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## Reclaiming Lilith as a Strong Female Role Model

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Reclaiming Lilith as a Strong Female Role Model

Kendra LeVine

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A thesis submitted to  
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We live in an increasingly patriarchal society, and in order for women to not only survive in our society, but *thrive*, they need strong female role models. Now the question is *how* do we find strong female role models? The field of Religious Studies can be used to uncover said female role models by way of examining mythology and ancient texts.

Perhaps one of the most unexpected role models to come out of this examination is Lilith. She is unexpected because her story is often told in a deeply negative way, and her portrayal in both mythology and rabbinical texts is quite literally demonizing. However, those tales are traditionally patriarchal, which means that if they were to be examined in a different light, she would arguably become a prominent example of feminism and a popular female role model. She is independent, strong, and makes sacrifices for her happiness even at the cost of things dear to her. Many women today can relate to those characteristics, but some may need help accessing those characteristics within themselves, and may need someone to show them that it's okay to be heard, to be acknowledged, to take up space, and to not be afraid to be exactly who they are, and who they want to be. I believe that Lilith can show women all of these things, and that her story can help them access the same characteristics that she has, that I think *all* women have.

According to rabbinical texts, specifically the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Lilith was the first woman and first wife of Adam. She was created from the earth like he was, and not from his rib like his second wife, Eve<sup>1</sup>. This meant that Lilith was created to be equal to Adam, and could not be mistaken as his subordinate or thought of as the lesser sex. Even so, Lilith did not want to be someone's wife. She wanted her freedom, to be able to travel as she pleased, and to make her own decisions. So, she left Eden, and began to explore the world God had created.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith>

Many of the story-tellers saw her departure from Eden as an act of defiance, but there was no rule or law that stated Lilith must remain in Eden — though it was expected that she remain married to Adam — so the claim of defiance is nothing more than the patriarchy being upset by her unwillingness to adhere to the expected social norms. This contrasts her with Eve, the second wife of Adam, who accepted her role as his companion.

Due to the fact that the story of Lilith as Adam's wife is not included in the Old Testament, Eve is widely thought of as the first woman, and is the antithesis of Lilith. Eve is a dutiful wife and a capable helper. Eve does not know of any life outside of Eden, and does not ask if there is any world beyond the garden, which something that can be seen as an indicator of her *ignorance*, while Lilith's desire to leave is an indicator of her *awareness*<sup>2</sup>. Lilith is also seen as someone who is aware of the consequences that would befall her if she left Adam. Eve is a prominent example of what women of that time period were *supposed* to be like. "Not only does Eve represent Israelite women, she is also a product of the way of life of women in that world. [...] To become aware of women's way of life during the time the Hebrew Bible was written is to come to grips with the reality that determined Eve. In this sense, 'Eve' is Everywoman – every woman who lived in ancient Israel."<sup>3</sup> In this passage from *Discovering Eve*, we see the contrast between her and Lilith, as well as why society accepted one and rejected the other. Lilith did not personify what it meant to be a 'proper' Israelite woman — in fact she was the complete opposite — but Eve did. Upon looking at *both* women, the more positive role model for women *nowadays* would be Lilith. She knows her worth, is aware of the world around her and the world outside of Eden, and values her independence above anything else. Moreover, she does not let

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<sup>2</sup> <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith>

<sup>3</sup> Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve : Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

men — such as Adam — rule her life, and she does not feel she owes *anyone*, not even God, anything.

As far as canonical text goes, Lilith is mentioned only once. “Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest”<sup>4</sup>. This description makes it very clear that Lilith is some sort of malevolent entity, and not someone you’d want to encounter. The above passage, from Isaiah, is placed within a large piece of text that speaks of God punishing a nation, and that alone signifies how Lilith was viewed by the creators of the Old Testament.

Once again, the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* — a non-canonical text — explains how Lilith came to be associated with evil, and what she supposedly did to deserve such a punishment.

Adam stood in prayer before his Maker and said, “Master of the Universe, the woman you gave me fled from me!”

The Holy Blessed one immediately dispatched the three angels Sanoy, Sansenoy, and Samangelof after her, to bring her back. God said, “If she wants to return, well and good. And if not, she must accept that a hundred of her children will die every day.” The angels pursued her and overtook her in the sea, in raging waters, (the same waters in which the Egyptians would one day drown), and told her God's orders. [...] She swore to them in the name of the living God that whenever she would see them or their names or their images on an amulet, she would not overpower that baby, and she accepted that a hundred of her children would die every day. Therefore, a hundred of the demons die every day, and therefore, we write the names [of the three angels] on amulets of young children.<sup>5</sup>

Lilith’s refusal to return to Adam resulted in her becoming both literally and figuratively demonized. It is no wonder that she is mentioned in Isaiah as part of God’s wrath, for what she represents — demons and the kidnapping of babies — was seen as horrifying in the eyes of the Israelites. Lilith’s association with the kidnapping of children is explored

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<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 34:14 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith>

briefly in Judit Blair's *De-Demonising the Old Testament*, "It is suggested that she is driven to kill babies in retaliation for God's punishment that every day one hundred of her children would be killed"<sup>6</sup>. While Lilith accepted the ultimatum God had given her when she refused to return to Eden (and Adam), she did so begrudgingly, because the deal was really more like simply picking the lesser of two evils. Her rage was demonized, along with her entire being, but in retrospect she is well within her rights to be upset about her punishment. Any mother would be furious to have to pay such a price for their freedom, but their rage would get twisted around by the patriarchy and they would be told that if they had chosen the more compliant option, they would not have received such a harsh punishment.

Another important piece of Lilith's story — following her departure from Eden — can be found in the Babylonian Talmud<sup>7</sup>. This source and other post-Talmudic texts identify Lilith as the consort of Samael<sup>8</sup>, an archangel who is sometimes described as a fallen angel, and is seen by some religious sects as Satan. Lilith's connection to Samael is important in regards to her relationship with God, and it also sheds light on why she is depicted as evil or malevolent. Having been punished by God for desiring freedom and independence from a husband who did not treat her as an equal — despite them being created from the same earth — Lilith likely found comfort in another celestial being who also had a precarious relationship with the Almighty, and found that Samael acknowledged her as an equal. The unfortunate downside to this choice was that it

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<sup>6</sup> Judit M. Blair, *De-demonising the Old Testament : An Investigation of Azazel, Lilith, Deber, Qeteb and Reshef in the Hebrew Bible*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Isidore Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Raphael Patai, et al. *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions*. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2013)



resulted in Lilith becoming associated with evil even more, once Samael became associated with Satan.

Outside of rabbinical texts, traces of Lilith can be found in Sumerian and Babylonian sources, specifically the ones concerning the goddess Inanna-Ishtar, whose domain includes sex, war, justice, and political power. This goddess was feared by men and women alike, and was one of the most important deities in Sumerian/Babylonian mythology.

The first known literary reference to Lilith exists outside the bible and predates Isaiah by more than a millennium. It is found in the famed Epic of Gilgamesh from Mesopotamian literature, being specifically, a Sumerian tale known as ‘Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree’. It dates as far back as circa 2,000BCE. There has been, as one might expect, a certain amount of scholarly discussion around the identity of this Lilith and her association with Isaiah’s Lilith.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that Lilith is mentioned in at least one story from civilizations as ancient as Sumer and Babylon indicates that the Israelites likely created their version of her based on the tales they’d heard from the Babylonians, given that the latter ruled over the Israelites for several years.

In addition to the goddess Inanna-Ishtar, Lilith is sometimes linked to Lamashtu<sup>10</sup>, another Sumerian/Babylonian deity. “Lamashtu, a terrifying spectre, threatened women and newborns during childbirth and stole suckling infants. She was later identified with Lilith, who was the child-stealer in Jewish folklore. They were often the personifications of dire situations, especially plague.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that these two entities are linked indicates that

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<sup>9</sup> Joel R Soza, *Lucifer, Leviathan, Lilith, and Other Mysterious Creatures of the Bible* (Lanham ; Boulder ; New York ; Toronto ; Plymouth, UK: Hamilton Books, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 89.

<sup>10</sup> K. Van Der Toorn, and Bob Becking, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, 2nd Extensively Rev. ed. (Leiden ; Boston : Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill ; Eerdmans, 1999), 520.

<sup>11</sup> K. Van Der Toorn, and Bob Becking, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, 2nd Extensively Rev. ed. (Leiden ; Boston : Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill ; Eerdmans, 1999), 236.

Lilith is likely older than the religion of Judaism, as does the etymology of her name, “The Hebrew term *lîlît* as a demon in Isa 34:14 is connected by popular etymology with the word *laylâ* ‘night’. But it is certainly to be considered a loan from Akk *lîlîtu*, which is ultimately derived from Sum *lîl*.”<sup>12</sup> These two things might explain why she was not mentioned in that religion until the rabbinic texts, and why she is considered a figure in Jewish *mythology* and not in the Bible itself, beyond a brief mention in Isaiah.

Lilith’s demonization has been the focus of many feminist scholars, many of whom have chosen to study not only Lilith herself, but her relationship with Eve, and how that was impacted by the patriarchy. Judith Plaskow’s *The Coming of Lilith*, explores the idea of Eve and Lilith interacting post-Lilith’s departure of Eden.

“One day, after many months of strange and disturbing thoughts, Eve, wandering around the edge of the garden, noticed a young apple tree she and Adam had planted, and saw that one of its branches stretched over the garden wall. Spontaneously, she tried to climb it, and struggling to the top, swung herself over the wall. She did not wander long on the other side before she met the one she had come to find, for Lilith was waiting. At first sight of her, Eve remembered the tales of Adam and was frightened, but Lilith understood and greeted her kindly. “Who are you?” they asked each other, “What is your story?” And they sat and spoke together of the past and then of the future. They talked for many hours, not once, but many times. They taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried, over and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them.

[...] And God and Adam were expectant and afraid the day Eve and Lilith returned to the garden, bursting with possibilities, ready to rebuild it together”<sup>13</sup>

This passage demonstrates what these two women have in common, rather than how they are different, with differences being something that is often promoted by the patriarchy. Both women had a relationship with Adam and God, but instead of bonding over their connection to

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<sup>12</sup> K. Van Der Toorn, and Bob Becking, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD*, 2nd Extensively Rev. ed. (Leiden ; Boston : Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brill ; Eerdmans, 1999), 520.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 32.

the men, they bonded over the fact that they were both women, and the only women in existence at that. Eve's curiosity allowed her to overcome her fears about Lilith being evil — courtesy of Adam's stories, which have a 'crazy ex-girlfriend' vibe to them — and shows that despite her loyalty to her husband, she does, in fact, think for herself. Another thing this passage does is show how the patriarchy impacts female relationships. God and Adam, being afraid of what will happen when the two women meet, is very much like how men in society are afraid of what will happen when women band together, and so do their best to make sure the women are set against each other. The 'logic' there is that if women are too busy fighting each other, they won't have the energy to fight the men, so to speak. In regards to positive female role models, this friendship is a perfect example of that, as Lilith and Eve are able to find role models in each other.

Another source that touches on Eve and Lilith's relationship is Lorna Crozier, in her article *Lilith and Eve*, which is about the two women as twin sisters, rather than friends. It also puts forth a suggestion as to why Lilith was demonized for disobeying God and Adam, while Eve was only mildly punished.

I, not Eve, brought pain into the birthing room. I didn't want to leave her. I clung to the walls of the womb with my nails, with teeth, ripped the sky in two, split night from day, eternity from now. Banned from paradise not for this but not long after, I wouldn't pretend I couldn't see my nakedness in Eden. I wouldn't lie placid as a hooked and fatty fish under Adam. That was my first argument with God. The second, that he turned my sister into bone for his own and Adam's sake honed away everything she'd been when we lay together among the stars.<sup>14</sup>

By telling this story via the first-person narrative, the author is able to help us understand Lilith on a more personal level. Lilith's dedication to Eve is the reason that she is associated with painful labor, why she fought with her creator, and why she ultimately

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<sup>14</sup> Lorna Crozier, *Lilith and Eve*, *Atlantis*. Vol. 22 No. 1 (1997): Open Issue.

left Eden. This small excerpt certainly makes one feel horrible for Lilith, and conveys that despite her gaining independence, she is still affected by the societal expectations placed on women.

Joel R Soza's take on Lilith and Eve is brief, but in-line with the general patriarchal view of Lilith as a temptress. "But the Lilith legend purports that Lilith indeed became the very serpent that tempted Eve in the garden out of her own jealousy, and was successful because she perhaps ate the forbidden fruit herself in the presence of Eve without suffering any immediate consequences, thereby convincing Eve to partake."<sup>15</sup> While this version of Lilith's story is meant to depict her as evil and cunning, it can also be re-examined to convey that she simply wishes for Eve to shed her ignorance and join her in the world outside of Eden.

It is interesting to note that while the patriarchy views Lilith as defiant, and punish her for it, the same treatment is not applied to Ruth, who has an entire book in the Bible named after her. Ruth defied the social norms/expectations by going with Naomi back to the latter's home country, rather than returning to her family and finding a new husband, which is what Naomi told her to do<sup>16</sup>. By the end of the Book of Ruth, the title character has found herself a husband that is of Naomi's husband's kin, ensuring that Naomi's property is safe, and Ruth herself is personally and financially protected from anyone who would want to take advantage of her being a widow<sup>17</sup>. She is praised for looking out for her mother-in-law, rather than shamed for not doing what was expected of

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<sup>15</sup> Joel R Soza, *Lucifer, Leviathan, Lilith, and Other Mysterious Creatures of the Bible* (Lanham ; Boulder ; New York ; Toronto ; Plymouth, UK: Hamilton Books, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 87-88.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth 1:15-18 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> Ruth 4:9-10 (NRSV)

a widowed woman. Her defiance was excused because she rejected the expectations of a woman for the sake of her family.

Interestingly enough, the patriarchy does however punish another Biblical woman for her defiance, and very nearly erases her from the text. In the Book of Esther, Queen Vashti refused a direct order from the king, and was punished for it.

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs.<sup>18</sup>

Following her refusal, the king stripped Vashti of her crown and status, and banished her from the court<sup>19</sup>. The consequences for her actions were unjust, but they made one thing very clear: obey or lose everything. This same message was conveyed to Lilith when she refused to return to Adam, but unlike Vashti, she's been somewhat venerated by various texts.

Pop culture has venerated Lilith more than any texts have, and made her into something of a feminist icon. She's referenced in TV shows, movies, and even art. One example of art is the Lilith Fair, which is "a high-powered group of female musicians touring under the name *Lilith Fair*. In the summer of 1997, *Lilith Fair*, a showcase of female songwriters, organized by Canadian songwriter Sarah McLachlan, launched a thirty-two-city tour with a sold-out show in a 20,000-seat natural amphitheater in the town of George, in Washington State, 150 miles east of Seattle. Ms. McLachlan called

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<sup>18</sup> Esther 1:10-12 (NRSV)

<sup>19</sup> Esther 1:19 (NRSV)

Lilith ‘the world’s first feminist’<sup>20</sup>. A second example is in the *Lucifer* franchise, where Lilith is the mother of Mazikeen, who is a demon and Lucifer’s right-hand woman, as well as the most skilled torturer in all of Hell.<sup>21</sup> She is described by Mazikeen as not particularly motherly, but this is to be expected when one considers that Lilith has over a hundred children, and all of them are literally demons. While this description does not display her in a positive light at first glance, it does when one thinks about the role she plays. She has made her own Eden in the underworld, and by doing that she has reclaimed the paradise that was previously lost to her.

Lilith’s story has many layers to it. At face value, she would be seen as anything but a role model, but upon deeper exploration she is actually a very realistic one. The beginning of her story has her vying for independence, and receiving punishment when she finally achieves it. Following that, she is vilified and demonized for being furious with the punishment she has received — the deaths of her children —, even though she really didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. Her decision to have Samael as her consort also brings scorn and negativity upon her. Even a possible relationship to Eve is corroded by the patriarchy. However, despite all of this, Lilith has the ability to become a symbol of feminism, and a powerful female role model. Her story represents the risks that women take when they go against the patriarchy, and the freedom that comes with going against said patriarchy, even if it comes at a steep price. The refusal to be less than equal to a man, bargaining for freedom at the cost of something dear to you, being criticized for the partner of your choosing, and being pitted against other women so you don’t feel as if

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<sup>20</sup> Enid Dame, et al. *Which Lilith? : Feminist Writers Re-create the World's First Woman* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1998), 389.

<sup>21</sup> <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/lucifer-50-lilith/4000-98203/>

you have any allies, are all issues that women have faced, and continue to face, in society. If Lilith's story were to be rewritten or retold from a more egalitarian (i.e. feminist) view, she could become a strong, positive female role model for women of all ages and all backgrounds.

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