

Another tidbit from my Bible Introduction. Old news for a lot of you, I know. But it's fun to write this kind of thing up for college students, who have never heard of such a thing!

One of the most mysterious and even bizarre stories in Genesis happens right at the beginning of the flood narrative, where we are told that the "sons of God" looked down among the human "daughters," saw that they were beautiful, and came down and had sex with them leading to the Nephilim. The word Nephilim means "fallen ones." According to Numbers 13:33, the Nephilim were giants. So what is going on here in Genesis? Apparently there were angelic beings (the "sons of God") who lusted after human women, cohabited with them, and their offspring were giants. It is at that point that God decides to destroy the world. The situation was too weird even for him.

This brief episode has parallels in other ancient mythologies. It is common in Greek myths, for example, for one of the gods to find a particular woman irresistibly attractive, to come down in human guise, have sex with her, and to produce an offspring that is something more than mortal. One of the most famous stories about such a liaison involves the king of the gods, Zeus, who sees a gorgeous woman, Alcmena, and decides he has to have her. Her husband, Amphytrion, is a general in the Greek army who is away at war. Not able to control himself, Zeus comes to Alcmena in the spitting image of Amphytrion himself. Alcmena assumes that he has returned from battle, and welcomes him with open arms and takes him to bed. Zeus enjoys the festivities so much that he orders the constellations to stop in their paths, so as to prolong the night.

When he finally has his fill (even Zeus can have too much of a good thing), and the constellations begin again to move, he returns to heaven. As it turns out, Amphytrion returns home - dismayed and distraught that Alcmena is not overjoyed at seeing him after his long absence, not understanding, of course, that she thinks she has just spend a wild night frolicking with him.

In any event Alcmena has been made pregnant by Zeus. And who is her child? None other than the demi-god Heracles (in Latin: Hercules).



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