



Lilith. I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

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■ Staley, J. L./R. Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination* (Louisville, Ky. 2007).

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch and Jeffrey Marlett

See also → Buddhism; → Confucianism; → Hinduism; → Lily; → Righteous, Righteousness; → Sermon on the Mount

Lilith

- I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. Judaism
- III. Christianity
- IV. Literature
- V. Visual Arts
- VI. Music
- VII. Film

I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

In Jewish, but also Christian folklore, Lilith is Adam's first and disobedient wife. This idea, though not attested at all in the HB/OT, was developed due to a rabbinic understanding of the two creation accounts in Gen 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–3:24. According to the priestly account in Gen 1:1–2:3, God creates man and woman simultaneously, both in his "image," whereas in Gen 2:21–23 YHWH creates the woman out of the "rib" or "side" of the first human ('*ādām*). The juxtaposition of these accounts led to the assumption that Gen 1 refers to Adam's first wife, and Gen 2 to his second wife, Eve. This is of course not the meaning of these texts, which were simply separate narratives on the creation of humankind put together at a late stage by the compilers or redactors of the Pentateuch.

The only text in the HB/OT that mentions Lilith (*Lilith*) occurs in Isa 34:14. This verse belongs to a passage (Isa 34:9–15) that describes the ruins of Edom after divine judgment:

The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the howlers, and the wild goats shall call to each other; Lilith shall settle there, and shall find a place of rest. There shall the owl nest and lay and hatch and brood in its shadow" (for an identification of the "inhabitants of the ruins see Nihan: 96–103 and 109–115)

This passage has parallels in Isa 13:19–23 (oracle against Babylon) and Zeph 2:13–15 (against Nineveh, see also Isa 14:23; Jer 49:33; 50:39–40), but none of them mentions Lilith among the inhabitants of the ruins.

The redactors of the different versions were unsure how to understand Lilith in Isa 34:14. The LXX renders it with *ὄνοκένταυρος* (a donkey-centaur). Aquila's version transliterates Λιλίθ, whereas Symmachos has Λαμία (in Greek mythology a child-eating female demon), which appears in the Vulgate as "lamia." The 1QIsa^a fragment of Isaiah from Qumran renders the name as a plural: *Lilthyot*.

The biblical Lilith is probably an adaptation of the Akkadian *Lilitu*, which comes from the Sumerian *Lil* (Hutter: 520). Lilith is mentioned for the first time in a Sumerian text about Gilgamesh, where she appears as a female demon related to stormy winds. According to this Gilgamesh tradition, Ishtar plants a tree, which gets infested by dangerous creatures. A snake is nesting in its roots, Anzu invades the top and "in its midst Lilith had built for herself a house" (line 42, translation according to Kramer). Gilgamesh intervenes, slays the snake and Lilith escapes to the wilderness: "In its midst Lilith destroyed her house (and) escapes to the desert places" (lines 96–97). This is exactly the place where she is found in Isa 34.

Akkadian texts mention a triad of demons: *Lilā*, *Lilitu* and (*w*)*ardat Lilī* as ruling over the winds and living in ruins (Frey-Anthes: 181–83). The latter two female demons are related to sexual fears and fantasies. They seduce and kill young men. *Lilitu* cannot bear children and kills babies by giving them poison from her breast. For this reason *Lilitu* has been identified as the demon Lamashtu since the 2nd millennium BCE.

There is some discussion as to whether the so-called *Queen of the Night*, a relief from southern Iraq made around 1,800 BCE, is a representation of the demon Lilith, because both are associated with an owl (Frey-Anthes: 183–86). The female figure looks however much more like a goddess than a demon (Collon: 39–40).

The biblical Lilith refers quite clearly to the Mesopotamian demon. This view has been challenged by J. Blair, who interprets Lilith in Isa 34 as referring to a night bird (Blair: 63–94, see already Driver). This interpretation is based on a popular etymology, which links Lilith to *laylā* (night). It is therefore more plausible to understand Isa 34:14 as referring to a Babylonian demoness. If Isa 34 is a text from the Persian period (Zapff: 188–96), it may have been written by an author who belonged to the Judean exiles in Babylon and had learnt about this demon whom he then introduced as one of the inhabitants of the ruins. This understanding of Lilith is also attested in Qumran (4Q510–511) in a text, in which the *maskil* (the "instructor") is in charge of exorcizing all kinds of evil angels and demons, among them also Lilith (Baillet: 215–19).

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