MORE SAMSON LEGENDS

by

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I

The divine father

The story of Samson’s conception and birth (Judg. xiii 2-24) contains all the elements common to the legends about the birth of mythological heroes: the barren mother, the intervention of a supernatural—usually divine—being, and the resulting miraculous birth. There are a number of such stories in the Bible:

1. The Messenger tells Abraham: ‘I shall return to thee kāšēt ḥayyā and lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son’ … Now Abraham and Sarah were old … it ceased to be with Sarah in the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself saying ‘After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’ And the Lord said unto Abraham ‘Wherefore did Sarah laugh? … Is


2 The meaning of this term is not clear: it is usually rendered ‘the time of life’, which is begging the question. Certainly Gen. xvii 21, ‘at this time next year’, implies a period of twelve months and the dictionaries give this definition (F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C. A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford, 1907), p. 312; L. Kohler and W. Baumgartner, Lexicon in V.T. Libros (Leiden, 1953), p. 746; J. Fürst, Hebräisches & Chaldäisches Handwörterbuch über das A.T. (Leipzig, 1876) I, p. 393; C. Siegfried and B. Stade, Hebräisches Wörterbuch zum A.T. (Leipzig, 1893), p. 197); though some also translate ‘spring’ (Fürst II, p. 196 b; Siegfried and Stade). Rashi and Ibn Ezra comment: ‘this time next year’; and Nahmanides: ‘the return of the year’ i.e. harvest season; R. Kittel, H. Gunkel, O. Procksch and G. von Rad in their commentaries to this verse give ‘this time next year’; R. Yaron (VT 12 [1962], p. 75) and O. Loretz (Bibl. 43 [1962], p. 75) suggest ‘one year’s time’, as does C. Westermann in his commentary on Genesis (p. 339). However, Rashbam and Radak write ‘gestation period’, while A. B. Ehrlich, Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel I (Leipzig, 1908), p. 72, gives ‘the time required for the embryo to be born’. For a detailed discussion see O. Margalith, ‘Some Aspects of Terms Denoting Time in the Bible’ (Hebrew), Beth Mikra 89-90 (1982), pp. 198-200.
anything too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed kāṣēt hayyā I will return unto thee and Sarah shall have a son.’ ” (Gen. xviii 10-14). “And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken, for Sarah conceived and bare Abraham a son in his old age at the set time of which God had spoken to him” (xxi 1-2).

From the opening verse of this story, “... the Lord appeared to Abraham” (Gen. xvii 1), and from v. 15, “... and God said to Abraham”, it is clear that this is a theophany, while v. 19, “And God said: Sarah thy wife shall bear unto thee a son”, is both divine prediction and promise. In xviii 14 the speaker clearly refers to himself when he says “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” We have here a clear case of a miraculous birth due to a divine act contrary to the laws of nature.

Gen. xxv 21: “And Isaac intreated the Lord for his wife because she was barren, and the Lord was intreated ... and Rebekah ... conceived.” There is no hint that Isaac had any part in this conception.

Rachel, too, was barren (Gen. xxix 31). Unlike the previous two instances, Jacob was well able to make his wife pregnant but nevertheless he states “Am I in God’s stead?” (xxx 2). An act of God was required to give her Joseph (vv. 22-3), though for Benjamin no such intervention was required (xxxv 16-18).

2. It is well within the concept of mythological thought to ascribe to the fathers of the nation—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph—divine paternity, and to their mothers miraculous conception. Gen. vi 2,4 tells us of whole generations of ημιθεοι: 3 “The sons of the gods saw the daughters of men that they were fair, and they took them wives of all which they chose ... There were nēpilim 4 in the earth in those days and also after that when the gods 5 came in unto the daughters

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3 Hesiod, Works and Days, 159-60: ἄνδρῶν ἡμών θείαν γένος οἱ καλέονται ημιθεοι.
4 The meaning of this word which is usually linked to the 'Anakim is unclear, and since it is used in connection with legends on superhuman beings many legendary meanings have been given. Even the traditional commentators were agreed that it refers to divine beings: Ibn Ezra on Gen. vi 4: “The sons of 'Anak were of the family of the gods”, and Rashi on Num. xiii 33: “Nephilim, who were the 'Anakim, were descendants of Shemhazai and Azael who fell from heaven”, and on Gen. vi 4: “They (i.e. the women) bore them 'Anakim like them'.
5 b̀nē hā'êlôhîm = the sons of the gods are not the children but the family of the gods, like b̀nē hannîhî̂lim (1 Kgs xx 35), and the phrase is used in this sense in Ps. xxiv 1, lxxxix 7. In Ugaritic phr 'êlim (C. H. Gordon, Ugaritic Textbook (Rome, 1965), p. 468, § 2038). See also M. D. Cassuto, s.v., Encyclopaedia Biblica 2 (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1965), cols 172-4, for full bibliography.