

Justin Williamson

HONR 370

December 14, 2020

The Evolution of Lilith: The World's First Feminist

Introduction

In the beginning, the Book of Genesis reveals that God graced the Earth with the creation of humankind. Male and female, in His image, God spoke the first two humans into existence.

in the era of its formation, was believed to be a deliverance of God's word through the writing of His prophets. Therefore, this text was thought to possess an essence of divinity — an unquestionable authority, perfected in content.¹ As ancient readers assumed the text to be cryptic, interpretation was deemed necessary for full comprehension. Under this assumption, any contradiction found within the narrative posed a threat to its immaculate nature.² Religious interpreters, unwilling to admit to imperfection, claimed apparent errors in Scripture were misunderstood as such. Instead, they were purposeful and indicative of a deeper, obscure meaning.³ Passages found to be inharmonious were countered by interpretation, as a multitude of theories and retellings were crafted in explanation of these dissonances. The interpretation process, which prioritized the preservation of flawlessness, served to negate perceived fallacies and answer challenges raised by the ambiguity of the text.

The first instance of discordance occurs within the first two chapters of Genesis, during the summary of the universe's creation. The creation of humankind is specifically mentioned in both chapters, retold in each in an exclusive, asynchronous order of events. Genesis 1:26, which provides a more general overview of God's creation, declares that humans were made to have dominion over all nature. In what is interpreted as a singular act, the following verse presents the

In Genesis 2, the first man is formed from the dust of the Earth, then placed in the Garden of Eden. Alone, he is designated to till the garden and steward the animals as their sole overseer. Subsequently, in order to prevent the man's inevitable loneliness, God places him in a deep slumber and forms the woman from his rib.⁵ The two humans introduced in Genesis 2 are eventually identified as Adam and Eve and are present throughout the story from this point onward. However, the chronological inconsistency between the two chapters has raised questions amongst ancient religious interpreters, who refused to accept the possibility of textual flaws within the Hebrew Bible. While the second woman, formed from Adam's rib, is explicitly distinguished as Eve, the identity of the first woman, created from the same dust as Adam, remained in question.

Lilith in Ancient Near Eastern Context

Recognized as a separate being from Eve, the woman created in Genesis 1 was identified to be Lilith by classical period interpreters. This figure, however, did not originate from classical interpretations, having already existed for centuries in ancient Sumerian demonology. In order to understand how the character became incorporated into the creation narrative, it is essential to consider her in ancient Near Eastern context.

The name "Lilith" is derived from the word "lil tu," a vampiric, succubus class of female demons, mentioned as early as 2400 B.C. in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.⁶ A fragment of this epic, the poem, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, is known to be the earliest source to specifically mention Lilith as an individual spirit, under an alternative name, "Lillake."⁷ In this tale, the

⁵ Gn 2:7-23 (NRSV).

⁶ Raphael Patai, "Lilith," 295.

⁷ Patai, 295.

Mesopotamian goddess of love and war, Inanna, lovingly nurtures a willow tree with the intention of using it to build herself a throne. Against her will, the demoness, Lillake, along with an evil dragon and an Anzĝ bird, invade the tree. The hero, Gilgamesh, in an attempt to restore the tree to Inanna, slays the dragon, striking fear in Lillake and the Anzĝ bird and intimidating them into flight. While the bird flies off to the mountains, Lillake flees into the desert, where the lil!tu were alleged to wander. As the first major piece of literature to discuss Lilith, this epic poem established a basis from which all future retellings are derived.

The depiction of Lilith, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, displays the first instances of several thematic recurrences throughout her historical development. Lilith, as Lillake in this tale, fulfills the role of the antagonist, opposite from the divine feminine figure, Inanna. The juxtaposition between the malefic spirit and the goddess depicts the two women as literary foils to one another. This opposition establishes a conflict of good and evil, repeatedly incorporated into retellings of Lilith. However, as Inanna is excluded from the biblical canon, she is later replaced by Eve.

While Eve is not a goddess herself, she shares striking similarities with her literary

tree. The resemblances between Inanna and Eve may have contributed to the latter's eventual replacement of the goddess as the foil to Lilith, who is known to symbolize elements antithetical to both of her adversaries.

Shortly after her literary debut in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Lilith is believed to be pictorially represented for the first time in a terracotta plaque known as the Burney Relief. Approximately 2000 B.C., the artifact illustrates Lilith as a nude woman with birdlike features.

as rabbinic texts, allowed for her transition from ancient Near Eastern folklore into her permanent role in Jewish mythology.

Lilith in Rabbinic Literature

Early rabbinic literature sought to define a basis of ethic and legal codes, contributing to the formation of traditional Jewish practices and beliefs.²⁰ The earliest association between Lilith and rabbinic Judaism occurs in such literature; namely, the Babylonian Talmud. Disseminated far throughout the ancient Near East by the Talmudic period, the common understanding of Lilith as

creature, is not subject to the same restrictions. She is unholy, therefore she is unbound by God's insistence to exhibit modesty. Often depicted as nude, as in the Burney Relief, Lilith allows her full self to be shamelessly and sensually displayed, while Eve learns to be ashamed of her nudity after eating the forbidden fruit.²⁹ Lilith's unkempt hair, a symbol of her sexual freedom, is one of her first rebellious expressions of unapologetic femininity.

Rabbinic portrayals of Lilith and Eve clearly establish the two as opposite figures. While Eve acts in obedience to God's instruction, Lilith remains sinful and untamed. However, the absence of direct juxtaposition between the two in rabbinic literature meant they were not yet determined as literary foils to one another. Instead, Eve is contrasted against another figure: the true first wife of Adam, not yet determined to be Lilith.

The theoretical origins of the first wife are rooted in *Genesis Rabbah*, a midrashic text focused heavily on analyzing the minuscule, grammatical details of the Hebrew Bible. Through this meticulous examination, midrashic interpreters discovered a line in Genesis which suggested Adam's confirmation of Eve as his second wife, rather than his first. As translated in *Genesis Rabbah*, Adam, in Genesis 2:23, exclaims "this time (*zot hapa'am*) [this is] bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."³⁰ This line is interpreted as an intimation that "this time," a woman was created from Adam's body. However, at an earlier time, there must have lived a woman created through alternative methods.³¹ *Genesis Rabbah*, through the interpretation of this line, generated the initial theory that Eve was the successor of God's first female creation. The following

²⁹ Colonna, 326.

³⁰ Kosior, 117.

³¹ Kosior, 117.

depiction of Adam's two wives as contrary to one another inspired the election of Lilith, already opposite Eve in a variety of ways, to fulfill the role of the first woman.

The negative depiction of evil figures, such as Lilith, throughout rabbinic literature would seem to accentuate Eve, God's chosen mother of humankind, in a more favorable light. However, she is also subject to harsh condemnation for her sin in the Garden of Eden. Cursed for her

justify her condemnation, dehumanizing her as property of Adam. While the first woman faces Adam's rejection, she is able to escape the suffering caused by his asserted superiority as she passes this role on to Eve.

By the end of the Talmudic period, *Genesis Rabbah* had identified two separate women in

The most notable, complete account of the relationship between Adam and Lilith occurs in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a retelling of Genesis dated to approximately 10 C.E. Also functioning as a prelude to the ancient Near Eastern mythology, the text reveals how Lilith became a demonic spirit, despite her origins in the Garden of Eden. As stated in Genesis 1, both she and Adam are created simultaneously from the Earth, believed by Lilith to be an indicator of equality between herself and Adam.³⁷ However, their partnership began to deteriorate when Adam attempted to assert his authority.

Insistent she is meant to lie beneath him, Adam would not accept Lilith's desire to be sexually dominant.³⁸ Unwilling to assume a subordinate position, Lilith refutes Adam's claim of superiority by arguing their creation from the same dust meant they were equal. When the two are unable to compromise, Lilith cursedly pronounces the Ineffable Name of YHWH, escaping into the air.³⁹ This retelling pays homage to earlier depictions of Lilith, incorporating elements associated with her character, such as the motif of flight. Illustrated in a new literary setting, these aspects were modified to adapt to the conditions of the creation narrative. Nonetheless, these alterations led to major advancements in the evolution of Lilith.

Recurrent throughout Lilith's history, the motif of flight is used in this retelling to display a new aspect of Lilith's character. Though this may allude to her earlier escape into the desert, mentioned in the *Gilgamesh* tale, the motivation behind her flight is significantly different. Initially, in *Gilgamesh*, Lilith flees in fear of the hero's great strength, after he slays the dragon in the tree.⁴⁰ In *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, it is her resistance of Adam's attempt to force her into

³⁷ Dan Ben-Amos, "From Eden to *Ednah* - Lilith in the Garden," 56.

³⁸ Ben-Amos, 56.

³⁹ Ben-Amos, 56.

compliance that causes her abandonment of him. Rather than the fear of masculine power, attributed to Gilgamesh, it is now her unwillingness to submit to Adam's tyrannical masculinity that is her new motivation. This act, rooted in her desire for independence, is famously regarded as Lilith's act of feminism. By liberating herself from male dictatorship, the scene of her flight establishes an explicit concept of feminism present throughout a multitude of retellings to this day.

Once again, Lilith is portrayed as the antithesis to the mother archetype, representing Eve in this narrative. Following her flight from Eden, The Alphabet of Ben Sira claims Lilith finds herself in a desolate place where she encounters the Great Demon. As her new male equivalent, this spirit becomes her substitute for Adam, who, in turn, replaces her with Eve. Similar to Eve's role as the mother of humankind, Lilith and the Great Demon beget legion children. Unlike the children of Adam and Eve, however, the spawn of Lilith are demonic, inhuman spirits. The parallel formed between the two sets of partners reincorporates the conflict between good and evil present in earlier retellings.

children, Lilith reveals how highly she values her own independence, expanding on the themes of feminism and the importance of self. Eve, on the other hand, passively accepts the agony of motherhood and feminine inferiority.

In order to redesign Lilith as a biblical figure, rather than an ancient Sumerian being, the text aides in the establishment of her character in a religious context. This is accomplished by mentioning the mythological practices associated with the legend, such as the use of incantations, and rerooting them in Jewish concepts. The text claims, in an act of vengeance for God's curse, Lilith declares she will cause sickness among human infants, the descendants of Adam and Eve.⁴⁶ She vows only to spare a child from harm if protected by an amulet inscribed with the names of the three archangels sent to retrieve her.⁴⁷ The inclusion of the amulets alludes to aforementioned Mesopotamian customs, though its origins are restated to be in Jewish angelology.⁴⁸ By incorporating this widespread tradition into the text, the preexistent credibility of the myth is transferred into the narrative, retold with a biblical background. Furthermore, by constructing Lilith's victimization of women and children as a result of her revenge, the Sumerian myth is reformulated in accordance to the women's rivalry in a biblical retelling.

One question that arises from this revolutionary retelling concerns Lilith's disobedience

Lilith's position as the first woman to be created, it remains constant to Lilith in its theme of feminism.

In continuity with her presentation as a nocturnal demon, Lilith's birth from the moon's indignation is reminiscent of her association with night.⁵⁶ However, this interpretation introduces a new understanding of Lilith as more than a spirit or the first woman. Instead, she is representative of the psychological concept of the shadow, also described by medieval astrologists as the "Black Moon Lilith." Present within each sex, the Black Moon is the dark feminine side which signifies an unconscious, hidden nature.⁵⁷ Defined by the Zohar as the inspiration behind sensual desires, in men, the Black Moon symbolizes a weakness to female temptation.⁵⁸ In women, on the other hand, it is representative of the unconscious sexual power and an internalized acceptance of inferiority to men.⁵⁹ According to the Zohar, by knowing Lilith, one may become more conscious of oneself.⁶⁰ This understanding of Lilith has facilitated her development as a symbol of feminine strength, albeit typically unawakened, present within each woman.

While *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* establishes the first act of feminism enacted by Lilith, the Zohar expands on her character as a figure of feminism. Through the elevation of Lilith to a more authoritative status, her abandonment of Adam is correlated to her significant empowerment. Although the Zohar attempts to provide alternative views of Lilith, divergent from her role as the first woman, the text holistically deepens her symbolism of an awakened feminine power, allowing for the liberation of herself from the oppression enforced by men.

⁵⁶ Patai, 310.

⁵⁷ Colonna, 332.

⁵⁸ Black Koltuv, 6.

⁵⁹ Colonna, 332.

⁶⁰ Black Koltuv, 6.

Lilith's development as a feminist figure is inarguably the most memorable element of her characterization following *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*.

Lilith's Role in the Women's Liberation Movement

Throughout the centuries of Lilith's development, interpreters have attempted to illustrate her in a negative light, broadening her demonic nature and defiance of God. However, what is remembered most fondly about Lilith, from *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* onward, is that she is a literary manifestation of women's battle for equality. During the second wave of feminism beginning in the 1960s, the figure of Lilith experienced a revival in fame. In admiration of her anti-misogynistic motivations, feminists declared Lilith to be a literary icon of rebellion against male supremacy.⁶¹ Moreover, the Women's Liberation Movement, led deliberately by Jewish women, gave rise to Jewish Goddess feminism. This subset of feminism reclaimed Lilith, among other figures in the Hebrew Bible, in praise of their acts of feminine autonomy.⁶² Despite the historical depiction of Lilith as an ungodly force, she is ardently idolized in the modern era revival of her character as a symbol of feminism.

In a 1972 reimagining of *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, "The Coming of Lilith," Jewish feminist theologian, Judith Plaskow, intensifies the theme of feminism by redesigning the narrative. Ultimately, this allows for Lilith to be illustrated as the first pioneer of feminism. One of the most outstanding aspects of Plaskow's midrashic account is the exclusion of Lilith's preexisting demonic aspects. In accordance with its inspirational source, Lilith, the first wife of Adam, flees from the Garden of Eden upon his assertion of dominance over her. During her exile

⁶¹ Howe Gaines, 17.

⁶² Melissa Raphael, "Goddess Religion, Postmodern Jewish Feminism, and the Complexity of Alternative Religious Identities," 202.

from Eden, following Eve's creation, Adam spreads "fearsome stories of the demon Lilith who threatens women in childbirth and steals children from their cradles."⁶³ However, Plaskow

the first time. The first two women begin to meet regularly, developing a bond of sisterhood. Over time, they share stories, laughs, and cries with each other. Eve begins to display a new attitude towards Adam, though Plaskow does not specify what this change entails. However, one can assume Eve begins to act more assertively, as Lilith demonstrates in *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*. Consequently, God and Adam begin to fear the day the two women return to the Garden of Eden together with the desire to restructure the order of the human community. In this meeting of the two women, Lilith is able to inspire another with her progressive ideas.

As Plaskow excludes the notion of Lilith as a demonic being, a majority of the conflict accumulated between Lilith and Eve is eliminated from the narrative. While conflicts between purity and wickedness, modesty and sexuality, and good and evil, are diminished in this narrative, the two women still serve as foils to one another. The main difference between them occurs in their understanding of freedom. Lilith continues to persist in this modern retelling as a liberated woman, while Eve remains constrained by her own subservience and accepted inferiority to Adam. When the two meet, Lilith is able to share her experience with freedom, enlightening Eve who is previously unaware of this liberty. Despite this contrast, the two women are similar in their powerlessness due to isolation. It is this interaction between them that Plaskow describes as a sisterhood that grows them into consciousness and a sisterhood that imparts her wisdom unto Eve, her inspiration for change reinstates her as the first feminist leader.

The character of Lilith, in her most prominent modern reformation, withstands another significant stage of evolution. By deconstructing Lilith's identity as a demon, Plaskow is a

reclaim the character as a true woman, rather than a supernatural force. For the first time, Lilith is completely humanized, which aides in Plaskow's audience perceiving her as a realistic inspiration of feminism. Moreover, the connection developed between Lilith and Eve is

Works Cited

Ben-Amos, Dan. "From Eden to *Ednah* - Lilith in the Garden." *Biblical Archaeology Review*

Kramer, Samuel Noah. "Bread for Enlil, Sex for Inanna." *Orientalia*, 54, no. 2 (1985): 117-132.

Kugel, James L. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. New York, NY:

Free Press, 2007.

Lesses, Rebecca. "Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in

Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity." *Journal of the American Academy of*

Religion, 69, no. 2 (2001): 343-375.

Mondriaan, Marlene E. "Lilith and Eve – wives of Adam." *Old Testament Essays*, 18, no. 3

(2005): 752-762.

Patai, Raphael. "Lilith." *The Journal of American Folklore* 77, no. 306 (1964): 295-314.

Plaskow, Judith. "Epilogue: The Coming of Lilith."

Shapiro, Ann R. "The Flight of Lilith: Modern Jewish American Feminist Literature." *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 29 (2010): 68-79.

Wiley, Tatha. *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press (2002).