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Nephilim in Aotearoa New Zealand: Reading Māori Narratives of Tāwhaki with Gen 6:1–4's Ancient Divine Heroes

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Abstract: The 2023 Bible Society New Zealand's translation of sample biblical passages into the Māori language, *He Tīmatanga*, caused controversy by incorporating names of Māori gods. Those who objected typically assumed inconsistency with the Bible's purported monotheism. But 'monotheism', in the sense that only one god exists, is not present in the Bible. Moreover, missionary adherence to monotheism in the mid-nineteenth century widely assumed a 'degeneration model' that also promoted European religious, moral, and cultural superiority. This article adopts a hermeneutical strategy to counter monotheistic misreadings of the Bible, and their racist effects, by reading Māori stories of the ancient divine hero Tāwhaki alongside the ancient divine heroes who feature in Gen 6:1–4's account of the Nephilim. First, the comparison provides resources for the translation of Gen 6:1–4 into the Māori language and worldview. Second, the Tāwhaki narratives stimulate a reappraisal of longstanding problems in the interpretation of Gen 6:1–4, especially the meaning of the phrase "the sons of the gods". Supported by analysis also of the Sumerian King List, this article argues that all three major interpretations of "the sons of the gods" are fundamentally consistent: they are gods, elite human rulers, and also Sethites.

Keywords: Gen 6:1–4; Nephilim; Tāwhaki; monotheism; henotheism; the sons of the gods; degeneration; Māori narratives; pūrākau; Sumerian King List



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1. Introduction

First translated in the mid-1800s, the current version of *Te Paipera Tapu*/the Māori Bible has not—except for minor formatting changes—been updated since 1952. Responding to a perceived need for a more contemporary translation, Bible Society New Zealand published *He Tīmatanga [A Beginning]* in March 2023 (Bible Society New Zealand 2023b), a sample of *te reo Māori* (Māori language) translations of eight biblical passages: Genesis 1–11; Ruth; 1 Samuel; Amos; Jonah; Acts 1–11; Philippians; and 1–3 John.¹ The sample offered a range of different translation styles, for the purpose of eliciting "quality feedback from te reo speakers" to assist the translation committee with their proposed future revision of the entire Māori Bible (Bible Society New Zealand 2023a). The publication provoked particular controversy over the translation of Genesis 1 by Te Waaka Melbourne, who included the names of several Māori gods (Rangi-nui, Papatūānuku, Tangaroa, and Tāne-rore²) alongside the Jewish god *te Atua* ('God'; see Knowles 2024, this issue). Readers were sharply divided. Among those who responded, the majority were opposed or unsure about the inclusion of the names of Māori gods, making objections that included complaints of "syncretism", "compr[o]mising the one true God", and of failing to recognize that Genesis 1 was "set [...] apart from the mythology of other peoples" (Knowles 2024).

Rather than determining here whether the names of Māori gods rightly belong in a translation of Genesis 1, the present article interrogates and counteracts the major rationale that underlay objections: the belief that the inclusion of Māori gods was antithetical to the presumed monotheism considered to be central to the Bible. As recent scholarship has made clear, the Bible does *not* promote monotheism in the sense believed by the nineteenth-century missionaries responsible for Bible translation: that no other god but

Yahweh exists.³ In contemporary scholarship, the predominant critical understanding is that, in the Hebrew Bible and also in the New Testament, “God is the sole object of worship, but he is not the only divine being” (Hayman 1991, p. 15). Despite the attempts of nineteenth-century European missionaries to eliminate Māori belief in traditional gods, the Hebrew Bible and New Testament would not themselves negate the existence of such gods, and in fact affirm the reality of many gods other than Yahweh—as the review of texts and scholarship in Section 2 below outlines. Today, therefore, a Māori Bible that undermines the reality of Māori gods not only misrepresents the content of the Bible, but fails to provide a specifically *Māori* translation. That is, it fails to employ comparable Māori terminology for the divine to translate biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek terminology for gods—and, more substantially, it fails to utilize conceptions of the divine within the Māori worldview (*te ao Māori*) even where they closely coincide with the plurality of gods found in biblical texts. That is not to deny that substantial differences also exist between traditional Māori and biblical views of the divine. It is rather to affirm that—in certain parts of the Bible—Māori and biblical conceptions of divinities coincide in ways that have been occluded by the imposition of monotheism onto biblical texts.

Nineteenth-century missionaries and Bible translators firmly denied the existence of Māori gods and vehemently opposed Māori incantations and other rituals involving these gods. Why so? Prominent in the mid-nineteenth-century missionary conception of the One God was a belief that Māori ‘polytheism’ was the result of a loss of their primitive belief in monotheism, a belief once held by their Polynesian or earlier ancestors. In such a view, Māori belief and interaction with multiple gods were seen as damning evidence of their intellectual and cultural degeneration. This now-obsolete ‘degeneration model’ for understanding religious differences between cultures, examples of which will be discussed in Section 3, also posited an original and pure monotheism given to all peoples by God. The European recovery of monotheism via Christianity was seen, within this model, as a sign of their greater religious virtue, superior rationalism, and more advanced civilization. When early European missionaries in Aotearoa New Zealand affirmed monotheism and condemned polytheism, they were not simply sharing their Christian beliefs to Māori but—due to the discursive constraints of the term ‘monotheism’—were inevitably also asserting their cultural and intellectual superiority *against* Māori. Although the intent of these missionaries was clearly focused on preaching what they perceived to be Gospel truths and on gaining conversions to Christianity, the discourse of monotheism with which they engaged was already bound up with, and so promoted, a view of the superiority of European religious thought and civilization, and conversely endorsed the devaluation of Māori *wairuatanga* (spirituality) and *ngā ritenga* (practices).

In Sections 4 and 5 of this article, I discuss one resource in Māori tradition by which we might counter this monotheistic misreading of the Bible, and its intellectual colonization of Māori religious beliefs and practices. It involves the hermeneutic of reading Māori narratives of the ancient divine hero Tāwhaki alongside Gen 6:1–4’s account of the Nephilim, the latter understood as ancient divine heroes born from sexual intercourse between human women and ‘the sons of the gods’.⁴ I make two complementary hermeneutical arguments in Sections 4 and 5. First, I argue that the stories of the Māori (and Polynesian) hero Tāwhaki furnish translators with highly appropriate terminology for rendering Gen 6:1–4 in *te reo Māori*. This is due to a closely shared context: the conceptually overlapping worlds imagined by Judeans and Māori in which ancient divine heroes loomed large. The second argument reverses the hermeneutical direction of the first. Extensive Māori narratives about the divine hero Tāwhaki offer a valuable resource for interpreting the brief and allusive Hebrew passage in Gen 6:1–4. In particular, extensive Māori *pūrākau* (founding narratives) about Tāwhaki offer new insights for interpreting (a) the important role of the temporal setting for Gen 6:1–4; (b) the meaning of the phrase “sons of the god(s)”; and (c) the essential connection of the genealogies in Genesis 5 to what follows in Gen 6:1–4. Point (c) also recuperates for critical interpretation one aspect of the long-discarded ‘Sethite interpretation’ of the passage. To this end, I also compare genealogies found in manuscripts

of the Sumerian King List (SKL) as well as related ancient West Asian texts. Reading Māori accounts of Tāwhaki alongside the biblical account of the Nephilim leads us to notice and then consider previously overlooked dimensions of the fascinating yet tantalizingly brief story in Gen 6:1–4.

2. The Many Gods of the Bible

Rawiri Te Maire Tau refers to the period of the early Māori encounter with Pākehā (Europeans) as not only instigating a dramatic political power shift, but also an epistemic one. Suddenly, the connections which had appeared natural to Māori appeared inadequate to negotiate the world in which they lived. For Te Maire Tau, the clash was stark: the process involved the “death of knowledge”, the collapse of “the fabric that held the traditional worldview together” (Te Maire Tau 2001, p. 131). Contributing to this epistemic crisis, I contend, was the systematic exclusion of *atua Māori*,⁵ disallowance even of the possibility of their existence in the translation of the Bible into *te reo Māori*.

Yet, the rejoinder might be: was this cultural clash, although painful, an inevitable one, involving the intrinsic incompatibility between biblical and Māori views of the divine? That is, maybe the Bible demanded the death of Māori gods? Indeed, this point of view seemed obvious to readers in the nineteenth century, at the time that *Te Paipera Tapu* was first produced—when it seemed clear that the Bible only recognizes one God, it is monotheistic, and it rejects Māori polytheism.

But all these ideas are incorrect. The use of the concept of ‘monotheism’—to refer to the quantitative belief that one god alone exists—is a misleading anachronism if imposed on the Bible. Such a concept of ‘monotheism’ retrojects an idea that evolved after the Bible was written onto this collection of texts from ancient West Asia and the Mediterranean (Fredriksen 2022, p. 45; 2020, p. 296). The existence of Māori gods is not at odds with the Bible, rather, it is this doctrine of monotheism that is at odds with the Bible.

The consensus in scholarship today is that the Hebrew Bible predominantly condemns the worship of any god apart from Yahweh (i.e., monolatry), but typically accepts the *existence* of gods under the high god Yahweh (i.e., henotheism). We see this combination in the prohibition of the worship of other gods found at the beginning of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:3). As Michael Hundley (2022, p. 256) observes, the First Commandment requires “exclusive commitment” (i.e., monolatry) “rather than being an expression of monotheism”. Moreover, Exodus 20:3 tacitly assumes the existence of other gods to whom Israelites might alternatively choose to direct their worship (Hundley 2022, p. 256). John F.A. Sawyer (1984, p. 172) earlier noted the wide recognition among scholars that “the Bible contains very few explicitly monotheistic statements and a good many passages in which the existence and authority of other gods are manifestly assumed by the writers”. Any monotheistic views, Juha Pakkala (2007, p. 175) similarly concludes, are only present in a “thin and late layer” of the Hebrew Bible, and Israelites generally followed an “intolerant monolatry” that affirmed the existence of, yet rejected the worship of, other gods. Yet even this allowance for a modicum of biblical monotheism is questionable today. What is sometimes claimed to be “emergent monotheism”, notes Francesca Stavrakopoulou (2021, p. 152), “is more accurately understood as a radical form of pantheon reduction: Yahweh lost his wife, while other members of his divine council were downgraded from deities to minor divine beings, heavenly messengers, or cosmic abstractions”. The Hebrew Bible, as Debra Ballentine (2022) observes, never denies the existence and legitimate realms of operation by other gods, while displaying signs of “centralizing, absorbing, collapsing, [and] telescoping” to focus divine power in one god named Yahweh. The only arguable basis for retaining the term ‘monotheism’ would be to rely on an ambiguity in its definition, as either (1) God’s “quantitative” oneness qua god, or (2) God’s “qualitative” difference from other gods, as supreme in power over any other being or force, including other beings called gods (Sommer 2021). Yet the continued use of the term in the second sense is inevitably tainted with this ambiguity. Moreover, it is unnecessary, given that the term ‘henotheism’ largely

covers the same conceptual ground while avoiding the ambiguity—and so presents us with the better analytical term.

No etic term is perfect, however, and attention should be given to the contents of particular biblical texts, for which terms such as ‘polytheism’, ‘monolatry’, ‘henotheism’, and ‘monotheism’ are ultimately heuristic. We might first take note of the Hebrew Bible’s repeated presentation of Yahweh as presiding over a divine court, a committee of gods. For example, Yahweh is said to give judgment “in the midst of the gods” (Ps 81:2); sons of the gods and the divine accuser, “the Satan”, present themselves to Yahweh (Job 1–2); and the prophet Micaiah reports discussions among Yahweh’s assembly, the hosts of heaven (1 Kgs 22). Yahweh’s very name, “the Lord of hosts”, assumes the presence of other gods: he is the boss of lesser gods, commander of the divine army of heaven. Other gods worship and bow down to Yahweh (Deut 32:43; Ps 97:7). Certain named gods serve Yahweh in battle (Hab 3:5). Each nation has its own god (Deut 32:8–9; cf. Gen 32:8; Mic 4:5), assigned to them by Yahweh (Deut 4:19) or, in one case, by a high god differentiated from Yahweh and superior to Yahweh (Deut 32:8–9). Yahweh controls a heavenly order of divine operatives and subordinates who carry out his commands. In Zechariah 1 alone, “a divine being converses with the chief deity on matters of political justice (1:12) while others serve as messengers (*hammal’āk*, 1:9) or roam the earth on patrol (1:10; cf. 1:11, 6:7; Job 2:2; Gen 3:8)” (Wasserman 2018, p. 63). Yahweh consults with a plurality of gods in creating humankind, an “us” (Gen 1:26), beings he is never said to have created, pre-existent like the formless substance from which he created the world. When Yahweh brings nations against Israel to punish them (as in Ezekiel 7), he then divides the spoil with those other gods (as in chs 8–9), “parcel[ing] out righteous judgments to divine delegates and subordinates” (Wasserman 2018, p. 63). Yahweh is regularly compared with other gods, as having none other like him (Exod 15:11) and being “greater than all other gods” (Exod 18:12), or having none other beside him (Deut 4:35, 39). That is, none of the other gods exist at his exalted level of divine power. As Saul Olyan (2012) observes, even deutero-Isaiah’s statement that there is “no god” but Yahweh (43:10; 44:6; 45:14) allows for other gods. The rhetorical nature of the comparison becomes clear when deutero-Isaiah also acknowledges gods such as Rahab (51:9–11) or a heavenly host individually called by name in chapter 40. In naming and distinguishing these other gods in the heavenly host, Isa 40:25–26 even presents “a more developed and differentiated host” than did earlier biblical references to Yahweh’s divine council (Olyan 2012, p. 197).

Moreover, the predominant monolatry and henotheism of the Hebrew Bible have much in common with contemporary developments taking place throughout ancient West Asia and the Mediterranean. Past or more apologetic scholarship has tended to exaggerate *contrasts* between the Hebrew Bible’s view of Yahweh and cosmology by making false comparisons between its mid-to-late first millennium contents and centuries-earlier Mesopotamian texts. Some of the false comparisons even originated over a thousand years beforehand, in particular, the creation account at the beginning of *Enūma Elish*. In addition to the clear bias of such incommensurate comparisons, to concentrate only on *differences* between Judean and other ancient West Asian texts fails to account for the very similar developments from polytheism to henotheism taking place in many ancient West Asian texts composed in the same period as the Hebrew Bible. That is, from about the mid-first millennium BC onwards, ancient West Asian, Egyptian, and Mediterranean texts increasingly attributed the major divine powers to, and concentrated worship on, one god through a process of syncretizing the powers of gods into one god or absorbing or subordinating other gods to one god (Versnel 1990). In addition, earlier creation and origins myths became increasingly euhemerized or allegorized, as for *Enūma Elish* in Berossos (Gmirkin 2006, pp. 96–100). In other words, the ‘demythologization’ claimed as peculiar to Genesis 1 is already evident in several other contemporary (ca. 600–300 BC) ancient West Asian and Mediterranean texts; contra, e.g., (Gunkel [1895] 1984, p. 46; Hasel 1974; Wenham 1987, p. 37).

For example, when deutero-Isaiah was promoting henotheism in the sixth century BC, his Greek contemporary Xenophanes was proclaiming the existence of “One god, the greatest among gods and men”. This One god, Xenophanes clarifies, “is not the only god that exists, but a god who towers above the rest” (in [West 1999](#), p. 33). The pantheon of Greek gods still existed in this framework, but power was concentrated on a single high god. These developments were not, however, confined to pre-Socratic philosophers of the sixth century BC. Over time, the gods of the Greek pantheon were increasingly viewed as emanations from the One god. The gods, for Greek poets, developed “from a pantheon of independently minded divine agents towards a quasi-monotheistic régime, in which Zeus is the only real source of divine initiative and the other gods are supporters and executants of his will” ([West 1999](#), p. 29). Meanwhile, Zarathustrian developments (also roughly contemporary with deutero-Isaiah) radically transformed the earlier Persian belief in a pantheon of gods, elevating one god Ahura Mazda to supremacy. In the process, other divine beings known as Amesha Spenta ('Bounteous Immortals') were reduced to personifications of the characteristics of Ahura Mazda, in a manner comparable to the way that Wisdom and Logos became hypostases of Yahweh ([Boyce \[1979\] 2001](#), p. 22). Later, many of the Greek-influenced mystery cults would also concentrate worship and divine power on a single deity, who became the sole object of devotion for initiates. For example, Apuleius (via his character Lucius) acclaims Isis as “the highest of the powers above, the queen of the shades below, the first of all who dwell in the heavens” (*Golden Ass* 11.25), proclaiming that all other gods are assimilated to her, “the one true face and manifestation of all the gods and goddesses” (11.4). The mythic activities of the gods disappear from creation accounts written contemporaneously with Genesis 1, too. Russell [Gmirkin \(2022\)](#), p. 43) compares the way Plato's *Timaeus* mixes a largely “scientific and phenomenological account of the origin of the universe” with attribution of the ultimate cause for the universe to a divine craftsman characterized as the “single supreme, benevolent god”. Genesis 1 follows a very similar mode of explanation, Gmirkin argues, while presenting it “in the form of an authoritative story or myth” (2022, p. 68). In each case, in a development occurring at the same time in different places, henotheism emerged from an earlier, more decentralized polytheism. For this reason, Jan [Assmann \(2010\)](#), p. 36) describes henotheism (although he uses the term ‘inclusive monotheism’) as “nothing other than a mature stage of polytheism”. Although I would avoid the normative evaluation inherent in the word ‘mature’, Assmann rightly identifies the ubiquitous historical trajectory from polytheism to henotheism in mid-to-late first millennium BC texts from Egypt, ancient West Asia, and the Mediterranean, the same process evident in Judean texts now contained in the Hebrew Bible.

In an influential 2006 essay, New Testament scholar Paula [Fredriksen \(2006\)](#) called for the mandatory retirement of the term ‘monotheism’ even in the study of Christian origins, given that first-century Christians and Jews were no different from contemporary pagans insofar as they affirmed the existence of many other gods under one high god. In the New Testament, it is clear that divinity and divine characteristics are concentrated in two figures, *theos*/God and *christos*/Christ. Moreover, Paul shows a reluctance to apply the term *theos*/God to any supernatural being but the Jewish high god. Yet two additional points must immediately be made. First, the New Testament consistently distinguishes the high god *theos* from Christ, in terms of hierarchy and various divine abilities (such as being the sole recipient of human prayers). This follows a similar distinction occurring widely in late Second Temple Jewish texts, where a second god is elevated to a position close to, but still less powerful than, Yahweh. Examples include the archangel Michael, the ‘son of man’ figure, hypostases such as Wisdom or the Logos, and divinized patriarchs such as Moses or Enoch ([Segal \[1977\] 2002](#); [Boyarin 2012](#); [Schäfer 2020](#)). This fundamental division of divine characteristics and roles, with only the high god possessing all divine powers, constitutes a divine duality that distinguishes it from later Christian dogma, and yet constitutes a recognizable form of henotheism. Second, the concentration of divine powers on two unequal figures is just one aspect of the New Testament’s henotheism. Many

other gods exist below the New Testament's high god. Paul's letters, for example, affirm the existence of "many gods and many lords" in the cosmos (1 Cor 8:5), even though Paul contends that there is, rhetorically speaking, only one God (*theos*) and one Lord (*christos*), that is, in terms of their power and importance and receipt of devotion (Fredriksen 2022, p. 298; 2020, p. 37). Soon after his dismissal of other gods in 1 Cor 8:5, Paul acknowledges in the same letter that the other gods and lords are real, albeit minor divinities (*daimonia*; 1 Cor 10.20–21; Fredriksen 2020, p. 38; Wasserman 2012). Expecting the imminent end of the age, Paul believed that every knee would soon bow to Christ, whether they be the knees of heavenly beings, earthly beings, or underworld beings (Phil 2.10). His threefold division assigns divine or supernatural beings to each of these three realms. Fredriksen has drawn attention to Paul's expectations for a final war between Christ and some of these other gods, the scenario envisaged in 1 Cor 15:24–27. At that future time, all lesser gods in the cosmos, finally including Christ, are expected to be subjected to the Jewish high god (Fredriksen 2020, p. 293; cf. Wasserman 2018, p. 124). For Fredriksen, these lesser gods must include at least the cosmic, heavenly bodies believed to rule over other nations, who in the final age will be brought into subjection to the supreme God. Ephesians 6:12 also describes Christians as partaking in a spiritual conflict with principalities (*tas archas*), powers (*tas exousias*), cosmic rulers (*tous kosmokratoras*), and other spiritual beings (*ta pneumatika*) in the heavens.

Emma Wasserman observes how the Pauline letter to the Colossians presents *stoicheia*, *angeloi*, and *archai* as occupying lower cosmic ranks. Colossians does so to exalt, by contrast, the greater gods above them: God and Christ. In this vein, Christ's triumph over *tas archas* and *tas exousias* (Col 2:15) demonstrates his superior power over all lower gods. Lesser gods "serve as foils for centralizing power in God and Christ" and demonstrate their control over an ordered cosmos. Once again, an early Christian text concentrates divine powers in God and Christ, yet in a manner that also affirms the reality of other, lesser gods (Wasserman 2021, p. 418). So too, Satanas and Belial can act as subordinate servants of the supreme deity in Paul's letters, not necessarily evil and oppositional. For example, one early Jesus follower is handed over to Satanas for discipline (1 Cor 5.5). Satanas is said to test the self-control and loyalty of various other Jesus followers (1 Cor 7.5; 2 Cor 2:11, 11:14, 12:7; and 1 Thess 2:18, 3:5; Wasserman 2018, p. 138). One final point may be made about the New Testament's many gods. If monotheism was really something that Paul's Jewish contemporaries believed in, we would require a good explanation for the fact that Paul's attribution of divine powers and roles to a human being, Jesus, was *never* a point of difference between him and other Jews. They objected to Paul's attribution of divine functions to Jesus in particular, but not to Paul's attribution of divine powers and roles to *a human being*. The absence of debate stands in marked contrast, for example, to the endless disagreements between Paul and other Jews over his interpretation of the Law.

Texts in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament clearly recognize the existence of many gods throughout the cosmos. These are predominantly texts of henotheism, not monotheism in its strict sense, yet also texts that focus divine power on the one supreme god Yahweh or, in the New Testament, that one supreme God and his main divine vizier, Christ. Textbook examples of henotheism, these texts confine worship to Yahweh—or sometimes, to Yahweh and Christ; the worship of any other gods is rejected and condemned while their existence is affirmed. The world of the Bible is not the world of strict monotheism: its imagined cosmos teems with gods.

It follows that any *te reo Māori* translation of the Bible that disallows belief in the existence of gods other than Yahweh is no Māori translation of the Bible, but a European adaptation that happens to employ *kupu Māori* (Māori words). A Māori Bible translation must be rendered in Māori language and thought, by Māori, and for Māori, and must not shut down the possibility of the existence of *atua Māori* when *the very sources it translates, the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, themselves affirm the reality of many gods*. At the least, the target language should include common nouns for the divine that are employed in *te reo Māori*, such as *atua* (gods and spiritual beings) and *tūpua/tipua* (supernatural beings). And

plausibly, in certain cases, translation terms might extend also to proper nouns denoting specific Māori *atua*, where they parallel lower gods within the Bible.

3. ‘Degenerate’ Māori Polytheism: ‘Monotheism’ as Declaration of European Cultural Supremacy

The Bible’s regular affirmation of a plurality of gods should prompt a re-evaluation of past translation policies. If there is a perceived clash between Māori belief in many gods and the Bible’s many gods, then from where did such a perception arise, given it is not based on the Bible? While monotheism had developed centuries before missionary contact with Māori, nineteenth-century missionary belief in monotheism took on a certain hue, colored as it was by the then-prevailing ‘degeneration model’ of religious development. Although New Zealand missionaries were primarily motivated by what they saw as Christian and biblical truths, by assuming a degeneration model of religious development, their promotion of ‘monotheism’ and opposition to ‘polytheism’ inevitably had the discursive effect of affirming European intellectual, cultural, religious, and moral superiority against Māori.

At the beginning of colonization in Aotearoa, two broad theories about the relationship between Christian monotheists and heathen polytheists prevailed. One theory, represented by David Hume, claimed that monotheism was the culmination of an evolution in religious thought from primitive animism and polytheism to the heights of monotheism ([Hume \[1757\] 1889](#)). The other, and older, theory claimed that polytheism was a degeneration from the primitive monotheism that had originally been held by all people ([Schmidt 1987](#); [Levitin 2012](#)). The two theories are of course at odds. But the effect was much the same: the assertion of European intellectual superiority and right to rule. All-too-quickly, as [Ballentine \(2019\)](#) notes, monotheism led to the “derogatory and dehumanizing” othering of “‘pagans’, ‘heretics’, ‘heathens’, and ‘idolaters’”. Konrad [Schmid \(2011](#), p. 275) contends that we should view the very concept of “polytheism” as “an aggressive and deprecating category used by the Christian-controlled academy of the 19th century”—during what was the major period of colonization. The vilification of polytheism was, and is, a technique for claiming superior status in rationalism, intellect, and civilization—a colonial apparatus of control and thus a form of intellectual colonization. Belief in the unassailable supremacy of European monotheism over degenerate polytheism was, as Ruka [Broughton \(1985](#), p. 5) once suggested, very convenient for an empire that firmly believed in its own absolute supremacy. Irrespective of missionary and later Māori motivations in employing the term, the discursive regime of ‘monotheism’ performed an ideological task in support of colonial rule. In addition, the degeneration model was especially attractive to missionaries who could easily interpret it in light of the theological doctrine of the Fall (from which the model ultimately derived), and so a basis for the condemnation of human sinfulness from which missionaries offered the only path of salvation.

While these theories of religious evolution or degeneration are today obsolete in scholarship, we still must deal with their legacy, including within Bible translations. The first missionary to produce a book in the Māori language was Thomas [Kendall \(1815\)](#), who provides us with an illuminating example. Kendall had declared that his goal was “to fix the Language of the New Zealanders so that they may be instructed in their own Tongue” ([Kendall 1814](#)). In carrying out this mission, Kendall developed a deep intrigue with Māori religion, and to a degree was attracted by its belief system, albeit only by imposing on it a strong Christian framework. The tension is shown, for instance, in Kendall’s translation of the term *atua* (correctly: gods and other supernatural beings) as “Supreme Being”, imposing his received monotheistic understanding on every appearance of the Māori term. Consistent with the degeneration thesis, Kendall understood the term *atua* as a survival from a purported original Polynesian monotheism. In consequence of such a jaundiced translation, the creation accounts and other *pūrākau* (origin narratives) that contemporary Māori related to Kendall “seemed to him to be a perverted form of the ‘real’ historical

events in Genesis" ([Binney 1967](#)). The good and even "sublime" parts of Māori religion, he concluded, must represent survivals from some earlier Māori knowledge of scripture.

Michael Jackson ([2007](#)) contends that Kendall's conflicted relationship with Māori spirituality was a product also of the discursive effects of defining Māori spirituality in opposition to the material possessions and rational concepts of Māori. Māori were permitted the former (their 'natural' 'spirituality' frequently even valorized in the process), but were denied access to the latter:

In Kendall's struggle to reconcile a view of Māori and Pākehā as radically different with an anthropological relativism that recognized historical and human continuities between them, we may discern one side of the tragedy that is colonialism. Since the colonizer cannot abandon the idea of the other as inferior without calling into question his right to have power over him, he has recourse to a compromise. He will deny reason and secular power to the colonized, but will recognize the latter's humanity by seeing him as potentially a spiritual equal. For the colonized, a similar dilemma emerges. By entering into contracts and treaties with a materially and militarily more powerful polity, his autonomy, sovereignty, and identity are undermined. But through spiritual power he imagines that he will make good whatever political losses he has suffered. Gradually, these stereotypes will come to constitute a "second colonization" ... in which both Māori and Pākehā unwittingly collude. ([Jackson 2007](#), p. 239)

Thus, Kendall's assumption of a lost Māori monotheism, that only Christianity could restore, although involving some degree of genuine appreciation for Māori religious beliefs, inevitably provided ideological support for European dominance via the colonial project. In addition, once Māori themselves accepted 'monotheism' as the ideal view of the divine, no matter how much agency Māori also exercised in adopting these new teachings for Māori interests, the discursive structure of dominance inherent in the concept of "monotheism" led inexorably to the vilification of traditional Māori culture and gods, of "savages and their intricate pantheon". For example, the spirits of ancestors (*kehua*) could take on a sinister and evil meaning; the formerly renowned and part-divine and supernaturally endowed (*tūpua/tipua*) ancestors of old could be demonized.

Even the generic term *māori* (not to be confused with the gentilic *Māori*) was vilified by nineteenth-century monotheist discourse. Before the arrival of Pākehā (Europeans), the term *māori* was employed in opposition to *atua*, denoting a distinction between the earthly/mundane and the otherworldly/supernatural. An example is the distinction between *iwi atua* (supernatural peoples, such as the sprite-like *Patupaiarehe/Pakepakehā*) and *iwi māori* (ordinary people: [Nahe 1894](#); [Royal 2012](#)). The distinction of ordinary/*māori* people and supernatural peoples was easily extended, after contact with Europeans, to the distinction between *māori* people and these unusual Pākehā who arrived from afar. In a tragic irony, the Māori Bible itself is responsible for giving the term *māori* its later negative connotation. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal ([2012](#)) examines how the Māori translation of the Bible employed the term *māori* as a qualifier of *atua* (gods) and *tohunga* (priests), so as to denote *pagan* deities and priests or religious practices deemed *illicit* in Yahwistic religion. The result was devastating. Te Kaawa and Ong ([2022](#)) document 72 occurrences of the term *māori* in the 1952 version of the Māori Bible, the majority of which are pejorative, referring to illicit religious practices, sorcery, and forbidden gods. So in the Māori Bible, the very term *māori* is primarily a bad word. The translations, motivated by contemporary Christian understandings of monotheism, also reinforced ideological support for European social, political, and ethical superiority.

One of the more explicit early examples of the widespread missionary assumption that Māori religion was a degenerate belief system occurs in *Te Ika a Maui* ([Taylor 1855](#)) by Anglican priest and CMS missionary Richard Taylor. He claimed, like many others of his time, that Māori were originally "one of the long lost tribes of Israel", who had later "abandoned the service of the true God, and cast aside his Word" and consequently "fell step by step in the scale of civilization". After wandering through Asia and the Pacific,

Māori “finally reached New Zealand” where they had “fallen to their lowest state of degradation, given up to the fiercest passions” (Taylor 1855, p. 8). Taylor detects traces or survivals of an earlier monotheism in Māori mythology, hidden “amongst fables and foolish tales” as “faint remains of ancient truth . . . which mark a far more advanced state than their present” (1855, pp. 12, 14). For Taylor, it is especially the stories of Tāwhaki’s “mixed marriages” (with animals such as lizards and sharks) that demonstrate “how low the mind of man may fall, when given up to strong delusions” (1855, p. 33). Taylor provides a lengthy summary of various Māori *pūrākau* (foundation stories) about Tāwhaki, before adding his objection that Tāwhaki’s behavior was unbefitting of a god. As proof, Taylor alludes to 1 Cor 8:5, ironically a text in which Paul of Tarsus had affirmed henotheism, summarizing that “they [Māori] had gods many and lords many” (Taylor 1855, p. 35). Taylor does not, of course, affirm the reality of such gods by this allusion—as Paul did later in his letter—but retains only Paul’s tone of mockery.

In practical terms, the humanitarian impulses behind the missionary imposition of monotheism resulted in no less effective ideological support for colonial power than the social-evolutionary views that rose to dominance in the later nineteenth century. There are also continuities between the two. For example, operating fundamentally within the emerging scientific paradigm that assumed an evolution in societies from primitive Māori to civilized Europeans, ethnographer Elsdon Best also promoted an adapted version of the degeneration theory (cf. Holman 2010). In his later work, in order to affirm the superiority of the knowledge held by *tohunga* (experts, priests), and so implicitly criticize Christianity’s loss of this romanticized ‘natural’ Indigenous spirituality, Best argued that superior Māori spiritual knowledge was hidden from the masses of Māori. The ordinary Māori, he argued, could not be trusted with this pure Māori spiritual knowledge, and if they had discovered it, they would surely have corrupted it into a degenerate form. In particular, secret knowledge of the alleged monotheist cult of Io “never became known to the many, but was jealously conserved and retained by a few, hence it was not affected by degeneration as were similar concepts in other lands” (Best [1924] 1952, p. 70). Elite Māori, argued Best, “preserved the purity of his conception of a supreme being by means of withholding it from the bulk of the people”, who were “barbaric” followers who would have otherwise “degraded” doctrines of the monotheistic Io, reducing him “to the level of a tribal war-god”. In this way, Best transformed the two-tiered missionary hierarchy (European culture and Christian monotheism versus degenerate Māori culture and polytheism) into a three-tiered hierarchy: an idealized imagined pure Māori Ur-monotheism at the zenith, imperfect Christian monotheism below that, and degenerate Māori polytheism as the nadir of religious forms. The effect was much the same: actual living Māori were disparaged, and Europeans and their culture extolled.

As Māori converted *en masse* to Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century, many also interiorized the European equation of polytheism with degenerate religion. Yet many other Māori responded, albeit usually for pragmatic and traditional reasons, in a manner more consistent with the Bible’s henotheistic presentation of the high god Yahweh: they affirmed the existence of *atua Māori* throughout nature and throughout the world, although now viewed as subject to the Christian God. Edward Shortland, writing in the 1850s, observes that such a view was the norm among Māori converts:

When the [Māori] becomes a professing Christian, it is not a consequence that he at once abandons his former belief. He continues, at least in a great majority of cases, to believe in the reality of the *atua* of his fathers. But he believes the Christ to be a more powerful *atua*, and of a better nature; and therefore he no longer dreads the *atua* Maori. (Shortland 1854, p. 85)

Jeff Sissons’ recent study of Tāmati Te Ito and the Kaingarara Movement illustrates how one influential Māori response to Christianity resisted strict monotheism (Sissons 2023). Te Ito converted to Christianity and thus came to view many *atua Maori* as evil demons. Yet *atua* were still real beings to Te Ito and the places they inhabited he considered really *tapu* (sacred). So, utilizing a traditional Taranaki *whakanoa* (*tapu*-removal) ritual,

he drove out those *atua*, seen in the form of small lizards, *ngārara*. These he considered minor but real gods. And in his preaching, Te Ito retained elements of a traditional Māori hierarchy of gods, based on their perceived powers, by declaring that the Anglican god was the most powerful god, the Catholic god somewhat below that, and at the bottom of the divine scale were Maori ancestral *atua*. Furthermore, in carrying out his *whakanoa* for Christian purposes, Te Ito claimed to be the embodiment of a *tuna* (eel) god from the Waikato, a relatively minor god named Karutahi. So, Te Ito was purifying the land of Māori religious practices in the name of Christ, by utilizing a traditional Māori *whakanoa* ceremony, under the command and embodiment of a traditional Māori *atua*.

The complexity of Te Ito's combination of Christian and Māori gods is not unrepresentative, and still today many Māori will recite a traditional *karakia* (incantation) addressing Māori gods in one context and a Christian *karakia* (prayer) addressing Jesus in another setting, or combine a Christian funeral service with a traditional *takahī whare* (trampling of the house [of the deceased]) to make it *noa* (non-*tapu*), so ridding it of the presence of any lingering *kehua* (restless spirit). In his discussion of the lived religion of ordinary Māori from more rural areas, Te Pakaka Tawhai describes how even those Māori who identify as Christians will typically also retain many traditional religious practices. "While the Christian God provides Maoridom with its first Redeemer", explains Tawhai, "he appears mostly to ignore needs at the temporal and profane level, leaving this domain to the ancestral gods who continue to cater for those needs" (Tawhai 1988, p. 96). Logical inconsistencies between two systematized 'religions' are, for many Māori, of little concern in meeting their pragmatic religious needs. Frequently in Māori practice, a *de facto* henotheism prevails. It is this practice of incorporating traditional Māori *atua* that I now draw upon to counter the racist effects of monotheistic interpretations of biblical texts.

4. Translating Gen 6:1–4 into te reo Māori with Help from Tāwhaki

Just as we find a range of Judean views on the divine within the Bible, *atua Māori* fit better with some biblical stories than they do with others. One story that demands translation with *atua Māori* is the account of the Nephilim in Gen 6:1–4, the story of how the sons of the gods copulated with human women and gave birth to great semi-divine heroes of ancient times. The Judean story-world of ancient Nephilim, long-dead heroes, is, in many important respects, the same story-world inhabited by Maui, Tāwhaki, Rupe, Rata, and other *tūpua/tipua* ("supernatural ancestors" or "demigods"). For the remainder of this paper, I show first how reading Gen 6:1–4 alongside the Tāwhaki cycle of *pūrākau* (founding stories) offers a rich resource for rendering the story in *te reo Māori*, and second, how the Tāwhaki cycle opens up several avenues of interpretation for understanding the biblical narrative.⁶

Genesis 6:4 identifies the Nephilim as the hybrid offspring of "the sons of the gods/God" (*benei ha'elohim*) and "daughters of men". Although the term '*elohim*' in the final form of Genesis 1–11 is likely to refer to Yahweh alone, the underlying source may well have referred to gods in the plural. In any case, the term for divine 'offspring' (*benei*) is certainly plural. Their own offspring, the Nephilim, are further identified as "heroes (*gibborim*) from antiquity" and "men of renown", and as freely having sexual intercourse with any women they chose, a common trope of ancient stories about nobles, kings, and princes (most famously, e.g., Gilgamesh). The term Nephilim, from the root *n-f-l* ("to fall"), is a reduction of the passive adjective (*qaṭil*), so "those made to fall", and so most plausibly refers to fallen warriors or heroes of legendary times (Gese 1974, p. 110; Hamilton 1990, p. 269; Hendel 2004, p. 21; Doak 2012, p. 63, no. 53). The Nephilim are further described as *gibborim* (heroes, mighty men) in Gen 6:4: great heroes who always inhabit Israel's legendary founding ages. In Numbers 13, the Nephilim are also identified as sons of Anak—a term most likely derived from the Greek *anax*, where the term likewise refers to legendary, largely Trojan-era heroes and warriors, and usually again with part-divine parentage (MacLaurin 1965; Römer 2015, p. 195; Galbraith 2019; Nissan 2019; yet already Bochart 1646, 1 c. 1). Deuteronomy 1–3, in turn, identifies these Anakim with the Rephaim,

a term meaning ‘great ones’ or ‘strong ones’, and so once again coinciding in meaning with mighty and elite warriors, all placed in ancient times. The equivalent term in Ugarit, Syria, is *Rapi’uma* (Aistleitner 1967, p. 295), also a reference to a group of noble, elite warriors. So, already in biblical tradition, the Judean Nephilim connect to a conception of ancient heroes found throughout ancient West Asia and the Mediterranean.⁷

In Māori tradition, the *tūpuna tupua* (ancestral demigod) Tāwhaki is likewise a descendant of gods. His grandmother is a goddess. His *whakapapa* (genealogical lineage) is recited back to the high gods Papatūānuku and Rangi-nui. In his many heroic adventures, Tāwhaki displays his supernatural abilities and strength, as befitting an *atua* and son of *atua*. As for all founding stories, the stories of Tāwhaki vary from teller to teller, changing shape in renditions, for example, from Te Arawa, Ngāi Tahu, Taranaki, and Ngāpuhi,⁸ and in stories throughout Polynesia, including Tafa’i of Samoa, Tahaki of French Polynesia, and Kaha’i of Hawai’i, to name just a few. Among the various *pūrākau* (origin stories) told about Tāwhaki in Aotearoa, we hear of his overcoming death after being attacked by his in-laws; of Tāwhaki causing a great flood to destroy all his enemies; of Tāwhaki’s revenge on a *tūpua*/supernatural people for kidnapping his mother; of his fame causing the descent of a goddess from the heavens to sleep with him; and of the ascent of Tāwhaki to the heavens.

The ascent of Tāwhaki to heaven is closely connected with obtaining secret knowledge and incantations, and knowledge of sacred ceremonies (White 1887, p. 55). His ability to climb to the heavens, prohibited for most mortals, is due to his liminal status, neither fully divine nor fully man. Tāwhaki “assume[s] the form of god or of man at his discretion” (Ngāi Tahu tradition, in White 1887, p. 60), sometimes taking “the appearance of a man” (Ngāti Hau tradition, in White 1887, p. 55). He is able to cause a great deluge that kills all his enemies by climbing to the floor of heaven and stamping on it until it cracks, to allow the waters to flow down and cover the earth (White 1887, p. 55; Grey 1855, p. 60). Tāwhaki’s dwelling is in this border region between heaven and earth, here at the top of a mountain. Grey records that Tāwhaki is called both *tangata* and *atua* (man and supernatural being), the latter which he translates as “demigod” (1855, p. 78). Ngāti Hau tradition records a prophecy made by Tāwhaki’s grandmother, Whai-tiri, before his birth, that Tāwhaki would “be the man to climb to the heaven of sacred ceremonies”, distinguishing him from other men and indeed even his mother who tried and failed to climb to heaven (White 1887, p. 55). The prophecy comes to pass, and Tāwhaki’s greatest feat was to climb a vine (in some traditions, gossamer) until he reached the heavens. As for Enoch (1 Enoch), Tāwhaki’s ascent to the heavens gives him access to heavenly beings who teach him secret knowledge, including powerful incantations (Ngāi Tahu tradition, in White 1887, pp. 59, 65–66), which he then teaches to people on earth (White 1887, pp. 59–60). During his heavenly journeys, Tāwhaki also acquires secret knowledge of the cosmos, such as the location of the storehouse of hailstones (White 1887, p. 64).

Like Gilgamesh’s notorious sexual pursuit of the women of his city Uruk, Tāwhaki has numerous sexual encounters. His infatuation with Hine-nui-a-te-kawa, a maiden already promised to another man, results in his in-laws plotting to kill him. Tāwhaki’s life is saved, however, because his wife is equally in love with him, as we would expect for a man of such heroic stature, and so nurses him back to health (White 1887, p. 54). Ngāi Tahu tradition relates that during his great crossing of the sea with his brother Karihi, “Tāwhaki took to wife many women, for he had many wives as they went on their voyage on the sea” (in White 1887, p. 62). His fame as a great warrior not only attracts human women, but also the heavenly maiden Tangotango. In a gender reversal of Gen 6:1–4, she descends each night from heaven to sleep with him (Grey 1855, pp. 66–67). Eventually falling in love with Tāwhaki, and giving birth to his child Arahuta, she decides to relinquish her place in heaven for a time to make a home with him (Grey 1855, p. 67).

As befitting a great warrior, Tāwhaki kills and destroys his in-laws who had conspired to kill him and their whole people (Grey 1855, p. 61). More than that, he is able to fight and defeat *iwi atua*, a large group of supernatural beings identified in various traditions as Ponaturi or Patupaiārehe (Grey 1855, p. 66; White 1887, p. 56).

Tāwhaki's world shares not only phrases and terminology with the world of the Nephilim, but also the essential elements of the story-world in which heroes carry out marvelous deeds in a time long past. Bible translators should, therefore, draw upon the terminology and conceptual world of the stories of Tāwhaki, with its multiple *atua*, to render biblical stories of heroes in *te reo Māori*. The divine parents of the Nephilim of Gen 6:1–4 and Tāwhaki are portrayed in similar ways. Grey records the description of the immediate divine offspring of Rangi-nui and Papatūānuku as *ngā tama a Rangi* (the sons of Rangi), which could be adapted to describe the divine parents of Nephilim, as *ngā tama a ngā atua* (the sons of the gods). The biblical description of "heroes of old" might also be rendered with the common phrase for referring to ancient heroic Māori ancestors, *ngā tūpuna o neherā* (the ancestors of ancient times). While the 1952 Māori Bible described the Nephilim as *tangata* (men), albeit tall men,⁹ we might also employ the description of Tāwhaki as an *atua*. Yet, given that the parents of these heroes are also *atua* (and sons of *atua*), we might choose a more specific subcategory of *atua*. In which case, *ngā tūpua/tipua* would be the closest translation equivalent to refer in the present context to less powerful divinities. As the term *tūpua/tipua* is also used in the Tāwhaki tradition to refer to the non-human race of Ponaturi/Patupaiārehe, and, by contrast, Tāwhaki is placed within human genealogies, the term might be qualified as *tūpuna tūpua/tipuna tipua*, translatable as "supernatural ancestors" or "demigods".

Accordingly, with comparison to the 1952 Māori Bible and Te Waaka Melbourne's translation for Bible Society New Zealand, I suggest the following translation of the key verse Gen 6:4:

Te Paipera Tapu 1952	BSNZ 2023	Galbraith 2024
<p><i>He roroa nga tangata o te whenua i aua ra, a i muri iho, i te haerenga o nga tama a te Atua ki nga tamahine a te tangata, a ka whanau a ratou tamariki, ko ratou nga marohirohi o mua, he tangata whai ingoa.</i></p> <p>The people of the land were tall in those days, and afterwards, when the sons of God went to the daughters of men, and they gave birth to children, they were the mighty men of old, men of renown.</p>	<p><i>I era rā, ā, i muri mai hoki, he tāngata tino nunui i runga i te whenua, he tipua nō ngā ira tangata wāhine me ngā tama a te Atua. He tāngata tino toa he tāngata rongonui i ērā wā.</i></p> <p>In those days, and also after, there were very large men upon the earth, demigods born from the spirits of human women and the sons of God. They were very brave warriors and famous men in those days.</p>	<p><i>I noho ngā tūpuna tūpua ki te whenua i era rā, ā, i muri mai hoki, nā te mea i moe ngā tama a ngā atua ki i ngā tamāhine a te tangata, ā, ka whānau ngā tama i a rāua. Ko rātou ngā toa o neherā, ngā tangata rongonui.</i></p> <p>The demigods were in the land in those days, and also after, because the sons of God slept with human women and sons were born to them. They were the heroes of ancient times, famous men.</p>

5. Interpreting Gen 6:1–4 in Light of the Stories of Tāwhaki

Given the brevity of the biblical story of Nephilim, the stories of Tāwhaki offer much more than sources of translation terms, however; they offer *one example of the rich and full context* for heroic ancestor stories that is lacking in the very brief and obscure biblical account. Other comparable contexts are found in Greek and ancient West Asian hero legends. It is not too much to claim that Tāwhaki, the Anax, Gilgamesh, and the Nephilim occupy a world of ancient elite heroes conceived in very similar ways across cultures, while not losing sight of the distinct contributions from each culture. The point here is not to collapse the distinctive elements of each of these traditions onto each other, but to place them in conversation in the hope of drawing out unnoticed elements in each, to stimulate questions previously unasked, to provide fresh answers to old questions of interpretation, to notice the hitherto unnoticed. The Tāwhaki stories should provoke our reconsideration of the story of the sons of the gods and the Nephilim. For the remainder of this article, I consider three ways in particular in which reading the stories of Tāwhaki in conversation

with Gen 6:1–4 challenges our understanding of the biblical story of the sons of the gods and the Nephilim.

5.1. The Narrative Role of the Temporal Setting of Gen 6:1–4

Comparing the Primeval History of Genesis with the stories of Tāwhaki increases our appreciation for the important role played in the narrative by its temporal setting and so why the Nephilim act as they do. As *ngū tūpuna o neherū*, as the heroes of old, these protagonists are—sometimes literally—too big for this earth. They live in a time in which the boundaries between heaven and earth had not closed, and so do not clearly belong to one sphere or the other. *Atua* and *tangata*, divine and human beings, frequently intermingle in these biblical and other ancient West Asian, Greek, and Māori stories. Although Tāwhaki’s divine wife Tangotango was “a woman from heaven” (*tētehi wahine nō runga i te rangi*), she could have sex with him and bear him a child. The scenario mirrors, with genders reversed, the actions of the sons of the gods in the Genesis legend. In each, the boundary between heaven and earth is porous. As a result, the hybrid offspring of their sexual encounter also belong neither here nor there. Soon after Tāwhaki’s child is born, she is whisked away to the heavens by her mother. The Nephilim too are transitory: they largely disappear after the Flood, making their reappearance in Num 13:33 only to describe a disappearing people (Anakim) of another founding legend.

The longer narratives about Tāwhaki make it clear that this tension of ‘being from elsewhere’ drives the narrative. Enoch, for example, travels from earth to heaven, joins with Yahweh, and in the *Book of the Watchers* is given a tour of the heavens. Both Enoch and Tāwhaki are given privileged access to the secret storehouse of hailstones, and both know the origin of lightning (for Tāwhaki, this is personal). The realm of the divine is accessible to the heroes of old; secret knowledge and power is readily obtainable. They have the right and ability to cross what, for other mortals, would present insuperable boundaries. They are empowered also, as demigods, to have adventures on earth beyond the constraints faced by other mortals. The paradox of their superhuman natures is that their impossible feats provide a larger-than-life exemplar, inspiration for distant human descendants, hearers of these traditional stories. They intrigue because they hold out the possibility that their descendants, by the recitation of *karakia* (incantations) or knowledge of secret words, might also gain some degree of esoteric knowledge first obtained by Tāwhaki or by Watcher angels, that they might themselves attain some measure of divine knowledge and power.

It has often been observed that, in contrast to the condemnations of human sinfulness in the Flood story that follows in Genesis 6, the account in Gen 6:1–4 says nothing necessarily negative about the Nephilim (e.g., [Wright 2013](#), p. 83). Their taking of human wives *mikkol asher baharu* (of any that they chose) goes unremarked: there is nothing of 1 Enoch’s later and more mythic retelling, where angels leave heaven to take human women by force. Instead, the Nephilim are spoken of in Gen 6:1–4 as heroes, as great men. Yet the description is ambiguous: does *mikkol asher baharu* merely convey the heroic nobleman’s sovereign choice of sexual partner, or the over-riding of a woman’s will? Does this short and opaque expression invoke longer tales told about romantic sexual encounters between heroic elites and woman, or about their rape of women? It is unclear, and despite our own concerns, within the story-world, their actions are attributed with no moral significance. Similarly, Tāwhaki’s sex with multiple women and taking of a second wife is never condemned. Such behavior from heroes is, rather, expected. The hero, often a royal or sovereign figure, operates beyond the law ([Derrida 2009](#)). Tāwhaki’s adventures on earth and in the heavens often involve him meeting new women and having sex with them. He becomes infatuated with and marries a woman who had already been betrothed to another man, named in some traditions as Hine-nui-a-te-kawa, and incurs the wrath of his in-laws that would for any other man be deserved. But somehow it is the in-laws who are found guilty, not Tāwhaki, who is proclaimed “innocent of the deed for which he was killed” ([White 1887](#), p. 55). Heroes are judged differently. When “Tāwhaki took to wife many women” and had

"many wives" he shows that a sovereign is neither judged favorably or adversely under the law, but operates above it. The reason Tāwhaki is not judged by normal standards is that he is not normal: he is more than human and acts outside of ordinary time. These are, after all, tales about our great ancestors and as such, their *mana* places them beyond our capacity or desire to render judgement.

5.2. The 'Sons of the Gods' in Gen 6:1–4

Attention to the liminal, ambiguous nature of the Nephilim and Tāwhaki and other *tūpuna tupua* challenges the formulation of the so-called interpretive crux of Gen 6:1–4, concerning the identity of "the sons of the gods". The traditional approach taken in modern biblical scholarship is to lay out, in logical fashion, three alternative interpretations. The sons of the gods (1) could literally be divine beings, (2) they could be merely elite but mortal princes and kings, or (3) they could be descendants of one of the lineages of chapters 4 and 5, Cainites or Sethites (Doedens 2019). A variation of the first interpretation is that the sons of gods could refer to angels—not so much an option based on the context of Genesis, but one based instead on later texts: the Greek translation in LXX Gen 6:1–4 and the *Book of the Watchers*. Yet we might take a step back and pose a more fundamental question. Is the meaning of 'the sons of the gods' really an interpretive crux or are these interpretive categories themselves the result of a too-wooden construction inapplicable to boundary-exceeding heroes of old? And has the brevity of the passage blinded interpreters to other possibilities from the wider world of ancient heroes? Consider Tāwhaki, who is interpreted as a son of mortals in some traditions, a son of gods in others. He is an *atua*, yes, but of what sort? Tāwhaki is called both *tangata* and *atua* in the same Te Arawa telling, seemingly mocking the logically distinct categories favored by modern biblical interpretation. Tāwhaki's shiny skin and lightning-emitting armpits place him with higher gods, but he still risks death in climbing the vine to the heavens, and his brother (or mortal double?) Karihi does in fact die this way in some tellings. The Tāwhaki cycle of legends opens up possibilities for interpretation shut down by the desire for clear-cut and rational distinctions between gods, high-born men, and the genealogies of antediluvian elites. Rather than follow the usual procedures to determine the answer, the Tāwhaki stories present the possibility that the very framing of the interpretive possibilities for Gen 6:1–4 is misguided. Interpretative options for the phrase *the sons of the gods* reflect again the monotheistic bias imposed on the Bible, under which men and gods cannot be the same persons, and genealogies of men cannot include gods.

As in the parable of the blind men and the elephant, those claiming that the sons of the gods are gods but not mortals may be grabbing the elephant's trunk rather than its tail. Already in 1972, David Clines considered that the alleged hermeneutical problem was, to some extent, a result of too-rigid categorical differences between gods and men (Clines 1979).¹⁰ In his article, Clines suggests "that the author of Gen 6:1–4 in its present form did not work with a system of closed categories in which 'sons of God' must be either human or non-human" (1979, p. 4). As evidence, he points out that ancient West Asian kings and elites were literally considered sons of the gods. The two categories are far from mutually exclusive. Clines also adduces King Gilgamesh, described as two-thirds divine in the *Gilgamesh Epic* (1979, p. 5; *Gilgamesh* I.ii.1), and rightly notes that noble antediluvians or the immediate postdiluvians would plausibly have been called by a title 'son of the god' or in the collective, 'sons of the gods' (1979, p. 5).

Yet, having dissolved the categories of heaven and earth, god and human, Clines falls back into this binary classification for the remainder of his article. He argues that the brief narrative in Gen 6:1–4 provides one more example of "breaking the bounds", or "a breach of the primal boundary between the divine and the human worlds", and so an instance of the increasing *human* sinfulness that led to the Flood. The conclusion marks a retreat from his earlier argument. If we examine the heroic adventures of Tāwhaki, or the boundary-crossing adventures of Gilgamesh, it would seem instead that the actions of the sons of the gods and the Nephilim described in Gen 6:1–4 entirely befit heroes who are

seldom bound by the physical and even moral restrictions put in place for other human beings. As already noted, there is no warrant for seeing any condemnation of the sons of the gods or Nephilim in Gen 6:1–4, let alone what Clines piously describes as “the violent and polygamous lust of the ‘sons of God’” (1979, p. 6). Clines force-fits the episode into his grand metanarrative of sin and punishment that he imposes on the Primeval History (Genesis 1–11) or, as he revealingly puts it, a pattern “stamped upon” Gen 6:1–4 (1979, p. 12). His attempt to compare Gen 6:1–4 with stories of *human* sin throughout Genesis 1–11 becomes especially forced in *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, when he attempts to locate four elements (sin, speech, mitigation, and punishment) that he believes characterizes each of the stories of the Fall: Cain, Nephilim, Flood, and Babel. He can only locate two of the four elements within Gen 6:1–4, and is forced to pinch the missing two elements from the Flood story (Clines [1978] 1997, p. 68). A Catch-22 situation undermines Clines’ entire argument: if the sons of the gods are really breaching boundaries between the divine and human, coming down from their proper place in heaven, then their transgression is not a *human* sin; if the sons of the gods are human rulers situated on earth, then there was *no ‘breach’ of the heavenly realm!* The problem stems, I contend, from Clines’ imposition of his metanarrative of sin and punishment on Gen 6:1–4, failing to recognize the implications of his own earlier insight that the categories of divine and human are already blurred in this narrative. In the world of divine–human heroes, there are no clear “bounds” to be “breached”. In the next section, I take Clines’ insight that antediluvian heroes and nobles naturally traversed the heavenly and earthly realms, but I pursue his insight to its logical conclusion.

5.3. Gen 6:1–4 as Genealogy

The stories of Tāwhaki provide multiple examples of how heroic semi-divine ancestors were expected to traverse what for lesser mortals constituted insuperable boundaries between heaven and earth. Tāwhaki achieves what even his mother and brother could not, successfully crossing over from earth to the heavens. He establishes a household with a goddess on earth, sires a daughter who herself travels from earth to heaven, and brings esoteric knowledge down from the heavens to benefit other human beings. In these stories, no absolute boundary exists between humans and gods for the hero figure. The stories prompt us to a more thoroughgoing interpretation of the sons of the gods as *both* divine and human, compared with Clines’ initial foray in this direction. Clines combined only two of the three major interpretations of the sons of the gods. But the dissolution of the divine–human boundary invokes also the third major interpretation, the genealogical interpretation, that ‘the sons of the gods’ refer to members of the preceding genealogy in Genesis 5. Such a suggestion recalls the traditional ‘Sethite interpretation’ that identifies the Sethite lineage in Genesis 5 with the sons of the gods and identifies the Cainite lineage in Genesis 4 with the ‘daughters of men’ (Dexinger 1992, pp. 169–75). Modern biblical criticism has usually dismissed the Sethite interpretation as motivated primarily by dogmatic rather than exegetical concerns (Doedens 2019, pp. 201–5). Yet I contend that, putting the identification of ‘daughters of men’ to the side, the Sethite interpretation recognizes an important and neglected dimension of Gen 6:1–4. The genealogies, too often bracketed out by modern readers, should be seen as an intrinsic part of the overall narrative of Genesis 1–11, not an interruption; moreover, as the immediate context for reading Gen 6:1–4.

The possibility is again suggested by Māori renditions of the Tāwhaki story. These *pūrākau Māori* (Maori origin stories) lack the modern bias against genealogies. To the contrary, the stories of Tāwhaki are frequently interwoven with recitations of his genealogy. Tāwhaki’s ancestry is traced to the gods: Mohi Ruatapu’s Ngati Porou tradition traced Tāwhaki’s ancestry to Maui, and then back to other and increasingly more powerful *atua* (Ruatapu 2020, p. 25). White records a Ngāti Hau tradition that traces 22 generations down from Raki to Tāwhaki (White 1887, p. 54). Other tellers trace Tāwhaki’s or his brother Karihi’s descendants down to the present day. Hare Hongi traced a genealogy of 72 generations from Tāwhaki’s brother Karihi down via Rahiri of Ngāpuhi to himself

([Hongi 1924](#), pp. 286–87). Tūtaka traces a genealogy of 15 generations from Tāwhaki to Toroa, captain of the Mātaatua waka, and so to Tūhoe and Tūtaka himself ([Mead 2022](#), pp. 13–14). The Tainui tradition recorded by Pei Te Hurinui Jones ([2013](#), pp. 92–94) traces one genealogy of gods to the first humans (culminating with Tāwhaki) and a subsequent genealogy from the first humans (commencing with Tāwhaki) to the captains of the Tainui and Arawa voyaging waka, ancestors of their *iwi* (peoples). Genealogy is of key interest for many of these story tellers. Genealogy and origin story are essentially intertwined.

By contrast, modern critical analysis of the genealogical lists in Genesis 4 and 5 typically attempts to distinguish the lists proper from any narrative element, treating the lists as an awkward intrusion into the surrounding narrative material including Gen 6:1–4. For example, Joel S. [Baden](#) ([2012](#), pp. 46–47) declares that the genealogy of Genesis 5 can be “clearly separated” from its surrounding context, and then “can be firmly assigned to a genre, and that genre can be assigned a probable *Sitz im Leben*”. As for many scholars, Ronald S. [Hendel](#) ([2004](#), p. 63) ascribes the genealogical list in Genesis 5 to the *toledot* source, the “Book of the Generations of Adam”. I agree that the existence of a *toledot* source is highly plausible. For the genealogies in both Genesis 5 and 11 share a distinctive formula and structure that supports a separate source. Yet for Hendel, the *toledot* book is a source confined to the genealogical lists and exclusive of any narrative material. Baden and Hendel have accepted the Gunkelian search for a pure form of genealogy and a pure form of story, even mapping those hypothetical constructs to distinct *Sitzen im Leben*. Instead, prompted by Māori narratives of the hero Tāwhaki, we should observe the form taken by *actual* ancient West Asian genealogies. Most relevant is the distinct mixture of legendary narrative and genealogy in the Mesopotamian king liststhe form of which provides the primary influence on the construction of Genesis 5.

The similarity of the genealogy in Genesis 5 to the SKL and related Mesopotamian lists or chronicles has long been noted. A significant number of similar elements are shared by Genesis 5 and the SKL and in combination, these similarities are unlikely to be the result of mere coincidence. The specific similarities include first the antediluvian setting, references to the Flood, especial mention of the Flood hero, and a list of generations of some six to ten kings before the Flood. The total number of pre-Flood generations is strikingly also ten in the broadly contemporary account of Berossos (in Eusebius, citing the second-century BC Apollodorus in *FGrHist* #244 F83), who also names the seventh ancestor on the list as Euedōranchos (=Enmeduranki). The 365-year life of Enoch (Gen 5:22–24) has obvious solar symbolism, which further recalls Enmeduranki’s ascent to the sun-god Shamash in the wider Enmeduranki legend, just as Enoch ascends to Yahweh. These factors make it highly plausible that the compiler of the genealogy in Genesis 5 was a scribe familiar with the Mesopotamian tradition. Indeed, the SKL enjoyed a “wide distribution and transmission down into the Hellenistic period” ([Gertz 2023](#), p. 230; cf. [Kvanvig 2011](#), p. 92). Furthermore, David M. [Carr](#) ([2020](#), p. 109) provides a compelling explanation of the different order of names in Genesis 4 and 5, an explanation that also indicates Mesopotamian influence. The different order, Carr suggests, results from the compiler of the list in Gen 5 deliberately moving Enoch from the fifth to seventh position (swapped with Mahalalel/Mehuajel, moved from the seventh to fifth position)so as to match the position of Euedōranchos in Berossos. The conscious association of Enoch with Enmeduranki is developed in the later Enochic literature, which adopts Enmeduranki’s reputation for having ascended to the gods, learning divine secrets and in particular divination ([Lambert 1967](#)). What the author of the genealogy in Genesis 5/11 has done, therefore, is compose a local, Palestinian lineage of names in a form and structure primarily influenced by the Mesopotamian SKL and related texts.¹¹

Yet largely overlooked in discussions of Gen 6:1–4’s reliance on the form of the SKL is the fact that ancient West Asian king lists regularly insert truncated origin legends into their so-called lists. I suspect that the modern bias against genealogical lists has combined here with a predilection for reconstructing ‘pure’ genres to ignore the many examples of genealogical works that regularly mix lists of primeval ancestors with legendary-historical

notes. The use of legendary–historical notes in the antediluvian genealogies of Genesis 4 and 5 bears a striking resemblance to their use in the SKL. Legendary–historical notes regularly punctuate versions of the SKL. Thorkild Jacobsen (1939, p. 146) plausibly assumed that such “notes” had been drawn from “epics, legends and chronicles” that offered fuller details. The notes may, however, given their antiquity, predate many of the later *written* forms of epics, legends, and chronicles that have come down to us. So they may well record recollections drawn from a wider and orally transmitted cultural heritage concerning heroic ancestors. Such a proposition accords with the strongly allusive character of the notes (Wilcke 1989, p. 123), a feature regularly observed also for Gen 6:1–4. Piotr Michalowski helpfully describes these notes as “short anecdotal pseudo-historical interpolations” (Michalowski 2012). Wilcke likens them to the short legendary–historical notes found in omens, which there take the form of “historiettes not history” (Wilcke 1989, p. 123). While the earliest largely extant copy of the SKL, the USKL, does not feature such legendary–historical notes (Steinkeller 2003), it is difficult to assess from this single surviving Sumerian exemplar whether the later legendary–historical notes are interpolations into an original genealogy simpliciter, or whether the USKL has reduced a tradition that in other versions included historical notes (*pace* Gabriel 2023, pp. 252–53). After all, even some of the later exemplars of SLK do not include all such notes. Nevertheless, legendary–historical notes are a regular feature of the lists, and can be seen as further expanded to construct works such as the Babylonian Chronicle and, more so, Berossos. Gianni Marchesi goes so far as to claim, albeit somewhat provocatively, that

there is no such thing as a Sumerian king list. The text usually referred to as the Sumerian King List . . . is a composition halfway between a literary text and a list proper.

Narrative and genealogy are intermingled in the recitation of genealogy, and only artificially separated, as is the case for contemporary recitations of *whakapapa* by Māori. Some nine legendary–historical notes inserted into the versions of the SKL refer to origin stories, sometimes also known in longer renditions (Marchesi 2010, pp. 238–43). For example, after the listing of “Etana, the shepherd” comes the note, “the one who ascended to heaven” (SKL 64–67), a note derived from the preserved longer legend of Etana. Another note mentions that “Meshkiangasher entered the sea and went up to the mountain ranges” (SKL 99–101), and another that Gilgamesh’s father was “a ghost, the lord of Kul’āba” (SKL 112–114). Significantly, these notes assume larger stories from a time in which ancient heroes regularly interacted with the gods. Michalowski observes that many of the legendary–historical notes stress a king’s outsider status, their alterity. “These brief stories were not random”, writes Michalowski (2021, p. 30), “they linked history with literary traditions, bringing into relief the alterity of certain kings—either their Outsider origins or their journeys to the strange highland areas rich in desired goods and Outsider power that molded them into secondary stranger-kings”. The pseudo-historical notes are features of this legendary period, and disappear as soon as we enter the more historical period, with the final instances of the notes (on Sargon) marking the transition between legendary and historical eras. After Sargon, as in Genesis 11, the notes disappear altogether.

In the light of the Tāwhaki stories and the direct evidence of the SKL, we should read the brief notes in Gen 6:1–4 as a continuation of the brief notes that form part of the preceding genealogies of Gen 4:17 to 5:32. These legendary–historical notes relate that Enoch built a city (Gen 4:17); describe the contributions of the culture heroes Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-cain (Gen 4:20–22); identify the time at which people first invoked the name “Yahweh” (Gen 4:26)—in tension with both Exodus 6:3 and the common theological interpretation of the Primeval History as involving an increase in sinfulness; and record the ascension of Enoch to heaven (Gen 5:24). City-building and consolidation are likewise prominent in the historical notes in the SKL, featuring in the notes about ‘Enmerkar (Uruk; SKL 102–105), Kubaba (SKL 224–227), and Sargon (SKL 266–271). In addition, the theme of culture origins is found, for example, in the Lagash King List, itself dependent on SKL (Sollberger 1967). In the Lagash King List, notes recur throughout the genealogy which refer to the building of canals and irrigation, as well as productivity achieved in agriculture.

Further, the primeval genealogy found in Philo (*Phoenician History* 1.10) lists those who brought civilization to humankind.

The story of the Nephilim in Gen 6:1–4 should be understood as another such brief note derived from the genealogical source employed in Genesis 5. It alludes to more extensive legends, some of which, such as the notes on Enoch and the Nephilim, may have provided source materials for the later *Book of the Watchers*. Furthermore, it seems plausible that the note that now comprises Gen 6:1–4 was originally included in the *toledot* book as a description of the extraordinary character of the elite Sethian lineage from Adam, or of certain members of that lineage. The description “the sons of the gods” still fits with this elite lineage; no longer kings in the final form of Genesis 5, but the unique line of firstborn men from Adam.

The reference in Gen 6:3 to the proper extent of a person’s life (120 years) is plausibly also taken from a legendary–historical note attached to the source of Genesis 5. It is a common theme in king lists and related chronological works, as well as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Lagash King List notes, “In those days, man in his carefree youth acted/lived for 100 years, (and) from his coming of age acted for (another) 100 years” (ll. 14–16, in [Sollberger 1967](#), p. 283). The author of the *Ballad of Ancient Heroes* laments that human life no longer extends for many thousands of years, listing antediluvian heroes drawn from a late copy of the SKL ([Arnaud 1982](#), p. 51). Berossos states that the length of human life was 116 years (in Censorinus, *The Birthday Gift*, 17.4) or perhaps more than 116 (in Pliny, *Natural History* 7.160), a figure not far from that given in Gen 6:3. Thus both of the main themes in Gen 6:1–4, the feats of heroes and the proper length of human life, are found in the legendary–historical notes to genealogical lists. The two notes are not then to be read together, as though the actions of ancient heroes caused the shortening of human life. Rather, these curtailed allusions each direct the reader’s mind to a distinct and well-known trope easily recalled from the extensive stories heard about the time of ancient heroes.

An appreciation of the genealogical origins of Gen 6:1–4 furnishes us with the most important context for understanding both its form and content. The short and allusive nature of Gen 6:1–4 is a function of its source in the *toledot* book, the source of both genealogical lists and genealogical notes, which constitutes the primary source for 5:1–6:4 and 11:10–32. Once the genealogical nature of 6:1–4 is recognized, all three of the main interpretations of the phrase ‘sons of the gods’ cohere. The sons of the gods and their sons, the Nephilim, are an elite line of humans who ruled since Adam and were renowned for heroic deeds; they receive the regal title “the son of the gods”, as bestowed upon other rulers throughout ancient West Asia, and they belong, in particular, to the elite Sethite lineage of Genesis 5.

It follows that the story in Gen 6:1–4 does not recount any ‘breach’ of the domains of heaven and earth, *pace* Clines. The legendary heroic figures from the antediluvian past were expected to cross such boundaries, as they were liminal figures who combined mortal and divine worlds in their persons. They were larger than life figures, perhaps even physically so, although Gen 6:1–4 is silent on their stature, referring only to their fame and sexual exploits. There is no essential distinction between the referents, therefore, of the “sons of the gods” and their offspring the Nephilim: both groups refer to famous elite heroic figures from the legendary period ‘before the Flood’. No moral judgment is made on their actions in Gen 6:1–4. They are valued in heroic terms that transcend morality, according to their legendary deeds and military prowess.

Only a theological interest in imposing a schema of “progressive decline”, “an increase in sin to avalanche proportions”, or “a continually widening chasm between man and God” ([von Rad 1961](#), pp. 148, 152) can impose the sort of metanarrative able to override the heroic context of Gen 5:1–6:4. Such a goal surely lies behind Clines’ unsubstantiated judgment that Gen 6:1–4 involved an episode of ‘titanic lust’ ([Clines \[1978\] 1997](#), p. 70). On the contrary, the story of primeval heroes in Gen 6:1–4 was exemplary for those who identify as descendants of these heroes. In the biblical worldview, such descendants logically include all of humanity, but the most relevant descendants were those in the chosen line

that continues in the *toledot* extensions throughout Genesis. Placed in its genealogical context, the Nephilim represent ourselves writ large, as much aspiring gods as mortal beings, inspiring all descendants to similar feats of heroism.

6. Conclusions: Beyond the Hermeneutics of Unethical Monotheism

Our understanding of the brief biblical account of the Nephilim benefits greatly from comparison with other ancient West Asian and Mediterranean traditions, and in shared discourse with Māori stories of Tāwhaki. The Nephilim lived in the world of founding heroes known to many cultures. We would miss Gen 6:1–4’s many allusions to this primeval world, however, if we failed to acknowledge the Bible’s affirmation that many gods exist within it. The intriguing account of the sons of the gods and daughters of men in Gen 6:1–4 is not a story of the breaching of boundaries between the human and divine, as it is often portrayed, but a heroic story told to hearers who expected that such putative ‘boundaries’ existed only to be overcome. Heroic antediluvian figures like Tāwhaki, Gilgamesh, and the Nephilim embody the limits of the divine–human distinction, in a time before ordinary time. They also test our ability to think beyond monotheism in biblical interpretation. In particular, Tāwhaki and the Nephilim challenge us to think beyond the *unethical* monotheism imposed on Māori, and on many other Indigenous peoples, by nineteenth-century missionaries and biblical translators, with the purported sanction of the Bible. Māori stories of Tāwhaki lead us to a reading of Gen 6:1–4 *beyond* the hermeneutics of unethical monotheism.

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Notes

- 1 *He Tīmatanga* was preceded by the publication of two new sample translations of Luke: ([Bible Society New Zealand 2014](#)).
- 2 Rangi-nui is the sky-father god, Papatūanuku the earth-mother god, Tangaroa the god of the sea, and Tānerore the god of the haze seen in the air during the heat of summer: ([Moorfield 2011](#)).
- 3 There are wider definitions of ‘monotheism’ also in use for other purposes, such as Benjamin D. Sommer’s ‘qualitative’ definition, in which more than one god can exist, so long as there is one supreme god who is in no way seen as subservient to other gods ([Sommer 2021](#), p. 145). Such a conception of a supreme god over other gods, tailored for biblical texts, is substantially the same as my use of the term ‘henotheism’ throughout this article. Also, recent studies in Classics, Late Antiquity, and Egyptology have employed the concepts of ‘pagan monotheism’ ([Athanasiaidi and Frede 1999](#)) or ‘inclusive monotheism’ ([Assmann 2010](#)), again with definitions that substantially equate to the definition of henotheism used in the current article. For the analysis of nineteenth-century biblical translation in Aotearoa New Zealand, though, the numerical exclusion of all other gods, particularly Māori gods, is the more relevant definition of ‘monotheism’, so has been employed for this particular purpose.
- 4 After his inclusion of Māori gods in his te reo Māori translation of Genesis 1, the next place that Te Waaka Melbourne includes them is in Gen 6:1–4, with Papatūanuku (the earth-mother god), *ngā tama a te Atua* (sons of God), and *he tipua* (“demigods”).
- 5 The term *atua* encompasses gods (major and minor), deified ancestors, local spirits of rivers and animals, and even unusual phenomena (such as lightning or geysers).
- 6 An earlier use of the Tāwhaki stories for biblical interpretation was made by Hare Hongi, parts of which were first published by a number of New Zealand newspapers beginning in about May 1910. In “Tāwhaki the Maori Christ” (in [Hongi 1924](#), pp. 247–87), Hongi offered a number of adventurous parallels between the stories of Tāwhaki and the gospel stories of Christ. My own article, in this respect, forms a tribute to this hero of old, *tōku matua kēkē* (*moe mai rā e te toa o neherā, e te tangata ronganui*).
- 7 For a more detailed analysis of the striking cohesion in the conception and terminology of Nephilim, Rephaim, Anakim, primeval Gibborim, and Og as “elite warrior-heroes and rulers, especially of legendary antiquity”, see ([Galbraith 2019](#), pp. 214–20).
- 8 Te Arawa/Tainui: Hohepa Paraone/Joseph Brown, Te Ngae, Rotorua, and Matene Te Whiwhi, from dictation of his uncle Te Rangihaeata (Mokau), Ngāti Toa (in [Grey 1855](#)); Ngāi Tahu (in [White 1887](#)); Taranaki: Te Āti aunaui-a-Pāpārangi, Wanganui (in [Mead 2022](#)); Ngāpuhi (in [Hongi 1924](#)).

- ⁹ Both the 1952 Māori Bible and Te Waaka Melbourne's translation referred to the height of the Nephilim. But their height is not mentioned in Gen 6:1–4, and as the translation choice appears rather to reflect their description in a different biblical book (Numbers, at 13:32–33), the description should be omitted here.
- ¹⁰ Clines (1998, p. 337) notes that he wrote the article in 1972, although it was first published in 1979.
- ¹¹ Seth L. Sanders (2017) is much more skeptical about the adduced parallels between Enmeduranki and Enoch, especially given the variation of some parallels (in particular, variations in the number of antediluvians and the place of Enmeduranki within the lists) and the marginality of the Enmeduranki myth of ascension and learning heavenly secrets within surviving Mesopotamian texts. Yet, even if Sanders is correct and there was no direct influence from SKL, Genesis 5:1–6:4 may still be safely presumed to share in a way of composing and reciting genealogies that was common throughout ancient West Asia, in combining lists with legendary-historical notes.

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