Robin Jarrell

_Fallen Angels and Fallen Women: The Mother of the Son of Man_


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_Fallen Angels and Fallen Women: The Mother of the Son of Man_, written by Robin Jarrell, seeks to plot a mythic trajectory that links human/divine sexual congress, the loss of immortality, and the acquisition of wisdom to the development of the figure of the Son of Man, based on the verbal correspondence between phrase “son of man” and the “daughters of men” who consorted with the “sons of God” (usually interpreted as angels) in Gen 6.

The book begins by examining an impressively diverse sample of ancient mythologies for narratives where a gendered transgression of the division between gods and humans is associated with themes of divine knowledge and immortality (1–2). In discussing Sumerian sources, Jarrell observes that, while sexual encounters between female divinities and male humans are well attested, encounters between male divinities and female humans are not (10–11). This point is well taken, as studies of the mythological context of the biblical fallen-angel traditions tend to assume the randy Zeus of Greek myth to be ubiquitous.

The Epic of Gilgamesh serves as Jarrell’s most frequent point of comparison, with the “taming” of the wild man Enkidu through sex with the prostitute Shamhat as the
paradigm for the mythological association between sex and knowledge (24–30). She connects these themes with human mortality by identifying Shamhat with the alewife Shiduri, who warns Gilgamesh against seeking eternal life (32–38), and locates both women as proxies for the goddess Ishtar (31–34). Corresponding narratives of human-divine sexuality prove more difficult to find in Ugaritic or Egyptian mythologies, however (15–23). Turning to Greece, Jarrell gives a sexualized reading of Pandora’s *pithos* as a womb (42–43), concluding that the curses unleashed on humanity are meant to emanate directly from female sexuality (39–43). She struggles, however, to connect Pandora to the acquisition of wisdom (45–47, also 75–78), ignoring the fact that Pandora’s very existence is the result of Prometheus’s gift of the knowledge of fire.

The second chapter looks to the story of Eve and the serpent in Gen 2–3 as another exemplar of Jarrell’s proposed mytheme. While the matter is far from settled, she is in good company in interpreting “knowledge of good and evil” as specifically sexual knowledge (50–54), and she notes the contrast with the positive portrayal of such knowledge in Gilgamesh (55–58). She seems to favor the traditional interpretation that Adam and Eve were immortal before the fall, but her suggestion that Eve believed the tree of life, not the tree of knowledge, was forbidden is based on a verbal quibble that is more fitting of rabbinic midrash (67–70).

Jarrell then moves to Gen 6 itself and its interpretations (which she calls “antecedents,” 80) outside the canon. While the Enochic and Edenic myths are usually seen as competing theodicies, Jarrell makes an anachronistically Augustinian move in positing Eve as a sort of prototype for female sexual transgression, whose “sexual awakening results in the original birth of the ‘daughters of men’ who are sexually awakened by the ‘sons of God’” (84). She later touches on the angelic instruction motif in 1 Enoch and Jubilees (96–98), but given her interest in the theme of the loss of immortality, it is curious that she devotes only a single paragraph to God’s limitation of the human lifespan in Gen 6:3 (83).

Jarrell’s case begins to take shape in chapter 3, arguing (after J. C. Reeves) that the birth narratives of Noah in the Genesis Apocryphon and 1 En. 105 react against a tradition in which Noah was fathered by an angel (86–90). Based on this hypothesis and the naming of Noah’s mother as Bat Enosh (“daughter of man”) in the Genesis Apocryphon and Jubilees, Jarrell constructs criteria for a “son of man” motif:

> The woman who gives birth to a son of man must be connected specifically to Eve; that is, she must be mythologically positioned according to her own concomitant sexual awareness, which is often directly related to the “Knowledge of Good and Evil.” … [She] is identified with those “daughters of men” … who gives birth to the *gibborim* and who gains not only sexual awareness but also knowledge …
conveyed to them by their angelic “husbands.” The “son of man” will also display vestiges of angelic paternity through an angelic and/or supernatural birth … [and] imposing physical characteristics such as ones possessed by the gibborim…. Finally, a Son of Man demonstrates evidence of God’s favor and engages in direct communication with God. (103)

This implicitly semiangelic Noah functions as the prototype a proposed stream of mythical influence on the “miraculous birth” type scenes in the Hebrew Bible. In particular, Jarrell sees Hagar’s naming of God (Gen 16:13) as a type of wisdom, comparable to the angelic astronomical knowledge passed from Enoch through Noah (106–9).

Jarrell continues to explore biblical birth narratives in chapter 4, finding only three examples (Hagar, Mary, and the mother of Samson) “where the themes of women and sexual awareness (or procreative potential) and the transmission of (divine) knowledge intersect” (117). She positions Samson as “the transitional ‘hinge’ bridging the birth narrative genre to the son of man ideology” (117). She notes that Samson (whose great strength resembles that of the gibborim) is born after an angel “comes unto” his mother, whom Jarrell equates to the generic “daughters of men” because she is only identified as ishah, “woman” or “wife” (117–21). But Jarrell finds little to connect Ezekiel and Daniel (the Hebrew Bible’s two canonical “sons of man”) to her hypothesis (130–34), and the concluding discussion of Paul is jarringly misplaced (134–41).

In the final chapter, Jarrell arrives at her project’s target: Jesus as the Son of Man. The annunciation narratives in Luke and Matthew, she asserts, deliberately distance Mary from the earlier “daughters of men” who bore children of angels (143–58). Jarrell suggests that Matthew “either borrowed the concept of Mary’s virginity or invented it completely for the distinct purpose of severing the mythological link between women and angels” (146). Luke’s use of Gabriel (who bound the gibborim in 1 Enoch) to announce Jesus’ birth (151) and the demonic recognition of Jesus in Mark’s exorcism narratives (158–60) are offered as evidence for an implicit defense of Jesus against assertions of demonic heritage. While she briefly sketches the parallels between Jesus and Noah, Samson, and Ezekiel (163–65), Jarrell does not explain why the evangelists would invoke such a loaded motif, except implicitly in her conclusion, where she offers her own spin on Charlesworth’s reading of John 20:11–18 (169–75). The dialogue between Mary Magdalene and the resurrected Jesus is interpreted as an inversion of Eve’s encounter with the serpent, with the Son of Man restoring immortality by undoing the sexual transgression of the Eve and her daughters.
As intriguing as its premise may be, Jarrell’s book falls considerably short of its aim. Neither Noah nor Samson—the only figures who meet most of her criteria for a “son of man”—are ever referred to by anything approaching that title. At best, the pseudepigraphal Noah could be called “son of daughter of man,” and Samson’s anonymous mother might lend him the title “son of woman.” But the entire argument of the book hinges on the begged question that the phrase “daughters of man” in Gen 6 has some connection to “son of man” as used in the later traditions. She produces not a single ancient source in which the phrase “son of man” appears even tangentially along with the fallen-angel myth (also highlighting her glaring omission of the Similitudes). In order to shoehorn Ezekiel—the biblical figure most often addressed as “son of man”—into her schema, Jarrell implicates him in the requisite sexual transgression by resorting to the rabbinic tradition that he is a descendant of Rahab (131–33). If the association between the “son of man” and fallen angels was so powerful that the evangelists had to concoct the virgin birth story in order to defuse it, one would expect to see it more explicitly attested elsewhere.

More generally, Jarrell’s argument lacks focus and a sense of structure; not until chapter 3 does she even state what it is she means to prove. The secondary sources referenced are authoritative, but they are far from comprehensive. (The absence of Annette Reed’s work from any recent study of fallen angels is especially conspicuous.) A revised edition of this book, with a less ambitious agenda and executed under a heavier editorial hand, could be a valuable addition to the scholarly discussion of fallen-angel traditions within the ancient mythic context. The possibility that the Bible’s angelophanic birth narratives (particularly that of Samson) might contain echoes of angelic sexual encounters bears further investigation, as does the question of the evangelists’ appropriation of established hero motifs. There is little doubt that themes of sexuality, mortality, and wisdom were bound together in many ancient texts, but Jarrell obscures her best insights by attempting to insinuate them into a grand but unattested mythic drama.