

Myth and Motif:
Lilith in Jewish Tradition

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Introduction

Lilith first began as a tale, the story of the first Eve who remains unnamed in the first chapter of the Genesis narrative. But the idea of Lilith has expanded to include so much more than a simple unifying measure of scripture. She has come to embody many of the despised natures of men and women. For men, she represents the unbridled sexual nature. Women see her as the Terrible Mother, unnurturing and vengeful. But she also incorporates everything that patriarchal society and religion encompass. She is a form of the neglected divine and the woman who refuses to be lorded over by a man simply because it is his right. Lilith is the representation of anti-culture, the Dark and the Feminine. Each myth of her creation weaves another strand of female identity into her intricate tapestry of metaphoric rejection and oppression.

The Mythic Origins of Lilith

Although Lilith's origins are numerous and shrouded in mystery, one detail remains consistent, she represents the feminine as a counter-balance to the masculine. Her position as "other" forces her to embody multiple characteristics, but always equal to her consort. This dualistic nature follows Lilith through her mythology and begins to characterize her position of the suppressed feminine.¹

Child of the Subjected Moon

Lilith's representation of darkness and the dark side of humanity embodied in the feminine begins with the diminishment of the moon below the sun as the great lights. The Zohar records an account within the creation narrative that resolves a dispute between the sun and moon. The two lights rose into the sky together after their creation

¹ Barbara Black Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (York Beach, ME: Nicholas-Hays, 1986), 1.

with equal distinction. The moon was uncomfortable and jealous of the sun because of his power since he was fashioned from fire and she from light. They both felt humiliated by the other's presence and quarreled over their shared purpose of illumination. The moon sought justice from their Creator. God intervened in their squabble addressing the moon, "Diminish yourself." Ashamed, the moon quibbled, "Why should I be like one veiled?" But following God's command, the moon became the head of the lower ranks. She was reduced, her light was no longer her own, but only a derivation of the sun's. A covering or husk was created to shield her light and from that husk, Lilith sprang. As recorded in Genesis, the greater light rules the day and the lesser night; the male has dominion of the day and female the night.²

Even though the moon continues to govern and rule, albeit of the lesser dominion, she continues to be diminished. God's intervention in her quarrel with the sun robbed her of her freedom of choice. Lilith draws her energy from this continued resentment. It is also from this Zoharic myth that Lilith's connection with the night and darkness is made.³

Consort of Satan

The resentment, hatred, and darkness correlate with Lilith's personification of evil when she is named as the consort of Samael, leader of the fallen angels, who is also known as Satan. In this context, she and Samael as a pair counter-balance the innate goodness of God and his consort Shekinah, the feminine personification of God's presence in the world. For this version of Lilith's creation, she and Samael are created from the growth of the autonomous power aspect of God which includes judgment and

² Koltuv, 1-3; Angelo S. Rappoport, *Myth and Legend of Ancient Israel*, vol. 1 (London: Gresham, 1928), 12, 14-15.

³ Koltuv, 4.

punishment, *Din*, also the origin of evil. This unholy pair represents the demonic, destructive side of the divine.⁴

Another writing which is only decades older than the Zohar purports that Lilith and Samael came from an emanation from beneath the Throne of Glory. They were an androgynous being with two faces. In this form, they correspond in the spiritual realm to the creation of Adam and Eve (below). Both couples were made in the image of God, a visible form of the androgynous deity.⁵

Within both of these couplings, Lilith is contained in Samael. Subordinate to him, she is the Bride of the Devil who attempts to spawn demons from their relations. God castrates Samael which forces Lilith to seek out human men for her pleasure and procreation. She is then struck barren but continues in fornication.⁶ All the while she personifies a “feminine transpersonal shadow,” a “renegade instinct” to exist among mankind which she seduces and kills.⁷

Unchaste Queen of Israel

Lilith leaves this position beside Samael to become the consort of God. Within the dualistic pairs, she is seen to be the handmaiden of Shekinah since the unholy couple is subverted to the holy union. Israel demonstrated unfaithfulness by worshipping Astarte, Asherah, the Queen of Heaven, and other forms of the feminine divine. In doing this they “uncovered their mother’s nakedness,” that is the Shekinah, and because of their unchastity, Israel and the Shekinah have been put away as punishment. Upon the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, Shekinah follows her people into exile, either

⁴ Siegmund Hurwitz, *Lilith – The First Eve: Historical and Psychological Aspects of the Dark Feminine*, trans. Gela Jacobson (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 1992), 146-147; Koltuv, 6-7.

⁵ Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd enlarged edition (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1990), 231.

⁶ Patai, 246.

⁷ Koltuv, 6.

willingly or forcefully. In her absence, Lilith steps up to become the mistress of God and rules over the earth just as Shekinah had. She is the unchastity of Israel, the mother of this mixed following, and is not easily cast down. The Zohar says that she will be removed and destroyed by the Messiah. Shekinah will be restored to her place of honor beside God.⁸

The First Eve, Rejected

Lilith is better known as the consort of Adam, the first Eve. But even this story varies. She is born out of the discrepancy of the two creation accounts in Genesis, the late Priestly and early Judean Yahwist versions. Genesis 1 records the Priestly account where man and woman are created simultaneously. Jewish commentaries describe this creation as androgynous, like the God who formed humanity in God's image. The androgynous Adam had two faces facing apart, the male forward and the female backward. This made movement and conversation difficult. Only later did God saw Adam in two and create a back for each of the faces. Lilith is this first Eve, the female of Adam, *Adamah*. She has been equally created from the earth by God.⁹

Another version recorded in the Zohar says that Lilith's soul was joined to Adam's in cohabitation before his body was completed. Upon completion, a thousand souls from the Left Side (which is the side of Evil) attempted to enter the body but God drove them away. God command the earth to produce a soul for this creation which God breathed into him. Adam arose complete with two sides, the female attached. God separated the two and fashioned the female as a bride for Adam. Upon seeing this Lilith

⁸ Patai, 250-251; Hurwitz, 148, Koltuv, 7, 117-118.

⁹ Koltuv, 10; Hurwitz, 178-179; Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (London: Cassell, 1964), 66-67.

fled to the Cities of the Sea where she snares mankind. Her jealous rage over the separation and replacement as companion fuels her to harm mankind in vengeance.¹⁰

The Yahwist account attempts to suppress Goddess worship among other religions prevalent in Biblical times. By making the woman out of the already existing man, the female is subjugated to the male in preeminence and power. It removes any sense of sexuality and magic and leaves the woman solely in the role of mother for the sake of procreation.¹¹

The midrash Alpha Bet Ben Sira, supplemented by the later Book of Raziel, records another account in which Lilith is created as Adam's equal, contrary to the oppressive, delimiting nature of the Yahwist account. God created man and woman on the sixth day in the image of God. This, however, was not Eve nor were man and woman fashioned as one and separated. Adam named every creature but was jealous because each existed in pairs, male and female, but he was without a mate. He tried mating with each female creature but found no satisfaction. So he called upon God to rectify this injustice. Just as God had already created Adam from the dust of the earth, God fashioned Lilith. Only, instead of using the pure dust from which Adam was formed, God used filth and impure sediments to form the female. As expected, she was an evil creature.¹²

When she joined Adam in the garden, they began to quarrel because neither would submit to the other. When Adam wished to lie with her, she objected at the recumbent position that he demanded of her. "Why must I be beneath you?" she asked responding to his wish to lie on top. He informed her that it was her duty to obey her

¹⁰ Patai, 230; Koltuv, 9.

¹¹ Koltuv, 10.

¹² Graves and Patai, 65; Patai, 230; Koltuv, 19.

“lord and master.” Lilith replied claiming their equality since they were both created from the dust of the earth at the same time. She believed that she held the same rights as her husband, the ability to act independently and autonomously. When Lilith realized that Adam would overpower her in order to claim his right, she spoke the Ineffable Name of the Creator, soared into the air, and left him to seek refuge by the Red Sea.¹³

That region abounded with lascivious demons. Like a great whore, she bore to them more than one hundred demons a day called *lilim* (supposedly a pluralized form of the name Lilith), creatures who are active at night. Meanwhile, Adam complained to God over his abandonment at which God dispatched three angels to retrieve Lilith. Upon locating her, they command her to return, threatening to kill one hundred of her offspring daily. She replied, “How can I return as an honest housewife to Adam, after my stay here?” When she refused, they threatened to drown her. Lilith informed them that they could not kill her since God charged her with all newborn children, boys until the eighth day and girls until the twentieth. She agreed to spare those children who were protected by the names or images of the three angels. True to the original threat and by Lilith’s acquiescence, one hundred demon offspring would perish daily as her punishment for not returning to Adam.¹⁴

Motif of the Dark Feminine

Following the Fall, God brings Lilith out of the wilderness and gives her the charge of punishing children for the sins of their fathers. In this motif, Lilith kills liable little children in their sleep. She has been dubbed the Terrible Mother and the Strangler. She is the Flame of the Revolving Sword that protects the gates of Paradise and dispels

¹³ Graves and Patai, 65; Hurwitz, 178-179; Koltuv, 19; Rappoport 77-78.

¹⁴ Graves and Patai, 65-66; Rappoport, 78.

all who have become subject to sin. Lilith's anger at her diminishment as the moon fuels her holy task. While the consort of Samael, she was laid barren. Now she is jealous of Eve in her childbearing and seeks revenge on her offspring. Lilith cannot live in relationship to another because it does not meet her needs. Nor can she be subjugated or reliant for this diminishes her individuated self. Lilith is repulsed by the infantile need of woman for approval and love. By killing children she eliminates their infantile reliance on another. Everything that Eve epitomizes as wife and mother, Lilith envies and seeks to destroy because she refuses to be diminished and subjugated.¹⁵

Her moon origins continue in the Queen of the Night motif. Her name supposedly has origins in the Hebrew word for night, *laila*. Not only does she kill children in the night but comes after men for intercourse, even in their dreams, as a succuba. In order to fulfill her sexual desires, she seduces men then bears demons by them. If a man is unlucky enough to fall victim while awake, then Lilith's fury that was once directed at Adam comes unleashed upon the man. She comes as a beautiful young woman, virgin, or harlot, then kills the man upon her sexual fulfillment. If men are seduced in their sleep, they survive the experience. Their only recollection of the experience is the dream in which Lilith enters and the nocturnal emission of semen as proof of her encounter. Because of the potential danger, men were encouraged never to sleep alone. The illustrations that depict this motif of her show her in the superior position, her continued refusal to submit to men. Even outside of her exclusive succuba identity, Lilith is still associated with sexual anima. Her sexual drive is carnal, natural, and unrestrained.¹⁶

¹⁵ Koltuv, 16-17, 81, 83, 85; Hurwitz, 31-32.

¹⁶ Patai, 233-235; Hurwitz, 52-53, 87-89, 142; Koltuv, 4, 6-8, 15; Graves and Patai, 66, 68-69.

Conclusion

Lilith embodies the rejected Goddess. She is mother and sexual nature. Out of her rejection broods a righteous fury. She seeks vengeance on all who oppress her, would seek to subject her, and those who accept the reliant nature. In many ways she is the Shekinah, the feminine aspect of God who has been set aside under patriarchy. Her quest for equality has demonized her. She is inferior in creation and the consort of evil. Lilith remains the subjugated female, characterizing darkness and inferiority within a patriarchal society and religion.¹⁷

¹⁷ Koltuv, 118, 121-122.

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