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Demon at the Doorstep: Lilith as a Reflection of Anxieties and Desires in Ancient, Rabbinic, and Medieval Jewish Sexuality

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DEMON AT THE DOORSTEP:
LILITH AS A REFLECTION OF ANXIETIES AND DESIRES
IN ANCIENT, RABBINIC, AND MEDIEVAL JEWISH SEXUALITY

BY
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SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES OF POMONA COLLEGE
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PROFESOR ERIN RUNIONS
PROFESSOR OONA EISENSTADT

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O you who fly in (the) darkened room(s)
Be off with you this instant, this instant, Lilith
Thief, breaker of bones.

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PREFACE

I began working on this thesis assuming that I would be writing, first and foremost, about women. I hoped that Lilith, as a she-demon intimately associated with sex and sexuality, would tell me much of what I needed to know about gender norms, women, and sexual regulations in Jewish society. I thought that Lilith would illuminate some underbelly of Jewish society where female sexuality was relegated to the demonic, strict sexual taboos were held in place through Scripture, and the figure of Lilith was used as a tool of sexual repression and subjugation. While versions of these hypothesis shook out as part-truths—held up by some pieces of evidence and struck down by others—I found, through my research and writing, that there was also another version of this story. At first glance I assumed, perhaps too easily, that a female demon associated so closely with the sexual sphere should illuminate the darker aspects of conceptions of female sexuality. I came to realize, however, that what Lilith could actually tell me was something quite different.

What I ended up discovering was that Lilith in fact suggests as much if not more about male sexuality, male sexual fears, and male sexual desires. A thesis that began as an exploration of a Jewish female demon's relationship to Jewish female sexuality morphed, quite straightforwardly and yet still surprisingly, into a thesis that was also about a Jewish female demon's relationship to Jewish men. In some ways, this should have been expected. All major Jewish texts are, after all, written by men, and with male audiences in mind. Of course, on some level, I should have realized that the texts I studied would tell me as much about the authors as they did about the subjects.

In the end, I hope that I reached some balance between my original goal and the ways in which my research developed. It is my hope that this thesis illuminates the multiple and varied ways that Lilith has been used throughout Jewish history and the ways in which she is a reflection of—and a reaction to—dominant Jewish society. Lilith can tell us about Jewish men—she is a creation of thousands of years of male-dominated religion, a scapegoat for “deviant” sexual acts such as masturbation and nocturnal emissions; she is a locus of desire, an explanation for numerous sexual ills, and a reflection of distinctly male fears concerning paternity, fatherhood, and lineage. She can tell us about dominant male conceptions of Jewish women—she is used as a negative female role model, made an example of as one of the evil ways in which female sexuality can take shape, and associated with the base, animalistic instincts that female sexuality was, at times, thought to possess. But Lilith can also tell us about Jewish women themselves—she reveals the fear and pain associated with the death of children and death during childbirth and is warded off by women who wish to protect their families and their homes. It is my hope that the following examination of Lilith, spanning the course of four millennia, can inform a notion of both male and female Jewish sexuality in relation to culture, religion, and society.

INTRODUCTION

No demon has gained as much notoriety, recognition, or infamy in Jewish culture at the she-demon Lilith. Tracing her origins back to similarly-named demonesses in Ancient Sumeria, Babylonia, and Canaan, Lilith developed throughout Jewish history into a fully-realized seductress, succubus, murderer, and tormenter of men, women, and children. A well-known demoness during the ancient, rabbinic, medieval, and, to some extent, modern periods of Judaism, Lilith was associated with multiple ills of the sexual sphere including masturbation (or onanism, so named for the biblical figure Onan who “spilled his seed on the ground”),¹ adultery, nocturnal emissions, impure thoughts, and bastard children. Her personality, focused as it is on these sexual ills, has remained remarkably constant throughout her 4,000 year development, a testament to her notoriety. Lilith did not spring, however, fully formed from the imagination of one group of people or in one particular place. Rather, a conception of the demoness slowly coalesced from a variety of ancient Middle Eastern sources even before she was integrated into the purview of Judaism.

Existing scholarship on Lilith centers mostly around piecing together a coherent timeline of her appearances in various texts and in the archeological record. Numerous articles trace her progression from Canaan to Babylonia to Israel, noting how she began as a winged demon and/or storm goddess, and was incorporated and further developed in Jewish texts to reach infamy in Jewish demonology. Such histories, while useful, are primarily topical and rarely delve deeper into interpretation or analysis of the Lilith myth and its place in society. This lack of historical and social contextualization of the Lilith

¹ Genesis 38:10

myth is the starting point for my contribution to scholarship on Lilith. In this paper, I will be focusing on a historical and cultural analysis of Lilith in Jewish society; how she was constructed, how she was understood, and, most importantly, what work she was used to perform by those who authored, added to, or interpreted her story. I hope to show that Lilith, in her many appearances and mythologies, can be used as an interpretive lens through which to understand Jewish conceptions of sexuality at various points in history. In her centuries-long journey from storm goddess to queen of demons, Lilith is employed alternately as a scapegoat for impure sexual thoughts and actions, an attachment for male sexual desire, a negative role model for women, a regulatory figure structuring acceptable forms of female sexuality, and an expression of male anxieties surrounding paternity and lineage and female anxieties surrounding infant mortality and death during childbirth. Throughout her development she is intimately and innately tied to the sphere of sexuality and therefore can be used to understand various sexual norms, regulations, taboos, and desires as they were conceptualized during formative periods of Jewish thought.

In order to perform such an analysis, I will, of course, have to trace the timeline in order to provide context for the Lilith myth in development. This examination of Lilith is divided into four parts: the first, contained within this introduction, will set the stage for the development of the Lilith myth, establishing its roots in ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, Canaanite, and ultimately Hebrew culture. In this section, spanning the period between roughly 2400 BCE and 900 BCE, I will examine Lilith's origins as a storm demon, who, because of mistaken etymology, came to be regarded as a night-demon. From the very beginning, Lilith was intimately involved with sex and sexuality as

a seducer of adults, a tormenter of women during childbirth, and a murderer of newborn children.

Chapter I: *Lilith of the Books* will concentrate on the post-Temple period of Rabbinic Judaism from 70 CE to about 600 CE. This chapter will focus on the shift from ritual to familial purity that characterized Judaism's transformation in the wake of the Second Temple's destruction while examining the ways in which Lilith develops as a symptom of the anxieties resulting from this shift. During this period numerous formative texts were produced, most notably, for my purposes, the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of rabbinic debates on issues of philosophy, religion, ethics, law, and history. Chapter I will focus on Lilith's mythology in this fundamental text, examining it for its connection to a developing concept of sexuality in Judaism. I hope to show that the rabbinic authors of the Talmud relied on stories of Lilith to exercise competing issues of anxiety and desire pertaining to the sexual sphere. Throughout the Talmud, Lilith reflects male fears surrounding fatherhood and lineage, is employed to regulate certain aspects of female sexuality, and is utilized to express and even excuse various "impure" sexual thoughts and actions.

Chapter II: *Lilith of the People* will examine a parallel tradition running alongside such scholarly rabbinic formations, that of midrash, folk stories, and folk magical practices. This chapter, focusing on the same time period as the first, will concentrate on the ways in which Lilith was understood and utilized by everyday people. I will examine a folk-style midrash, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, in order to facilitate an understanding of how Jewish people negotiated the space between scholarly teachings disseminated by the rabbis and folk stories which were, at times, critical or disrespectful of these rabbinic

traditions, as they related to the sphere of sexuality. I will also examine numerous references to Lilith on magical incantation bowls found in villages in Iraq in order to provide textual support for an understanding of Lilith's place in greater popular Jewish society. Because these bowls were often commissioned by women, they can illuminate an understanding of the ways in which women were able to associate directly with the Lilith myth, revealing fears about adultery, childbirth, and infant mortality.

Chapter III: Lilith of Kabbalah will move on to discuss Lilith's most comprehensive development in Jewish demonology, focusing on mystical Judaism, known as Kabbalah, which gained popularity from the 12th century onwards. In this section, I will highlight the new heights (or depths) that Lilith gained as demon Queen and antithesis to the heavenly Shekhinah, concentrating as well on Kabbalistic practices performed in Lilith's name. I will show that Lilith's representation as the evil facet of femininity, along with rituals associated with her, can shed light on anxieties regarding adultery, illegitimate children, and "impure" sexual acts for the Kabbalists (members of a movement which was itself bound inextricably to the sphere of sexuality).

Woven throughout these three chapters will be an understanding of regulations surrounding sex and sexuality, expressions of intense concern with lineage and paternity, ways in which Lilith serves alternately as an object of forbidden desire and a negative female role model, and a discussion of the Lilith-Eve (and, in Kabbalah, the Lilith-Shekhinah) binary that always relegates Lilith to the depths. I will concentrate on the ways in which Lilith is a reflection of—and a reaction to—norms, desires, and deviations of sexuality during these historical time periods. I hope to show how Lilith was figured in these texts as a negative female role model, an expression of male sexual desire, a threat

to the house and family, and a way to work through of fears surrounding paternity and lineage. Throughout my thesis, I will highlight the multiple, overlapping, shifting, and possibly conflicting ways in which Lilith has been understood throughout history, while examining her particular influences on gender and sexuality in ancient, rabbinic, and medieval Jewish societies.

Lilith's Beginnings

The origins of the Jewish demoness Lilith can be traced back to multiple and varied instances from across the ancient Middle East. The variety of stories about Lilith or liliti-esque demons with similar names and characteristics attest to both her widespread popularity and to a degree of fluidity in her myth at this time. As conceptions of the demoness who came to be known as Lilith were just being formed, she is found in numerous guises and possessing a variety of characteristics. The earliest mention of a demon with a name similar to Lilith's comes from the Sumerian King List, an ancient manuscript dating from around 2400 BCE.² The King List, a catalog of the kings of Sumer, their reigns, and their lineages, names the father of the great Sumerian hero Gilgamesh as a "*Lillu*-demon." The *Lillu* "was one of four demons belonging to a vampire or incubi-succubae class," known for their ability to visit humans by night and bear half-human, half-demonic offspring. The other three demons of this category were *Lilitu* (or Lilith), a she-demon; *Ardat Lili*, *Lilitu*'s handmaiden (both of whom tormented men); and *Irdu Lili*, *Lilitu*'s male counterpart who tormented women.³ The depiction of "liliti-demons as seducers of men and slayers of children has a long prehistory in ancient

² Raphael Patai, "Lilith," *The Journal of American Folklore* 77.306 (1964): 295.

³ Patai 295.

Babylonian religion.”⁴ Lilu, lilitu, and ardat lili-demons “were hungry for victims because they had once been human; they were spirits of young men and women who had themselves died young.”⁵ In order to exact revenge upon still-living humans, they “slipped through windows into people’s houses looking for victims to take the place of husbands and wives whom they themselves never had.”⁶ Lilith, as she develops into Hebrew and Jewish culture, maintains many of these characteristics, most notably the ability to seduce men (and sometimes women) and to take the shape of their husbands or wives so as to aid her seduction.

The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* lists “*lilu*” (male) and “*lilitu*” (female) demons, citing various examples in ancient Assyrian texts concerned with omens, demonology, and ritual.⁷ Some have surmised that the root name “*li*” originates from the Sumerian word for “storm,” thus identifying these figures as storm-demons.⁸ A case of mistaken etymology and associations with the Semitic word “*li*” meaning “nightmare or nighthag” may have transformed these demons from storm demons into specifically nighttime terrors.⁹ The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* supports such a shift as it lists the word “*lilu*” as also meaning “evening.” These words are furthermore similar to the contemporary Hebrew word “*layla*” meaning night, which is often associated with Lilith’s name.

⁴ Rebecca Lesses, “Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69.2 (2001): 356.

⁵ J.A Scurlock, “Baby-snatching Demons, Restless Souls, and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing With Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Incognita* 2 (1991): 153.

⁶ Scurlock 154.

⁷ “Lilu,” *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, (Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute, 1973) L, 190.

⁸ Mychal Copeland, “Was Lilith in the Garden? The First Eve in Genesis Rabbah,” (1998) 3. Unpublished, e-mailed to me by the author, a Rabbi at Stanford University, upon request.

⁹ Copeland 4.

Lilith appears in the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree*, found on a tablet in Ur and dating from approximately 2000 BCE. In one episode, “after heaven and earth had separated and man had been created,” the mighty Gilgamesh assists Inanna, goddess of love and war, as she tends to a huluppu (willow) tree near the Euphrates River.¹⁰ Inanna hopes to turn the wood of the huluppu tree into a throne and bed for herself, but her plans are nearly thwarted by a dragon, a Zu-bird, and “the demoness Lilith” who are possessing the tree.¹¹ Gilgamesh slays the dragon, forcing the Zu-bird to flee to the mountains while Lilith, “terror-stricken, tears down her house and escapes to the desert.”¹² This tendency to flee to desolate locations becomes a central part of Lilith’s mythology in the coming centuries. It can be surmised that Lilith is already a known figure by this time, as she is an established entity in this popular tale.

A terracotta relief, roughly contemporaneous to the *Huluppu Tree* epic and found in Arslan Tash in northern Syria further attests to Lilith’s having already been a recognizable entity. Here, she is depicted as a winged sphinx along with an incantation written in the Phoenician-Canaanite dialect:

O you who fly in (the) darkened room(s)
Be off with you this instant, this instant, Lilith
Thief, breaker of bones.¹³

The tablet is pierced at the top, indicating that it was most likely hung as an amulet on a wall. The lines are part of an incantation used to protect women in childbirth, “one of the many extant from the period of the Assyrian Empire and the new Babylonian

¹⁰ Samuel N. Kramer, “Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-Tree: A Reconstructed Sumerian Text,” *The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Astrological Studies* 10 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1938), 10.

¹¹ Kramer 10.

¹² Patai 295.

¹³ Patai 296.

Kingdom.”¹⁴ Presumably, if Lilith saw her name written on such a plaque she would fear recognition and flee the room. The designation of Lilith as a tormenter of women and children is evidently being established during this time, as is her intimate connection with the dangers of the sexual sphere. It is possible that “to explain the high rate of infant mortality... a demon goddess was held responsible. Lilith stories and amulets probably helped generations of people cope with their fear,”¹⁵ while reflecting women’s lived experiences.

Lilith’s one and only appearance in Hebrew Bible is found in Isaiah 34:14, written circa 900 BCE. The text lists Lilith among the beasts of prey and the spirits that will lay waste to the land on the day of vengeance:

The wild-cat shall meet with the jackals
And the satyr shall cry to his fellow,
Yea, Lilith shall repose there
And find her a place of rest.

The extent to which this Lilith is the same as any of the previous figures we have discussed is, however, debated. It is possible that “she is simply one of the beasts of prey and spirits who is to dwell among the ruins,” as there is no definitive evidence that this Lilith “is connected to the legends of a night demoness who strangles babies or attacks men,” the common threads of the Lilith myth as it was contemporarily known.¹⁶ A connection may, however, be drawn to the appearance of Lilith in *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-Tree*, as both of these texts associate Lilith with places of desolation.

¹⁴ Patai 296.

¹⁵ Janet Howe Gaines, “Lilith: Seductress, Heroine Or Murderer?,” *The Biblical Archeology Review*, 17.5 (2001): 15.

¹⁶ Copeland 6.

A fragment found among the Dead Sea Scrolls in the caves at Qumran reveals the only other ancient Jewish text with a reference to Lilith. Dating from the first century BCE, this fragment, called *The Song for a Sage*, is a hymn possibly used in exorcisms:

And I, the Sage, sound the majesty of His beauty to terrify and confound all the spirits of destroying angels and the bastard spirits, the demons, Lilith..., and those that strike suddenly, to lead astray the spirit of understanding and to make desolate their heart.

The Qumran sect was “engrossed with demonology” and was “surely familiar with the Isaiah passage” from the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ Following these two references, Lilith is absent from Jewish texts for centuries, until she is picked up again by the rabbis creating the Babylonian Talmud after the turn of the century. Her absence and then reemergence, however, may speak to her popularity, as may the fact that references to her are almost always accompanied by little to no identification or explanation. This may indicate that the Lilith myth was well-known to the Jewish people during these periods, and that her name was all that was needed to conjure up images of her and her destructive powers.

It is during this ancient period, in her journey from Babylonian storm goddess to Jewish night demon that Lilith assumes many of her fundamental characteristics; she is a demon of the night, a tormenter of men and women, a seductress, and a murderer of children. It is important to note that even at this early stage, many of the fundamentals of her myth that would follow her until the 12th century and beyond had already been established. Each of these references lay the groundwork for later elaborations on the theme. In the ancient Near Eastern world, Lilith is a demon or a class of demons, possessing both male and female attributes or identifications. She is an incubus or a succubus who preys upon human men and women, impersonating their spouses to lay

¹⁷ Gaines 15.

with them at night. She is also, as seen in the epic of the *Huluppu Tree*, an enemy of a revered female figure, the goddess Inanna, and will later be juxtaposed with both Eve and the Shekhinah. She troubles households, lurking in the darkness of doorsteps while women give birth, hoping to strangle their children. She is a fundamentally evil figure who attempts to upset homes, marriages, childbirth, and children's lives. From the beginning, Lilith is deeply rooted in issues of sex, sexuality, and reproduction. From the outset, she is both a demon associated with sex (as an incubus and succubus), and one who is involved with the product of sexual union, that is, children.

I will next turn to an analysis of Lilith's place in rabbinic Jewish society, tracing the continuation of the themes I have just laid out. With her adaptation into Judaism, Lilith sheds any goddess-like associations and is instead relegated solely to the demonic realm. In rabbinic Judaism, Lilith is used as a reflection and expression of numerous male fears and desires concerning sex and sexuality. She will be used to illuminate notions of sexual taboo, reproduction, lineage, and desire.

CHAPTER I: LILITH OF THE BOOKS

The period to which we will next turn is marked by great upheaval and change for Judaism. Between 70 CE, with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, and roughly 600 CE, with the completion of the Babylonian Talmud—an influential text of recorded rabbinic discussions concerning law, ethics, philosophy, and history—Judaism underwent radical shifts as the religion was completely transformed. During Temple times, Judaism was essentially a sacrificial cult that centered itself around the Temple, its rituals, and its sacrifices. Upon its destruction, however, Judaism transformed into a religion more concerned with texts, learning, and interpretation. Part of this great upheaval was a distinct shift from ritual to familial purity. As the Temple could no longer be the site of ritual purity, the locus of sanctification shifted from the Temple to the Jewish people themselves, and most notably to the home and the family. Laws of purity converged onto the household, vaulting issues of marriage, procreation, and lineage to the forefront. Anxiety surrounding the sexual sphere is evident in writings throughout this period, as authors are concerned with male virility, sexual desire, taboo, purity, lineage, adultery, and procreation.

It is in this environment that the Lilith myth developed once more. In the writings of this time she is deeply involved with many negative aspects of sexuality, including adultery, illegitimate children, impure thoughts, and sexual taboo. She reflects numerous fears and anxieties concerning the vast number of things that could go wrong in the sexual sphere and is increasingly blamed for a multitude of sins. As a scapegoat or explanation, Lilith reflects significant anxieties surrounding sexual and reproductive ills,

and can help us gain insight into how the Jewish people negotiated complicated issues of sexuality and lineage during this period.

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the shift from ritual to familial purity in greater detail. In doing so, I will highlight debates surrounding the treatment of women between roughly 70 and 600 CE and what an understanding of Lilith can gain from—and contribute to—such debates. Then, I will briefly describe the history of the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash, important writings of various styles produced during this period. Finally, I will focus my analysis on the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of written rabbinic discussions and debates and one of the most important compilations of Jewish writing produced during this period. The Babylonian Talmud contains five references to Lilith, the four richest of which will be discussed in detail. Each of these references—and the overarching conception of Lilith which they create—reflect anxieties, regulations, and male sexual desires intimately linked to issues of virility, procreation, and fatherhood. In addition, as Lilith is a female demon, stories about her are able to construct a regulatory system for certain aspects of female sexuality. She is associated with a base, animalistic conception of female sexuality, drawing direct connections between the demon herself and the human women whom she is meant to, at times, represent. In the Talmud, Lilith is a dangerous demoness who can threaten lineages and take away lives, a dominating and perhaps even desirable woman who can provide sexual escape for Jewish men, and a negative role model used to regulate certain aspects of female sexuality.

The Shift from Ritual to Familial Purity

As Jacob Neusner points out, the cycle of holy time for the Jewish people was originally marked by sacrifice. “The power of the Torah...lay in its focus on the Temple,” concerning itself with priests, sacrifices, the maintenance of the priestly caste, and other “cultic matters.”¹⁸ The central Temple cult underlined the distinctiveness of the Jewish people from the world around them, separating them from other peoples. “What made Israel Israel was the center, the altar, the life of Israel flowed from the altar” and defined, in many ways, who the people were.¹⁹ But in 70 CE, during a war fought by Jews against Roman rule of Palestine, Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the Temple, save the Western wall of the surrounding platform, was destroyed. The upheaval caused by the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent dispersion of the Jews from Palestine necessitated a massive shift in Jewish ideology and practice. Of primary concern was the sanctification of Israel now that its very locus of holiness was in ruins. Neusner argues that during this period the locus of sanctification was forced to shift radically from the Temple to the holy people itself. The people’s very lives had to be made holy, first in the holy land, and then everywhere the Jewish people lived. One of the major reactions to this tumultuous period was the codification of the Oral Torah, situated in part around the sanctification of an Israel without a Temple. The codification of the Oral Torah (in the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash, further discussed below) set forth “a twin ideal: (1) sanctification of everyday life in the here and now, which when fully realized would lead

¹⁸ Jacob Neusner, “The Formation of Rabbinic Judaism: From the Mishnah's Philosophy to the Talmud's Religion,” *Communio Viatorum* 44.1 (2002): 21.

¹⁹ Neusner, “Formation” 21.

to (2) salvation of all of Israel in the age to come.”²⁰ What was produced is, in Neusner’s words, a “Dual Torah” that came to be the governing text of Jewish life.

Jocelyn Hellig echoes many of Neusner’s arguments and elaborates upon the ways in which this shift, from a focus on the Temple to a focus on the people, impacted Judaism’s gender construction. In the wake of the Temple’s destruction, and experiencing their people’s landlessness and powerlessness, the rabbis emphasized “an extraordinary level of behavioral restraint on every aspect of life.”²¹ In place of an altar on which sacrifices were slain, Jewish religious life began to center itself around books, learning, and study. “Verbal recitation of sacrificial laws took the place of real sacrifice. Verbal memory of life in Zion took the place of the actual life of the people in its own land.”²² Many of these changes centered themselves around a shift from ritual to familial purity as the locus of sanctification shifted away from the Temple and towards the Jewish people themselves. Hellig argues that “laws of purity associated with the Temple now converged on the household. Sacrificial ritual gave way to an emphasis on laws of purity in the home such as *kashrut* (dietary laws) and *niddah* (laws concerning the menstruant wife).”²³

The centrality of the family and of familial purity vaulted issues of marriage and procreation to the forefront, resulting in “marriage being regarded as the normal state for adult Jewish males, and, by extension, also the normal state of adult Jewish females.”²⁴ This shift corresponded to an increase in specific *halakhic* (legal) regulations regarding

²⁰ Neusner, “Formation” 21.

²¹ Jocelyn Hellig, “Lilith as a Focus of Judaism’s Gender Construction,” *Dialogue & Alliance* 12.1 (1998): 37.

²² Hellig 37.

²³ Hellig 37.

²⁴ Hellig 37.

sexual purity, procreation, and marriage. This elaboration of biblical laws into a complex regulatory system ordered the daily lives of men and women, their interactions with each other, what could make them clean and unclean, and the proper way they were to behave in the (married, heterosexual, and often though not always procreative) sexual sphere. A great deal of anxiety surrounding the sexual sphere is evident in writings from this period. Issues of male virility and the ability to father children who would go on to study the Torah are of central importance, as are fears about infidelity, divorce, impure sexual thoughts, onanism, and a number of acts or states of being that could render one unclean. During the rabbinic period, “social and political upheavals generated a new pessimism about human weakness and sinfulness.”²⁵ As easily corruptible creatures “subject to the lure of sexual temptation, human beings had to be on guard against even seemingly innocent contact between women and men.”²⁶ Discussions about sexuality were often couched in the “language of the law; the concerns [expressed] are those of social behavior and social control.”²⁷ In this atmosphere, “women’s sexuality came to be seen with a new negativity; women were perceived as temptresses, beguiling and ensnaring men.”²⁸

Judith Plaskow notes that during this period, “rabbinic attitudes towards women’s sexual functions took on an increasingly negative cast.”²⁹ Before 70 CE, laws surrounding the menstruant (*niddah*) were observed as laid out in Leviticus and pertained primarily to ritual purity. After the destruction of the temple, while “other sorts of

²⁵ Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 177.

²⁶ Plaskow 177.

²⁷ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth (New York: Macmillan Free Press, 1992) 189.

²⁸ Plaskow 178.

²⁹ Plaskow 177.

impurity legislation fell into disuse, . . . the laws of *niddah* were transferred to the realm of family life and sexual taboo.”³⁰ As hostility towards female sexuality grew, Plaskow argues, *niddah* became a metaphor for impurity and debasement. “Terms like *bet hatorfa* (place of rot) were used to designate the uterus and prophetic passages filled with sexual disgust became the basis for legal exegesis. As other sorts of impurity became increasingly irrelevant, the laws of *niddah* were developed and strengthened,” leading to an increased negativity as regards women’s bodies and sexuality.³¹

Judith Hauptman presents a list of like-minded scholarly opinions:

Jacob Neusner suggests that men viewed women as anomalous, dangerous, dirty, and polluting, and in possession of an unruly sexual potential that is lying there just below the surface. Judith Wegner says that rabbis ascribe to women moral laxity. David Biale writes that according to the rabbis, women are “incapable of willed sexual restraint.” Leoni Archer claims that the rabbis consider women to be insatiable sexual aggressors. Michael Stalow says that although men and women were both thought to be sexually desirous, only men were thought capable of controlling their desire. According to all of these authors, men, rather than accepting responsibility for their own sexual misbehavior, blame women for instigating it.³²

Significant to my project is the general consensus among a group of scholars that “men, rather than accepting responsibility for their own sexual misbehavior, blame women for instigating it.”³³ It will become clear through the rest of this chapter that this is exactly one of the ways in which the Lilith myth is conceptualized. Lilith is often a scapegoat, an explanation, a way for the rabbis to take the blame for “sexual misbehavior” off of men and place it on one demonic, powerful, and seductive woman. While Hauptman provides us with this list, however, she advocates a slightly different theory of the rabbinic view of female sexuality. Hauptman argues that the fact that men in ancient societies viewed

³⁰ Plaskow 177.

³¹ Plaskow 177.

³² Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998) 30-31.

³³ Hauptman 31.

women as Other “does not necessarily imply that they impute evil or depravity to women.”³⁴ On the contrary, she argues, various Talmudic sources indicate a recognition of the complexity of sexual desire that does not, in fact, inscribe complete negativity onto female sexuality.

In line with Hauptman is Daniel Boyarin, who argues that the body—specifically the sexual body—could be neither renounced nor sublimated by the rabbis, particularly because they placed a special emphasis on marriage, sexual union sanctioned by marriage, and reproduction. Boyarin acknowledges that this nod towards the importance of sex, however, “did not imply a resolution to the radically unequal distribution of power that characterized relations between the sexes in all late-antique societies.”³⁵ Instead, “patriarchal structures remained a fact of life for rabbinic Judaism and indeed underlie Talmudic literature and its tangle of emblematic stories.”³⁶ In contrast to Plaskow, Boyarin presents an argument against any sort of notion of general loathing of the female body or disgust with female sexuality. He contends that while male constructions of female sexuality (and of the proper treatment of women as sexual beings) do exist, and are obviously influenced by patriarchy, “rabbinic Judaism did not rest on a theoretical (or practical) loathing of the female body.”³⁷

While each of these scholars present differing views about the status of female sexuality during this time, Plaskow, Hauptman, and Boyarin do find common ground in acknowledging that what definitely *did* exist in discussions of Jewish sexuality (in which Lilith notably features) are rules and regulations surrounding the proper deployment of

³⁴ Hauptman 31.

³⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2008).

³⁶ Boyarin.

³⁷ Boyarin.

one's sexuality. Sex within heterosexual marriages, in other words, was not regarded as something worthy of disgust, but acts such as onanism, nocturnal emissions, and adultery were viewed in a decidedly negative light. It can be argued, therefore, that while perhaps no general taboo existed around sex and sexuality at this time, specific taboos, designed to keep sex within the context of heterosexual marriages, were in place. Whether or not women's bodies and female sexuality were reviled in general might be impossible to determine; Plaskow, Hauptman, and Boyarin make convincing arguments alternately for and against this claim. However, what is critical to my project is the acknowledgement that sexual taboos did exist, and that, in the Talmudic texts I will subsequently read, there is evidence for Lilith's connection to a specific and localized negative opinion surrounding both women's bodies and "improper" sexual acts.

It is around the figure of Lilith that many fears and anxieties regarding both men and women's sexualities coalesced. Writings concerning Lilith from the rabbinic period reflect numerous fears as they pertained to the dangerous sphere of sexuality. Many of these anxieties focused around the vast multitude of things that could go wrong on the path from sexual awakening to sexual intercourse, conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and childhood. At any point along this path, linked as it was to the family, the sexual sphere, and the continuation of the Jewish people, calamity could strike, and, increasingly, Lilith was to blame. It is during this period that Lilith morphs from a Babylonian storm goddess with sexually predatory leanings to a demon intimately involved with all of the dangers of the sexual sphere. Lilith may seduce men, steal their seed, corrupt the children of an impure human sexual union, torment women during childbirth, and kill babies in their sleep. Lilith reveals anxieties surrounding these dangers, functions as a scapegoat or

explanation for a multitude of sexual and reproductive ills, and can help us gain insight into how the rabbis dealt with the contentious issue of sexuality during this time. Before we continue with a discussion of Lilith's specific intersections into this period, let us break for a moment to discuss the significance and history of the written texts that defined Rabbinic Judaism, and from which we will draw our analysis.

Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash

The history of written Jewish exegesis and interpretation begins with the Mishnah, a philosophical code of law compiled by about 200 CE. The Mishnah “manifests the Judaism that took shape in the aftermath of the Jews’ defeat in the Second War against Rome, fought from 132 through 135 [CE].”³⁸ The Mishnah was viewed as a component of the Torah, passed down orally from generation to generation as a companion to the recorded books of Moses. Once it was recorded and formalized, the Mishnah rapidly gained the status of an authoritative text for the law-code of the Jewish people and was viewed, alongside Scripture, as Torah.³⁹ Over the next three hundred years, “the Mishnah served as the foundation for the Talmud’s formation of the system of law and theology we now know as Judaism.”⁴⁰ As the Mishnah was accorded more importance in Jewish life, it demanded more explanation, both as a text in and of itself, and in its relation to Scripture. The interpretation of the Mishnah followed two distinct lines, one of which coalesced into an amplification and compilation of exegesis, creating the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds (completed circa 400 and 600 CE, respectively),

³⁸ Neusner, “Formation” 23.

³⁹ Jacob Neusner. A Midrash Reader. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 9-10.

⁴⁰ Neusner, Midrash Reader 10.

the other of which formed the Midrash, a “full-scale rereading of important books of Scripture,” often through a “folk story” style.⁴¹

The first line of interpretation, The Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, is more accurately referred to as the Gemara, a term which identifies them as commentary on the Mishnah. However, as they are understood today, the terms Gemara (identifying only the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds) and Talmud (technically referring to the Mishnah and both Talmuds) are used quite interchangeably. For my purposes, the term Talmud will be used to refer to the Babylonian Talmud (also known as the Bavli), which will be examined for its references to Lilith. The other line of interpretation, known as Midrash, was based around reinterpretations of Jewish Scripture. The Midrash Rabbah, exegetical collections of Midrash organized generally through their relation to the Torah, were created in about 400-500 CE. These texts, a collection of commentary on multiple books of the bible from numerous different authors, responded “to the political crisis of the events of the fourth century, marked as they were by the triumph of Christianity and the permanent subordination of Judaism as relic.”⁴² In general, the Midrash are either *halakhic*, concerned primarily with the legal aspects of Judaism, or *aggadic*, non-legal and chiefly homiletical. Both of the Talmuds and the compilations of Midrash expanded upon and commented on the Mishnah, interpreting it and offering new and timely insight for the Jewish people.⁴³

⁴¹ Neusner, *Midrash Reader* 10.

⁴² Neusner, *Midrash Reader* 11.

⁴³ I will not discuss the Midrash Rabbah much further in this chapter, as they only contain one reference to Lilith. Numbers Rabbah refers to her as a demon who eats her own children when there is nothing else to destroy, stating “As that Lilith (*kelilith*) who, when she finds nothing else, turns upon her own children, so *Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land...he hath slain them!*” (Num. XIV, 16). One midrash in particular, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* (not a part of the Midrash Rabbah) will be greatly expanded upon in Chapter II.

By the third century CE, the influence of rabbinic Judaism, based as it was in this burgeoning field of interpretation, debate, and written exegesis, was spreading across Mesopotamia. *Yeshivot*, or rabbinic academies, were being established, centered around the study of the Scripture, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Midrash.⁴⁴ “Rabbis served in the administrative and legal structures of the Jewish community, headed by the *Resh Galuta*, or Exilarch, who governed limited areas of Jewish life under the authority of the Sassanian kings.”⁴⁵ The Babylonian Talmud gained particular importance, as it contained the “highly edited record of discussions and decisions of the rabbis of the *yeshivot* and law courts who sought to influence other Jews to live according to their biblical interpretations and legal rulings.”⁴⁶ Much like the Mishnah before it, the Babylonian Talmud was compiled in layers, “each generation adding its thinking on the matters under discussion to that of the previous one.”⁴⁷ The Talmud, “together with its commentaries, codes of law deriving from it, and institutions of autonomous administration resting on it, has defined the life of most Jews and the Judaic system that prevailed as normative.”⁴⁸

Lilith in The Babylonian Talmud

Actual references to Lilith in the Talmud are scant. Though there is ample evidence attesting to a general knowledge of Lilith during this time period (notably through written incantations, amulets, and other archeological findings discussed in Chapter II), her notoriety was not reflected in a major role in the Talmud or in the

⁴⁴ Alongside the structured forms of Judaism being taught in—and disseminated outwards from—the *yeshivot* was a parallel tradition of ancient Jewish beliefs and practices rooted in folk religion and beliefs. While this chapter will deal with these scholarly and established texts, most notably the Babylonian Talmud and Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah, Chapter II will address this parallel folk tradition.

⁴⁵ Lesses 347.

⁴⁶ Lesses 347.

⁴⁷ Hauptman 9.

⁴⁸ Neusner, “Formation” 26.

Midrashim of the talmudic period. She is mentioned by name or referred to as a class of demons (“a lilith,” “like a lilith,” or “lilin,” depending on the translation), on four occasions in the Babylonian Talmud.⁴⁹ Once, she is not named, but a story with obvious allusions to her provides some identification.⁵⁰ Though the number of references to Lilith in the Talmud may be small, their impact on the development of her myth and its connection to conceptions about sexuality is significant. Each of these references, to which we will next turn, establish the basic strands of the Lilith narrative that would be elaborated upon and developed for the next ten centuries. Lilith retained her position as a dangerous demon, but now became “the most feared of the evil night spirits and a fiend especially dangerous to women” during critical periods of their lives.⁵¹ Although there is no etymological relation between Lilith’s name and the Hebrew word *laylah* (“night”), the phonetic similarity helped establish her role as a night-demon during this period.⁵²

The name Lilith (or the category “lilith,” or “lilin,” depending on the translation) appears four times in the Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 151b, Erubin 100b, Niddah 24b, and Baba Bathra 73b. Not one of these references, however, is part of larger mythological explications or stories about Lilith herself, but are instead dropped into the middle of other topics and discussions. It is likely that these references, devoid as they are of much explanation as to who or what exactly “a lilith” is, indicate Lilith’s notoriety in greater Jewish culture. Because no author felt the need to explain the term, it can be inferred that they were relying on a general knowledge held by their readership to supplement these

⁴⁹ Shabbat 151b, Erubin 100b, Niddah 24b, BB 73b. Whether she is named as Lilith or referred to as a class of demons depends, in part, on various translations.

⁵⁰ That is, Erubin 18b.

⁵¹ Israel Ta-Shma, “Day and Night,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol 5, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) 486.

⁵² Ta-Shma 486.

references. All that was needed was a quick reference to her name in order to conjure up a shared cultural knowledge of what, exactly, she could do. Four of these references (three citing her name and one recounting enough of her narrative for us to assume identification) are key in constructing what will eventually become the sort of “canon” of Lilith’s mythology, while the fifth (Baba Bathra 73b) merely reinforces the fact that she is a demon.⁵³ The other four establish her, in turn, as a tormentor of men in the sexual sphere, a witch-like creature with long, tangled hair, an unclean being related to the creation of monstrous children, and a woman with whom Adam had sexual relations while he was separated from Eve. Each of these passages work to establish a general narrative of Lilith’s story, interrelating with each other to give us a fuller picture of how Lilith was viewed during this age.

It is my hypothesis that each of these passages—and the overall picture that they together create—serves as a reflection of real and important fears held by not only the rabbis but also by the general Jewish population during this time. Lilith, as a whole, can be read as a reflection of and a working through a multitude of negative fears and anxieties concerning the sexual sphere. Lilith is a significant figure in the formulation and regulation of both female and male sexuality. As a female demon she can be immediately interpreted for her connection to human women. Through references to her the rabbis are, in part, able to construct a regulatory system for certain aspects of Jewish female sexuality. Some references to Lilith are used to identify women with a base, animalistic, and demonic sexuality, drawing direct comparisons to the demon herself and the fear of sexually impure human women with which she is associated. Lilith represents not only

⁵³ “Rabbah said: I saw how Hormin [a demon] the son of Lilith was running on the parapet...” BB 73b, Seder Nezikin, Volume II, Tractate Baba Bathra, *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. and ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1935-1952) 290.

the anxieties and fears of the rabbinic writers, but also importantly, their *desires*. On the one hand, she torments men at night, causing them to accidentally spill their seed and may use it to bear demonic children who will later return to torment them, as she did with Adam after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, however, she is a dominating woman who provides a sexual escape for Jewish men, acting as a scapegoat for sexual taboos such as onanism, adultery, and “impure” thoughts during intercourse. Significantly, the link between procreation and desire in the minds of the rabbis was a strong one; Daniel Boyarin argues that “perhaps the most arresting fact about the discourse of sexuality throughout the Talmudic literature is that desire is nearly always concatenated with having children.”⁵⁴ Lilith is intimately bound up in this overlapping space of fear, procreation, sex, and desire. As a figure in the Talmud and Midrash, she is an attempt to work through issues of sexuality, to negotiate oneself between its dangerous and desirable poles, and possibly, in the end, to acknowledge the constant and necessary interactions between fear and desire.

Two Talmudic passages, Erubin 100b and Niddah 24b, are essential for the ways in which they relate Lilith to human women. Erubin 100b discusses the ten curses that befell Eve after she was expelled from the Garden of Eden. One of the curses is:

She grows long hair like Lilith, sits when making water like a beast, and serves as a bolster for her husband.⁵⁵

In addition to identifying Lilith physically by her long hair,⁵⁶ this passage relates women to a demonic and bestial nature while furthermore describing their sexual subordination to men. Women’s nature as demonic, bestial, and subordinate are all caught up together

⁵⁴ Boyarin 71.

⁵⁵ Erubin 100b, Seder Mo’Ed, Volume II, Tractate ‘Erubin, *The Babylonian Talmud*, 698.

⁵⁶ A physical descriptor that will become a staple of the Lilith myth.

in punishment for the sin of Eve. Thus we also see an immediate relationship between human women, Eve, and Lilith: human women are cursed by the ten curses of Eve, but one of these curses is justified in the name of Lilith. The relationship between these three archetypes (human woman, Eve, and Lilith) will serve as one of the cornerstones of the Lilith myth as it develops. In its first instance, here, it sets the stage for an understanding of human women as caught between Eve and Lilith, between the mother of humanity and a terrible demon. While this particular passage is concerned with the negative aspects of Eve (namely curses experienced in her name), subsequent references to this triangle often position Eve in the positive, good, and heavenly position and Lilith in the negative, bad, and demonic, while figuring the human female as caught between these opposing archetypes.⁵⁷

Rebecca Lesses argues that “the demonic image of Lilith’s long, flowing, and disheveled hair may shed some light on the significance of women’s uncovered hair in rabbinic literature.”⁵⁸ Specifically for our purposes, this trope can help us understand rabbinic conceptions of female sexuality and purity while examining how Lilith is used to reinforce these ideas. According to the Mishnah, a man may divorce his wife without paying her any money previously guaranteed to her if she goes out of the house with her hair uncovered:

These are the women who are divorced without their *ketubbah* money: The one who transgresses the law of Moses and Jewish law. What is Jewish law? The one who goes out with uncovered head....⁵⁹

The reasoning for such a declaration is that married women must cover their hair to indicate that they are sexually available only to their husbands, and not to other men, in

⁵⁷ This theme will be developed more fully in Chapter III.

⁵⁸ Lesses 358.

⁵⁹ Ketuboth 72a (Mishnah), Seder Nashim, Vol. 2, Tractate Ketuboth, The Babylonian Talmud.

“contrast with the unbound hair of the woman suspected of adultery, the *sotah* (Num. 5:18)⁶⁰.”⁶¹ The *sotah*, with her uncovered hair, “embodies illicit female sexuality and serves as the Other for rabbis as well as respectable women.”⁶² Lilith, with her long, flowing, and disheveled hair, would immediately call to mind images of the *sotah*, and therefore associations with female sexual impropriety and impurity. As R. Sheshet says, “Hair in a woman is sexually arousing [‘*ervah*], as it is said, ‘[Ah, you are fair my darling.]...Your hair is like a flock of goats’ (Cant. 4:1).”⁶³ The need for women to cover their hair is often identified as a punishment for Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, thus tying this trope again to this first Talmudic Lilith reference. Genesis Rabbah 17:8 states (as part of one of the more misogynistic passages in a rabbinic text):

Why does the man go forth with an uncovered head and the women’s head is covered? [R. Yehoshua] told them: “As one who committed a sin and is ashamed in public, so the woman goes forth with a covered head.”

Lilith’s connection to the *sotah*, over and against the purer form of pre-sin Eve, can be easily inferred. Lilith, as seen elsewhere in the Talmud, is a dangerous, seductive, immoral, and unclean woman who can beguile men into adultery and kill children. She is nothing like a good wife or mother, with whom she is immediately compared. Lesses suggests that, through this comparison, we can perhaps “read the rabbinic statement that women grow their hair like a lilith to mean that if a woman’s hair is visible and disheveled, she is not only an immodest, wild woman whose husband cannot control her but also outside of the human realm altogether—she has entered the realm of demons.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Numbers 5:18: “After the priest has had the woman stand before the LORD, he shall loosen her hair and place in her hand the reminder-offering, the grain offering for jealousy, while he himself hold the bitter water that brings a curse.”

⁶¹ Lesses 358.

⁶² Lesses 358.

⁶³ Lesses 358.

⁶⁴ Lesses 359.

As a female and sexual demon, Lilith is “the antitype of the proper woman.”⁶⁵ The figure of Lilith represents an amplifying of male fears regarding unfaithfulness and seduction and helps coalesce these fears into an actual law regulating the lives of human women. By drawing such stark comparisons, the rabbis could set up a binary designed to keep women in line in the sexual sphere. If they were not faithful wives and good mothers, then they were lilithe, not only bad women, but not *even* women, rather demonesses instead. Long, disheveled hair served as the demonic counterpoint to the covered hair of virtuous married women—“perhaps implying that women’s hair should be hidden because of its demonic connotations.”⁶⁶ To be a respectable wife and mother, a woman must distance herself as far as possible from her base, animalistic, or demonic nature; she must not become a lilithe. The strict divisions between being a lilithe and being a good woman, between being Lilith and being Eve, serve not only as reflections of rabbinic anxieties surrounding woman’s capacity for unbridled sexuality, but also function as real regulatory mechanisms through which women’s sexuality could be structured.

The other talmudic reference tying Lilith to specifically female sexuality is found in the volume *Tohoroth* (“Cleannesses”), which is concerned with the laws of the clean and unclean and constitutes a “code of levitical purity” that is both incredibly detailed and tied, for the most part, to the Temple.⁶⁷ *Tohoroth* identifies three main categories of the sources of uncleanness: death, disease, and sexual functions. Sexual functions, “whether normal or pathological, carry with them a type of uncleanness varying in

⁶⁵ *Lesses* 359.

⁶⁶ *Lesses* 359.

⁶⁷ Isidore Epstein, Introduction to *Seder Tohoroth*, *The Babylonian Talmud* trans. and ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1935-1952) xiii.

severity according to the nature of the affliction. Included in this category is the menstruant, and the woman after childbirth.”⁶⁸ Isidore Epstein asserts that “while the study of the other ‘Orders’ [of the Talmud] was continuous and regular, suffering no break or interruption through the centuries, that of Tohoroth was casual and intermittent.”⁶⁹ Of notable exception to this intermittent focus on Tohoroth, however, are the laws of *niddah* that concern the legal uncleanness arising from certain conditions of women such as menstruation or pregnancy. The laws of *niddah* remained of utmost importance, and even gained in importance, after the destruction of the Temple, even as other laws of Tohoroth rose and fell in popularity. It is in this section of Tohoroth, Niddah (“The Menstruant”), that another reference to Lilith is found. Niddah 24b states:

Rab Judah citing Samuel ruled: If an abortion had the likeness of Lilith, its mother is unclean by reason of the birth, for it is a child, but it has wings. So it was also taught: R. Jose stated, It once happened at Simoni that a woman aborted the likeness of Lilith, and when the case came up for a decision before the sages they ruled that it was a child but that it also had wings.”⁷⁰

The phrase “the likeness of Lilith” is here used to denote wings, or, perhaps, any sort of physical deformity that could befall a child. The reference to Lilith reinforces both the physical attribute of wings with which she is associated, and also the nefarious attribute of further demonic associations. By mentioning her name, the Talmud conjures up images of demonic births and sexual impropriety to which Lilith was beginning to be linked. While the rabbis do rule that such a child is in fact a child, not a demon, even though it “also had wings,” they still deem the mother impure “by reason of the birth.” The image of Lilith is thus linked to both motherhood and lineage, as the child, in her “likeness,” may be a punishment for the mother’s improper sexual acts. A direct link

⁶⁸ Epstein, “Introduction to Seder Tohoroth” xviii.

⁶⁹ Epstein, “Introduction to Seder Tohoroth” xvi.

⁷⁰ Niddah 24b, Seder Tohoroth, Vol. 1, Tractate Niddah, The Babylonian Talmud.

between improper sexual acts and deformities in children is established elsewhere in the Talmud, and will be examined shortly.

Throughout the Talmud, there is a strong emphasis on procreation, and more often on the procreative abilities of men than of women. Having children, fulfilling the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply,” was of utmost importance, and was the man’s duty to fulfill. Men must be married (“It is not good that a man should be alone”), couples must have children (“A man shall not abstain from the performance of the duty of the propagation of the race unless he has already had children”), and law after law concerns itself with marriage, lineage, inheritance, and family.⁷¹ As the family is the basic building block of Jewish society, “its stability is essential for both the spiritual and physical survival of the Jewish people.”⁷² It is absolutely vital that couples produce children, and that male children continue to study Torah and thus continue the lineage of both their father and of the Jewish people. The very desirability of sex was often bound up in its ability to produce offspring. Indeed, the Hebrew word for “procreation,” *“piriya uriviya,”* is often used as a synonym for sexuality itself.⁷³ This is not to say that procreation was the only and absolute function of sex; the rabbis exulted in its ability to bring couples together, to give them pleasure, and to fulfill their lives. It was, however, part of the very “essence of sexuality...to continue the life of the collective body.”⁷⁴

Under these circumstances, it is understandable that there was a great deal of concern and anxiety surrounding the issues of procreation, virility, and the male potential to father children. The very act of sex was understood to be directly connected to the sort

⁷¹ Yebamoth 61b, Seder Nashim, Vol. 2, Tractate Yebamoth, The Babylonian Talmud.

⁷² Hellig 39.

⁷³ Boyarin 71.

⁷⁴ Boyarin 75.

of children that the sex act would produce. “Improper” sexual activity was related to the production of improper children, “while proper sexual behavior and intimacy produced children beautiful in body and spirit.”⁷⁵ The Babylonian Talmud explicitly states:

Rabbi Yohanan the son of Dabai said—The Ministering Angels told me:
Why are there lame children? Because they [their fathers] turn over the tables.⁷⁶
Why are there dumb children? Because they kiss that place.
Why are there deaf children? Because they talk during intercourse.
Why are there blind children? Because they look at that place.⁷⁷

Due to this understanding of impure sex being linked to defects in children, we are able to interpret Niddah 24b and its reference to a Lilith-esque child as speaking to a punishment for some sexual misdeed of the parents. As a result of the parents’ sexual misconduct, their child bears likeness to the demon intimately connected to a slew of sexual ills. Lilith’s very connection to sex is constantly negotiated through her connection to children, lineage, and continuing one’s family tree.

Lilith also illuminates the connection between desirable procreation and honesty with one’s spouse, another ideal which she violates and therefore in part reveals. The Talmud states that even if a man “believes that he is sleeping with one of his wives and is actually with another, that alone is enough to produce such undesirable offspring, because the intimate emotional relations required for appropriate sexual joining are absent.”⁷⁸

Lilith, understood since her inception in ancient Sumerian culture as able to take the place of a wife by impersonating her and seducing her husband, violates the principal of

⁷⁵ Boyarin 71.

⁷⁶ “Turning the tables’ may refer to anal intercourse, or to vaginal intercourse from behind, or even just to vaginal intercourse with the woman on top. The male, understood in any case as the active partner, is the one ‘held responsible.’” Boyarin 110.

⁷⁷ Boyarin 110. Nedarim 20a-b. Boyarin does go on to suggest that this passage is not, in fact, prescriptive of the types of sex that Jewish couples might have, and that it is tempered by other, more permissive passages in the Talmud. I do not intend to read this passage as prescriptive or not, but only to point out direct connections in written texts between sex, procreation, and the kind of children one might have.

⁷⁸ Boyarin 115.

“intimate emotional relations required for appropriate sexual joining” and causes the husband to have “improper” or “impure” sex. She tricks the husband into sexual relations with her, and the children they produce, much like the children he would produce with one wife if he imagined being with another, will be terrible and demonic offspring. Lilith is figured as that which disrupts multiple aspects of the sexual sphere, regulating proper sexual actions (such as procreation, honesty, and emotional fulfillment with one’s spouse) while reflecting the violations of these actions in the types of children they would produce, thereby drawing a direct connection between sexuality and lineage.

The connection between male fears concerning successful reproduction and the Lilith myth has its roots, in part, in a Talmudic passage that does not in fact refer to Lilith by name. We are able to read this passage for its connection to Lilith based on its similarities to the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a midrashic text written between the 8th and 10th centuries CE, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. The *Alphabet* describes Lilith’s sexual relations with Adam, a trope that can be traced back, in part, to the following Talmudic passage:

R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar further stated: In all those years⁷⁹ during which Adam was under the ban⁸⁰ he begot ghosts and male demons and female demons,⁸¹ for it is said in Scripture, *And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years and begot a son in his own likeness, after his own image,*⁸² from which it follows that until that time he did not beget after his own image.⁸³

This passage lays the groundwork for later associations between Adam and Lilith and the demonic children they produce during this one hundred and thirty year period. As it stands, the text mentions “male and female demons,” or “night demons,” phrases which

⁷⁹ One hundred and thirty years after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

⁸⁰ His expulsion.

⁸¹ Or, ‘night demons.’

⁸² Genesis 5:3.

⁸³ Erubin 18b, Seder Mo’ed, Volume II, Tractate Shabbath. The Babylonian Talmud, 126.

can be readily associated with Lilith herself. This passage provides the Rabbis with a possible genesis for the fears concerning lineage. If even Adam, the first man and father of humanity, could be tempted by a demon and beget demonic children, then any other man may be susceptible as well, and his legitimate children will be threatened by their demonic brethren. The passage continues, raising objections to this interpretation (of Adam's impure sexual relationship), stating that the passage refers in fact to involuntary nocturnal emissions, not voluntary sexual actions:

An objection was raised: R. Meir said, Adam was a great saint. When he saw that through him death was ordained as punishment he spent a hundred and thirty years fasting, severing connection with his wife for a hundred and thirty years, and wore clothes of fig [leaves] on his body for a hundred and thirty years.— That statement⁸⁴ was made in reference to the semen which he emitted accidentally.⁸⁵

Whichever the case may be (the debate remains unresolved in the Talmud), this passage can be seen as providing the space for a fear of Lilith's sexual connection with men, both during waking voluntary moments and slumbering involuntary ones.

Further anxieties concerning lineage are revealed in another passage, Shabbat 151b. This passage, however, also speaks to significant elements of uncontrollable desire that emerge in connection to the Lilith myth. With no relation to the sentences before or after it, the relevant passage states

R. Hanina said: One may not sleep in a house alone, and whoever sleeps in a house alone is seized by Lilith."⁸⁶

This short passage is ripe with meaning in its connection to taboo sexual acts, scapegoating, desire, and lineage. It is generally agreed that this passage refers in the first place to the possibility of either nocturnal emissions or the act of onanism, each

⁸⁴ The previous one of R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar.

⁸⁵ Erubin 18b, Seder Mo'ed, Volume II, Tractate Shabbath. *The Babylonian Talmud*, 126.

⁸⁶ Shabbat 151b, Seder Mo'ed, Volume I, Tractate Shabbath, *The Babylonian Talmud*, 773.

considered at this time to be a sexual taboo. Onanism, in particular, was regarded as the reprehensible act of deliberately spilling one's seed instead of using it properly, to conceive children. The term is taken from the name from the biblical figure Onan who, according to the law of Levirate marriage, married his brother's widow after his brother died. However, "Onan knew that the offspring would not be his"⁸⁷ due to the provision that any male child he had with the widow would inherit the estates of his deceased brother. So, "he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother."⁸⁸ Onan's act was "displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death...."⁸⁹ The act of Onanism is thus intertwined with issues of ancestry and paternity from the start. The addition of Lilith into the already-established prohibition against onanism is therefore understandable, as her associations with lineage are at this point becoming an significant part of her myth. A man sleeping in a house alone may be prone to onanism or nocturnal emissions, and should therefore keep company with other men, or with his wife, to prohibit him from participation in defiling acts.

The impetus to perform such an act, however, (whether consciously through onanism or unconsciously through nocturnal emissions) is placed fully on the shoulders of Lilith, who will "seize" the lonesome man and cause him to err. Lilith is a ready scapegoat—a demonic, powerful, sexual woman onto whom blame for sexual impropriety can easily be placed. In this way, conceptions of Lilith actually create the space for deviance from the sexual norm, providing Jewish men with not only an explanation for their "impure" thoughts or actions, but even a justification. (To put it

⁸⁷ Genesis 38:9.

⁸⁸ Genesis 38:9.

⁸⁹ Genesis 38:10.

bluntly: “Lilith made me do it.”) Here, Lilith’s appearance in the text may appear to be primarily regulatory (“One may not sleep in a house alone”), but is, in fact, also self-exonerating. By writing such a regulation into the text, the rabbis were also able to include a justification for deviance and a ready scapegoat for activities they knew would no doubt occur. As a scapegoat, Lilith is a reflection not only of anxieties, but also of desires. She reveals a rabbinic knowledge surrounding onanism and nocturnal emissions, and is used by the rabbis to provide space and cover for such acts. Onanism and nocturnal emissions are further bound up in fears of lineage. Indeed, as this idea is developed in the Kabbalah (discussed in Chapter III), it becomes clear that Lilith’s motivation for inspiring such acts was often to steal some of the escaped seed in order to impregnate herself and bear demonic children. These children would then wreak havoc on their human fathers and half-siblings, threatening their lives, households, and inheritance.

In its references to Lilith, the Talmud focuses primarily on the belief that Lilith was sexually threatening to men (and also, in part, a negative role model for women). In the next section, concerning folk traditions and magical practices, it will be clear that the threat Lilith poses is, in these instances, much more prominent for women and children. This shift most likely is bound up in the fact that the Talmud was written both by and for men, while magical folk traditions were accessible to women and sometimes even directly rooted in the home/female sphere. The Talmud focuses on the sexual danger posed to men, most likely because it knows its audience, and could express male fears and desires to and for a male audience. Folk narratives and practices allow us to invite both women and common, non-scholarly men into the conversation, examining how their relationship to Lilith may differ from that of the rabbis. Such narratives and practices can

reveal to us in more of a direct manner what common people's concerns were in particular areas of their lives, most notably, where Lilith is concerned, with "health and disease, pregnancy, childbirth, children's health, sexual anxieties, and fears of malevolent human (male and female) and demonic attacks."⁹⁰ It is to these popular folk stories and magical practices, which provide for us a parallel strand of Jewish narrative, that we will now turn.

⁹⁰ Lesses 367.

CHAPTER II: LILITH OF THE PEOPLE

Lilith was not only known within the upper echelons of scholarly Talmudic exegeses. Rather, her mythology permeated multiple levels of Jewish life, taking on new forms and rituals through popular expressions of Judaism by ordinary people. The myth of Lilith had a real presence in Jewish life during the rabbinic period as people knew her story, feared her, and protected themselves from her and her demonic children. Whether the myth of Lilith “trickled down” from the Rabbis to the people, or, if you will, “trickled up” from the people to inclusion in sacred texts, unfortunately cannot be deduced from either the texts or the archeological record. What is clear, however, is that Lilith was known in both scholarly and commonplace circles, and that her mythology was more or less identical between these two spheres.

While the previous chapter focused on sacred Jewish texts and the scholars who created and interpreted them, this chapter will focus on the creations and interpretations of everyday Jewish people, notably Jewish women, during the same period. I will begin this chapter by focusing on Lilith’s presence in a folk-style midrash, the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. The *Alphabet* recounts a vulgar, irreverent story about Lilith, imitating the style of rabbinic biblical interpretation. It can act as a sort of bridge between scholarly exegesis and popular Jewish discourse, informing us about the ways in which Lilith was understood and utilized by the Jewish people. I will then examine Lilith’s inclusion in the archeological record during the rabbinic period through an analysis of the Aramaic Magical Incantation Bowls (AMIB), on which numerous inscriptions and incantations bearing her name have been found. The AMIB, often commissioned by and perhaps even

created by women, will begin a discussion of the magical practices performed by the Jewish people in Lilith's name, continued in the third and final chapter of this thesis. An analysis of the bowls will highlight the ways in which Jewish women interacted with the Lilith myth, revealing the fear and pain associated with complications during childbirth and infant mortality. I hope to show that the combination of folk-style midrash and actual magical practices can aid us in our understanding of Lilith's role in greater Jewish society. Folk-style midrash, wall plaques, amulets, and magical incantation bowls all speak to the presence of Lilith in everyday Jewish life. These texts can help us gain an understanding of the ways in which Jewish men and women negotiated the space between scholarly rabbinic teachings and popular folk practices as they related to the particularly volatile sphere of sexuality. This section will examine the ways in which Jewish people related to the concept of Lilith in an attempt to gain control over their sexual lives, protect their families, and ensure the continuation of their family trees. While Talmudic scholarship was the purview of the rabbis, white magic and ritual practices were undertaken by the people, who lived with Lilith and feared her.

The Alphabet of Ben Sira

The *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a compendium of aphorisms dating from somewhere between the 8th and 10th centuries CE, contains one of the most important additions to the Lilith myth, as it is the first text that names Lilith as Adam's first wife. While the origins of this trope may be traced back, in part, to Erubin 18b as discussed in Chapter I, this is the first recorded instance in which Lilith is directly identified as Adam's first wife and as existing before Eve. The *Alphabet* consists of a list of double proverbs, twenty-two in

Aramaic and twenty-two in Hebrew, enriched by commentary, midrash, and legends pertaining to them. The *Alphabet* is a “didactic alphabetic acrostic,” with each of its sections corresponding to a letter of the Aramaic or Hebrew alphabet. Didactic acrostics are generally understood to have served one or both of two purposes, to primarily “either to teach school children the order of the alphabet or to convey moral instruction in a form easy to memorize.”⁹¹ The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* does not fit neatly into either of these categories, however, as its themes are more adult than a children’s pedagogical tool would suggest, and morality is not its central focus. It may be understood as adopting the pedagogical model of a didactic acrostic, and indeed, intending to instruct its readers with general advice regarding marriage, income, and interpersonal relations, but at the same time satirizing both the acrostic model and the scholars who employed it.

The Hebrew acrostic set, in which the elaboration upon the Lilith myth is found, is supplemented by a presentation of a number of legends surrounding Ben Sira, a precociously learned man, and his often irreverent and vulgar discourse with King Nebuchadnezzar.⁹² Nebuchadnezzar presents Ben Sira with a number of dilemmas and questions, ranging from a daughter “who expels a thousand farts every hour”⁹³ to “Why does the ox not have hair under its nose?”⁹⁴ to “Why does the raven copulate by mouth?”⁹⁵ The *Alphabet*’s language is often quite crude and its tone irreverent, “exposing the hypocrisies of biblical heroes such as Jeremiah and offering ‘serious’ discussion of

⁹¹ Ralph Marcus, “Alphabetic Acrostics in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6.2 (1947): 109-15.

⁹² David Stern and Mark J. Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 167.

⁹³ Stern 184.

⁹⁴ Stern 186.

⁹⁵ Stern 190.

vulgar matters such as masturbation, flatulence and copulation by animals.”⁹⁶ The *Alphabet* can be understood as a satirical, irreverent take on the considerably more scholarly Talmudic commentary we have so far examined. It lampoons this style of interpretation and rabbinic discourse, together with that of the didactic acrostic, parodying its form to address common, even impertinent, themes. In fact, parts of the *Alphabet* “clearly parody not merely the genre of *aggadah* [homiletic or non-legalistic midrash and text] but specific passages in the Talmud and midrash. Indeed, ‘The Alphabet’ may be one of the earliest literary parodies in Hebrew literature, a kind of academic burlesque—perhaps even entertainment for rabbinic scholars themselves—that included vulgarities, absurdities, and the irreverent treatment of acknowledged sancta.”⁹⁷ By taking into account its mocking tone and coarse subject matter, we can examine the *Alphabet* as a sort of bridge between the scholarly Talmudic exegeses of the rabbis and the more common knowledge and discourse undertaken by the people. The *Alphabet* can serve as a connecting piece between the scholarly and popular understandings of the Lilith myth, and can be read for its contribution to—and reflection of—general Jewish society during the rabbinic period.

The *Alphabet* is perhaps best known for its treatment of the Lilith myth, as it adds two new dimensions to the story with which we are now familiar, identifying Lilith as the first wife of Adam and setting out to explain the already-widespread tradition of hanging amulets around one’s house to ward off Lilith. In the midrash, Ben Sira attempts to heal Nebuchadnezzar’s ill son by creating an amulet and inscribing it with the names of the angels in charge of medicine, identifying them by their “forms, and images, and by their

⁹⁶ Gaines 19.

⁹⁷ Stern 167.

wings, hands, and feet.”⁹⁸ Upon being questioned by Nebuchadnezzar about the origin of these angels, Ben Sira identifies them as Snwy, Snsnwy, and Smnglf (names that are perhaps indented to be comical in their own right) and provides us with the following story.

Ben Sira asserts that God created a woman from the earth, “as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith.” Adam and Lilith immediately begin to fight about their respective positions during intercourse, he unwilling to lie below, saying to Lilith “you are fit only to in the bottom position, while I am to be the superior one” and she unwilling to forgo her equality, asserting “we are equal to each other inasmuch as we are both created from the earth.” Pronouncing the Ineffable Name, Lilith flies off into the air and disappears to the desert. On Adam’s request, God sends three angels, Snwy, Snsnwy, and Smnglf to find her in the Red Sea, saying that if she refuses to come back, “she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day.” The angels find Lilith in the midst of the Sea and implore her to return. She refuses, claiming that she was expressly created to cause sickness in infants, tormenting males for eight days after their birth and females for twenty days. She swears to the angels, however, that “Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant,” further agreeing to have one hundred of her children die every day as part of the bargain. Accordingly, the midrash states, each day one hundred demons perish, and, for the same reason “we write the angels’ names on the amulets of young children. When Lilith sees their names, she remembers her oath, and the child recovers.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Stern 183.

⁹⁹ Stern 184.

In the context of the irreverence of the *Alphabet*, this story of Lilith “may have served as lewd entertainment for rabbinic students and the public” and was “largely unacknowledged by serious scholars of the time.”¹⁰⁰ Its bawdy references to sexual acts and its placement just before a story explaining the reason for flatulence orient it in the scope of “folk” rather than “scholarly” midrash. In this way, we can read the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* as a reflection of certain concerns present in the minds of both scholarly and everyday Jewish men. The midrash’s reference to an attempt at sexual equality and its characterization of the woman demanding this equality as a demon who will willingly kill one hundred of her children each day suggests that sexual equality was, at this time, both laughable and yet viewed as potentially seriously detrimental to society. A tale of a woman demanding sexual equality was absurd—easily included after a discussion of flatulence and deserving of as much respect. It was also, however, dangerous. The midrash suggests that the sort of woman who demands sexual equality will also be the sort of women who believes she is meant to terrorize other people’s children and sacrifice hundreds of her own. The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* intimately links women’s sexual equality with the murder of children, suggesting a direct line between these two catastrophic possibilities. This, in turn, speaks to a great anxiety surrounding male lineage and procreation, established already throughout the previous discussion of the Talmud. If men cannot maintain their sexual superiority, the midrash seems to suggest, their women could leave them, become Liliths, and even vow to kill their own children in response. What was likely a bawdy story read for entertainment among Jewish males nonetheless speaks, quite seriously, to real and important fears concerning sex, power, and lineage.

¹⁰⁰ Gaines 20.

Lilith's association with these fears, already examined in the Talmud, can be seen as making its way through the *Alphabet* and out into popular opinion.

In the *Alphabet*, for the first time, Lilith is identified as a “first Eve,” who was created from the earth at the same time as Adam, before his later, more well-known wife. By figuring Lilith as the “first Eve” the *Alphabet* fills the gap between the two creation stories present in Genesis. The creation of humanity in the Bible occurs twice: once in Genesis 1:26-28 in which man and woman are created at the same time, and again in Genesis 2:5-8 and continuing in Genesis 2:18-23, in which man is created first, and then woman is later fashioned from his rib. Many scholars recognize Genesis as a combination of two sources, “(1) a Priestly editorial layer or source (P)...and (2) a “non-Priestly” source” also known as the Yahwistic source (J).¹⁰¹ Though some scholars attribute the first creation story to P and the second to J, thus explaining the presence of two distinct stories by attribution to two distinct authors, the degree of the stories' distinction from one another, along with the dating of these two sources, is still under heavy debate.¹⁰²

The first of the two creation accounts as they are presented in the Bible describes the creation of man as in *mankind*: man and woman are created together:

And God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.¹⁰³

It is important to note the oscillation between pronouns here, as the narrative switches between referring to man(kind) as “he” or “him” and “they” or “them,” without any

¹⁰¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) 4.

¹⁰² Richard Wright, *Linguistic Evidence for the Pre-Exilic Date of the Yahwistic Source* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2005) 3.

¹⁰³ Genesis 1:26-27.

indication that different people are being described. Furthermore, both man and woman are equally given the blessings and responsibilities of life, as “God blessed them; and God said unto them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.’”¹⁰⁴ They are both charged with taking care of the earth, and are both blessed for doing so, equally. At this point in time, God makes no distinction between the role of man and the role of woman, their rights and responsibilities are the same.

In comparison, the second creation story of Genesis 2 presents man as created first, from the earth, well before the creation of woman:

Then the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul.¹⁰⁵

Man is then placed in the garden, still on his own. Only after God decides that it is “not good that the man should be alone” is a “help” created for him.¹⁰⁶ Thus, woman is created:

And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the place with flesh instead thereof. And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from the man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man.¹⁰⁷

The multiple points of inconsistency between the two stories themselves, the different pronouns used, and the different narratives they set forth, create the gap that the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* then subsequently fills. It is interesting to note, however, that the piece of biblical text the *Alphabet* cites as basis for this Lilith midrash is from the *second* creation story, the one that is most commonly understood to refer to Eve: “When God created Adam, who was alone, He said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone.’”¹⁰⁸ The Lilith

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 1:28.

¹⁰⁵ Genesis 2:7.

¹⁰⁶ Genesis 2:18.

¹⁰⁷ Genesis 2:21-22.

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 2:28.

midrash set forth in the *Alphabet* therefore complicates the two creation stories even more, conflating the creation of Adam's "helper" (usually understood as Eve) with the woman "also created...from the earth, as He had created Adam himself," who is called Lilith¹⁰⁹. The *Alphabet* seemingly combines these two stories into one, speaking of Lilith as a woman created after Adam, to ease his loneliness, but still from the same earth as him, and therefore as his equal.

This strand of legend figuring Lilith as Adam's first wife weaves together with the older strand of Lilith as the enemy of women and infants during childbirth that we have already seen and further positions itself as an explanation of the already-existing custom of placing amulets banishing Lilith in the home. Erubin 18b,¹¹⁰ as discussed in the last chapter, indicates that a mythological strand linking Adam with a woman other than Eve already existed (though without any explicit connection to Lilith), before the *Alphabet* was written. It is possible that the author of the *Alphabet* incorporated this legend into his midrash, either directly from the Talmud or perhaps from popular knowledge of the myth. The conflation between these two distinct legends, one of a malevolent demoness associated with harming women and children, and one of a woman who Adam lay with in addition to Eve, "should not be construed as a mere minor modification. This latter trait changed the [Lilith] legend dramatically, adding a completely new dimension to the story with substantial consequences."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Genesis 2:28.

¹¹⁰ The passage from the Zohar which describes how Adam lay with a demon, presumably Lilith, for the 130 year after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, fathering numerous demonic children.

¹¹¹ Copeland 14.

Amulets and Aramaic Magical Incantation Bowls

The addition of Lilith, previously known as a night demon and terrorizer of women and children, to the creation stories of the Garden of Eden, had considerable effects on Jewish custom, superstition, and tradition. Throughout the rabbinic period and continuing on into the Middle Ages, amulets warding off Lilith from the home proliferated. “Metal and parchment scrolls bearing the phrases ‘Adam and Chava [Eve]—out Lilith’ and ‘Sanvai, Sansanvai, Semanglof [variations on the names of the angels Snwy, Snsnwy, and Smnglf] Out Lilith and the First Eve’ were used by Jews for protection against Lilith’s evil efforts.”¹¹² These amulets were often associated directly with women and children, and hung on the walls of nurseries or rooms in which women gave birth. The amulets referred to in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, and indeed, the possible reason for the midrash to be set forth, refer to a specific kind of folk tradition or “white magic” employed by Jewish people during the Rabbinic period. Numerous amulets banishing Lilith and other demons from the household are evident in the archeological record from this period onwards. “Bind Lilith in chains!” reads a warning in Hebrew on this amulet, dating from the 18th or 19th century CE, intended to protect an infant from the demoness. This amulet, created centuries after the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, speaks to the continued endurance of this superstition in Jewish life.

¹¹² Copeland 15.



“Bind Lilith in Chains!”
Hebrew amulet from the 18th or 19th century CE.

The image of Lilith appears in the center of this amulet, bound in chains represented by the small circles outlining her body. “The divine name is written in code (called *atbash*) down her chest. (The letters *yhwh* appear as *mzpz*.) Beneath this is a prayer: ‘Protect this boy who is a newborn from all harm and evil. Amen.’ Surrounding the central image are abbreviated quotations from Numbers 6:22-27 (“The Lord bless you and keep you...”) and Psalm 121 (“I lift up my eyes to the hills...”).”¹¹³ Amulets such as this one reveal a popular tradition of taking the protection of oneself and one’s house into one’s own hands. These amulets drew upon populous folk traditions and understandings of Lilith, likely uninformed by the scholarly exegeses of the Talmud.

The folk tradition of protecting oneself and one’s house from Lilith flourished with the production of the Aramaic Magical Incantation Bowls (AMIB). These ordinary earthenware bowls, dating from the 5th to 8th centuries CE and discovered in Nippur in southern Iraq, were inscribed with Aramaic incantations and buried, usually upside down,

¹¹³ Gaines 18.

in the thresholds or courtyards of dwellings.¹¹⁴ Often commissioned by women, and with multiple references to Hebrew women's names, these bowls can illuminate an understanding of the ways in which women interacted directly with the Lilith myth. Through the incantations inscribed on the bowls, "their makers intended to protect against dangerous and evil human and demonic figures, including groups of human women and men, female lilitis, male lilin (the male counterparts of lilitis), and other named classes of dangerous demons who were believed to cause illness and other misfortunes and who attacked men and women sexually and killed children."¹¹⁵ It is through an understanding of these bowls that we can again see the deep connections between Lilith and the familial space, the explicit domain of women during this time. This theme, touched upon in the previous chapter with the shift from ritual to familial purity in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, is expanded upon with the AMIB. The AMIB speak to the need to protect one's house (and the sexual sphere that it represents) from Lilith and other similar demons who may wreak havoc on oneself and one's family. As an exiled community relying on kinship and familial ties to maintain the religion, Judaism emphasized protection of the family as an issue of utmost concern. The AMIB were a way for the Jewish people, and notably Jewish women, to gain control over a tumultuous aspect of their lives, that of sexuality, while negotiating their way between the authority of the rabbis and the popular undercurrents of white magical practices to which women had ready access.

Charles D. Isbell, a scholar of the AMIB, asserts that the magicians who created the bowls and the people who purchased and used them were often female speakers of

¹¹⁴ Lesses 343.

¹¹⁵ Lesses 345.

Aramaic who were familiar with Hebrew scripture, mostly, but perhaps not entirely, Jewish.¹¹⁶ Though the majority of the names written on the AMIB are Semitic or Persian, there are a few Greek (Christian) names present in these inscriptions, “and even one reference to Peter (spelled *petrūs*) and Jesus (spelled *yeDsūs*)” on one of the bowls.¹¹⁷ This may suggest that some of the people who created and utilized the bowls were Christian, but it more likely attests “to the fluidity with which proper names originally restricted to one culture or religion eventually began to cross those boundaries in a complex and heterogeneous society.”¹¹⁸

Isbell contends that the AMIB are intended to ascertain “absolute certainty and completeness” that the named demon will no longer bother the house or its tenants. Various bowls serve this purpose in different ways, some attempting to banish the demons, admonishing them to “go away, flee, vanish, do not return, turn away, go far away,” and others attempting to trap them, bind them in chains, or cover and contain them.¹¹⁹ From the patron’s perspective, it is the desire for absolute certainty that must be stressed.

The magician wrote down every conceivable thing about evil powers of every kind hoping thereby to insure that his client might be adequately protected. Whether the demons were tied in knots or whether they were to speed away from the house of the client mattered little. If protection could be achieved, if the demons ceased to harass, everyone would be happy regardless of the logic (or lack of it) involved. It was the nature of magic to seek results, not detailed explanations about causes.¹²⁰

Of all the evil figures on the bowls, Lilith is the most prominent and well-defined, referred to either as a singular female figure or as a member of a class of male and female

¹¹⁶ Charles D. Isbell, “The Story of the Aramaic Magical Incantation Bowls,” *The Biblical Archeology Review* 41.1 (1978): 6.

¹¹⁷ Isbell 6.

¹¹⁸ Isbell 6.

¹¹⁹ Isbell 6.

¹²⁰ Isbell 9.

lilith demons.¹²¹ From her proliferation throughout the bowls, it appears as though Lilith is a well-known character in this time and place. “The bowls demonstrate that she is a common enemy of men, women, and children and that actions were taken against her which were certainly thought to be efficacious in halting her activity.”¹²²



Incantation bowl from Nippur, Iraq,
with a drawing of a figure that may be Lilith.¹²³

In accordance to the earlier myths of Lilith previously discussed, we see Lilith figured on the bowls as a succubus, a female spirit capable of assuming the physical features of a man’s wife and entering into sexual relations with him without his knowledge or consent. As a result of these relations, Lilith would become impregnated and later give birth to hundreds of demon children who would desire to seek out their father and terrorize his household, raging and screeching in the night. It was assumed that Lilith herself would harbor a deep hatred for the human members of any given household, especially for the naturally and legitimately born children who disrupted her

¹²¹ Isbell 9.

¹²² Copeland 9.

¹²³ Isbell 8.

own children's chance at an inheritance from their father. An incantation intended to ward off Lilith "would need to be designed so as to insure that everyone — the innocent but duped husband, the wife, the children and the entire household—would be insulated from the screeching sounds of the Lilith progeny and protected from all other angry designs of this formidable opponent."¹²⁴ The bowls further feature Lili, the masculine counterpart of Lilith and the singular male of the lilin, whose roots reach back to her Sumerian, Babylonian, and Canaanite origins, where Lilith was understood to have both male and female facets of her being. Lili operates as an incubus, terrorizing the woman of the household by assuming the features of her husband and fathering a child by her without her knowledge or consent. The child produced from this union between a man and Lilith or a woman and Lili, "was thus not fully a product of its legal father and mother; but no one would realize this fact until the embarrassing and uncharacteristic (for such a good family!) actions of the child could no longer be ignored. Again, the proper incantation could be designed to insure in advance that such evil activities never occurred."¹²⁵

Given the prominent sexual nature of the attacks by these lilitis, it is understandable that a common form for the incantations to be written in is that of the *get*, or Jewish ritual divorce. Since Lilith's sexual activities cast her in the role "of an adulterous or promiscuous wife or concubine, the victim is entitled to rid himself of her attentions by the use of the writ of divorce. As a divorced wife who is accused of adultery, Lilith is no longer entitled to return to the house... The bowls often state that Lilith is being divorced just as demons divorce their own wives, to emphasize the binding

¹²⁴ Isbell 12.

¹²⁵ Isbell 12.

nature of divorce writ between a human and demonic client.”¹²⁶ One bowl that utilizes this *get* formula reads

Thou Lilith...Hag and Snatcher, I adjure you by the Strong One of Abraham, by the Rock of Isaac, by the Shaddai of Jacob...to turn away from this Rashnoi [a female Hebrew name]...and from Geyonai her husband...Your divorce and writ and letter of separation...sent through holy angels...Amen, Amen, Selah, Halleluya!”¹²⁷

This incantation is meant to offer protection for a woman named Rashnoi and her husband Geyonai, who wish to expel Lilith from their home and banish her from terrorizing them with her demon children. It refers to God as the God of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creating a direct link between issues of Jewish lineage and the need for this particular divorce. If Lilith is not banished from the house, the lineage of Geyonai and Rashnoi, connected as it is to the powerful lineages of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, will be threatened. Lilith’s presence in the household and in the sexual sphere reflects a deep concern with continuing one’s lineage and honoring the line of the patriarchs. These bowls were designed to preserve this line and protect Jewish families from threats to their family tree.

The demons, both female liliths and male lilin, also attack children, furthering the associations between Lilith and threats to the family. One bowl, for example, instructs a whole range of demons, including “evil spirits, raging furies, and the male and female liliths” not to kill children.¹²⁸ Another “accuses ‘Hablas the lilith, granddaughter of Zarni the lilith,’ of ‘striking boys and girls.’”¹²⁹ Yet another is much more specific, asserting

¹²⁶ Markham J. Geller, “Tablets and Magic Bowls,” *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005) 72.

¹²⁷ Gaines 16.

¹²⁸ Lesses 356.

¹²⁹ Lesses 356.

that Lilith “destroys and kills and tears and strangles and eats boys and girls.”¹³⁰ A similar description “of a female demon who kills children calls her ‘Murderess daughter of Murderess’; she is the ‘Strangler, who kills the young in the womb of their mothers; she is called Slayfather is Destroyer.’”¹³¹ These graphic descriptions of Lilith murdering children were intended, once again, to provide complete protection for the family. The more actions that could be described, the greater the likelihood that Lilith would be thwarted from completing a variety of intended ills.

These bowls speak to the female fear of losing children during pregnancy, childbirth, or early childhood, reflecting what were no doubt high rates of infant mortality during this time. The fact that Lilith appears both on amulets designed specifically to protect women in childbirth and bowls designed to protect the entire household indicate that Jewish women maintained an antagonistic relationship with this terrorizing demon throughout their family’s life cycles. The bowls represent a degree of female agency, exercised through the utilization of white magic, that could not be found by women through scholarly works such as the Talmud. Through amulets and bowls, women were able to express a desire to protect their husbands from Lilith the succubus, their children from Lilith the murderess, and themselves from Lilith the tormentor of women.

Some bowls are commissioned directly by women in order to protect all members of their family through a ritual *get*. One AMIB demands, on behalf of a woman named Komis, the daughter of Mahlapta, that several liliths go away “from her house and from

¹³⁰ Lesses 356.

¹³¹ Lesses 356.

her dwelling and from Kalleta and from Artasrit her children.”¹³² Utilizing the language of a *get* to protect both herself and her children, Komis orders the demons to leave:

This day from among all days, years, and generations of the world, I, Komis bat [daughter of] Mahlapta, have divorced and dismissed and banished you—You lilith, lilith of the desert, ghost, and kidnapper. You, the three of you, the four of you, the five of you, are sent out naked, and not clad. Your hair is disheveled, thrown over your backs.... I have decreed against you, with the curse that Joshua ben Perahia sent against you. I adjure you by the glory of your father and by the glory of your mother. Receive your *gets* and your divorces, *gets* and divorces that were sent in the curse that Joshua ben Perahia sent against you, about which Joshua ben Perahia said to you, ‘a *get* has come to you from across the sea. In it is found written, whose mother’s name is Palhan and whose father’ name is Pelahdad Lilith. Hear and go away and do not lie with her, with Komis bat Mahlapta, not in her house and not in her dwelling.¹³³

This incantation and others like it reflect the beliefs that liliths could become attached to family members in a perverted kind of marriage, dissolved only through the use of the *get*. The incantation utilized by Komis credits Joshua ben Perahia, a first century BCE rabbinic leader, with formulating this *get* itself. Like the rabbinic *get* used for actual divorce proceedings, this AMIB gives “the exact specification for the lilith whom it dismisses, in this case the names of her mother and father (also demons).”¹³⁴ Female agency is evident as, “in this incantation, Komis appears under her own name as the agent who expels the liliths to prevent them from harming her or members of her family. Although the incantation uses elements of the rabbinic divorce document, it is not part of rabbinic literature; instead, it seems to reflect knowledge in a wider community of certain aspects of rabbinic lore that could be used for protective incantations.”¹³⁵ Komis operates under her own agency, employing a ritual practice in order to gain power, protecting her

¹³² Lesses 346.

¹³³ Lesses 346.

¹³⁴ Lesses 346.

¹³⁵ Lesses 346.

family in a way that was certainly not available to her through traditional rabbinic laws and regulations.

Another bowl utilizing the *get* formula and commissioned by a woman, Newanduch bat Kaphni, emphasizes the sexual connection between the proprietor of the bowl and Lilith, as it commands Lilith not to lie with her (reflecting the tradition that Lilith could take the form of a husband in order to terrorize a wife):

I have written for you and I have separated you from Newanduch bat Kaphni, as demons [*sedin*] write divorces to their wives, and they do not return to them. Take your [f. sing.] *get* from Newanduch bat Kaphni and do not appear to her, neither during the day or at night, and do not lie with her, do not kill her sons and her daughters.¹³⁶

By utilizing white magic, Komis, Newanduch and other Jewish women were able to allay their fears surrounding adultery, sexual desire, childbirth, and infant mortality while actively playing a role in their family's protection. The very fact that these women are utilizing a *get* formula, in Jewish law reserved only for men to give their wives and not the other way around, speaks to a greater degree of female involvement in white magic than was afforded to them in traditional rabbinic Judaism.

While the Newanduch bowl makes it clear that women commissioned bowls, the Komis bowl, written as it is in the first person, raises the question of whether women could have produced some of these bowls themselves. Though it is rare, several bowls utilizing this first-person formula, written in the names of both men and women, have been found. It is therefore possible “that those named on the first-person bowls were knowledgeable practitioners, not merely clients.”¹³⁷ These practitioners “could have written the bowls or dictated the formulas to scribes (if they themselves did not know

¹³⁶ Lesses 360.

¹³⁷ Lesses 362.

how to write) and performed some kind of accompanying ritual. If this is true, some of the ritual practitioners could have been women.”¹³⁸



Lilith, depicted on a ceramic bowl from Mesopotamia, dating from about 600 CE. The Aramaic incantation inscribed on the bowl was indented to protect a man named Quqai and his family from assorted demons.¹³⁹

These bowls are a reflection of what could be termed “Judaism on the ground.” This is a Judaism practiced by the people, influenced by, but not directly beholden to, the Judaism of the rabbis. Within the specific sphere of white magic in this “Judaism on the ground,” women were perhaps able to be equal players alongside their male counterparts. The roughly equal number of bowls commissioned by men and women, in addition to the few that are written from a first-person female perspective, may be a testament to this fact. The rabbinic Judaism taught in the academies (and discussed in the previous chapter) developed alongside these forms of populous practices and beliefs. The bowls thus provide us with a “glimpse into a particular area of Jewish culture not ruled by the

¹³⁸ Lesses 362.

¹³⁹ Gaines 15.

rabbis: spells and rituals that ordinary people employed to rid themselves of demons and the ills they caused.”¹⁴⁰ Through these bowls we can understand some of the popular conceptions of Lilith, away from the scholarly academies, and how she was formulated and understood by the Jewish people. The bowls demonstrate a reliance on “white magic” of which the rabbis, who had a generally quite negative view of sorcery, and especially of women who performed it, would have most probably disapproved. The Babylonian Talmud states, for example: “When one encounters the women who do sorcery, he should say thus: hot dung in broken baskets in your mouths, women who do sorcery. May your heads become bald, may the wind blow the new saffron that you were holding, women who do sorcery.”¹⁴¹ In order to fully protect their houses and families, however, Jewish families turned to these bowls, and the “sorcerers” who created them, to ensure their safety.

In relation to the Judaism of the rabbis, women were able to exercise a surprising degree of power in these more “on the ground” forms of Judaism. Through the bowls, Jewish women were able to take the protection of their families into their own hands and exercise their power over harmful demons. As Lilith was characterized as a tormentor of the house and household, women, whose domain was, at this time, primarily the domestic sphere, were placed in the unique position of being their family’s protectors and defenders. The direct relation between Jewish women and the female demon they were bent on banishing created a sort of oppositional power between these two forces. Women protected their homes from an adulterous, seductive, murdering succubus, and thereby protected their children, their husbands, and their family tree from harm while raising

¹⁴⁰ Lesses 347.

¹⁴¹ B. Pesah 110a.

themselves up as the standard-bearers of good womanhood in relation to the evil Lilith. It should be noted, however, that even though Jewish women were able to exercise a degree of agency in protecting themselves from Lilith through the use of the AMIB, they had to do so in a way that was still somewhat misogynistic (through banishing and condemning a powerful female figure) and thus still a part of the overall patriarchal culture of the time.

It must be recognized that the AMIB have only been found in a small section of southern Iraq and thus cannot be interpreted as representative of a broader movement towards using such bowls throughout Judaism. What they can represent, however, are the ways in which a section of Jewish people negotiated the space between scholarly rabbinic teachings and popular folk practices in order to control a part of their lives, regulating the contentious space of the sexual sphere in particular. That the bowls overwhelmingly feature Lilith, the destroyer of marriages, disrupter of sexual lives, and creator of illegitimate children, is significant. They are an attempt on the part of ordinary Jewish people to maintain control over these tumultuous parts of their lives through utilizing multiple and overlapping Jewish customs, some rabbinically-sanctioned such as the *get*, and some most likely not, such as the use of white magic itself.

The AMIB demonstrate distinct associations between Lilith and the marital home, positioning her as a disrupter of normal sexual events and marital relations. They display an obvious preoccupation with protecting the home and the sexual sphere, and a fear of what occurs there and what is unknown. Tensions surrounding sex are evident, as Lilith not only terrorized men and women, sleeping with them without their knowledge or consent, but also attacked babies, children, and women at vulnerable times in their lives,

such as during menarche or childbirth. As one who may have illicit children with a Jewish man, Lilith, and her demonic children, posed a threat to the legitimate children's claims on inheritance. This worry is further expanded upon in the conception of Lilith in medieval mystical Judaism, Kabbalah, which we will next examine.

In both Talmudic scholarship and popular conceptions of Lilith, her association with evil, a perverse form of womanhood, and sexual taboos is evident. Lilith is an example of “what becomes of the female who claims equal rights: she becomes demonized, wreaks havoc on the world, and is destined to kill even her own children.”¹⁴² Lilith is continually figured as a scapegoat for those negative aspects of life that people would like to sublimate: she was “thought to cause the death of babies and mothers during childbirth, was blamed for the night emissions of men, the occurrence of nightmares and even divorce, and was thought to maliciously afflict children with diseases.”¹⁴³ The most prominent thread tying Lilith's multiple attacks together is that of sexuality; she is an individualized, feminized, and yet entirely demonic woman bent on disrupting the sexual and familial lives of the Jewish people. This figuration of Lilith remains prominent, and even expands, as she moves into the medieval and mystical periods of Judaism, to which we will now turn.

¹⁴² Copeland 15.

¹⁴³ Copeland 16.

CHAPTER III: LILITH OF KABBALAH

Drawing on the threads of Lilith's mythology already disseminated into Jewish thought during rabbinic times, Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, conceptualizes Lilith as a serious and powerful source of evil female sexuality, one that should be both feared and protected against in new and elaborate ways. Kabbalah often places Lilith squarely in the realm of the evil and the demonic, raising her to her highest position of power yet, that of Demon Queen, wife of the Demon King, Samael. Lilith is also figured as the antithesis to both Eve, mother of humanity, and the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of the Divine. Kabbalah's contribution to the Lilith myth highlights continuing fears and anxieties surrounding sexual intercourse, sexuality, and, in particular, lineage and inheritance. Through the following examination of this period, I hope to show that Lilith's mythology acts (primarily, again, for men) as a reflection of these fears, a way to express them in a religious and social context, and, in ritual, a means for obtaining some feeling of control over a volatile and incredibly important portion of one's life.

In this chapter, I will begin with a brief explanation of the history of Kabbalah, its most important and influential texts, and its basic tenets, most notably those of the *Sefirot* and the Shekhinah. I will then focus on the *Treatise on the Left Emanation*, written by Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, a 13th century Kabbalist and scholar. The *Treatise* will be examined for its significant contribution to the Lilith myth as it formulates Lilith as Demon Queen, wife of Samael. Lilith's new station, situated in opposition to the positive female figures of Eve and the Shekhinah, will be used to shed light on Kabbalah's conceptions of female sexuality. Next I will turn to the *Zohar*, the central text of

Kabbalah, in which stories about Lilith reach their apex. I will examine three references to Lilith in-depth: two variations on the creation story in Genesis that present Lilith and Eve/the Shekhinah in opposition and relation, and one that speaks to the dangers Lilith poses to married life. An examination of the Zohar will demonstrate that Lilith reveals distinct anxieties surrounding sexual intercourse and inheritance, as the Lilith of the Zohar steals men's seed and bears hundreds of demonic children who vie for inheritance with their human half-brothers. Finally, I will recount various ritual practices performed in Lilith's name and the ways in which they relate to fears concerning both sexual intercourse and inheritance. Ritual practice will be examined for its use in negotiating the difficult realm of sexuality, as that which is feared and defended against, even as it is intimately desired.

A Brief History of Kabbalah

The term "Kabbalah" (meaning "reception" or "receiving") refers to the esoteric study and practice of Jewish mysticism that flourished during the Middle Ages, from the 12th century onwards. As it developed, Kabbalah moved away from the main trajectory of Jewish religious thought, creating a complex and new understanding of God, creation, and human existence. Kabbalah is concerned with the nature of the relationship between humanity and the Divine; it seeks to both explain and continually formulate this relationship through numerous teachings and mystical practices. Kabbalah focuses both on God's transcendence and on his "immanence within the true religious life, every facet of which is a revelation of God."¹⁴⁴ A mystic's experience with the self-concealing and

¹⁴⁴ Gershom Scholem, et al. "Kabbalah," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol. 11, 2nd ed (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) 587.

the self-revealing God “determines the essential sphere of mysticism” as the mystic attempts to “reveal the mysteries of the hidden life of God and the relationships between the divine life on the one hand and the life of man and creation on the other.”¹⁴⁵

The written history of Kabbalah begins with a short book, the *Sefer Yezirah* (“Book of Creation”) that was widely circulated among learned Jews shortly after its publication. The *Sefer Yezirah* was written between the 2nd and 6th centuries BCE, perhaps, according to noted Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem, in the 3rd century BCE¹⁴⁶. Later Kabbalists attributed the *Sefer Yezirah* to the great Rabbi Akiba, who was martyred by the Romans sometime in the 2nd century CE. The *Sefer Yezirah*’s importance stems chiefly from its introduction of the concept of the *Sefirot* to Jewish thought. The book introduces the ten *Sefirot*, which in later works become the divine emanations of God by which creation is structured, in the rudimentary form of “primordial numbers,” or “created powers,” fulfilling a role in both the creation and the ordering of the world.¹⁴⁷

The next Kabbalistic text of great importance, the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (*bahir* meaning “bright”), presents a refined and elaborated-upon concept of the *Sefirot*. Because the *Sefer ha-Bahir* was written between 1150 and 1200¹⁴⁸, possibly a full thousand years after the *Sefer Yezirah*, “students of Kabbalah necessarily confront the problematic of a thousand years of oral tradition. All of Jewish medievalism becomes a vast labyrinth in which the distinctive ideas of Kabbalah were invented, revised, and transmitted in an area ranging from Babylonia to Poland.”¹⁴⁹ We must assume that there were many philosophical changes made, but possibly not recorded, between the publication of these

¹⁴⁵ Scholem, “Kabbalah” 587.

¹⁴⁶ Scholem, “Kabbalah” 595.

¹⁴⁷ Scholem, “Kabbalah” 596.

¹⁴⁸ Scholem, “Kabbalah” 602.

¹⁴⁹ Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (London: Continuum, 2005) 7.

two significant texts. The status of the *Sefirot*, which will become central to our discussion of Lilith in the Kabbalah, is one example of such change. The *Sefer ha-Bahir* figures the *Sefirot* as attributes of God emanating out from an infinite center into every possible reach of the world, presenting a more complex and refined way of viewing this particular aspect of Kabbalistic thought.

The 13th century brought about numerous independent meditations on Kabbalah from various rabbis and thinkers centered in and around Spain. Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen's *Treatise on the Left Emanation* is one such publication, in which Rabbi Isaac sets forth a broad analysis of the concepts of good and evil based on extreme dualistic attitudes. The *Treatise* plays off of major themes of Kabbalah, such as the centrality of the Shekhinah and the importance of humanity's relation to the world, but also presents completely new mythologies, traditions, and philosophical theories, all while featuring Lilith prominently. The *Treatise* seems to have exerted considerable influence on the *Zohar*, the most influential text in Jewish mysticism.

The true emergence of Kabbalah culminated in the *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("The Book of Splendor"), written, it is believed, largely between 1280 and 1286 by Moses b. Shem Tov de Leon in Guadalajara, Spain. The *Zohar*, "the most important evidence for the stirring of a mythical spirit in medieval Judaism," centers itself around two axes—"one consisting of the mysteries of the world of the *Sefirot*...and the other of the situation of the Jew and his fate both in this world and in the world of souls."¹⁵⁰ The book—if it can be called "a book"—"varies from manuscript to manuscript, and seems more a collection of books or a small library than what ordinarily we would describe as a self-contained

¹⁵⁰ Scholem, "Kabbalah" 609.

work.”¹⁵¹ It is organized as an apparent comment on scripture, in some ways in the midrashic tradition, with hundreds of short stories and explanations, many conflicting and overlapping, and departing, sometimes radically and sometimes subtly, from mainstream Jewish thought. After 1492 and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the Zohar ceased to be simply an esoteric text and instead became “public property.” From about 1530 on, the city of Safed, Palestine, became the new center of Kabbalah, and from there the practice emanated out into the Diaspora.¹⁵² In many ways, Kabbalah proposes to give meaning to suffering, as it recounts a history of exile and diaspora, deeply germane to the Jewish people. It did not simply reinstate mythology to a religion previously purged of such elements, but also provided “the masses of suffering Jewry with a more immediate and experiential personal faith than the strength of orthodox tradition might have allowed.”¹⁵³ Central to the concepts of exile and diaspora, and the desire to reunite the Jewish people with God, is, again, the concept of the *Sefirot*, and, as we will shortly see, the concept of the Shekhinah in particular.

Conceptions of Sexuality

Kabbalah involves several radical departures from mainstream Rabbinic Judaism, most of which I do not have the time to recount here. Most significant for my project is Kabbalah’s conception of sexuality: both the sexuality of God and the sexuality of the Jewish people. In mainstream Jewish thinking, it can be argued that God’s nonsexuality is “an important pillar in the symbolic and moral order such that changes in the image of God threaten the sacred order by undermining the symbolic restraints on self-discipline

¹⁵¹ Bloom 8.

¹⁵² Bloom 15.

¹⁵³ Bloom 14.

and control.”¹⁵⁴ In Kabbalah, however, quite the opposite is the case, as the discipline involves itself, deeply and significantly, with the relationship between sexuality and the sacred or divine order.

A conception of the sexual nature of the Divine is seen most notably through an understanding of the *Sefirot*, or the emanations of God. The term *Sefirah* (in its singular form) is not connected to the Greek “sphere,” as might be originally assumed, but instead comes from the Hebrew *sappir*, meaning “sapphire,” for “it is the radiance of God which is like that of the sapphire.”¹⁵⁵ The *Sefirot* denote the celestial order through which creation came into being, “each of them emanating from the one principle, *Ein-Sof*, or that which is without end, ‘outside of which there is nothing.’”¹⁵⁶ The *Sefirot* are “complex figurations for God, tropes or turns of language that substitute for God,”¹⁵⁷ rather than allegorical personifications of the Divine, like might be seen in the pantheon of Greek or Roman mythology, for example. They are alternatively described as “names, lights, powers, crowns, qualities, stages, garments, mirrors, shoots, sources, primal days, aspects, inner faces, and limbs of God,” in various Kabbalistic texts.¹⁵⁸ Early Kabbalists did identify the *Sefirot* with the actual substance of God, but later groups “warily regarded the Sefirot only as God’s tools, vessels that are instruments for him....”¹⁵⁹ The *Sefirot*, then, can be understood as ten complex conceptions for God in his process of creation, “with an interplay between literal and figurative meaning going on within each *Sefirah*.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ Plaskow 188.

¹⁵⁵ Scholem, “Kabbalah” 628.

¹⁵⁶ Scholem, “Kabbalah” 628.

¹⁵⁷ Bloom 9.

¹⁵⁸ Bloom 9.

¹⁵⁹ Bloom 9.

¹⁶⁰ Bloom 9.

The Zohar uses “extensive sexual imagery to describe the inner life of God, particularly in discussing the relation between the ninth and tenth *Sefirot*.”¹⁶¹ The ninth *Sefirah*, *Yesod* (“foundation”), is the symbol of male potency as well as sexual purity, the “foundation for all of life, which guarantees and consummates the *hieros gamos*, the holy union of male and female powers.”¹⁶² The tenth *Sefirah*, *Malkhut* (“kingdom”), represents the feminine principle and inherits all the elements and characteristics of the higher *Sefirot*. The tenth *Sefirah* is also known as the Shekhinah, an ancient rabbinic term for the indwelling divine presence. The Shekhinah is the divine power closest to the creation, the passive path or door through which a mystic may achieve divine vision, and the representation of God’s light in the world. The Shekhinah “was said to dwell in Israel’s midst, to follow them into exile, and to participate in their suffering.”¹⁶³ *Yesod*’s sacred marriage to the Shekhinah is central to the process through which the *Sefirot* unfold in creation. Kabbalah seeks to restore the unity of God, in part through the union of the masculine principle and the Shekhinah, which have been torn apart through the sins of Israel, by evil powers, and by exile. The reunion of God with the Shekhinah, “the uninterrupted joining of the divine masculine and feminine, is the very meaning of redemption.”¹⁶⁴

The importance of this sexual imagery to the Kabbalistic understanding of divinity allows the mystical tradition to be “the source of some of the more positive strands in Jewish attitudes toward marital sexuality.”¹⁶⁵ For example, “for the Kabbalist,

¹⁶¹ Plaskow 188.

¹⁶² Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1969) 104.

¹⁶³ Arthur Green, “Introduction,” *The Zohar I*, trans. and comm. Daniel C. Matt, Vol. I (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) LIII.

¹⁶⁴ Alan Unterman, et al., “Shekhinah,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol 18, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) 443.

¹⁶⁵ Unterman 443.

human sexual intercourse, performed with the right intention and within its proper limits is an imitation of processes within the divine and a symbolic realization of the reunion of God and the Shekhinah.”¹⁶⁶ The married state represents the whole and perfect human condition, as “a man who is unmarried is like one divided, but when male and female unite with one another they immediately become one body.”¹⁶⁷ The Shekhinah does not rest in creation “nor does the flow of blessing descend, except through the conjunction of male and female, and if a man does not perfect his own ‘image’ by taking a wife, his soul cannot be given a place in the realm of divine holiness in the world to come, but is given to ‘the other side’ instead.”¹⁶⁸ Kabbalah’s focus on the unity of God and the Shekhinah was reflected in a focus on the unity of men and women in creation. Sex was a sacred and significant act, integral to effecting the unification of God in heaven. Kabbalists understood sex as one of many kinds of reparative acts through which they could actually effect change on the Divine. Not only did human sex inspire sex between God and the Shekhinah, or between the various *Sefirot*, but almost *everything* the Kabbalists did could be understood as an attempt to facilitate this union.

Given the grave importance of proper unions between men and women—the very state of not only one’s soul but also of God and the Shekhinah depends upon them—it is understandable that there would be great anxiety surrounding this sphere as well. Sexual union must be guarded, protected, and, above all, it must be undertaken with a concern for the Divine and the role that intercourse plays in the reuniting of the Shekhinah with

¹⁶⁶ Unterman 443.

¹⁶⁷ Zohar iii 81a-81b, cited in Isaiah Tishby, “Section II: Conjugal Life: Introduction,” The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts, ed. Isaiah Tishby trans. David Goldstein, Vol. III (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002) 1355.

¹⁶⁸ Isaiah Tishby, “Section II: Conjugal Life: Introduction,” The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts, ed. Isaiah Tishby, trans. David Goldstein, Vol. III (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002) 1355.

God. Ideally, one should therefore coordinate one's intercourse with the precise moment of intercourse in the upper world, generally at midnight, because it is at that time that "the Holy One, blessed be He, takes His delight with the Shekhinah in the Garden of Eden."¹⁶⁹ By virtue of having intercourse with his wife, a man can cleave to the Shekhinah and thereby move closer to the glory of God. He must, therefore, take care to maintain the sanctity of this union and not allow any malevolent forces to interfere with his holy task.

It is in this space, in this desire to protect that which is most sacred, that Lilith becomes a threat. Within in the tradition of the Kabbalah, we find Lilith stealing semen from men in order to bear demonic children, disrupting married couples during intercourse, cursing unborn children and killing babies, and generally preventing one from cleaving fully to the Shekhinah through the sexual sphere. She inserts herself into multiple aspects of sexual life such that practitioners of Kabbalah must actively guard against her and her nefarious ways.

The centrality of the Shekhinah to Kabbalah should not be understood as a grand liberation of the female element or even a general acceptance of female sexuality within Judaism. The union of the Shekhinah with God must instead be understood through its use to conceptualize and define heterosexual, married, *halakhicly*-sanctioned intercourse; it was not a vehicle through which Jewish female sexuality gained absolute equality with that of male sexuality. As we will soon see, the figure of Lilith is actually that which often balances the exaltation of the Shekhinah, providing Kabbalistic thought with an association of the feminine with the demonic, over and against the association of the feminine with the Divine. In Kabbalah, Lilith is raised (or lowered, one might argue) to her most influential position yet; she is the antithesis of the Shekhinah, the demonic

¹⁶⁹ Tishby "Conjugal Life," 1357.

counterpart to the Shekhinah's purity and goodness, and the other face of human female sexuality. The Shekhinah, a godly emanation, and Lilith, a demonic power, each reflect back onto Judaism's understanding of female sexuality; together, these two otherworldly dualities structure the poles of human female sexuality. A third important conception in the range of female sexuality is Eve, the mother of humanity. Lilith and her lover, the demon king Samael, are similarly paired off against Adam and Eve, with Lilith again representing the evil aspects of femininity over and against Eve's purported goodness. Through these two main comparisons to Lilith, between her and the Shekhinah and between her and Eve, Lilith's mythology is codified and defined squarely in the realm of the evil and the demonic.

Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen's *Treatise on the Left Emanation*

Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, a Kabbalist writing during the second half of the 13th century in Spain, contributes an important element to Lilith's development in Jewish thought. In his *Treatise on the Left Emanation*, published by Gershom Scholem in 1927,¹⁷⁰ Rabbi Isaac presents a comprehensive analysis of the concept of evil based on extreme dualistic attitudes. Joseph Dan, whose work on the *Treatise* greatly informs the following discussion, points out that, for the first time in a dated Jewish work, Lilith is identified as the wife of the demon king Samael in the "realm of Satanic power,"¹⁷¹ a concept that is later incorporated into the Zohar and subsequently disseminated into wider circulation.

¹⁷⁰ Gershom Scholem, ed. "Qabbalat R. Ya'aqov v-R. Yisshaq benei R. Ya'aqov ha-Kohen," (Madda'ei ha-Yahadut 2: 1927) 244-64.

¹⁷¹ Joseph Dan, "Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah," *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 18.

The sixth chapter of the Rabbi Isaac's *Treatise* opens with a list of powers negatively influencing the world, "the princes of jealousy and hatred," chief among whom is Samael. After describing seven such princes, Rabbi Isaac introduces Lilith, drawing upon already-established elements of her myth while intertwining them with strands that are wholly new to Kabbalistic concepts:

Truly I shall give you a hint, that the reason for all the jealousies which exist between the princes mentioned above, and the [other, good] princes which belong to seven classes, the classes of the holy angels which are called "the guardians of the walls," the reason which evokes hatred and jealousy between the heavenly powers and the powers of the supreme host, is one form which is destined for Samael, and it is Lilith, and it has the image of a feminine form, and Samael is in the form of Adam and Lilith in the form of Eve. Both of them were born in a spiritual birth as one, similar to the form of Adam and Eve, like two pairs of twins, one above and one below. Samael and the Eve the Elder, which is called the Northern one, they are emanated from below the Throne of Glory, and this was caused by the Sin.¹⁷²

Not only are new elements introduced to her mythology here, but Lilith is also raised to the highest position of power she has yet inhabited, that of Demon Queen, wife of Samael—the pair of which together are analogous with, and antitheses to, the first humans, Adam and Eve. Rabbi Isaac pairs the story of the birth of Samael and Lilith with that of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:26-27 ("creation one"). Both male-female pairs are "born in a spiritual birth as one," but are differentiated in their variable degrees of goodness, namely as one "above:" Adam and Eve, and one "below:" Samael and Lilith. Rabbi Isaac then describes the exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which he sees as a result of the sexual awakening of the two pairs of "twins," caused by the snake, called here either Nahasiel or Gamliel.¹⁷³

Since talmudic times, Samael had been regarded as the archangel in charge of Rome, and, therefore, a demonic figure. He is one of the fallen angels mentioned in the

¹⁷² Dan 18.

¹⁷³ Dan 18.

Book of Enoch, and in later midrash he is figured as present in the drama of the Garden of Eden. His first appearance in a Kabbalistic work comes in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, but nowhere in any of these descriptions is he ever associated with Lilith, or, for that matter, any other feminine counterpart.¹⁷⁴ Lilith, similarly, had previously been characterized only as a singular figure, and, with the exception of her union with Adam, was devoid of any permanent male partner. Eli Yassif posits that the notion of the marriage of Lilith and Samael is born from a text we have previously examined, the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. As Dan points out, Yassif identifies two versions of the *Alphabet*, “one closer to the original and another, known in Europe since the eleventh century, which was edited and enlarged by a later compiler.”¹⁷⁵ In the version “closer to the original” (that which was discussed in Chapter II), the angels who are sent to find Lilith leave her be with little protest after she promises that she will not harm babies protected by them or by their names on amulets. In the later version of the *Alphabet* that Yassif asserts became known in Europe, Lilith provides further argument for her cause:

They [the angels] said to her: “If you do not come back we shall drown you in the sea.” She answered: “I cannot return because of what is said in the Torah— ‘Her former husband who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled,’ that is, when he was not the last to sleep with her. And the Great Demon has already slept with me.”¹⁷⁶

Confronted with the difficulty of explaining the behavior of the angels, the later writer supplied a purportedly *halakhic* reason for why Lilith refused to return.¹⁷⁷ “The Great Demon” (*ha-Shed ha-Gadol*) “is a new term, unknown in previous Hebrew sources, but it

¹⁷⁴ Dan 18.

¹⁷⁵ Dan 20.

¹⁷⁶ Dan 22.

¹⁷⁷ Dan points out that “naturally, this whole ‘halakhic’ discussion does not have any basis in actual Jewish law.”

is quite natural that he could not remain unnamed for long.”¹⁷⁸ Yassif, and Dan following him, posit that “there was only one possible name for the ‘Great Demon’ added to the text...and that name was Samael,” as Samael’s name had already entered Kabbalistic thought in the *Sefer ha-Bahir* and was also already associated with the drama in the Garden of Eden (as was Lilith).

Rabbi Isaac weaves the story of Lilith and Samael into the overall project of his *Treatise*, an attempt to describe and categorize the existence of, and the reasons for, evil in the world and the battle between evil and good that will culminate in the end of days. A portion of this is done through his treatment of Samael and Lilith, who, together, represent the antithesis of the good represented by Adam and Eve. Samael and Lilith are “like a sexual pair, who by means of an intermediary¹⁷⁹ receive an emanation of evil and wickedness, one from the other, and emanate it onwards” out into the world.¹⁸⁰ This principal of parallel pairs is also strung out to another pair of lower demons, who are, later in the text, associated with terrible afflictions such as leprosy. Rabbi Isaac identifies these two demonic pairs and asserts their importance to the Kabbalist tradition:

The Grand Old Lilith is the mate of Samael, the great prince and great king of all demons. Asmodeus, the king of the demons, has as a mate Younger Lilith. The masters of this tradition discuss and point out many wonderful details concerning the form of Samael and the form of Asmodeus and the image of Lilith, the bride of Samael and of Lilith, the bride of Asmodeus. Happy is he who merits this knowledge.¹⁸¹

This description also reflects the tradition of multiple classes of Lilith that stretches back to the earliest mentions of the demoness in the Ancient Near East. In another chapter of

¹⁷⁸ Dan 22.

¹⁷⁹ Dan 38. “This term is used here in a derogatory sense—an intermediary who leads one to sin.”

¹⁸⁰ Dan 38.

¹⁸¹ Scholem, “Qabbalot R. Ya’aqov” 225.

the *Treatise*, Rabbi Isaac combines the principal of pairs with direct connections to Adam and Eve:

In these sources it is explained that Samael and Lilith were born as a hermaphrodite, just like Adam and Eve, who were also born in this manner, reflecting what is above. This is the account of Lilith which was received by the sages in the *Use of the Palaces*. The Elder Lilith is the wife of Samael. Both of them were born at the same hour, in the image of Adam and Eve, intertwined in each other. And Asmodeus, the great king of the demons, has as a wife the Younger Lilith, the daughter of the king, whose name is Kafzefoni, and the name of his wife is Mehetabel daughter of Matred, and their daughter is Lilith.¹⁸²

This text explicitly emphasizes the hermaphroditic nature of both Lilith and Samael's and Adam and Eve's births, further strengthening their connection even as it duplicates the principal of pairs again by referring to the Younger Lilith and her demonic husband, Asmodeus. It should be noted that Rabbi Isaac's *Treatise* thus figures *Eve* as the woman of Genesis 1:26-27 ("creation one"), she who was created simultaneously with Adam, the figure often used to provide the space for the presence of Lilith. In doing so, Rabbi Isaac closes off Lilith from this space in the Garden of Eden, thus effectively breaking her association with Adam and figuring, instead, Samael as her original and true mate. Dan argues that this configuration of Adam permanently and originally with Eve and of Lilith permanently and originally with Samael is used to further Rabbi Isaac's dualistic notion of good and evil. "The ancient story concerning Lilith being Adam's first wife was not suitable to Rabbi Isaac's purposes because Samael did not take any significant part in it. He used the later edition of the Pseudo-Ben Sira to introduce Samael into the story, not as Lilith's second husband but as her original mate,"¹⁸³ creating a direct parallel between Lilith and Samael and Adam and Eve, un-muddied by any appearance by Lilith in the Garden of Eden.

¹⁸² Dan 24.

¹⁸³ Dan 25.

According to Rabbi Isaac, these Adam-Eve and Samael-Lilith pairs are in continuous conflict, “both within the realm of evil and between the evil system and the good one.”¹⁸⁴ Dan argues that Rabbi Isaac’s mythology presents the pairs as necessarily struggling against one another, ceasing only when one side is completely annihilated and true unity can reign in both the divine and earthly worlds. The elimination of Lilith from her previously-conceived position as Adam’s first wife, therefore, is most likely more about fitting Lilith into Rabbi Isaac’s overall conceptual of dual and parallel mythologies than it is about creating a new myth specifically for her. With these connections, the conflict between Lilith and Eve is made explicitly clear, as they are figured as opposite sides of the same coin, representing, I believe, a good portion of what the author saw as the range of female sexuality, from its goodness (for procreation, as Eve is the mother of nations), to its evil tendencies (to incite improper lust, to bear improper children, as Lilith is the mother of demons). As we will soon see, the Shekhinah is another prominent figure in this conception of the range of female sexuality, conceptualized as even greater and more good than Eve, as she is understood as the mother of the House of Israel.

The centrality of the children of these female figures to their positions on either side of the struggle between good and evil should not be underestimated. The concepts previously discussed in the Talmud concerning types of intercourse (or different approaches to it) and the progeny that will therefore spring forth from such unions is, in Kabbalah, emphasized to an even greater degree. In Rabbi Isaac’s *Treatise*, Lilith’s main demonic function is that of wife to Samael and mother to Lilith the Younger and numerous other demons. It is through her *children* that her terror reaches its fullest potential. She is therefore a stark contrast to Eve, mother of humanity, whose children,

¹⁸⁴ Dan 25.

constantly tormented by Lilith's, seek to serve God and cleave to the Divine. While in some conceptions of Lilith her children have human male fathers (Adam, the original, or any of the numerous men whom Lilith visits at night), here they are of completely demonic parentage. She is in further contrast to the Shekhinah (whose parallelisms we will explore further in the next section), as the Shekhinah "is the mother of the House of Israel, so Lilith is the mother of the unholy folk who constituted the "mixed multitude" (the *erev-rav*) and ruled over all that is impure."¹⁸⁵ Together, it seems as though Lilith and the idea of the "good woman" in Eve and the Shekhinah make up a full conception of feminine sexuality. However, separate and apart, "they epitomize the contradictory aspects attributed to womanhood by man...positive and negative aspects of "woman" are compartmentalized. This process of demonizing women serves to identify all women with the potential for evil," perhaps over and against their potential for good.¹⁸⁶

The Zohar

In the Zohar, mythologies surrounding Lilith reach their apex. Here, she becomes a fully-formed character in her own right, with more demonic power than ever before. She is no longer a household pest, so to speak, but is now the Queen of demons and the antithesis of the Shekhinah, and, importantly, a significant and powerful presence in the lives of Jewish mystics. The Zohar reiterates many now-familiar tropes of the Lilith myth, namely that she is Adam's first wife, the temptress of innocent men, and mother of demons, and, following Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, the wife of Samael. Each of

¹⁸⁵ Gershom Scholem, et al., "Lilith," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, Vol 13, 2nd ed (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) 18.

¹⁸⁶ Copeland 19.

these characteristics, however, is expanded upon and more fully-formed in this text, reflecting, in part, Kabbalah's overall understanding of sex and sexuality.

The Zohar names Lilith, or implies references to her, a number of times, most notably when dealing with the drama of creation, the genesis of demonic spirits, and the danger she poses to married couples and children.¹⁸⁷ One passage refers to Lilith, though it does not specifically name her, as both the wife of Samael and a “snake,” “a wife of harlotry,” “the end of all flesh,” “the end of days.”¹⁸⁸ This passage also provides a strand of the Lilith narrative that is seen neither before nor after it, as it describes Lilith's powers over men during the waking hours of the day, during which “she dresses herself in finery like an abominable harlot,”¹⁸⁹ attracts men, embraces them, poisons them, and kills them. I wish to focus, however, on one passage which speaks to the dangers Lilith poses to married life, and then on two different conceptions of Lilith in the Zohar's reimagining of the story of creation (the second of which will subsequently be split into two further parts). These passages outline what I believe are the most significant contributions the Zohar makes to Lilith's narrative and underscore especially relevant issues of fear and danger present in the sexual sphere.

The first section of the Zohar to which we will turn deals with the dangers Lilith poses to married life, sexual intercourse, and healthy children. The Zohar states

She [Lilith] goes out into the world in search of babies, and when she sees human babies she attaches herself to them, seeking to kill them, and to absorb the spirits of these human babies. She goes off with this spirit, but there are three holy spirits who are gathered there. They fly in front of her and take the spirit from her and present it to the Holy One, blessed be He. And there they teach the babies in His presence.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Primary examples can be found in: Zohar i 19b, Zohar i 148a-148b, Zohar i 34b, Zohar iii 19a, Zohar iii 76b-77a.

¹⁸⁸ Zohar i 148a-148b, *Sitrei Torah*, The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol. I 538.

¹⁸⁹ Zohar i 148a-148b, *Sitrei Torah*, The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol. I 538.

¹⁹⁰ Zohar iii 76b-77a, The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol. II 543.

This account thus begins by outlining Lilith's role, once again, as the snatcher of babies. Here, she is not only seeking to kill them, but also to "absorb" their spirits and effectively gain them as citizens of "the other side." She is, however, often foiled in her plot by "the three holy spirits," most likely Snwy, Snsnwy, and Smnglf, who snatch back the spirit of the child and present it to the Holy One. The Zohar goes on to recommend sanctity during intercourse as a means of guarding against Lilith's nefarious ways:

It is for this reason that the Torah warns people: "Sanctify yourselves and be holy" (Leviticus 20:7). And it is true that if a man is holy during intercourse he need not be afraid of her, for then the Holy One, blessed be He, will summon the three holy angels that we have mentioned, and they will protect the child and she cannot harm him....But if man is not holy and draws out a spirit from the side of uncleanness, she will come and mock at the child. And if she kills him she will absorb the spirit and will never be separated from it.¹⁹¹

Recalling the Talmudic passage detailing the link between "improper" sexual intercourse and children's disabilities, this passage asserts that the ritual for protecting one's child from Lilith is entirely bound up in the way in which one participates in sexual intercourse, and that the punishment for turning away from the Holy during sex will be on one's children. The Zohar states that unholy intercourse—of whatever kind—can cast a blemish on the children that result from it. "If a man is inflamed with the evil inclination, without directing his will and intention toward the Holy One, blessed be He, he attracts toward himself a soul from the side of the evil inclination that is not good."¹⁹² Furthermore, "whoever has intercourse for immoral reasons...the child that is produced will be wicked, licentious, impudent, and shameless, and will not be counted among the seed of truth."¹⁹³ Having intercourse without one's thoughts turned towards God allows Lilith a gateway through which she can attack one's children. Such impure thoughts may

¹⁹¹ Zohar iii 76b-77a, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* Vol. II 543.

¹⁹² Tishby, "Conjugal Life" 1362.

¹⁹³ Tishby, "Conjugal Life" 1362.

also be instigated by another similar demon, Na'amah, who "goes out into the world to warm herself on men, and a man will suffer an erection because of her, wake up, embrace his wife, and lie with her, but his thoughts will be on the desire he had in his dream."¹⁹⁴

Lilith will subsequently attach herself to the child produced as a result of this union and bring him to "the other side." The Zohar emphasizes, however, that the righteous can protect themselves from such defilements, and from the defilement of seminal emissions also inspired by Lilith, and that it is only sinners who are vulnerable to her ways:

You might object and say that the others [children] whom she kills, but whose spirits are taken by the three holy angels who are assembled before her, cannot have been formed from the side of uncleanness. And, if that is so, by what right did she kill them? In these cases, man has not sanctified himself, but neither did he have the intention of defiling or of becoming defiled. Therefore she has the power to control the body but not the spirit.

When a man has sanctified himself, however, Lilith cannot reach him in order to enter into his sexual thoughts or disrupt his family tree. Sanctification and ritual prescribed by the Kabbalah will be further examined in the following section.

The two creation stories I will next examine provide, in part, some further explanation as to why Lilith steals men's seed and kills human children, as indicated in the above passage. Each of these stories contain surprisingly different narrative strands, but, despite their differences, they serve, at base, some similar purposes. These stories separate Lilith from Eve and the Shekhinah (and therefore the evil side of femininity from the good), explain Lilith's purpose as murderer of children, and describe in detail the ways in which the circumstances of her creation relate to the evil of her character.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Zohar iii 77a, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* Volume II 543.

¹⁹⁵ There is at least one more creation narrative in the Zohar that features Lilith (Zohar iii 19a). However, it follows a very similar trajectory to the second story that I deal with here, and therefore will not be discussed in detail.

The first of these passages (Zohar 1:19b) refers to Lilith but does not explicitly name her, explaining instead many now-familiar aspects of her mythology in an exegesis of the biblical phrase “let there be light,” allowing us to infer her presence in the passage.

It begins:

Let there be (me'orot), lights in the expanse of heaven (Genesis 1:14)—spelled deficiently: (me'erat), curse, for diphtheria was created for children. After the radiance of primordial light was treasured away, a shell was created for the kernel. That shell expanded, generating another shell. Emerging, she ascended and descended, arriving at the small faces. She desired to cling to them, be portrayed in them, and never depart. The blessed Holy One separated her from there, bringing her down below when He created Adam, so that this would be perfected in this world.¹⁹⁶

This story begins with an explanation of a “deficient” spelling of the word *me'orot* (lights) in Genesis 1:14, which is written without *vavs*, the vowel letters. “This deficient spelling is interpreted to mean that something was missing on the fourth day of Creation: the light of the Shekhinah—symbolized by the moon—diminished; and this lack represents the potential for evil or ‘curse’ (*me'erah*),” indicated here as diphtheria.¹⁹⁷ Following this discussion is a description of the creation of the primordial light, which was quickly hidden away, and then the expansion of a “shell” around it, to surround, conceal, and protect the kernel of primordial light. That shell expanded in turn, generating another shell, which is interpreted by scholars of the Zohar to be Lilith.¹⁹⁸ The passage goes on to indicate that Lilith seeks to assume a higher form by clinging to the cherubim, the small faces, but was separated and brought down to the world to be with Adam. Here, we begin to see a peculiar conflation with the more familiar aspects of the

¹⁹⁶ Zohar 1:19b, *The Zohar I*, trans. and comm. Daniel C. Matt, Vol. I (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) 148.

¹⁹⁷ Zohar 1:19b, *The Zohar I* 148.

¹⁹⁸ Daniel C. Matt, “Zohar 1:19b Commentary,” *The Zohar I* trans. and comm. Daniel C. Matt, Vol. I (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) 148.

creation stories, as well as an inter-weaving of some of Lilith's more permanent characteristics also seen in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*:

As soon as she saw Eve cleaving to the side of Adam, beauty above, as soon as she saw the complete image, she flew away, desiring as before to cleave to the small faces. Those guardians of the gates on high did not allow her. The blessed Holy One rebuked her and cast her to the bottom of the sea, where she dwelled until Adam and his wife sinned. Then the blessed Holy One plucked her from there, as she rules over all those children—small faces of humanity—who deserve to be punished for the sins of their fathers. She flies off, roaming through the world...finding children who deserve to be punished; she toys with them and kills them. This happens in the waning of the moon, whose light diminishes; this is *me'orot*, lights, deficient.¹⁹⁹

This story underscores Lilith's opposition to both Adam and Eve, seemingly equally, as she views them as a perfect pair with which she cannot compete. In this way, this passage departs from Rabbi Isaac's strict Lilith-Eve/Adam-Samael duality and instead sets Lilith up as the antithesis to the original pair of humans on her own. Her demonic potential reaches new strength in this figuration, as we see that she is not only the evil mirror of the human female figure, but the mirror of both the human female and the male, together.

Many aspects of this passage overlap obviously with the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. In both texts, Lilith flees from Adam, is banished to a desolate place (in the *Alphabet*, the desert, in the Zohar, the bottom of the sea), and subsequently sets about tormenting and killing human children. Key differences are evident, however, between these two stories. This passage in the Zohar describes Lilith's birth as stemming from the shell around the shell of the primordial light, devoid of any primary connection to Adam. Furthermore, it indicates that Lilith flies away once she sees Eve "cleaving to the side of Adam, beauty above...the complete image," indicating that "together, he and Eve constitute an image of the divine couple, *Ti'feret* and *Shekhinah*."²⁰⁰ Unlike in the *Alphabet*, this passage does

¹⁹⁹ Zohar 1:19b, *The Zohar I* 148-149.

²⁰⁰ Matt 148.

not attempt to configure Lilith as the first wife of Adam, but portrays her instead as an interloper upon a beautiful pair. Lilith has no place in this divine wholeness of male and female, and, as such, flees from them, desiring to return to the world of angels. God, however, does not allow her to return, and instead banishes her to the sea, where she waits until she is “plucked” from there after “Adam and his wife sinned.” Now, again following the pattern laid out in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Lilith torments the children of Adam and Eve, toying with them and killing them. However, the reason for Lilith’s torture is, here, neither revenge nor resentment for being banished, but to punish truly bad children, those “who deserve to be punished for the sins of their fathers” i.e. Adam. It is in this version, therefore, that “Adam and Eve’s sin empowers Lilith to kill.”²⁰¹ The Zohar thus creates a sort of excuse for Lilith’s actions; she *must* kill children because they deserve it, as punishment for the sin of Adam and Eve. This is a radical departure from the Lilith of the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. In the *Alphabet*, Lilith kills out of her own feelings of jealousy and resentment, and she is in no way deserving of any pity, nor offered any excuse for her actions. The Zohar, however, seems to supply a built-in excuse for Lilith’s actions, perhaps even exonerating her in some way. (The other creation story that I will next address will elaborate upon this theme, demonstrating that the Zohar, perhaps more than any other text we have previously read, demands less culpability of Lilith for her actions.)

This refiguration of the creation story concludes with an explanation of demonic workings in the world, highlighting, in particular, the stealing men’s seed at night:

Until Cain was born, she could not cling to him. Later she drew close to him and gave birth to spirits and flying demons. For 130 years Adam copulated with female spirits until the arrival of Na’amah, whose beauty seduced *the sons of*

²⁰¹ Matt 149.

Elohim, Uzza and Azael. By them she gave birth; from her, maleficent spirits and demons spread through the world. In the night she roams; they roam the world and titillate humans, causing them to spill seed accidentally. Whenever they find people sleeping alone in a house, they hover above them, grab hold of them, cling to them, seize desire from them, and bear offspring. Further, they attack him with disease unawares. All this in the waning of the moon.²⁰²

The Zohar here again describes Na'amah, (generally numbered among the four mothers of demons along with Lilith, Agrat, and Mahalath),²⁰³ as the main progenitor of maleficent spirits in the world, but the associations to similar and earlier stories about Lilith are obvious. That Lilith is regarded as demon who causes humans "to spill seed accidentally" is made clear in practical applications of Kabbalah, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Similar to Rabbi Isaac's *Treatise* and his conception of the Samael-Lilith and Adam-Eve dichotomy, and, furthermore, like the midrash we have previously explored, the second account of Lilith-in-creation in the Zohar provides us with its own way of "filling in the gaps" between the first and second creation stories, creating a slightly different way of viewing the Eve-Lilith dichotomy. Unlike the exegesis of the *me'orot*, or deficient lights, that gave rise to a story aligned in some ways with the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, this exegesis (Zohar 1:34b) focuses on the phrase "let us make man" and provides us with a very different account of Lilith's role in the drama of creation. This second description of creation can be further split into two different accounts, loosely modeled on "creation one" and "creation two" in Genesis. The Zohar's versions, however, do not follow the biblical narratives strictly, as they overlap portions of one into the other. The Zohar seems to break down the separations between the two biblical stories of creation,

²⁰² Zohar 1:19b, *The Zohar I* 148-149.

²⁰³ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978) 358.

muddying the distinction between them (and between the Lilith-Eve dichotomy) while providing, perhaps, a degree of acceptance of Lilith that we have not yet seen.

The first account of creation offered in this section of the Zohar describes the creation of the *name* of Adam, before the *being* Adam himself:

Moreover, we may regard the words ‘Let us make man’ as conveying this: to the lower beings who derived from the side of the upper world God disclosed the secret of how to form the divine name Adam in which is encompassed the upper and the lower, in the force of its three letters *alef*, *dalet*, and *mem* final. When the three letters had come down below, there was perceived in their form, complete, the name Adam, to comprehend male and female.²⁰⁴

This account can be mapped onto the biblical “creation one,” the account that provides room for Lilith in the midrash, as they both describe decidedly egalitarian creations of humanity. In the Zohar’s version, the one entity, the name of Adam and the precursor to the embodied man and woman, is poised like a gateway between the upper world of creation and the lower world of actuality. The original name, comprised of both the male and the female, possibly Adam and Lilith, is not nongendered, but rather dually gendered; a single entity made up of two distinct parts, both fragmented and whole at the same time. This creation thus also echoes the fragmentation of God characterized by the *Sefirot*, the significant rupture between God and the Shekhinah, as here exists a name/proto-being, created in his own image, that is both simultaneously fragmented and whole.

There is also, however, a parallel to the biblical “creation two” this creation story. Just as woman is derived from the side of man, so are the creators of the name of Adam derived from the side of the upper world. The creation of the *being* Adam is multiple times removed from God: he is created from the name, which is created by the lower beings, who are derived from the side of the upper world, which is where God relays the

²⁰⁴ Zohar 1:34b, cited in Gershom Scholem, *Zohar: The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (Schocken Books: New York, 1977) 7.

secret of creation. The creation of woman is thus even further removed, one step further from God. The reference to the upper and lower worlds also suggests some semblance of a pre-existing hierarchy that may effect the egalitarian name/proto-being. The two entities cannot be forever equal, as, just as an upper and lower heaven exist, so will upper and lower male and female beings.

The second half of this creation story delves further into the ideas of separation, distinction, and removal from God by distancing itself from the egalitarian Genesis Chapter 1 and instead following the story presented in Genesis Chapter 2:

The female was fastened to the side of the male, and God cast the male into a deep slumber, and he lay on the site of the Temple. God then cut the female from him and decked her as a bride and led her to him, as it is written, ‘And he took one of his sides, and closed up the place with flesh’ {Gen. 2:21}.²⁰⁵

Suddenly, there is distinction. In the space between this line and the one before it we move from two parts of a whole, two un-embodied beings in one, to a stage of complete embodiment, and furthermore, a stage of complete distinction. The body of the male can be put to sleep without affecting the female, and they can literally be apart. The man is put to sleep, and the woman is cut from him (as opposed to them being cut from one another), as if she were an accessory to him, an extra appendage. Importantly, again, this idea of “woman as male appendage” is also seen in the description of the *Sefirot*, where each *Sefirah* is seen as a section of the male body, his arms, his legs, his head, his torso, his crown, and his woman, the female Shekhinah.

²⁰⁵ Zohar 1:34b, Zohar: The Book of Splendor 8.

The Zohar then shifts from biblical retelling to personal statement, as the author announces

In the ancient books, I have seen it said here that the word ‘one’ means ‘one woman,’ that is, the original Lilith, who lay with him and from him conceived.²⁰⁶

Thus, the author implores us to read Genesis 2:21 as follows: “And He took one [woman] of his sides, and closed up the place with flesh.” A question then arises, as this woman is identified by the author of the Zohar as Lilith, but the Bible clearly indicates that the woman created from Adam’s ribs is Eve. Furthermore, as we have seen, rabbinical midrash assumes, if it references her at all, that *Lilith* is the woman of “creation one” who was created equally with Adam, and was then dismissed (over her desire to be treated as an equal) to be replaced by Eve. The Zohar, it seems, seeks to break down this clear division in order to purposefully muddy the distinction between the biblical “creation one” and “creation two,” and thus the distinction between Lilith and Eve. The Zohar describes a woman, or at least the idea of a woman, created in conjunction with the idea of a man in the name of Adam, and then describes another (?) woman taken from Adam’s side. Unlike Rabbi Isaac’s attempt at creating a stark duality between Eve the good and Lilith the evil (by even removing Lilith from the Garden of Eden in the first place and attaching her instead to the demon king Samael), the Zohar provides us with the possibility to think of both of these women as Lilith, and to think of the second woman as both Lilith and Eve. In exploring this issue, it is important to include the next line of the Zohar, which distinguishes Lilith further:

But up to that time [when the side was taken out of him] she [Lilith] was no help to him, as it is said, ‘but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him’ {Gen. 2:20}²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Zohar 1:34b, Zohar: The Book of Splendor 8.

²⁰⁷ Zohar 1:34b, Zohar: The Book of Splendor 8.

Thus, the Zohar does suggest some distinction between Lilith and Eve, namely that Lilith was no help to Adam and that Eve was created as a helpful replacement. We can see that Lilith existed before the incident with the rib, and that Eve only existed after. Even so, the Zohar presents a decidedly more “muddied” view of the Lilith-Eve (and even, by extension, the Lilith-Shekhinah) dichotomy, suggesting, perhaps, a more nuanced view of female sexuality, over and against Rabbi Isaac’s strict dualisms. This “muddying,” combined with the “excuses” afforded to Lilith in the first creation account I discussed (Zohar 1:19b), indicate a degree of acceptance of Lilith, and of the perceived range of female sexuality, that has not been previously seen. While previous texts have emphasized the strict duality of Lilith and Eve, or have highlighted and condemned Lilith’s evil actions as destructive to lineage and bloodline, the Zohar proposes more of a conflation between these two female figures, and demands less culpability of Lilith for her actions. Though I can not go so far as to say that Lilith is a respected or even accepted figure in the Zohar, I do believe that the Zohar presents a more nuanced view of Lilith, and one that gives her, essentially, more benefit of the doubt than other texts. This may reflect Kabbalah’s more positive view of sexuality, or may indicate that, in these passages, the desire for Lilith (or a Lilith-like, sexual, and dominating woman) supersedes the fears and anxieties that otherwise surround her.

Kabbalistic Practice

While much of our discussion of Kabbalah has so far centered around recorded texts, it is important to note that this mystical movement did not only exist in scholar’s libraries, but was also a practice that emanated out into people’s lives. The figure of

Lilith, as Gershom Scholem notes, was central to certain aspects of Kabbalistic ritual practice. Scholem recounts various Kabbalistic practices that directly relate to Lilith, the existence of which speaks to our overall understanding of Lilith as that which negotiates the difficult realm of sexuality, and that which must be feared and defended against, even as it is at times desired. The centrality of Lilith's children to her mythology, a theme present as far back as the first recorded mention of the demoness, is nowhere more evident than in the Kabbalistic rituals performed in her name. Fears surrounding illegitimate children take the forefront, and speak to a preoccupation with lineage, familial relations, and sexual intercourse central to Jewish conceptions of sexuality. In these rituals, Lilith's generative power is her most potent, her most feared, and it is in her role as demonic mother that she must be defended against. Of course, motherhood and the generation of demons cannot occur outside the realm of sex itself, and so Lilith is still feared as a temptress and a succubus, involving herself not only in unlawful sexual practices, but also in the personal affairs of man and wife, infringing, so to speak, on the domain of Eve. Some of these rituals, however, reflect less of Lilith's evil nature and more of her existence in the folkloric sphere. For example, from the 16th century onwards it was commonly said that if an infant was laughing in his or her sleep, it was an indication that Lilith was playing with him. In order to banish her from the room, one would tap the child on the nose to avert any further danger.²⁰⁸ Though there are obvious overtones of Lilith's dangerous connection to infant mortality in this case, less of her demonic nature is, perhaps, evident in this ritual as compared to the others to which we will now turn.

²⁰⁸ Scholem, Kabbalah and Symbolism 157.

One of the more complex of the rituals associated with both Lilith and her demonic children centers itself around Jewish burial practices. Scholem tells us that, “until quite recently (and occasionally to this day),” Jewish burials in Jerusalem were often marked with “a strange happening.”²⁰⁹ Before the body of a deceased male was lowered into the ground, ten men danced around it in a circle seven times, reciting a psalm traditionally regarded as a defense against demons (Psalm 91, “Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence/[...]You will not fear the terror of the night...”), or another similar prayer. Then, a stone was laid above the grave and Genesis 25:6 was recited: “But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts and sent them away.” This rite “has to do with Kabbalistic conceptions about sexual life and the sanctity of the human seed. Here we have an entire myth, the object of which is to mark off the act of generation from other sexual practices, which were interpreted as demonic in nature, and especially from onanism.”²¹⁰

To understand this connection, we must first take note of a Talmudic tradition which alleges that demons are spirits made in the Friday evening twilight, and, because of the intervening Sabbath, are unable to receive bodies.²¹¹ From this tradition, later authorities inferred that the demons had been looking for bodies ever since, and therefore attached themselves to men. This concept entered into combination with another one we have already explored, that of Lilith’s union with Adam during the 130 years he was estranged from Eve. From this union “in which Adam’s generative power was misused and misdirected, stem a variety of demons, who are called *nig’e bne Adam*, ‘spirits of

²⁰⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 154.

²¹⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 154.

²¹¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 154.

harm that come from man.”²¹² The Kabbalists took up each of these older conceptions of demonic generation and systematized them so that they played a considerable part in the Zoharic picture of man’s relations with the “other side,” or the realm of demons. To the Kabbalists, abuse of a man’s generative powers by demon succubi (most often through onanism and nocturnal emissions) “was held to be a destructive act, through which not the holy, but the ‘other side,’ obtains progeny.”²¹³ It was held in opposition to the *halakhic* union between a man and woman, viewed as a “venerable mystery,” so that it was eventually understood that, as we have previously touched upon, “every act of impurity, whether conscious or unconscious, engenders demons,”²¹⁴ a fraught conception of the world, to be sure.

Abraham Sabba, an early 16th century Kabbalist who was born in Spain and lived in Morocco, was the first to make the connection between the danger of demonic progeny and a man’s burial rituals. He posited that all the illegitimate children a man had sired before his death would come to his funeral to take part in the mourning:

For all those spirits that have built their bodies from a drop of his seed regard him as their father. And so, especially on the day of his burial, he must suffer punishment; for while he is being carried to the grave, they swarm around him like bees, crying: ‘You are our father,’ and they complain and lament behind his bier...²¹⁵

Later Kabbalists expanded upon this notion, asserting that the demons would try to claim their inheritance on the day of their father’s burial and furthermore try to harm his legitimate children. The dancing around the grave, the psalm, and the biblical quotation were, therefore, all meant to prevent these unlawful children “from approaching the

²¹² Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 154.

²¹³ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 155.

²¹⁴ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 155.

²¹⁵ Abraham Sabba, *Tseror ha-Mor*, Venice, 1576, 5a.

deceased, sullyng his corpse, or doing other harm.”²¹⁶ A similar rite, in which the bier is set down on the ground seven times on the way to the cemetery, has the same purpose. Most important of all, the Kabbalists strictly forbade the children, and especially the sons, of the deceased from accompanying him to his burial. “In his lifetime, it was held, a pious man should expressly forbid ‘all his children’ to follow him to his grave; by doing so, he will keep his illegitimate demonic offspring away and, in case any of them should nonetheless get through to his grave, prevent them from endangering his true children, begotten in purity.”²¹⁷

Further evidence of this connection comes from the report of Johann Jakob Schudt, director of the Frankfort Gymnasium (high school) about the Jews of that city, two centuries after the life of Abraham Sabba. In 1717 he wrote:

They firmly believe that if a man’s seed escapes him, it gives rise, with the help of *mahlath* [a female demon] and Lilith, to evil spirits, which however die when the time comes. When a man dies and his children begin to weep and lament, these *shedim*, or evil spirits, come too, wishing, along with the other children, to have their part in the deceased as their father; they tug and pluck at him, so that he feels the pain, and God himself, when He sees this noxious offspring by the corpse, is reminded of the dead man’s sins. It is known to me that Jews in their lifetime sternly ordered children not to make the slightest plaint or weep until the dead body in the cemetery had been purified by washing, cleansing, and the cutting of the finger- and toenails, because these unclean spirits are thought to have no other part in the body, once it is cleansed.²¹⁸

It is clear to see that these ritual burial practices stem from a fear of the power that Lilith and her demonic horde may have over the human sexual sphere. At key junctures such as births (as previously seen in the amulets), sexual intercourse (as seen in the AMIB), and death, as seen here, Lilith and her children had the greatest potential to wreak havoc on

²¹⁶ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 155.

²¹⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 156.

²¹⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 156.

Jewish life. As such, ritual practices were developed to protect against “the other side” during such vulnerable instances.

Another notable rite is embedded with similar connections to nocturnal emissions, onanism, and demonic children; over all of which, Lilith presides. “Especially in a leap year, the Kabbalists fasted on Monday and Thursday of certain weeks in the wintertime, in order to ‘correct,’ by special prayers and acts of penance, the taint which a man inflicts on his true form by nocturnal pollution and onanism.”²¹⁹ This rite, called *tikkun shovavim*, takes its name from the first letters of the sections of the Torah read in the synagogue on corresponding Sabbaths, which form the word “*shovavim*,” meaning the “ill-bred,” “obviously referring to the ‘ill-bred’ sons of man, whose return to the sphere of the holy this rite is thought to favor.”²²⁰ In order to protect against their demonic offspring, begat through nocturnal emissions and onanism alike, Kabbalistic men fasted and corrected themselves through prayers and penance. Lilith’s connection here, though not explicitly stated, is nonetheless clear. By this point of development in Jewish thought, her association with nocturnal emissions, onanism, and demonic children was all but solidified. Even without mentioning her name, lists of such acts creating “ill-bred” sons of man were no doubt attributed to her evil seductive and progenerative powers.

It is not only in unlawful sexual practices, however, that Lilith’s influences must be feared. The centrality of Lilith’s children (and, therefore, her role as demonic mother) continuously comes to the forefront. It is through her illicit sexual connections and the children they produce (as she is taking the place of Eve/the rightful wife) that her potency reaches its apex. In reaction to her ability to infringe upon the rights of Eve, we find

²¹⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157.

²²⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157.

“widespread observance of a rite recommended by the Zohar, the purpose of which was to keep Lilith away from the marriage bed.”²²¹ This particular rite involves, “in the hour when the husband enters into union with his wife,” first reciting the following incantation in order to turn his mind to the holiness of his Lord and banish Lilith from the marriage bed:

Veiled in velvet—are you here?
Loosened, loosened [be your spell]!
Go not in and go not out!
Let there be none of you and nothing of your part!
Its waves are calling you.²²²
But I cleave to the holy part,
I am wrapped in the sanctity of the King.²²³

Then, the husband should “wrap his head and his wife’ in cloths, and afterward sprinkle his bed with fresh water.”²²⁴ This rite is necessary because “Lilith is always present in the bedlinen of man and wife when they copulate, in order to take hold of the sparks of the drops of semen which are lost” and create demons out of them .²²⁵ Understandably, rites of this sort occur primarily in connection to the dangerous sexual sphere, a space in which there are many *halakhic* rules and rituals and where much can go wrong. Lilith might not only steal a man’s semen in order to produce her own children, but also might attempt to kill a child as it is being conceived between husband and wife. In order to prevent such a calamity, a man must be in a “state of holiness” during intercourse so that he “has no fear of her.”²²⁶ If he is in such a state, he and the child being conceived will be protected from Lilith, but “if man is not holy and draws out a spirit from the side of

²²¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157.

²²² Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157. Referring to Lilith’s dwelling place as at the bottom of the sea.

²²³ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157.

²²⁴ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157.

²²⁵ Patai 303.

²²⁶ Zohar iii 77a, Cited in Patai, “Lilith” 304.

uncleanness, she will come and mock at the child. And if she kills him she will absorb the spirit and will never be separated from it.”²²⁷ Such rites, directed towards the purification and protection not only of the sexual realm but also of the offspring produced thereof, “embody the darker aspects of Kabbalistic ritual, reflecting man’s fears and other emotional states. Unmistakably mythical in origin, they must be regarded as scarcely inferior in importance and in influence to those other rights in which Kabbalists turned their face not toward the ‘other side,’ but toward the holy and its realization on earth.”²²⁸

These rituals were used to negotiate the dangerous sphere of sexuality; from “illicit” sexual acts such as onanism and nocturnal emissions, to protecting *halakhic* marital unions, to shielding newborns and birthing mothers, the sexual sphere was regarded as a decidedly potent, and often dangerous, place. Lilith’s involvement in the variety of moments encompassed within the sexual sphere speaks to a general uneasiness surrounding it. That one demoness was used as a “catch all” explanation for the myriad things that could go wrong points to the need to defend and protect this sphere from very real influence and harm. Furthermore, the centrality of Lilith’s demonic children and their contestation with the legitimate children of Jewish marriages speaks not only to a fear of her infringement upon the domain of Eve, but also to a fear of the dangers of procreation and the extreme importance of having the “right” kind of children to carry on the Jewish people (as seen previously in Talmudic writings).

At her apex in Kabbalah, Lilith becomes the ultimate fear within the sexual realm and, therefore, a reflection of the real and serious anxieties felt by the Jewish people in regards to sex, sexuality, and reproduction. She reaches new heights in Kabbalah, where

²²⁷ Zohar iii 76b-77a, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* Vol. II 543.

²²⁸ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 157.

she is formulated as the Demon Queen, the antithesis to the Shekhinah, the destroyer of marriages, and the disrupter of family life. She is also, however, afforded some benefit of the doubt in the Zohar, a text which both provides an explanation for her evil ways (and thereby partly exonerates her), and, in part of its treatment of the creation myth, seemingly muddies the previously oppositional distinction between Lilith and Eve. It is in Jewish mysticism that Lilith's myth reaches its fullest point of development, as the demoness is taken to be a powerful reflection of, and reaction to, distinct fears surrounding sexual intercourse, sexuality, and, in particular, issues of lineage and inheritance.

CONCLUSION

After reaching dizzying heights in the texts of Kabbalah, Lilith all but disappears from the Jewish historical and literary record. Trace references to her are sustained in Jewish superstition into the modern day, most notably through a continued (but significantly diminished) presence in wall plaques and amulets designed to protect children and through some sporadic continuation of the ritual practices described in Chapter III. These small traces are all of Lilith that come out of the Middle Ages for Judaism; the rest is left to history. In some ways, Lilith's disappearance from the historical record can be seen as occurring even earlier in mainstream Judaism, as it is primarily through Kabbalah that her mythology continues beyond the rabbinic period at all.

Christian and secular literary texts written at the end of the middle ages and beyond pick up the mythology of Lilith, usually figuring her in relation to Satan or to other sexually deviant characters. She is named as the grandmother of the female pope in a German drama by Theodoricus Schernberg (15th century); is depicted throughout Renaissance artwork as a female-headed snake tempting Adam and Eve; plays a supporting character in Johann Goethe's *Faust* (1808); is featured in the title of Robert Browning's (1812-1889) poem *Adam, Lilith, and Eve*; appears in Victor Hugo's *La Fin de Satan* (1886); is figured as Adam's first wife in paintings and poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882); and is listed in the ancestry of the White Witch in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* written in the 1950s. Each of these appearances is, however, either Christian or secular; to Judaism, she seems all but lost.

In the many articles and books I read while researching this thesis, not a single one posited an explanation for Lilith's spectacular disappearance from Jewish life. I too, will unfortunately be unable to provide an adequate account of why exactly Lilith disappeared from Judaism, but I will gladly speculate. It seems possible that this disappearance could be due to a number of factors. Perhaps the Lilith myth's integration with Kabbalah was its downfall, for as Kabbalah declined in popularity, so did stories about Lilith. Perhaps she was left behind in Judaism's effort to enter the modern world as the religion reinvented itself in the form of pure ethical monotheism, leaving behind as many of the trappings of demonology and superstition as it could. Perhaps she merely became obsolete as the Jewish people gained newer, more scientific ways of coping with dangers such as death during childbirth and infant mortality (and, indeed, as these dangers diminished with the advent of modern medical technologies). These speculations, may indeed be part of another thesis entirely.

The contemporary feminist movement has, in recent decades, attempted to reintroduce Lilith into the Jewish cultural lexicon, drawing inspiration in a refiguring of the demoness as a powerful and independent woman. In 1972, Lilly Rivlin published an article on Lilith for *Ms.* magazine with the aim of recovering her as an inspirational figure for modern women. The Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith*, founded in 1976, took her name, inspired by her choice to demand sexual equality from Adam. An article in the first issue of *Lilith* explained the choice of name, arguing that Lilith should be reconceptualized as a strong and powerful positive female role model in a rejection of her demonic past. Judith Plaskow created her own midrash concerning Lilith in 1972, rewriting the myth by describing the two wives of Adam, Lilith and Eve, as forming a

deep sisterly bond that puzzles both Adam and God. Jewish feminists generally ignored or explained away Lilith's more nefarious characteristics, choosing to concentrate instead on her formulation as a positive female role model for modern women.

By keeping in mind these modern Jewish feminist reinterpretations, we may trace the Lilith myth as being deeply involved with issues of sex and sexuality in Judaism for over four thousand years. In her long and storied history, Lilith has transformed herself from a Babylonian storm goddess to a nefarious she-demon, to the first wife of Adam to the Demon Queen, and finally into a strong female role model. Each retelling of the Lilith myth can be interpreted for its presence in the social, cultural, and historical moment in which it was formed. Lilith can be seen throughout the history of Judaism as a reflection of, and a reaction to, deep and significant anxieties and desires concerning issues of sex, sexuality, and reproduction. She has been used by both men and women throughout the centuries as a figure through which they can express these anxieties and desires, render them understandable, and perhaps even gain power over them and thereby, over aspects of themselves.

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