingent upon the fulfillment of πρακτική, practical knowledge comprised of converting the individual's habits to virtue. Cassian's methodology for proper biblical interpretation has already demonstrated two qualities of his writing in the *Conferences*. First, *Conference XIV* fully instructs the reader in the interpretive methodology alluded to in *Conference VIII*. Second, *Conference XIV* insists upon the dependency of biblical interpretation on the conversion to virtue. But what factors influence Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 in *Conference VIII*? Is his interpretation guided by the concepts of πρακτική and θεωρητική? In this chapter I will attempt a close reading of Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 in the hope of identifying the influences on his interpretation and the significance that the narrative has on his thought that it should be included in the *Conferences*.

This process begins in *Conference VII – On the Changeableness of the Soul and on Evil Spirits*. *Conference VII* begins with consideration of Lust and the question of why, even though desiring the contrary, the ascetic still suffers from lust. Cassian and Germanus approach Abba Serenus, who, Cassian records, famously conquered lust through angelic intervention,

As he was untiringly devoting himself with constant supplication and tears to the request that he had made, there came to him an angel in a vision of the night. He seemed to open his belly, pull out a kind of fiery tumor from his bowels, cast it away, and restore all his entrails to their original place. 'Behold,' he said, 'the

impulses of your flesh have been cut out, and you should know that today you have obtained that perpetual purity of body which you have faithfully sought.’¹

Within its first paragraphs, thematic continuity can be seen between *Conference VII* and *Conference VIII* through the themes of angelic interaction with humanity and sexual temptation. Serenus responds to Cassian and Germanus with a discussion of the changeable nature of the mind. The mind is changeable and without a specific concrete task before it, the mind will have many thoughts capable of leading it into diverse areas of thought, some opposed to asceticism.² The human being must master the powers of memory, memorizing practice or habituations capable of redirecting the mind to the task of *theoria*.³ In particular, Cassian urges his reader to practice and memorize thoughts of ascent, thoughts capable of both re-directing the human mind to God and actually ascending to the Deity itself.⁴ Cassian progresses from a discussion of the influences upon the mind and the mastery of memory to a discussion of the degree to which a non-human/spiritual entity can influence or eventually control the human soul. In the course of this discussion a philosophical belief of Cassian important to the interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 emerges,

It is not surprising that a spirit can be imperceptibly joined to a spirit and that it can exercise a hidden persuasive influence where it has been permitted to. For among them, as among human beings, there is a certain substantial similarity and relationship, since the understanding of the nature of the soul may likewise be applied to their substance. But, on the other hand, it is completely impossible for them to enter into and be united with one another in such a way that one can contain the other. This is rightly attributed to God alone, who contains an incorporeal and simple nature.”⁵

¹ VII.II.2

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ VII.II.3

⁵VII.X.1

In Cassian's thought, there is some similarity of substance between demons, human souls and other spiritual entities, however, Cassian implies that each has a subtle corporeality proper to itself that prevents total union with another being. Only God, who alone is incorporeal, may unite with another being. Cassian continues with specific reference to the nature of angels,

Nor even if a spirit is mingled with this dense and solid matter (that is, with flesh), which can be very easily done, is it therefore to be believed that it can be so united to a soul, which is also a spirit, that it can also make it the bearer of its own nature. This is possible to the Trinity alone, which so penetrates every intellectual nature that it is able not only to embrace and encompass it but even to flow into it and, being itself incorporeal, to be poured into a body. For although we declare that some natures are spiritual, as are the angels, the archangels and the other powers, our soul itself and of course the subtle air, yet these are by no means to be considered incorporeal. They have body appropriate to themselves by which they subsist, although it is far more refined than our own bodies.⁶

Cassian reiterates his previous contention that God alone possesses incorporeality and is capable of penetrating the substance of another being and is able to affect a physical body. Other spiritual beings are marked by a subtle materiality, proper to each one and distinct from each other. This section is important to understand Cassian's subsequent interpretation of the sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4. There could not be any copulation between human women and angels (a literal interpretation of the text) on account of the differences between the corporeality of angels and the corporeality of humans. The "bodies" of humans and angels are too distinct to allow for such interaction and since angels have a definitive corporeal form, Cassian's thought excludes the possibility of angels changing their corporeality into human corporeality. The implication for interpreting such passages as Genesis 6:1-4 is that angelic antagonists have to be excluded; the sons of God must be human beings because no being can change its definitively assigned

⁶ VII.XIII.1-2

corporeality into another being's corporeality – angels cannot switch from angelic corporeality to human flesh.⁷

Conference VIII is given the title *On the Principalities*. It too is under the guidance of the same Abba Serenus. *On the Principalities*, begins with a more complete treatment of angelology including such tenets as individual angels having power over the individual nations of the earth, the fall of the angels, and the placement of certain hostile angels (the principalities) between heaven and earth.⁸ Indeed, Cassian demonstrates a particular interest in the role of the principalities in the governance of nations; in his angelology, the principalities are responsible for bringing nations to war and setting peoples against each other.⁹ The tumult raised among peoples reflects warring of the principalities themselves.¹⁰

When Cassian begins his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 he immediately turns to the distinction of natures between angels and humans found in *Conference VII*. A literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 is impossible on account of the distinctions between the corporeality of human beings and the more subtle corporeality of angels. Rather, if sexual relations between human beings and angels were possible, Cassian proposes, then it should still happen, as opposed to being a phenomenon of the past.¹¹

⁷ Cassian's position on the corporeality of angels distinguishes his interpretation from the work of Origen. In *De Principiis* VII.1, Origen argues the position that the angels are indeed incorporeal creatures. Origen writes, "All souls and rational natures, whether holy or wicked, were formed or created, and all these, according to their proper nature, are incorporeal... The Apostle Paul, moreover, describing created things by species and numbers and orders, speaks as follows, when showing that all things were made through Christ: 'and in him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions or principalities or powers....' He therefore manifestly declares that in Christ and through Christ were all things made and created, whether visible, which are corporeal, or things invisible, which I regard as none other than incorporeal and spiritual powers. But of those things which he had termed generally corporeal or incorporeal, he seems to me, in the words that follow, to enumerate the various kinds, thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, influences."

⁸ VIII.VIII.1-XII.1

⁹ VIII.XIII.4

¹⁰ Ibid. It should be noted that at this point in the Conferences, we can detect the influence of Origen's *De Principiis* on Cassian's angelology in *Conference VIII.V.1-2*

¹¹ VIII.XXI.1

Cassian's explanation of the sons of Seth, who they are and how they were distinct in the human race, is subtly influenced by his own asceticism. The seed of Seth, removed from the descendents of Cain, preserved the gifts possessed by Adam before the expulsion from Eden. Seth's seed possessed a natural philosophy, complete attainment of wisdom, and "the grace of the gift of prophecy."¹² Cassian's last description of the seed of Seth as possessing "the grace of the gift of prophecy," is exceptionally crucial to understanding the significance of Seth's line in Cassian's thought and what really is at stake in his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. More important for humanity than myths of angels copulating with human women, Genesis 6:1-4 is the account of the loss of an inherited cultural transcendence to God via natural contemplation.

Cassian's argument in this section of the *Conferences* appears to be influenced by Hellenistic philosophy to some degree. Scholars have debated the nature of the relation between philosophy and asceticism for decades. Gregorio Penco in "*La Vita Ascetica come Filosofia nell'antica Tradizione Monastica*" argued in favor of interpreting asceticism as the true philosophic life.¹³ The lives of various ancient Christian ascetics are meant to be a counter-response to the claims of philosophers and establish the way of asceticism as the means by which to attain true philosophy. Johannes Leipoldt followed Penco and argued that the numerous descriptive accounts of monastic lives as well as the popular terminology in monastic movements derived from Greek philosophy. Columba Stewart has noted the literary parallels between aspects of philosophical works and early monastic works. He argues that Athanasius's *Life of Antony* borrows clearly from the *Life of Pythagoras*.¹⁴ However, as Stewart also notes, when Cassian openly refers to philosophers, it is normally with hostility and that monastic

¹² VIII.XXI.4-5

¹³ Gregorio Penco, "*La Vita Ascetica come Filosofia nell'antica Tradizione Monastica*" 66-82

¹⁴ Columba Stewart, "Monastic Attitudes Towards Philosophy and Philosophers," *Studia Patristica* (XLIV 2010) 323

borrowings from philosophy are often difficult to determine with any certainty on account of monastic authors being either unwilling or unable to identify their sources.¹⁵ Additionally, by Cassian's time, monastic authors were aware of the competition they faced with philosophical circles for providing an alternative means of living in the late Roman Empire.¹⁶

Given Stewart's argument, is it unreasonable to look towards Greek philosophy in order to explain Cassian's exegesis? Mark Sheridan in his article "Mapping the Intellectual Genome of Early Christian Monasticism" has argued for the influence of Greek philosophy on Cassian's eighth conference. Cassian, Sheridan argues, continually presents asceticism as superior to philosophy on account of asceticism's ability to actually achieve that towards which philosophy claims to be oriented. Sheridan finds evidence for this claim in Cassian's treatment of the visit of the two philosophers to Antony and Cassian's exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4.¹⁷

It follows that philosophy is not entirely contrary to John Cassian's thought or exegesis. Rather, Cassian distinguishes between a counterfeit philosophy, a philosophy largely contained in pagan literature and true philosophy. He identifies true philosophy with physical and spiritual discipline coupled with worship of the true God. These characteristics are located by Cassian in Seth's original line and in the monk who properly pursues ascetic discipline.¹⁸ Nevertheless this does not negate Stewart's observation regarding writers of Christian ascetical works: there is a tendency to not acknowledge, either by deliberation or by ignorance, the positive influence of philosophical writings on their thought. I would like to propose that there are certain parallels between Cassian's argument for the impossibility of humans and angels engaging in intercourse

¹⁵ Stewart, 322.

¹⁶ Stewart, 327.

¹⁷ Mark Sheridan, "Mapping the Intellectual Genome of Early Christian Monasticism." *Church, Society and Monasticism. (Roma: Pontificio Ateneo Anselmo 2009)* 333 According to Sheridan, Cassian's attribution of Wisdom 7:17-21 to the seed of Seth represented Seth and his posterity as the original living fulfillments of the ideals of philosophy.

¹⁸ Sheridan, 335. Sheridan goes on to argue that Cassian's presentation of the seed of Seth is designed to convey the concept of primitivism – society as being caught in a perpetual decline from an original golden age.

and Aristotelian thought. This contention recognizes the warning provided by Stewart – Cassian may not either directly credit Aristotle or even be aware of his own Aristotelian parallels. Aristotle may very well just be in the intellectual air he breathes as opposed to being an author of whom he is fully cognizant.

Cassian’s description of the nature of angels underlies his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. Aristotle’s *De Generatione et Corruptione* seems to underlie facets of Cassian’s angelology and thus his interpretation of the passage. First, Aristotle distinguishes between generation/corruption and alteration. Alteration, according to Aristotle, is observable in nature. In alteration, the substance of a thing remains unchanged whereas the substratum or matter of an object undergoes visible change.¹⁹ In alteration, the substratum remains detectable but its physical properties undergo change. Generation and corruption, conversely, effect the definition or substance of an object as well as the material factors of an object.²⁰ The change undergone in generation or corruption is total or whole, particularly when the change involves something imperceptible becoming something perceptible.²¹ Aristotle demonstrates how radical the change wrought by generation or corruption must be; a seed would turn to blood, there would be the complete corruption of one substance and complete generation of another.

Returning to Cassian’s angelology and its relationship to his exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4, Cassian utilizes the concept of spiritual natures for angels, fallen angels and demons; however, he does not allow incorporeality for any group.²² Cassian goes on to define this corporeal quality of angels, archangels, etc., as possessing bodies appropriate to themselves, though more refined

¹⁹ Aristotle. *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Bk I.CH.I.15

²⁰ Aristotle. *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Bk.I.CH.2.20-25

²¹ Aristotle. *De Generatione et Corruptione*. Bk.I.CH.3.10-20

²² See *Con.* VII.XIII.1-3

than a human body, in which they subsist.²³ The corporeality of angels and archangels functionally corresponds to the substratum in Aristotle's thought – it is the physical characteristic of the angels which distinguishes them from humans. When examining Cassian's discussion of the impassibility of the soul, we see echoes of Aristotle's definition of substance. Cassian argues that possession by an unclean spirit does not affect the substance of the soul nor change the substance of the soul into itself. There is a substance to the human soul that cannot be changed. If an unclean spirit comes in close proximity to a soul, the substance of the human soul cannot be changed into that of an unclean spirit, even though the unclean spirit may take control of the body.²⁴ Cassian holds to the concepts of substance and matter, the latter of which he describes variously as corporeality, dense matter or flesh. The human person is composed of matter and substance. Similarly, the angels or spirits are also composed of matter (corporeality), though more refined than a human body, and substance. For Cassian, there are two fundamental impossibilities that preclude a literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. Humans and angels possess bodies appropriate to themselves, not to each other. There could be no physical compatibility between human being and an angelic being. Humans and angels also possess a definitive substance proper to each of them. To hold to a literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 requires affirming a change of substance among the angels of God into human beings.

Cassian's exegesis of Genesis 6:1-4 comes at a time when there is a shift in the typical Christian interpretation of the passage. For the first three centuries of the Church, Christians favored a literal interpretation of the passage, accepting a mythic construction of history during which the lines between human beings and divine beings were blurred with creation of a mixed offspring. As early as Origen, however, we begin to see theological problems emerging from

²³ VII.XIII.2

²⁴ VII.XIII.1

such an interpretation. The incarnation of angels at a prior point in human history seems to conflict with the unique incarnation of the Logos. By the fourth century, an interpretation of the passage as referring to the sons of Seth and the daughters of Cain gradually becomes normative in the Christian Church. Cassian's interpretation, however, has greater parallels with a particular strain of Sethite interpretation wherein the antediluvian patriarch is seen as the progenitor of a more or less ideal human society that gradually succumbs to its temptations and becomes corrupted. Cassian's interpretation, therefore, follows in the continuum of traditional Christian interpretation of the passage.

Cassian's interpretation, however, raises interesting questions about his principles for Biblical interpretation. Scripture is not, for Cassian, an open book. One cannot simply turn to any given text and begin reading and hope to comprehend what is read. Proper understanding of Scripture requires previous mastery and internalization of the virtues. The virtuous life, or the ascetic life, must become natural to the human being before he or she can begin reading scripture and hope to understand spiritually what is said. The ultimate meaning for scripture can only be discerned through the lens of theoretical knowledge and one does not come to theoretical knowledge until one has mastered practical knowledge or the practice of virtue. How do these principles work in his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4? And what is the significance of the seed of Seth for John Cassian?

The sons of Seth, according to Cassian, possessed a natural philosophy and the possession of this natural philosophy is lost to the human race when the sons of Seth join with Cain's line. Presenting the Sethite interpretation of the sons of God is not, however, primarily about the loss of the perfect human society and continual societal corruption thereafter. Rather, it offers Cassian's audience the mythic reason for the ascetic pursuit. The intermarriage between

Seth's and Cain's lines sets off a chain of events throughout history leading to the very moment a monk chooses the ascetic life.

The “true discipline of natural philosophy”, “the plentitude of wisdom and the grace of prophecy,” were all enjoyed by Seth and his descendents until intermarriage with the descendents of Cain.²⁵ Cassian writes,

If this had been observed by every individual according to the Lord's plan, as was the case in the beginning, it would certainly not have been necessary for that other law to be given which he promulgated thereafter in writing. For it was superfluous to offer an external means of health when the one that had been placed within continued to be effective.²⁶

The seed of Seth once existed as the sole enclave of humanity wherein natural knowledge of the law was exercised. The loss of Seth's line to intermarriage with Cain results in the subsequent failure to observe the natural knowledge of law and necessitates the delivery of the Torah to Moses. Instead of interpreting this as the loss of a golden age, however, Cassian notes a paradox,

Hence, it is very clear that this written law did not have to be given from the beginning, for it was superfluous as long as the natural law was still standing and had not been completely violated, and that gospel perfection could not be bestowed before the law had acted as a restrained.²⁷

Were the seed of Seth never to have intermarried with the line of Cain, there would never have been a Torah. Had there never been a Torah, there would never have been the “gospel perfection” prescribed after the Torah.²⁸ Cassian quickly qualifies his use of the term “gospel perfection” providing the reader with a clear illustration of what is meant,

For they were unable to hear, “whoever strikes you on your right cheek, offer him the other as well...Nor could “love your enemies,” be said to those in whom it as considered a great advantage and a good thing that they loved their friends, but

²⁵ VIII.XXI.5-7

²⁶ VIII.XXII.1

²⁷ VIII.XXIII.3

²⁸ VIII.XXIII.3

who turned away from their enemies, differing from them merely by hatred and not trying to oppress and kill them.

The definition of “gospel perfection” is found, in Cassian’s understanding, in the beatitudes. Cassian’s reference back to the beatitudes recalls his original proposition of the goal and end of the monk. “Gospel perfection” is required on account of the corruption of the seed of Seth and constitutes the substance of the ascetic pursuit. Purity of heart is the goal which leads one to the end of the kingdom of God or, as Cassian alternatively writes, the kingdom of heaven.²⁹ Cassian supplies the reader with descriptions of purity of heart at various points in the first conference when he establishes the basis of his ascetic schema. Cassian writes,

Those whose concern it is to press on to knowledge and to the purification of their minds have chosen, even while living in the present world, to give themselves to this objective with all their power and strength. While they are dwelling in corruptible flesh they set themselves this charge, in which they will abide once corruption has been laid aside, when they come to that promise of the Lord, the Savior, which says, ‘Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.’³⁰

“Gospel perfection,” if followed, leads to purity of heart, the goal of the monk’s profession, the state upon which both contemplation/*theoria* and eventual realization of the kingdom of God depend. Cassian locates his ascetic schema in the very words of Christ and finds a divine mandate for his asceticism. Interpreting Genesis 6:1-4 as an account of the intermarriage between the seed of Seth and the line of Cain thus provides Cassian with a mythological narrative in which to situate asceticism. Asceticism is the divine mandate to restore to humanity a praxis once lost since asceticism is the way to fulfill Jesus’ teaching in the gospels. There remains one last item to discern: what principles of Biblical interpretation does Cassian apply to Genesis 6:1-4?

²⁹ I.III.1, I.IV.3

³⁰ I.X.5

As previously discussed, knowledge of Scripture is θεωρητικη, divided into two foundational types, historical knowledge and spiritual understanding. Ultimately, although Cassian begins his interpretation by identifying the historical sons of God, his primary concern is to establish the seed of Seth as a mythological justification for asceticism. This is not only theoretical, but indeed practical. Seth's seed maintains, as Cassian notes, "the true discipline of natural philosophy," is called "the sons of God on account of their holiness," and conducts worship of God.³¹ These traits were natural to Seth's line prior to intermarriage with the line of Cain. Intermarriage with the line of Cain acclimated the seed of Seth to the habit and practice of vice, beginning with their lust for the daughters of Cain,

The Seed of Seth, then, enjoyed this universal knowledge from generation to generation, thanks to its ancestral tradition, as long as it remained separate from the sacrilegious breed, and what it had received in holy fashion it also exercised thus for the worship of God and for the general good. But when it intermingled (*cum vero fuisset impiae generationi admixtum*) with the wicked generation it fell into profane and harmful deeds (*ad res profanas ac noxias*) that it had dutifully learned at the instigation of demons, and thereupon it boldly instituted the strange arts of wizards, sleights and magic.³²

The practice of vice among the seed of Seth begins with lust for the females of Cain's line (mentioned in by Cassian in VIII.XXI.4) and proceeds to malicious actions (harmful deeds) and the establishment occult practices.³³ The descendents of Seth, now interbred with Cain, initiate yet more praxis contrary to the natural law originally practiced by Seth's line and contrary to the Law delivered to Moses and the Gospel.³⁴ The category of θεωρητικη in which Cassian's interpretation of the narrative falls, then, is the tropological or moral sense, since according to Cassian, "Tropology is moral explanation pertaining to correction of life and to practical

³¹ VIII. XXI.3,6

³² In particular, see VIII.XXI.6,9.

³³ VIII.XXI.6

³⁴ VIII.XXI.9

instruction.”³⁵ In mythic terms, Cassian’s interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 establishes a greater narrative in which to situate the necessity of asceticism. In agreement with the Gnostic texts and Philo, Cassian affirms Seth as having passed on holiness/virtue to succeeding generations but does not believe in the seed of Seth’s perennial maintenance of sanctity. With this holiness, natural philosophy and knowledge of God lost, the aspiring ascetic seeks to conquer the vices to which the once great branch of the human family succumbed. Asceticism restores to human society exemplars of natural philosophy or the living wisdom of God and in effect creates a “new seed” undefined by biology.³⁶ Indeed, the narrative structure in the *Conferences* illustrates this point. The Abba (the ascetic father) in the conference instructs the aspiring ascetic until he too can come to such a point so as to be qualified to groom another aspiring ascetic in the ways of monasticism.

³⁵ XIV.VIII.3

Conclusion

John Cassian rejects a literal interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 as an account of angels copulating with human women and producing a hybrid offspring. In so doing, Cassian interprets the passage as referring to the seed of Seth and its eventual corruption through interbreeding with the descendents of Cain. Cassian's interpretation does not, however, occur in a vacuum. In the course of the interpretative history of Genesis 6:1-4 there is a demonstrable shift away from a literal interpretation based upon the myth of the fallen sons of God towards a less literal understanding. Additionally, there is, beginning with Jewish literature, particularly in Philo of Alexandria, the cultivation of a mythical lineage derived from Seth. Cassian alludes to the myth of Seth and Seth's lineage, but his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 does not agree with the tradition of Seth's seed being preserved in perpetuity. On this point, Cassian disagrees with Philo's proposition that all who practice virtue belong to the seed of Seth and with the Gnostic contention that there is a biologically and spiritually distinct line of humans descendent from Seth.

The exchange between Germanus and Serenus in *Conference VIII* indicates that there was some concern over how Genesis 6:1-4 ought to be interpreted. Afterwards, Cassian mentions some basic principles one must keep in mind when interpreting Scripture. Scripture is not always readily comprehensible and at times requires one utilize a variety of interpretative categories. Proper Biblical interpretation rests upon having successfully mastered *πρακτική*, the process by which one purifies oneself from vice and made virtue one's natural inclination. After mastering *πρακτική*, one acquires *θεωρητική*, the spiritual or contemplative knowledge that constitutes the proper understanding of Scripture. The proper understanding of Scripture,

facilitated by θεωρητική, sees beyond the literal text of Genesis 6:1-4 to the tropological or moral instruction at the base of the narrative. In Cassian's interpretation of the narrative of Genesis 6:1-4 demonstrates the downfall of a once naturally virtuous line of humanity through the vice of lust. This downfall necessitates the deliverance of the Law and eventually the Gospel to correct and instruct the wayward morality of humans. Such an interpretation supplies Cassian with a mythic framework in which to situate the origins and necessity of asceticism. Asceticism recalls the virtuous line of Seth before it fell by lust. Asceticism restores the practice of virtue common to the line of Seth among a new human society, without biological distinctions.

Still, however, there are lingering questions regarding Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 that, for the time being, defy explanation. Why is this interpretation in the *Conferences* to begin with or, at the very least, why in a conference dedicated to the subject of the Principalities. Athenagoras may have made an obscure allusion to the sons of God as demons inhabiting the air and thus drawn a connection between Genesis 6:1-4 and Ephesians 6:12, however, that connection, as I tried to indicate, is hypothetical. Antony's letters and Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, if taken as being, respectively, authentic letters of Antony and a reasonable rendition of an address Antony would have made, establish a precedent for interpreting the principalities mentioned in Ephesians 6:12 as the spirits who inhabit the desert and war against the monk. It does not, however, establish a precedent for identifying the principalities with the sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4. There is, however, precedent for interpreting the sons of God in Genesis 6:1-4 as the descendents of Seth. One of the proponents of this interpretation is John Chrysostom. The period at which Chrysostom would have likely written his homilies is not entirely certain; Antioch is the presumed place of composition, however, as Hill implies in his edition, there is no definitive data situating the composition of his Genesis homilies to either Antioch or

Constantinople.¹ However, we do not know the quality and quantity of interaction Cassian had with Chrysostom other than his ordination to the diaconate. Thus, we cannot say with any certainty that Cassian's interpretation was influenced by Chrysostom's. Furthermore, we do not know the specific reason Cassian frames the Sethite/Cainite interpretation with the motif of the seed of Seth, a concept previously seen in both Philo and Sethian Gnostic literature, both of which presumably come out of Alexandria. Cassian accepts the notion of Seth's seed being an ancient enclave of human virtue, however, he rejects the proposition that all subsequent virtuous human beings somehow belong to Seth's lineage. Additionally, Cassian's contention that seed of Seth eventually falls from grace seems to reject the Gnostic notion of an impassable and eternal race founded upon Seth. Ultimately, however, the seed of Seth functions as an ascetic myth of sorts. Seth's seed originally constituted a community defined by the observance of the natural law of God and its adherence to virtue until it gave in to the vice of lust. The gospel provides the aspiring ascetic with the means of reestablishing a community defined by the practice of and adherence to virtue.

In the course of researching this thesis, I have been tempting to wonder if Cassian's treatment of the seed of Seth was, in one way or another, influenced by either Philo of Alexandria or any of the numerous Gnostic works. Geographically, both Philo and the Gnostic writings emerge in Alexandria, part of the Greek speaking Egyptian area that included the areas of Cassian's desert sojourn. Both sources were originally composed in Greek, the Gnostic materials later being translated into Coptic. Finally, both sources explicitly work with the concept of Seth's seed. Once again, we lack any hard evidence that proves a connection to Cassian's treatment of the seed of Seth and either Philo of Alexandria or the Gnostic material. The possibility of Philo having *some* connection to Cassian's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4

¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 1-17. 4-5

gains further traction when considering his own interpretation of the same passage. I did not treat of this in the main body of the paper because, in my estimation, the possible connection is tenuous; however, it is worth briefly examining this material before concluding this paper. Philo's interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 occurs in his aptly titled treatise, *De Gigantibus*. Two aspects of Philo's interpretation may potentially be relevant to understanding how Cassian comes to combine the themes of principalities, Genesis 6:1-4, and the seed of Seth. Philo interprets angels, souls (including human souls) and demons as denoting on in the same subject. Philo works off of a text of Genesis 6:1-4 that follows the οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ. Philo writes, "those whom other philosophers called *daimons*, Moses is accustomed to name angels, they are the souls who fly across the air (ἀέρα)."² Here Philo locates the angels of Genesis 6:1-4 as inhabiting the air. This *could* supply subsequent Christian readers with the impetus to connect the Principalities of the Pauline literature with the figures of the sons or angels of God in the Genesis narrative. It is worth noting, however, that Philo interprets angels as being interchangeable with souls and *daimons*. As he develops his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4, the interchangeability of souls with the angels of Genesis takes on increasing importance. Some souls, Philo argues, descend into this mortal body and devote their life until the end (τέλους) to the acquisition of true philosophy and study to die to the impulses of the body in the hope of attaining immortal and incorporeal union with God.³ Other souls, however, "pay no regard to wisdom and give themselves up to unstable acts of fortune".⁴ Some souls, then, pursue eternal, Godly things; others pursue ephemeral and chaotic things. When Philo comes to Genesis 6:4, he interprets the phrases "sons of God" and "daughters of man" as denoting two of three types of (human) souls, earth-born (most probably corresponding to the daughters of man), heavenly born, and God-

² Philo of Alexandria, *De Gigantibus*, II.6-7.

³ *De Gigantibus*, III.14.

⁴ *De Gigantibus*, III.15.

born. The earth born pursue indulgence of bodily pleasure, the heavenly born are devoted to the arts and acquisition of knowledge, and the God born are identified as “men of God” and as “priests and prophets,” who have refused both bodily pleasure and arts and knowledge.⁵ Using the example of Abraham’s change in names, Philo believes it is possible for the heavenly born (Abram) to God born (Abraham).⁶ It is possible, according to Philo’s interpretation, to ascend from being heavenly born to the status of a God born human being after having discerned the nature of divine reality through philosophy.

By citing this material from Philo, I do intend to state that Cassian directly utilized Philo for his interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4. However, I do wish to note that there is a certain thematic affinity between the interpretations of both authors. Namely, both authors interpret the passage of Genesis 6:1-4 as relating to spiritual progress or, loosely stated, asceticism. For Philo, the passage can only be correct interpreted when one understand the interchangeability of subject among the words angel, soul and *daimon*. Additionally, one has to interpret the descriptions “daughters of Cain” and “angels of God” with the designations “earth born,” “heavenly born,” and “God born.” The human soul is able to transit between the three designations based upon its progress from pursuing bodily pleasure, to pursuing the arts and knowledge, to renouncing all earthly pleasure and pursuing God alone. Although Philo does not discuss the interbreeding between the angels of God/sons of God and the daughters of man one must note the connection between his interpretation and that of Cassian. Namely, Cassian interprets the sons of God as an ascetically or more spiritually progressed people (the seed of Seth) who leave behind its spiritual advancement and become acclimated to the practices of a people who pursue more earthly goals contrary to union with God (the daughters of man/daughters of Cain).

⁵ *De Gigantibus*, XIII.60-61.

⁶ *De Gigantibus*, XIV.62-64.

Frustratingly, there is still much that is unknown as to how and why John Cassian interprets the Genesis 6:1-4 in the manner in which he does. I do not believe that Cassian's interpretation and the confluence of themes contained therein emerges in a vacuum. I believe I have established that there are precedents to many of the themes involved in Cassian's interpretation in the writings of prior authors. However, it remains to be seen if the combination of the themes (Genesis 6:1-4, Principalities and the seed of Seth) are uniquely the product of Cassian's literary powers or if there are still other authors who may have influenced Cassian in combining these themes.

What can be said definitively is that Cassian outlines a well developed theory of biblical interpretation. How we interpret the Bible, in Cassian's thought, is determined by how virtuous our practices are. Perfecting our practices through virtue opens our mind to deeper levels of meaning embedded in the sacred text. It can also be stated that Cassian understands the Seed of Seth and its subsequent corruption resulting from desire or lust for the daughters of Cain as providing a sort of mythic foundation for asceticism. Seth's line represented a human society for whom virtue and the worship of God was customary behavior. When enticed by their desire for the daughters of Cain, the Seed of Seth abandons their societal practice of virtue and true worship of God in favor of the society of Cain's line, which Cassian implies practices vice and the worship of idols. Interpreting Genesis 6:1-4 through the lens of the Seed of Seth provides aspiring ascetics with a mythological point of origin. The ascetic pursuit is seen in the light of trying to restore a human society given to habitual practice of virtue and worship of the true God in the form of the monastic communities to whom the *Conferences* is directed.

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