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“The Lilith Myth”
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I chose to do my major paper on a mythological character named Lilith. When I first began exploring the Lilith myth, I was interested in the fact that she was a demon. I was curious to know whether Jews believed in the devil. While doing my research, I learned that Lilith was a strong, independent woman who was demonized for believing she was equal to men.

Legends about Lilith, or characters very similar to her, have shown up in many different cultures, including Greek, Native American, and Oriental. But most of the stories come from Jewish folklore. These stories have been retold for over 3,000 years, and with each retelling the details grew and evolved.

The first Jewish reference to Lilith is in the Hebrew Bible, Chapter 1 of Genesis. “On the sixth day, God created male and female from His own image.” But in Chapter 2 of Genesis, Lilith has disappeared and the more familiar version of how man and woman were created is told. In this second version, God created man from the dust of the ground and then, while this first man slept, God removed his rib and created the first woman.

Later, in the Talmud, which was written from about 300 to 500 of the Common Era, the rabbis explained another aspect of Lilith. She is a wild-haired, winged creature, who seduces men. The Talmud was written for brilliant scholars; all of whom were men, and they never expected it to be read by women. People with average intelligence did not study the Talmud. Their exposure to the Lilith figure comes from stories and pictures of Lilith that decorated everyday items.

The story of Lilith as Adam’s first wife appears in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, around 800 CE. The Alphabet of Ben Sira is a medieval text that consists of a list of proverbs, some in Aramaic and some in Hebrew. The final section of the book takes place in the court of the Babylonian king. This king relays his problems to Ben Sira, who solves them by telling the king different stories. In one of them, Ben Sira tells him the story of Lilith. He says Adam asked God to send him a mate. When Lilith was sent down, Adam wanted her to lie beneath him, but she refused, not wanting to be in the symbolically inferior position.

God’s punishment to Lilith, for refusing to return to Adam, was that one hundred of her children would have to die every day. According to the Encyclopedia Mythica, Lilith is a female demon who flies around at night looking to steal or kill newborn babies. She also seduces men in order to give birth to her own demon children. Even today, observant Jews do not tell the name of the baby before it is born, and if it is a boy, not until the bris. Originally, this was most likely done to keep the baby safe from Lilith and other demons.

The story of God’s punishment and Lilith’s revenge was not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, but may have been written by rabbis who were trying to fill in the blanks in the Bible stories. It would have appeared in the Midrash or in the Talmud.

Men showed Lilith in this negative way because they were insecure and afraid that women would leave them. Through the Lilith myth, they were trying to send women the message that they should listen to the men, no matter what. Jewish men made up these stories because they had no power in the outside world. But in their community, they were able to use these stories to exert power over Jewish women.

As I did my research, and read more about Lilith, I began to see that she had a positive side. She was an independent, strong woman, and I started to think that men demonized her as a way of scaring women away from wanting to be equal. I actually think that Lilith was ahead of her generation. In modern times, many women expect to be treated equally.

Interestingly, there is a Jewish feminist magazine, called Lilith, which was launched during the height of the feminist movement. On the magazine's website, Lilith is described as Adam's absolute equal. There is a quote from the Alphabet of Ben Sira, which says "In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings— a man named Adam, and a woman named Lilith. Lilith said, 'We are equal because we are created from the same earth.'"

And in the first issue of Lilith Magazine, published in 1976, there is an article entitled, "The Lilith Question." In this article, the author, Aviva Canter Zuckoff, discusses Lilith's departure from the Garden of Eden. She says that Lilith chose loneliness over being controlled by Adam, and describes her as a powerful female, one who is independent and takes responsibility for her life.

The author also makes a connection between the Lilith myth and what was happening to Jews at the time. The Jews were cast out and did not have a homeland, and it was during these times of exile that many of the Lilith legends were developed. For 2,000 years, Jews were forced to live on the edge of society. They were cast out in the same way that Lilith was cast out.

There are other Jewish stories, such as the story of Purim, which sends a similar message to women. In this story, Esther marries the king and hides the fact that she is Jewish. Later, she reveals that she is Jewish, and risks her life by asking the king to save the Jews. The king's previous wife, Vashti, was more like Lilith in that she was independent and outspoken. She refused to "dance" in the king's harem, and as a result Vashti lost her crown and possibly her head too. The message in this story is that it is okay for Jewish women to be assertive as long as she's doing it for the good of Jewish men.

Through the ages women have been punished and ridiculed for being powerful. In the late 1600s, for instance, there were the Salem witch trials. During these trials, unexplained deaths of children were blamed on the midwives. These women were accused of being possessed by the devil. Like the Jews who were exiled, men during the time of Puritanism felt threatened with regard to their religious beliefs. When this happens, it is often the women who are demonized.

Even as late as the 1960s, at the beginning of feminism, men criticized women for choosing to work outside of the home rather than taking care of the family. Men demonized these women by making up stories about the women and accusing them of being masculine and aggressive.

The effects of feminism could be compared to periods of exile because each, in different ways, threatened men's power. Feminist women were similar to Lilith because they considered themselves equal to men and were not willing to back down when confronted with men's displeasure.

An even more recent example of the Lilith message can be found in the extremely popular sitcom of the 1980's, Cheers. In it there is a character named Lilith Sternin, who wears fitted, masculine suits, and keeps her hair in a tight bun. She moves and speaks in a very robotic way, and doesn't let herself relax and be softer like a "normal" woman.

Her relationship with Frasier is that she hates him when her hair is up, and will not permit him to behave in a gentlemanly manner toward her. But when her hair is down, she is sexy and they are attracted to one another. During these moments she lets him literally carry her away.

Now, please look at the screen to your right to see a short clip from Cheers.

As you can see from Lilith's behavior and appearance, it is safe to assume that the creators of Cheers were familiar with the Lilith myth.

After doing all the research and reading about Lilith, I realize that what drew me to her character is my strong belief in feminism. I think women should be treated equally. And I admire those people who, like Lilith, stand up for equality.

One of the things I love is playing sports, but it wasn't until the 1970s, with the passing of Title 9, that girls were given equal opportunity to play sports. This has especially benefited me, since last summer I was able to go to Holland and play soccer on a coed team.

When I was eight, I had my first experience of gender inequality. I was on a coed little league team for baseball. I was one of three girls. The league only allowed each team to have two girls, but our team had three because one of the girl's names was Michelle and they thought it was Michael. The coach said everyone would get an equal amount of playing time at the different positions, but it became clear that the coach wanted to put the boys at the best positions and never the girls.

There is a flip side to feminism that affects choices for boys as well. While girls are allowed to do "masculine" things, it's frowned upon if boys play with dolls or put on makeup. Luckily, today, as boys get older and become men, and women have careers, the men can choose to be stay-at-home dads without facing ridicule. It is this kind of result that women like Lilith have fought for over the centuries, and while there's still work to do, we are much closer than ever before to a society that treats the genders equally.