
Reviewed by Nancy Klancher (University of Pittsburgh)
Published on H-Judaic (June, 2012)
Commissioned by Jason Kalman

**Metonymic Eve: As Eve Fares, So Fare All Women?**

In her new reading of the *Greek Life of Adam and Eve* (*GLAE*), Vita Daphna Arbel redeploy the study of literary antecedents and tradition histories in the service of a Bakhtinian-feminist analysis of the *GLAE*’s literary and ideological “multivocality,” “reading against the grain.” She defines her subject as “the multiplicity of voices, cultural traditions, and countertraditions that seem to be embedded in the *GLAE* framework and their relations to power, ideological stances, and gender conceptualizations” (p. 7). In so doing, she moves beyond the longstanding scholarly prioritizing of theological readings of the *GLAE*, and in particular of the figure of Eve. She instead focuses our attention on the diverse and contradictory representations of Eve that coincide in this complex text and their relationship to “specific theological traditions, exegetical views, as well as gender ideologies and cultural norms of the time” (p. 113).

The literary and cultural influence of the *GLAE* and its seminal position in transmitting the story of Adam and Eve is hard to overstate. Emerging sometime between 100 BCE and 200 CE, the traditions comprising the *GLAE* continued developing, according to Arbel, through the seventh century CE. The narrative is one of the earliest elaborations of the opening chapters of Genesis. Whether there was a Hebrew original—no longer extant—or not, these traditions produced not only Greek and Latin adaptations, but also Armenian and Slavonic translations. Beyond these, there is the broad array of related Adam and Eve literature that develops key concepts and images from *GLAE*, including the Coptic Discourse on Abbaton; Greek and Syriac versions of the Testament of Adam; Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions of the Cave of Treasures; the Arabic, then Ethiopic, Conflict of Adam and Eve; and the Apocalypse of Adam discovered at Nag Hammadi. This is not to mention the wider ripple effects of depictions of the fall, and of Satan’s role therein, in poetry, medieval drama, Dante, Milton, and beyond. It is, therefore, not trivial to propose that the *GLAE*’s depiction of Eve, through its juxtaposition of independent and unreconciled Eve traditions, complicates and in some sections subverts her enduring “official” theological role as source and cypher of human sin, guilt, pride, inordinate desire, and disobedience.

Arbel’s thesis rests upon the contradictory representations of Eve in the *GLAE* and their composite effect within a “unique source” that she argues reflects “everyday life traditions” and “bears a collective, nonofficial hallmark,” as popular and subversive as it is official and dogmatic (p. 9). Thus, Arbel explores four aspects of Eve, alternately infamous or honorable, developed in the *GLAE*. These include 1) her role in the origin of sin and the fall, 2) her embodiment of a variety of constructed femininities, 3) her exemplary care of Adam during his illness and especially after his death, and 4) her depiction as a “privileged” visionary at the end of the poem.

In the first instance, Arbel demonstrates, through intertextual analysis, the fusion of two traditional etiolo-
gies of sin in different scenes in the *GLAE*. She argues that Adam’s and Eve’s accounts of the first sin (*GLAE* 7–8 and 15–30, respectively) fuse themes and details from both the biblical account in Genesis and the fallen-angels tradition from the Book of the Watchers, which appears in the opening chapters of the book of Enoch. One intertextual effect of this amalgamation is to fuse the figure of the biblical serpent with the Devil, Satan, and fallen angels and present this figure as the primary instigator of the first sin. Within the context of this fusion, the nature of Eve’s sin becomes sexual and Cain becomes the supernaturally, luminous, demonic issue of that sin. Arbel concedes the presence of non-narrative piecemeal references to the same themes and motifs in other early Jewish and Christian sources, but argues that the *GLAE* blends and develops them in a unique and highly influential way, constructing an Eve associated with the first human sin and with the sexual sins of the fallen angels.

Arbel’s second chapter explores the way in which the *GLAE*’s conflicting representations of Eve construct juxtaposed and polarized models of womanhood. She delineates a range of Eves that surface in the text—heretical, orthodox, irreverent of male authority, rebellious, sexually unbound, repentant, dedicated mother, self-sacrificing wife—and comments upon the literary association of religious notions with gender characteristics. She reviews paradigms of femininity within the larger culture of the *GLAE*, mostly from Proverbs and contemporary wisdom literatures and concludes that the *GLAE* as a whole re-enforces a traditional, polarized model of good and bad womanhood.

Eve’s actions in the account of Adam’s death and burial are the subject of Arbel’s third chapter. Arbel sees her dependability and faithfulness in enacting valued and esteemed funerary practices as subverting, or “subtly disrupting,” concurrent traditions of Eve’s liability. Eve’s anointing and guarding of Adam’s body and her praying for his sake, she argues, echo respected cultural norms and practices and produce a countertradition that constructs a favorable image of a dutiful, compassionate Eve. Similarly, in her fourth chapter, Arbel links Eve’s visions of God, his chariot, angels, divine mysteries, and Adam’s ascension at the end of the *GLAE* to the “worthiness, authoritative status and high position” of visionaries in Qumranic, pseudepigraphic, and Merkavah traditions. The *GLAE*’s use of stock themes and tropes, which she takes time to delineate within visionary literatures contemporary to the *GLAE*, accomplishes this elevation, through analogy, of Eve’s (and through her metonymic function, all women’s) status: “It seems to associate her implicitly with a long line of righteous male ‘ideal figures’ and thus to deliberately represent her as an esteemed individual, worthy of beholding sublime visions” (p. 96).

Arbel concludes the book with thoughts on the *GLAE*’s multivocality and textual-conceptual unity, and its significance for the study of women in antiquity. Certainly, one of her most important arguments is that the disjointed mix of diverse traditions in the *GLAE* comprise a unified narrative which should be read and understood as coherent, a narrative that demonstrates “ease with the underlying tensions and contradictions” it reproduces, and constituting “an ongoing cultural discourse about Eve” and femininity (p. 117). This is, of course, not a question unique to the *GLAE*. The pseudipigrapha as a corpus are elaborative and cumulative along multiple dimensions as rewritten Bible, haggadic midrash, and sites of Christian redaction, not to mention translations and manuscript recensions. They are ancient intertextual “mash-ups,” a form critic’s nightmare or dream, depending on her attitude. Nonetheless, Arbel’s argument in favor of the intrinsic unity of these dialogic texts is justified; I have argued similarly elsewhere about Testament of Job. Each of these texts, as a new encounter with cultural touchstones, comprises a new commentary and contribution to their transmission.

It is this understanding of the *GLAE* that informs Arbel’s contention that its “plurality of independent and unmerged voices” subverts “official dogmatic views in authoritative or institutionalized contexts” (pp. 117-118). Yet, at least to this reviewer, the Bakhtinian leap from multivocality to subversion is, in this case, logically at odds with the “ease with contradictions” that Arbel ascribes to the text, an ease which presumably cuts both ways, requiring neither condemnation nor recuperation of Eve. Living, oral, everyday, non-dogmatic narratives may allow for the expression of contradictions more readily, as they do for humor for instance, but that is not in itself subversive. There are a number of ways to read Eve’s positive behaviors in the *GLAE*, not the least of which is as the salutary byproduct of repentance, her own testament-as-confession, and her subsequent embodiment of a submissive, wifely obedience right out of Proverbs and Ben Sira. The point is that it is very difficult to say which reading carries most weight, or even if a hierarchizing of characterizations is called for by the text.

On the whole, however, Arbel’s treatment of the *GLAE* is thought-provoking and erudite. Its focus on the
construction of femininity in a pseudepigraphal text is most welcome. Arbel's documentation and analysis of the myriad dynamic and fluid cultural traditions, conventions, ideologies, and gender conceptions surround-
ing and emerging out of the GLAE narrative is fascinat-
ing and the move beyond purely theological implications long overdue.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35173

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.