

FIRST LADY?

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I have never understood women-- or woman --or the feminine psyche. Never. Fortunately, I am blessed with a lovingly tolerant and forgiving wife, not to mention daughter, step-daughter and daughters-in law. My daughter will, on occasion, vocalize the archetypal, exasperated, eyeball-rolling "Oh, Dad!", but she is usually just teasing. Usually.

Our attitudes about women seem so muddled. Woman is alternately presented as an object of desire and a force to be feared, one moment "the fairer sex", the next, "the boss". Over a century ago Alexander Dumas wrote, "Woman inspires us to great things, and prevents us from achieving them."

How could I overcome this perhaps not so unique deficiency of perception (according to my wife!), I wondered? Some sort of self-improvement, perhaps a study of the female psyche was warranted, but where should I begin this arduous, if not frankly harrowing, labor? The stories or myths of ancient times illuminated and explained some of the confusing issues which perplexed our ancestors, and psychoanalysis has demonstrated that these apparently mythic issues are still widely shared and thus cannot be related only to ancient times. Myth, after all, Milton Scarborough reflects in Myth and Modernity, "fulfills in primitive cultures an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man." Is not the same true for us of religion? "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start", counseled Oscar Hammerstein's postulant Maria in "The Sound of Music". The beginning? Why not?

Genesis 1:1, as we recall, proclaims, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Even a non-literalist such as I, who substitutes the "Big Bang" in there somewhere, can deal with that. Woman first appears in this Chapter in Verse 27: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created he them." Together? Really? Then what about Genesis 2:7 where God recreates man? Where is woman then? Well, this time around woman pops out of Adam's rib fifteen verses later. Why? Is this the second time around for woman? What if there are two stories here? Is this search going to befuddle me even more? Will an examination of such myths (to the literalists among us, my sincere apologies) be fruitless? Or can we glean some concepts of how the male authors of these writings really viewed women and of the lasting influence on us of these views?

If we follow this issue of the apparent doubling of the story of the creation of woman in the Tanakh, the Christian Old Testament, closely, we find that the problem has led scholars to some fascinating, and sometimes disturbing, speculations. These early writings also illuminate an unfortunate male perspective of woman which has lasted for too many centuries. But the ladies, as usual, will have the last word in this story!

And now, permit me to introduce the central character of the evening, the one and only -- Lilith. The myth of Lilith is central to these musings: Lilith, perhaps the First Lady? Well, she was no lady, as we shall see, but perhaps she *was* first. Lilith first emerges, as do a number of the concepts of the Old Testament, the Tanakh, in ancient Sumer, today's southern Iraq. Then we shall discover her in the Tanakh itself. In post-Biblical documents we shall find the persona of Lilith splintered, modified, colorfully and ferociously transformed in post-Biblical writings: The Testament of Solomon, the Talmud, The Alphabet of Ben Sira, and finally the Zohar. Then twentieth century women changed all that.

Gilgamesh, mythic king of the Sumerian city-state of Uruk, whom we know from the first great epic myth, the Epic of Gilgamesh written in the third millennium B.C.E., also appeared in other Sumerian stories, one of which is called "Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree". Here we find a winged character named Lilith inhabiting a tree beloved of Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of love, war, and fertility. Around the roots of the sacred tree curled a very large and apparently very troublesome serpent, which Gilgamesh heroically slew for Inanna. Lilith here may have been referred to as an owl, symbol of wisdom, as she also appeared in the Epic of Gilgamesh. However, Inanna, who in other Sumerian writing found Lilith useful, wanted her out of that tree as well as the serpent, so perhaps she had some unpleasant characteristics as well. Lilith was described as a "dark maid" or "maid of desolation", but her placement in a tree trunk may also connect her to the Sumerian (and later Biblical) Tree of Life, or represent her connections with the upper and lower worlds, themes which persist as we follow the transformations of Lilith in literature.

The very etymology of the name Lilith brings early contradictions, with the word *lil* carrying the roots of the Semitic words for air, night (Hebrew *lilah*), storm, or ghostly dust-cloud. The Burney Relief, a beautiful late Sumerian or Babylonian terra cotta of about 2000 B.C. E. , now in the British Museum, pictures a beautiful nude Lilith with wings, a crown, and the feet of a bird, standing on a pair of lions, holding a staff and circle, and flanked by two owls, symbols of the moon and also of night. This association with the moon, and with darkness and night, lasted for millennia.

Lilith flies into the Bible in Isaiah 34:14. In the King James version the Lord warns the sinners of the world, "The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and the satyr shall cry to his fellow; the screech owl shall also rest there, and find for herself a place of rest. "The Hebrew word translated as "screech owl" is, of course *lilith*, with the overtones of an evil creature of the night. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible uses the translation "night hag" to clarify the meaning implied. Anyone startled by the eerie hoot and rustle of great wings of a nocturnal owl in the deep woods will understand this association made in the Tanakh and its translations. Isaiah, a male prophet, has remarkably transmuted the characterization of a mythic female character heretofore associated with the most powerful goddess of the Sumerian pantheon. Why?

Now that we have placed Lilith in the Tanakh, let us return to the conundrum of the apparent two Creation stories of woman found in its first book, Genesis. There arose the folkloric and rabbinic elaboration that the first time woman was created, it was *simultaneous* with man, while the second time she appeared *after* Adam. If every word

of the Bible was inspired truth, then the most logical explanation seemed to some that there had to be two women known to, and by, Adam. The first of these was named, as you may have suspected, Lilith, while Eve (from the Hebrew Havva, life-giver) was apparently believed in Jewish folklore to be God's second try. If Eve came second, then she was inferior to man (try telling that to your "significant other"), and this became the basis for many centuries of gender-biased theological writing and worship practices which have prevailed in the attitudes of society and religion regarding the roles of male and female. More on this later.

Lilith reappeared in The Testament of Solomon, written sometime between 100-400 C. E. as a Greek pseudepigraphic catalog of demons summoned by and dealt with by King Solomon. One of these demons is believed to be Lilith. Her body was described as all "in darkness", her hair a raven black (remember *lilah*, Hebrew for black), and she has become, chillingly, a killer of children. Why did this depiction of her persona take such a sinister turn? The death of a child is one of life's greatest tragedies, and blame had to be assigned to exculpate the parents from any wrongdoing (or thinking). Why not blame a convenient demon? Lilith now carried a demonic aura about her, a being who can fly in and kill, and this became one of the characteristics most elaborated on in later literature. Protective amulets for children, with the alleged power to drive off this evil spirit, began to appear in the first millennium C. E. and were reported being sold in New York's Lower East Side as recently as 1994. This became a central part of the myth of Lilith.

We find her next in the Babylonian Talmud of the fifth century C. E. The Talmud is the body of Jewish civil and canonical law which evolved after the final definition of the Tanakh. Only four sections of this vast document refer to Lilith, yet these were enough to bolster the growing assumption that Adam's first mate had become a malicious force capable of wreaking havoc upon her human victims. Her demonic qualities were elaborated on. Her long, sensual, dark hair was said to be unkempt, and she was now described as able to assume a form partly human and animal at the same time (redolent of her Sumerian terra cotta image) or to appear in different human forms. However, a new trait was added to Lilith's repertory in the Talmud. She was now also a succubus, a female demon associated with darkness and the night, fabled to have sexual intercourse with sleeping men, an encounter that devout Jews would view as Onanism, "the spilling of seed", a sin described in Genesis 38:9-10 for which the punishment was death. So one could blame a demon for nocturnal emission and not one's unchaste thoughts. Untoward sexuality, the ability of a woman to entice men through her adornments, such as long, luxurious hair, could lead to sinful sexual desire, which had to be repressed in a society which legislated morality. And Lilith was its symbol. Who was passing on this increasingly bizarre mythic material? Men, of course, wrote the Talmud, and this power of Lilith took away the responsibility of men for erotic dreams and their consequences. Just as with infant death, someone or something needed to be blamed, and the myth of demonic woman was usefully at hand.

Another fascinating addition to the myth of Lilith came from an anonymously authored work dated between the seventh and eleventh centuries C.E., the Alphabet of Ben Sira. Comprised almost entirely of the birth, life, and death of a prophet known as Ben Sira, the text mentions Lilith during an alleged conversation between King Nebuchadnezzar (King of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, 605-562 B.C. E.) and the prophet.

The details of the conversation center on twenty-two sets of questions offered by the King which Ben Sira answered by assigning a story to each of the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Alphabet of Ben Sira has been looked upon as a parody on the life of the Jewish man and not as a religious work. For example, it describes Joshua as a buffoon too fat even to ride a horse. The Alphabet reinterpreted Lilith in the Garden of Eden strikingly, telling us that God created a woman for Adam, "from the earth, as he had created Adam himself and called her Lilith. "The narrative continues: "Adam and Lilith began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie below', and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are only fit to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name (of God, a forbidden act) and flew away into the air."

Adam protested to God, who sent three angels after Lilith. She refused to return. "Leave me', I she said. 'I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth' (probably not by coincidence the ordained waiting period between birth and ritual circumcision or Brit Milah, bris in Yiddish), and if female, for twenty days.' When the angels heard Lilith's words, they insisted she go back. But she swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God, 'Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant.'" These are the amulets we have mentioned. One recent commentator noted, "It made perfect sense, in the netherworld of the psyche, to attribute so unnatural an event as the death of an infant to the most unnatural of females, the rebellious first wife of Adam. She who ought to have been the mother of all living things would naturally hate the birth of any living descendant of Adam."

In The Alphabet Lilith then engaged in numerous blatant sexual exploits, taking for lovers all the demons she found in a cave where she took up residence, giving birth to a great multitude, thus explaining the proliferation of demons in the world. However, as apparent penance for defying God, she agreed to have one hundred of her own demon children die every day. Does this punishment make her a more sympathetic character? There are modern, feminist commentators who believe so; we shall return to the modern view of Lilith.

The most detailed information about Lilith comes from the Zohar (which means "radiance"), a great medieval compendium of Jewish mysticism which is part of the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical school of thought. The Zohar, probably written in the thirteenth century C.E. by Rabbi Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon, elaborated upon the myths of Lilith found in the Talmud and Alphabet of Ben Sira, while adding a few of its own. For example, God was said to have created the two major celestial bodies, sun and moon, which, for a time resided in the sky at the same time, as equals. The arrangement apparently displeased God who decided to let the sun reign over day because its brilliance so exceeded that of the moon, whose role was diminished by receiving dominion over the night. Initially considered to be a membrane of evil around the moon, Lilith was eventually expelled to become, yet again, an evil presence. Recall that the origin of Lilith's name carries overtones of darkness. This strange parallel to the Creation story, with a primordial aura to it, alludes to the male principle, i.e. sun, struggling with the moon, traditionally (and in Indo-European languages possessing a gender designation,

always) the feminine. The masculine sun triumphs again. According to the Zohar, Adam was recreated as an androgynous creature with Eve attached to his side, as half of the physical makeup of the first human. Lilith, jealous of Eve, departed in a rage but returned later to Adam, mating with him while he slept, producing demon offspring called "the plagues of mankind", a fascinating Jewish mystical suggestion of evil having originated in the Garden of Eden. For this God cast Lilith into the sea where her image in the Zohar became strangely mingled with that of the monster Leviathan, also considered a form of demon. God eventually extracted her from the sea and now charged her with punishing Adam and Eve for their disobedience. In the Zohar the tale of Lilith became ever stranger. She mated with Samael, a Talmudic figure, literally "venom of God", identified with the Angel of Death and Satan. Complexity is an understatement for the transmutations of Lilith from here on in the Zohar. A Blind Dragon was described as an intermediary in the fiendish union with Samael. Then we learn there were really two Liliths, each with a demonic spouse. Lilith in the role of succubus is the older of the two, and the Zohar detailed the ways she lurked in hidden places waiting to seduce and corrupt man. Her physical adornments, though merely a facade, could lead men into sexual corruption, at which time she would take possession of their souls. The younger Lilith could cause her own brand of devastation.

Mysticism is, by definition, beyond logic. As the strange story of Lilith in the Zohar ended, she was again transmuted, now to become the consort of God! She was begrudgingly accepted as an unworthy yet essential replacement for the Shekhina, a word meaning the "glory or radiance of God", and a concept which has been understood by some as the feminine side of God. A modern commentator notes, "The Zohar states that the most terrible outcome of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Israel was that God was forced to accept Lilith as his wife in place of the Shekhina. Only the coming of the Messiah can reunite God with his proper bride and bring about the destruction of Lilith." This bizarre concept must have been present for centuries in the folklore of Israel, a people who sometimes strayed from monotheism, and for whom the coming of Lilith to replace the Shekhina would be a severe punishment.

In the nineteenth century Lilith reappears, given new life by the pens of Goethe, Keats, and Rossetti. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1808 work, Faust, Part 1 presents her to a large, heterogeneous audience in the Walpurgis Night scene, where Mephistopheles explains who Lilith is:

"Adam's wife, his first. Beware of her.
Her beauty's one boast is her dangerous hair.
When Lilith winds it tight around young men
She doesn't soon let go of them again."

Ironically, after Mephistopheles offers this warning to Faust, he then urges Faust to dance with Lilith, "the pretty witch". This seeming contrast will become a familiar motif in Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite writing, where Lilith is "wicked" but not

necessarily damned. She will be admired and feared simultaneously as a femme fatale, Keats' "La Belle Dame sans Merci", a beautiful, sensuous woman.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a founder of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, wrote a sonnet to Lilith in 1868 to accompany his painting, "Lady Lilith". Her hair, as in Faust, is now bright or golden, with the Hebrew origin of her dark being now forgotten or unknown to the writers. She invites men to her body where she will enslave, ensnare and kill.

“Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.”

Rossetti uses extensive snake imagery, reminding us that Lilith could deceive as, or even before, the snake in Eden.

So we have watched the myth of Lilith evolve from the interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 as representing two creations of woman, with the First Woman not Eve but Lilith. She was given, notably by male authors, dreadful attributes of child killer and seducer of men whose souls she could possess. So far, I haven't increased my understanding of women, or have I? There is here the notion that Western man has placed the blame of some of the world's worst personal tragedies on this remarkable mythic female persona. She became an intimidating, negative presence, and a symbol of fearful, untrustworthy, detrimental female characteristics. Why? Have the male authors of these texts given us archetypes of woman as potentially too independent and therefore to be demonized if she attempts to be too "liberated"? Has some part of society (certainly not *us*) required that woman must always be subservient?

The figure of Lilith has fascinated modern feminist writers who have seen in her a *positive* symbol of the once powerful goddess figure of ancient Near Eastern religions, which had to be subverted and reconfigured by a male-dominated, patriarchal societal culture. In such cultures as ours, men invoked religious authority to be dominant sex, with God as the Lord of man, and man as the lord of woman. The woman's wedding promise to "love, honor, and obey" has disappeared only in the last generation. Thus a patriarchal society often seems to devalue the opposite sex, commanding woman, controlling her life, arranging her marriage. In America man allowed her to vote less than a century ago. Man created a "glass ceiling" in the job market and paid her lower wages than his. This is an uncomfortable indictment, for it rings of truth.

Another reason for devaluing the female principle that the Lilith-figure may once have represented was the effect of women whom she symbolized to illuminate, even among the devout, male vulnerabilities regarding marital infidelity, lust and sexuality. Orthodox Jews and Moslems still pray separately from women to avoid the temptations that even the sight of the back of a woman's covered head might evoke. That long, dark hair issue again! In patriarchal times, and into the twentieth century, woman was either

"the little woman", obedient mother, with her sexuality limited to the proscribed marital embrace, or she was idealized and spiritualized into "Virgin" or the "good" girl.

Lilith is neither. She, and the women who identify with her persona, control their own sexuality and fertility, as did the goddesses of the ancient Near East. Not only was the myth of Lilith invoked to explain the ills of the world, but so was the other woman, the figure of Havva, Mother Eve, who was also needed by many to explain evil in the world. Eve, submissive even to the serpent, whom some see as Lilith, was central to explanations of theodicy and the resultant need for the male to dominate, control and lead the weaker female.

Lilith, representing female attributes which could threaten a stable, male-dominated society, was vilified, leading to misogynist strains in this vision of Lilith, the concept that women just might be inherently evil. A Jewish apocryphal text begins, "Women are evil, my children, because they have no power or strength to stand up against man; they use their wiles and try to ensnare him by their charms; and man, whom woman cannot subdue by strength, she subdues by guile." Lilith, the succubus, was made responsible for man's inherent sexual foibles, for this was far more acceptable than admitting that the pious male believer could have urges difficult to control. Eve, created as an appendage of her husband, was a safer sort of female, less threatening, since she had no aspirations of autonomy and equality.

Modern feminist writers suggest that independence, free thinking, and sexual freedom are Lilith-like traits, condemned by a male-dominated society which stresses the importance of marriage, subservience (recall the saying, "*Behind* every successful man stands a woman"--or, one might add, a surprised mother-in-law), and child rearing. These attitudes dominated Western society up to at least the last third of the twentieth century, since which "the times, they are a-changin'."

In the last few decades Lilith's persona, and similar feminine representations, have been reexamined and rehabilitated, as male-oriented stereotypes of women are called into question. Lilith, as archetypal seductress who stole children from their cradles and robbed sleeping men of their semen, has been the product of the male imagination and psyche for centuries. Now Lilith, and what she represents, has become a pivotal symbol in the feminist movement, utilized to support the demands of liberated women who claim that previously the myth of the evil Lilith reflected only the intentions and insecurities of men. The negative traits of Lilith have been dismissed as the creation of misogynist medieval male authors, and she has been transformed to represent female self-sufficiency, freedom, autonomy, and sexual equality, healthy, not evil attributes. Deborah Green-Scott, writing for her feminist audience, states, ". . . I hope to show women how to find the wild-natured, autonomous Lilith in them and ourselves, to appreciate the 'Shadow' figure who questions authority, feels anger, challenges us, makes us creative, revels in her sexuality and so enables us to reach our full human and spiritual potential." This paradigm challenges the view of woman as *either* the faithful, submissive, unquestioning homemaker, represented perhaps by Eve, *or* the sensual, physically alluring and intensely sexual female, the Lilith-figure, whose image continues to appear on ninety percent of the magazines we see at any newsstand, but whose persona is a bit risky to bring home to the family. The feminists tell us that we must see women as embodying all these very human traits without idealizing or debasing her. Do women

see us men more clearly than we see them? Are they not both Lilith and Iyva, Eve, the life-giver? Do men permit women to integrate the full extent of their humanity?

Women are bringing these issues to the forefront in many ways. Lilith, now the title of an independent women's quarterly with a Jewish emphasis, was established in 1976 and remains an active force. And yes, there really is a lilith.org! In 1997 Canadian musician Sarah McLachlan established Lilith Fair as a touring music festival featuring only female singers and songwriters. This concert tour was repeated for several years nationwide and was revisited by the VH1 cable network just this February. Sadly, this broadcast evoked a few horrifically obscene male responses on the internet, furiously declaiming that only men could "rock", that women had no right to take such leading roles, and that such women were only meant for degrading sexual usage. Such ugly, visceral male reactions suggest that the movement which spawned Lilith Fair can be extremely threatening to some men, and that the movement which spawned Lilith Fair will continue to struggle, as society evolves, ever so slowly, toward a more just view of women. Alice Ostriker sings passionately of Lilith and brings to life the modern feminist view in her poem "Lilith Jumps the Fence";

Girl, that man of yours
Was one pathetic creature
Puffing his chest, thinking the world of himself,
Standing there saying *Lie down and hold still*,
Waving his scepter at the jacaranda,
The bougainvillea, like the boss of something,
Though wasn't he only taking orders
From a bigger boss,
Or pulling stones from the ground to set on top
Of other stones, he'd say *We need this wall*,
Paradise constantly in
Motion, and him wanting it to stop –
What kind of husband
Was that, what kind of lover?

Honey, I answered
No hard feelings, but I don't like men
Who try to lay down the law
And I don't like enclosures
Nobody gives me orders

Now or ever

They say he invented names, and it's true
He called me shrew, bitch, witch,
And dumb cunt, he that was scandalized
Spilled a mouthful of curses
When I jumped the fence
Then God put him to sleep and gave him you

(Author's note: all punctuation, or lack thereof, here is per the poetess.)

Lilith may have been the first mythic woman, but "First Lady"? That's not her style! Maybe she *has* taught me something about women, and why the historical societal expectation that they must *only* behave like ladies has been a tragedy of many millennia.

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