

Lilith

Lilith is the primary representation of the demonic feminine in Jewish lore (see **Demon**). Her main function is to attack family life and particularly the things traditionally valued by women. So on the one hand, she is associated with infant death, and to a lesser extent threatens women's health in childbirth. On the other hand, she acts as a seductress, leading men away from their wives, but more importantly into disfavor with God. She also uses this opportunity to steal men's semen and bear numerous demon children.

Her relation to older demonic figures from Mesopotamia is disputed but probable. Certainly the Mesopotamians (Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians) had evil feminine **spirits** whose functions closely parallel Lilith's, but the exact nature of the relationship has not yielded scholarly consensus. She does, however, give her name to a class of similarly functioning spirits called "liliths" (actually three differently formed plurals in Hebrew). It may not always be clear when her name in texts refers to her or one of her minions. But her earliest undisputed literary references are to "liliths" (2 Bar. 10:8, and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q510 *fr.* 1). She also makes a few appearances in the Talmud (tractates Erubin 100b; Nidda 24b; Shab. 151b; and one of her "sons" is referenced in Baba Bathra 73a–b).

Her one cameo in the Bible (Isa. 34:14), however, is disputed. The context has a *lylyt* haunting desert places in the company of other animals, and a *sa'ir* (calling to his companions). *Sa'ir* can mean "goat," but it is used in other biblical contexts for a type of demon (or possibly a **satyr**); *lylyt* occurs nowhere else in scripture. If the *sa'ir* is a demon, then the *lylyt* probably refers to our demoness (given the Mesopotamian parallels and her clear role in later Judaism),

but if he is a goat, then *lylyt* is most likely an otherwise unknown animal name (probably an owl, judging from the immediate context).

In the ancient world, Lilith appears in magical texts, amulets, and other prophylactics intended to thwart her activities, but we see somewhat more of her in late Roman and early medieval Judaism. She appears frequently on magical bowls (buried under thresholds to keep various unwanted spirits out). These protective methods are most frequently intended to thwart her role as a threat in childbirth and infancy, although they may also protect against her sexual attacks. She is often countered by invoking the powers of her nemesis **angels**: Snvi, Snsvi, and Smnglof.

In the late Talmudic period, *Genesis Rabbah* (a collection of commentaries on the Book of Genesis) tells us that Eve had a predecessor—that she was Adam’s second wife, although the first wife is never named (18.4; 22.7). Between the eighth and tenth centuries C.E., however, Lilith shows up in a satirical work entitled the *Alphabet of Jesus Ben Sira*. At this point the connection is made between Eve’s predecessor and the already well known baby-stealer. She is created at more or less the same time as Adam, but because she tries to assert her equality, and is rebuffed by Adam’s own self-assertion (the issue is really about dominance in sexual intercourse), she ends up escaping from Eden, and being replaced by the more submissive Eve. Lilith now adopts her new persona as baby-stealer and mother of demons. She makes a deal in which she promises to leave babies alone if they are protected by amulets with the names of the three angels mentioned above.

Jewish mystical literature (Kabbalah) plays down the “first wife” aspect of the Lilith tradition and focuses instead on her role as Samael’s (Satan) wife (see **Devil, The**). She participates in the temptation of Eve in Naftali Bacharach’s *Emeq haMelekh* 23c–d (17th c.) and

then, after the fall, sleeps with Adam for a time, making many demon babies. In some traditions, she has been rendered infertile in order to prevent her from filling the world with her progeny.

She is a major player in Jewish supernatural folklore, most of which focuses on her role as the Devil's queen or as a sexual temptress. She is the mistress of illusion and a personification of temptation, seeking to entrap even the righteous, killing them and bringing them to God for judgment if they fall. In her role as **succubus**, she has, of course, particular control over nightmares and erotic dreams. She also rules a horde of other succubi and incubi.

In many Renaissance paintings of the temptation of Adam and Eve, the serpent is given a woman's head and often a full **mermaid**-like body (half-snake, rather than half-fish). This feminizing of the serpent may simply represent a general feminizing of personified Sin, also seen in Milton (1608-1674), but may alternatively (or also) reflect Lilith's function in the temptation, as described in Kabbalah. We do know that there was some intellectual crosstalk between the Kabbalists and a parallel Christian scholarly movement (usually spelled Cabala), which may have, in turn, influenced art, although medieval portrayals of **lamia** frequently had serpentine torsos.

The Vulgate uses *lamia* to translate *lylyt* in the Isaiah passage (discussed above). The distinctions between the Greco-Roman lamia and the Jewish Lilith may be fairly subtle anyway (see the entry on Incubus/Succubus), so it is not particularly surprising that the two concepts merged in nineteenth-century art and literature. Her transition into the modern world began with a brief appearance in Goethe's *Faust* (1808) in which she is portrayed as irresistibly sexual. She then returns eleven years later in John Keats's poem *Lamia*, in which readers are reminded of her connection to the snake. Poet-artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti added a painting (*Lady Lilith*, 1868) and two poems ("Lilith" [renamed "Body's beauty"], 1868, and "Eden's bower," 1869). There

followed Robert Browning's "Adam, Lilith, and Eve" (1883), and several paintings by John Collier (1850-1934).

Although the para-biblical myth occasionally surfaced (see for example George MacDonald's *Lilith*, 1885), as the nineteenth century progressed into the twentieth, Lilith/lamia usually represented the feminine dark side (the part that men subliminally fear) in both literature and art. This is what lies behind Carl Jung's (1875-1961) use of her as the prime expression of the *anima* in men (the suppressed *femme* within), or for a maladaptive behavior in a woman that seeks to destroy other women's marital happiness. The best monograph on her still belongs to one of Jung's disciples, Siegmund Hurwitz (1980).

With the feminist movement, particularly beginning in the latter third of the twentieth century, Lilith has been escorted through another shift in persona. The story in the medieval *Alphabet of Jesus ben Sira* (composed somewhere between 700 and 1000 C.E.), written from a man's perspective, paints a picture of Lilith's lack of submission to Adam as the root cause of her transition from Eden to the demonic. Read subversively, however, feminists find a heroic story of one woman's escape from oppression to independence; Lilith becomes the first feminist, sacrificing even the paradise of Eden as the necessary cost of freedom and equality. Of course, her roles as baby-stealer, and her marriage to the Devil, are usually down-played (or assigned to a patriarchal layer of the tradition). Her assertion of sexual equality is held up as a model for women's sexual independence and self-awareness. Some neo-pagan groups have taken up her cause as well, either accepting her dark nature as part of a larger sacred reality (a Kali-type goddess), or finding the erotic goddess within by removing the clutter of what they argue are patriarchal and monotheistic condemnations.

Art and literature have generally followed suit. Most graphic images try to portray her as unapologetically sexual. Another significant group focuses on her as a dark goddess, or in a few cases as powerful and unyielding. Of course, para-biblical images continue to abound (see, for example, contemporary artist Lilian Broca's "Lilith" series, 1994ff). Novels and poetry (including songs) often focus on retelling the *Alphabet* story, often with some clever twist as in Eduard Le Compte's 1988 *I, Eve* (which focuses on Eve's response to Lilith's role as Adam's lover after Eden) although there are, a number of offerings, usually from a magical point of view, that reassert her demonic nature such as in Donald Tyson's *The Tortuous Serpent* (1997).

Finally, she has a place in **vampire** lore, either as the first and most powerful of the vampires, or at least as their queen. She is sometimes presented as the daughter or the consort of **Dracula**. She plays this role in Marvel Comics' *Tomb of Dracula* series (1972–1979), and it has been her primary guise in various motion pictures including *Bordello of Blood* (Gilbert Adler, 1996). This, and her demon persona not surprisingly have proved fruitful ground for the creators of role-playing and video games such as *Darkstalkers*, in which she is a vampire/succubus alter-ego to the character Morrigan (either to be played or fought). **Alan Humm**

References and Suggested Reading

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