

OF WATCHERS AND WOMEN
The Origin of Evil in the Rebellion of the Watchers
(1 Enoch 6-11)
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Narratives, letters and literary texts within the Bible explain the relationship between human beings and God. The unsuspecting reader can assume that somewhere within its chapters lies an explanation for the origin of evil. Biblical texts not only explain the relationship between human beings and God, but they also may provide answers to life's essential questions. Understanding the origin of evil is to understand how the world works and our relationship to it. Genesis 6 opens with a mythic story about the "sons of God" who coexist with the "daughters of humans" (*New Revised Standard Version*, Genesis 6:1-4). Much of this mysterious, brief tale developed into a theological concern on the origin of evil during the Second Temple Period. Judeo-Christian theologians look to Genesis for an elucidation of events, given that it comprises some of the earliest events in history.

Genesis 6:1-4 provides an account of wickedness on earth, albeit rather scant. In order to satisfy a curiosity for a more elaborate tale of forbidden teachings and illicit mating between angels and humans, one must turn to a source outside of the biblical canon entitled the First Book of Enoch ("Enoch"). The opening chapters of Enoch comprise a literary capsule called the Myth of the Watchers (1 Enoch 6-36, "MW"). MW emerges from the "complex" literary history of Enoch, one which pieces together various elements (Reed 24). This essay will focus on one of its earliest portions (25), the Rebellion of the Watchers (1 Enoch 6-11, "RW"). Enoch and RW in particular seek to address the origin of evil because for the authors, the question of evil helps them understand their place in the world.

RW explains that heavenly beings¹ are so overcome with lust for human women that they conspire to descend on earth and have children with them (1 Enoch 6:1-6, trans. in Nickelsburg and VanderKam). Watchers have intercourse with the women, and expose them to secret divine teachings of spellcasting and

magic (1 Enoch 7:1). They reveal their secret knowledge of metallurgy, ornamentation, spellcasting and astronomy (1 Enoch 8:1-3). Women give birth to offspring (1 Enoch 7:2). The human-angel hybrids are referred to as giants on account of their imposing stature, but also for their insatiable appetite for destruction (1 Enoch 7:3-5). Together, the spread of secret divine knowledge and interminable violence wreak havoc on humanity. By the time all of creation protests, only divine intervention can hope to restore righteousness (1 Enoch 7:3; 8:4; 9:1-2). Four archangels intercede and bind the Watchers to the earth for their misdeeds (1 Enoch 10:4-5, 11). Simultaneously, the giants kill one another in a battle to the death, eliminating their souls. (1 Enoch 10:9-10, 15). God promises to bless the earth once peace and truth replace all impurity and defilement have been driven out (1 Enoch 11:1-2).

The aim of this essay is not to arrive at some definition of a hermeneutical framework that the reader can use to understand RW and the corresponding verses in Genesis. Rather, this essay will address the relationship between two main groups in RW: the Watchers and the women. What exactly took place between the Watchers and the women? Which interpretation of evil best explains what happened between humans and watchers?

LINKS WITH GENESIS 6:1-4

RW provides the audience with a more detailed account of Genesis 6:1-4. Scholars agree that it expands on Genesis 6, and that it makes a reference to Enoch (Stokes 1333). From this, the reader can assume two things: first, Enoch elaborates on Genesis, and secondly, Enoch predates Genesis, so Genesis recalls Enoch (Douglas 45). The RW story draws out an element of Genesis, but Enoch is actually older than Genesis. The whole RW myth elaborates on Genesis 6:1-4. By this logic, the RW myth must have been added to Enoch after Genesis was composed. In this respect, Enoch actually borrows from Genesis and not the other way around. Furthermore, Enoch is also referenced or alluded to in the New Testament, thus indicating the value of the text with respect to the “understanding of the matrix of cosmic evil” throughout the Bible (Douglas 45).

RW elucidates obscure elements within the Genesis narrative, assigning a name and identity to the sons of God and clarifying their interactions with the women. A major difference between the Enochic text and Genesis is that the former employs a fairly neutral tone. Its retelling refers to the sons of God as Watchers, who themselves are angelic beings. Their first sin in the RW narrative is that they covet human females and begin sexual relationships with them, which produce a mixed-race offspring referred to as giants. The giants, in turn, also sin and commit violent acts against humanity. Sexual misconduct alone does not account for all of the Watchers’ activities on earth (Stokes 613). The Watchers also teach humans about astronomy, metallurgy and sorcery. Stokes estimates that to speak of RW as the origin of evil exaggerates its meaning (Stokes 614). Early Jewish literature considers the primary function of the myth as paradigmatic and not etiological “components”, in terms of tracing present “illicit practices” back

to the teachings of the Watchers (Stokes 614).

Reed cautions against the assertion that Enoch has less credibility or authority than Genesis. She instead endeavours to eliminate a sense of hierarchy between the two texts. To this end, Reed supports Milik's unpopular hypothesis that Genesis also depends on Enoch (Reed 53). Such a hypothesis "highlights the problem, namely, the inadequacy of a simple dependence model to explain the complex relationship between Genesis and the Book of Watchers" (Reed 53). She argues that RW "[draws] from Genesis" but also "[preserves] elements selectively omitted from [it]" (Reed 54). RW can then be understood as a text that which fills in the "narrative gaps" of Genesis, by providing details that the latter neglects to include (Goff 84). The description of the Watchers accounts for one key component that differentiates the Genesis account from that of RW. Genesis describes the angels in a positive light, as "heroes" whereas RW casts a negative presentation of the Watchers (Genesis 6:4). Such a negative portrayal links the presence of the Watchers and giants to evil in the world (Goff 97). This also removes the onus of evil from humans, which is problematic because it implies that humans are punished for the wrongdoings of non-humans.

TWO NARRATIVES AT PLAY

RW comprises a distinct narrative unit within Enoch, despite some apparent inconsistencies (Stokes 1333). Scholars have identified two predominant "legends" within the narrative of RW: that of Shemihazah and that of Asael (Reed 37). Reed sees both as providing two different etiologies of evil, as they share the theme of "illicit angelic instruction" in the discussion of the Watchers' actions (29).

According to Reed, the army of Watchers are to be understood as being under a "strict military organization" (Fröhlich 13). Together with their chief Shemihazah, the Watchers take an oath before descending to earth (1 Enoch 6:3). Shemihazah needs the participation of all the Watchers, as he wishes to avoid sole culpability for his actions. He wants to foster a sense of accountability. While he may be ready to accept the burden of guilt for all of the Watchers, he would prefer all the Watchers to remain in solidarity. This does not necessarily establish that Shemihazah is entirely to blame for the all of the unfolding events. However, such a suspicion lingers, because Shemihazah is considered a catalyst for the Watchers acting upon their desire for human women. His proactivity leads the Watchers to defile the women, who then go on to conceive violent, gluttonous giants. In that sense, Shemihazah enables immoral sexual relations between angels and humans. The Shemihazah version of events places the responsibility of evil on the Watchers (Douglas 55). Thus, human beings are victims of sexual immorality imposed upon them by the Watchers, which inflicts sin and suffering upon humanity.

According to the Asael narrative, the angels' illicit teaching causes sin and suffering (Douglas 55). To make matters worse, the Watchers teach forbidden crafts of sacred knowledge, such as divination and magic. One Watcher in particular, Asael, teaches metalwork, cosmetics and jewelry (VanderKam). The Asael

account, introduced after the Shemihazah portion, creates inconsistencies within RW because its version of events ultimately implicates humanity in the problem of evil. Asael's teachings make humans sexually immoral and violent, which implies a more active role of human beings in the origin of evil. Furthermore, there is disagreement among scholars concerning Asael's status as a Watcher. Asael is listed as a leader of the rebellious Watchers, but according to the text, he is under Shemihazah's command (Fröhlich 10).

Ultimately, the "conflict" or difference between Shemihazah and Asael stories should not be considered problematic because Asael is not actually a Watcher (Fröhlich 10). The material that portrays Asael as an active leader of the Watchers is misleading because it presents a "dual leadership" at play, which is not the case. Rather, Shemihazah is a Watcher, and Asael is his subordinate (Fröhlich 10). Douglas and Collins consider it an imposition on the text to read these angelic actions in such a delineated manner. Whilst there may be differing emphasis in the Enochian texts regarding culpability, the sexual violence of the angels and the covetous nature of their teachings are most helpfully read together as two "strands of tradition...not merely juxtaposed but...carefully intertwined," as the whole text presents them (Collins 101).

The Shemihazah tradition defines the sin of the Watchers as marriage with humans and procreation of giants. The Asael tradition, on the other hand, defines the sins of the Watchers as improper revelation. Both narratives coexist despite their apparent tension within RW, which indicates to the reader that each can be interpreted allegorically. Furthermore, RW's symbolism allows the story to be applied to many different situations (Collins 98). Collins claims that the two traditions reflect some kind of "crisis", given that the actions of the Watchers draw on a "figurative...pollution of the earth" (98). This does not mean the crises that seem to be unfolding within RW necessarily refer to a "social reality," because in Collins' research, no historical evidence exists to support such a claim (101).²

Regardless of the nature of the pollution at play in RW, the problem was "transposed to a mythological plane," whereby RW could serve as a "paradigmatic model," for similar problematic situations.³ For Collins, the historical circumstances of a myth need not be "unique" (Collins 99). What remains more important is that the reader can focus on the myth as a historically-situated recurring event. Thus the myth must repeat itself over and over again, without having distinctive historical leverage over other events, in order for it to be understood as a model that applies to other situations (Collins 99). Setting aside the particulars in order to focus on the "primeval archetype" and "apocalyptic symbolism" at play in RW delineates a healing effect of the narrative (Collins 100). Turning a crisis (whatever it may be) into an allegory allows people to cope with the situation. Downplaying the gravity and importance of the crisis can be therapeutic because the abstraction of the said crisis detaches the reader from the situation and allows the myth to gain meaning in its context. In this sense, the reader uses the allegory as reassurance that their sins are not committed through

any fault of their own.

PROFILING THE LUSTFUL WATCHERS

As part human and part divine, Watchers share characteristics of both types of beings. Human characteristics include desire for women, and illicit astrological teachings suggest that the Watchers were heavenly bodies in the night sky before they descended to earth (Fröhlich 12). Fröhlich attributes the sin of the Watchers to sexual intercourse with human women (13). Part of sinning has to do with their rebellion, which entailed leaving their post in heaven and descending to earth.⁴

Fröhlich looks to two Mesopotamian sources, *Enuma Elish* and *Enuma Anu Enlil*, to shed light on the Watchers' rebellion; Mesopotamian cosmography attributes heavenly bodies to gods (13). *Enuma Elish* explains that heavenly bodies were prohibited from leaving their divinely-appointed posts in the night sky. As fixed stars, they were "inscribed into the surface of the heavens" (Fröhlich 14). *Enuma Anu Enlil* sketched an ideal calendar wherein astrological phenomena were placed along a fixed timeline. This ideal calendar acted as a point of reference that people used to compare to the actual dates of moon sightings, equinoxes, appearances of stars, etc (Fröhlich 14). Given that there was a discrepancy between the actual date of the astrological event and its projected date, the astrological calendar had to be adjusted or "intercalated" (Fröhlich 17). Based on these two sources, Fröhlich claims that the revolt of the Watchers may have been an astrological one. Since they left their posts in heaven to descend to earth, they were no longer present as heavenly bodies in the night sky. This subsequently affected the appearance of other astrological phenomena in the night sky. In this context, evil derives from "astral irregularities," which arose when the Watchers "contaminated" their heavenly bodies by having sex with humans (Fröhlich 17). Humans and the Watchers share responsibility for this impurity, in the sense that such an inter-species mingling is prohibited. Fröhlich thus views what happens between the humans and the Watchers as an act of impurity (17). This is also interesting with respect to the motive of RW. Such a sharing of responsibility of evil between humans and Watchers draws on the all-important concern of marital purity in the Second Temple Judaism. The implication is that marital purity is at stake, and since it is the worst kind of impurity, it must be maintained and protected at all costs (Fröhlich 17).

The dual nature of the Watchers allowed them to alternate between human and divine forms (Fröhlich 10). Rather than being killed, the Watchers were bound to the earth (1 Enoch 10:4, 11). This means that they were punished according to their divine nature. Whereas a human being could be killed, their body and spirit completely eradicated from the earth, the Watchers were punished in a much more lasting way (Loader 24). Their immoral acts could never truly end, even when they wanted to stop lusting after women or defiling themselves (Loader 13). Not even physical death could then relieve this punishment, as evil spirits emerged from their dead bodies and persisted in doing evil on earth (Fröhlich 17). Evil is therefore immortal and no being has control over it.

As heavenly beings, the sins of the Watchers are greater than those of humans; since it would be against the nature of heavenly beings to sin, their sins are all the more grave, and their punishment correspondingly more severe as well. That the Watchers are bound to the earth is thus a fitting punishment (Loader 22). The contradiction at play pertains to the fact that the punishment of the Watchers provides for the continuation of evil. Nevertheless, there is an element of justice in such a punishment.

A PARADIGM OF EVIL FROM THE WATCHER'S ACTIONS

Among the scholarship on RW, two outstanding approaches exist to make sense of what transpired between the Watchers and the women. The first analyzes the actions of the Watchers, and the second assesses the effects of RW on humans (Suter 116). While the reader can also focus on what the angels did (i.e., their actions), looking instead to the effects of those actions provides an etiology of the origin of evil that places the blame on the Watchers and their rebellious acts.

Suter views RW as a paradigm for the origin of evil that which expands into a “typology” of the origin of evil as “lists of great sinners ... headed by the [Watchers]” (117). He analyzes the angel’s actions, all the while focusing on the purity of their actions, and the pollution involved in having sexual relations with humans (116). For Suter, the most important aspect of the myth is the purity of the angels (116). This approach stems from the attitude that reflects a relationship between RW and the social context from which it emerges. While the myth demonstrates an “attitude towards society”, the same social context also informs the trajectory of the narrative (Suter 117). His interpretation of the myth leaves out a discussion of the effects of the angel’s actions on humans.

Protecting the purity of the priesthood accounts for a major concern of Second Temple Judaism (Suter 120). Suter links angelic purity to priestly purity in Second Temple Judaism, which insisted on restricting priestly marriages to a “relatively closed circle” as the best way of maintaining their purity (121). The RW’s condemnation of angel-human marriages hence reflect a concern for illegitimate marriage of priests. Otherwise, the giants, the product of angel-human intercourse, would not have met such a grim fate, nor would the Watchers. In a similar vein, Fröhlich understands the social and theological meaning of RW through an analysis of all the motifs present, as well as their common denominators (10). She identifies one such motif as sin and impurity, and relates the sins in RW⁵ to ethical impurity in particular. In the absence of such a concern, the sinners would not have been banished from the land, and their families would have remained intact (Fröhlich 11).

THE EFFECT OF THE WATCHERS: AN ETIOLOGICAL APPROACH

Douglas construes the story of the Watchers who “[leave] their places” in heaven as one dealing primarily with rape (51). Douglas qualifies her stance: what happened between the Watchers and the humans violates cosmic laws, but also more importantly violates the notion of women as objects of desire. Loader

nuances this point of view by noting that the choice to have intercourse with human woman actually refers to a “forbidden mixing” of beings (10).⁶ This “mixing” emphasizes the notion of sexual wrongdoing, but not necessarily rape, or the notion that the women did not consent to such a ‘mixing’ even if it was immoral (Loader 10). Rather, what is taking place with the Watchers has to do with lust and covetousness. Desire, then, is the “root” of such impure actions (Douglas 51). For Douglas, “covetous desire and rape” are at the center of the etiology of evil (51). Diabolical violence spreads on the earth as a result of the “possessive, violent desire” of the Watchers (Douglas 51). In a sense, then, sin can be interpreted as an intermarriage- the condemnation of marriages with foreign or strange wives, not because different kinds of beings should not mix, but rather because doing so is “defiling”(Douglas 51).⁷

In order to interpret the persistence of violence and evil on earth, Douglas uses the theory of mimetic desire.⁸ On the basis of mimetic desire, Watchers are entirely at the root of the origin of evil on earth. Specifically, Shemihazah is to blame, because the Watchers follow his lead in descending to earth. They compete for the attention of women, but also to teach forbidden skills. Violence is “the inevitable consequence” of such desire (Douglas 56).

Hanson views RW as being centred on the theme of “rebellion in heaven,” whereby the Watchers knew what they were doing was wrong, and knowingly acted against their better judgment (197).⁹ The element of desire for beautiful women remains, according to Hanson, a main catalyst for the rebellion (200). Hanson focuses on the implications of leaving a heavenly post, as well as its outcomes, rather than seeing it as a rape narrative (201). This rebellion was evil because the Watchers were cognizant of their wrongs, but critically proceeded despite this knowledge. Hence, the Watchers were not victims of lust. Rather, they were choosing to sin, and in this sense, Hanson’s rebellion argument returns the responsibility of evil to the Watchers.

PARADIGM OR ETIOLOGY?

Suter observes that “a paradigmatic interpretation treats the actions of the angels as central” to the origins of evil, but importantly makes humans responsible for evil in the world (132). This is more consistent with the Bible and therefore more likely to be less controversial. Parallels drawn from the Watchers and Genesis within the paradigmatic approach and more “safe,” less controversial than the narrative in the etiological approach (Suter 132). In the same vein, “etiological possibilities of [the Rebellion tale] lie just under the surface where they exist in a basic tension with its paradigmatic function” (Suter 132-3). Somehow, the myth houses both opposing interpretations.

Second Temple Period scholars have long grappled with the seemingly problematic suggestion that evil stems from the rebellion of divine beings, rather than human beings (as in Genesis).¹⁰ This may explain the exclusion of Enoch from the biblical canon. If the burden of evil did not fall on humans, they would not know how to understand why God punishes them. When the burden of evil falls on the Watchers, mimetic desire can provide the hermeneutical links

to explain how evil was passed down from generation to generation. In order for humans to justify evil acts happening to them, evil has to have some sort of tangible anchor or origin in human life. Thus, the origin as well as the persistence of evil has some sort of agency in humankind. The reader who would look to Genesis for an explanation of evil would be unsatisfied by the account found in the brief passages, and would be utterly scandalized by the tale from the Book of Enoch. In terms of human agency, the reason why MW cannot be found within the pages of the Bible is clear: it confuses readers in the sense that it contradicts the Bible, which places the onus of evil on humans, as opposed to heavenly beings. Humans need to believe that the origin of evil lies in humankind in order to feel a sense of motivation to avoid it or to try to be better. The importance of Enoch lies in its alternate presentation of biblical events, and how this representation affects the way they humans perceive of their role in the origin of evil.

NOTES

1. This term is used interchangeably in the literature with “sons of God”, “angels”, and “Watchers”. Henceforth, the latter designation will be used.
2. Suter (1979) and Loader (2007) disagree, and point to an interpretation in which the crisis is the distaste for Jewish priests. Oddly enough, their view did not discuss the actual related historical evidence. Rather the implicit understanding was that there was some kind of tension between the priests and everyone else, who disagreed with their choice of spouses.
3. See Collins 98 for more on this discussion.
4. *cf.* Hanson 1977, addressed later on in this paper.
5. Cited as “illicit sexual contamination, magic, bloodshed, [and] consuming blood” in Frohlich 11.
6. *cf.* Deut 22:9-11; Lev 18:22-23
7. Other scholars echo this point of view: Wright considers the “angel-human event” as an “unlawful sexual act” (Douglas 50). Isaac describes what the angels did as having “consorted with women,” and Reed refers to their action as “sexual impurity” (*Ibid.*).
8. Frear 1992 (p. 799) explains mimetic desire as follows: two actors, subject and mediator vie for the same thing. The subject desires that thing because the mediator does, too; the subject does not know what to desire and adopts the desire of the mediator. This process leaves both the mediator and the subject under the impression that their desire is unique, meaning that both actors are unaware that they have a common desire. They continue to pursue their object of desire. Upon the realization that they both desire the same thing, they compete for that object, and this competition usually degenerates into violence.
9. This rebellion theme has four components: rebellion, devastation, punishment and restoration.

10. Second Temple Period scholars have affirmed this view before me. I understand that it would seem peculiar to claim this idea as my own. This is nevertheless a conclusion that I came to, after having upon reflecting on my research.

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