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MINISTRIES

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Testing the Lilith Myth: Did Adam Have Another Wife?

Did Adam, the first man, have another wife named Lilith before Eve?

We are all familiar with the story of Adam and Eve, the first human couple. According to Genesis 2-3, this couple lived in the Garden of Eden until the serpent enticed them to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit, which resulted in the fall. It is only after the fall, when Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden, that we are introduced to additional characters—namely, Cain and Abel, the children of Adam and Eve. Before this, Scripture mentions only four characters: God, Adam, Eve, and the serpent.

The first chapters of Genesis are pretty straightforward. So, it can come as a surprise when we hear that there are Jewish traditions regarding the alleged first wife of Adam named Lilith. Where do these traditions come from? Does the Bible give us any evidence that Adam had another wife named Lilith?

In regard to the first question, the earliest source that identifies Lilith as Adam’s first wife is the Alphabet of Ben Sira. This Jewish text was likely composed around the eleventh century AD (Judith R. Baskin, “Women and Judaism,” *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism, Vol. 4* (Netherlands: Brill, 2005), 2803). According to this text, both Adam and Lilith were made from the ground. But as soon as God created Lilith, she and Adam had an argument related to intimacy. They couldn’t resolve their differences, so Lilith flew away. Here is how the alphabet of Ben Sira puts it:

When God created the first man Adam alone, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone.” [So] God created a woman for him, from the earth like him, and called her Lilith. They [Adam and Lilith] promptly began to argue with each other: She said, “I will not lie below,” and he said, “I will not lie below, but above, since you are fit for being below and I for being above.” She said to him, “The two of us are equal, since we are both from the earth.” And they would not listen to each other. Since Lilith saw [how it was], she uttered God’s ineffable name and flew away into the air.

—Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith (Quoted in Jewish Women’s Archive, “Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith,” jwa.org)

The idea behind this story is that Adam and Lilith were incompatible because they were equal as they were both formed from the earth. Therefore, using one of Adam's ribs, God made Adam a new wife who would be more submissive to him.

For some, this is just one more piece of evidence showing that God, and thus the Bible, is misogynistic. Some believe the Lilith myth was created in the eleventh century to further diminish women, making Eve solely created to be submissive to Adam, and thereby vilifying strong women. It's not surprising, then, that the character of Lilith has evolved into something of a feminist champion in modern times, serving as a symbol for independent women who refuse to submit. There is even a Jewish feminist journal titled *Lilith Magazine*, which was inspired by her character. (Sara E. Karesh and Mitchell M. Hurvitz, *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 296). Of course, it should be noted that the Bible itself, teaches that women are inferior to men but that both bear God's image (Genesis 1:27). For more on the topic of misogyny in the Bible, please see our teachings: [Is the Bible Misogynistic?](#) and [Is God A Misogynist?](#)

Nevertheless, in the Alphabet of Ben Sira, the story doesn't end with Lilith leaving the garden. The author goes on to say that God sent three angels after Lilith to warn her that if she doesn't return, a hundred of her children will die every day. Despite the warning, Lilith refuses to return and says that she was created to cause illness in infants, and that's what she's going to do. However, she also says that if she sees an infant wearing an amulet with the names of the three angels on it, she will not be able to harm the child. So, in this story, Lilith essentially transforms into a demon who inflicts infants with sickness unless they are wearing a protective amulet. Because the story involves things like demons and protective amulets, it is perhaps unsurprising that Lilith has become widely associated with occult symbols and images in modern times.

This story in the Alphabet of Ben Sira likely draws from and combines other Jewish traditions. For instance, in Genesis Rabbah, a Jewish midrash written in the fifth century AD, there is no mention of "Lilith," but some rabbis posited that there were actually two Eves. It is said that Adam rejected the first Eve because she was "full of secretions and blood," as if she were a newly born infant. Thus, God created another Eve that Adam would find more attractive (Gen. Rabbah 18:4). What happened to the first Eve then? Some rabbis said she was the reason Cain and Abel fought, while others said she simply returned to dust (Gen. Rabbah 22:7).

Other Jewish traditions mention Lilith by name and describe her as a female demon who preys upon men who sleep alone (b.*Shabbat* 151b; b.*Niddah* 24b). The tradition of Lilith as a female demon in these late Jewish traditions may have evolved from earlier Mesopotamian myths about a class of storm demons who visited men during the night and bore them demon children (H. Wayne Ballard, Jr., "Is Lilith Fair? An Observation from Isaiah 34:14," *Review and Expositor*, 95 (1998), 585). The Dead Sea Scrolls also mention Lilith ("The Song for a Sage," 4Q510-511), including her in a list of demons in a liturgical song intended for use in exorcisms (Joseph M. Baumgarten, "On the Nature of the Seductress in 4Q184," *Revue de Qumran* 15 (September-March 1991-1992), 134). This concept of a female demon named Lilith persisted into the Middle Ages, and the author of the Alphabet of Ben Sira finds an origin for this character in the midrash of Adam's first wife that he rejected.

So, that is where this idea that Adam had another wife named Lilith originated. It came from an eleventh-century Jewish text that combined traditions involving a female demon named Lilith with other Jewish speculations about there being two Eves. Nothing in ancient Jewish literature before the fifth century AD suggests that Adam had another wife. And contrary to what you might find on the Internet, there is simply no evidence that misogynistic scribes removed the story of Lilith from the Bible so they

could subjugate women. Genesis 1-3 doesn't mention any humans other than Adam and Eve, and no Scriptures speaking about creation mention this "Lilith" character. The story of Lilith being Adam's first wife comes from medieval Jewish folklore.

Now, some will point out that the word Lilith *is* mentioned once in the Bible, in Isaiah 34:14. How should we understand this passage?

Isaiah 34:14

And wild animals shall meet with hyenas; the wild goat shall cry to his fellow; indeed, there the night bird [lilith] settles and finds for herself a resting place.

Here, Lilith is mentioned in the context of Isaiah's prophecy concerning Edom's imminent destruction (Isaiah 34:5-17). According to Isaiah, the destruction will be so thorough that only wild animals and demons will inhabit the region. As Walter Brueggemann writes:

Indeed, the creator God intends that real life should here be impossible. As verse 12 indicates, it is a "no life" place, with no identifiable political order, no functioning rulers, all reduced to disorderly anarchy and death. This political reference is reinforced in verses 13-15 with a rich inventory of negativities, including thorns and thistles, scavenger animals, creatures of the night, and ominous, ill-defined demonic forces. We note here the single mention in the Old Testament of Lilith, a type of demonic power. The intention of the exaggerated rhetoric is to exhibit the land of Edom as an ominous, dangerous, seething, death-filled place in which human habitation is impossible.

—Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 273

The ESV translates the Hebrew *lilith* as "night bird," but many scholars see this as a reference to a demonic entity whose name was then adopted for the Lilith figure in later Jewish traditions. As D. W. Watts writes:

Isa 34:14 has the only mention of "Lilith" in the OT, unless suggested emendations to Job 18:15 and Isa 2:18 are accepted. The name is very similar to the Hebrew word for night. However, the demoness was well known in Mesopotamia. The Sumerian word *lil* "wind" was related to the name and she was known as a storm-demon. But the syllable *lil* was associated with the night in Semitic languages. Lilith entered Jewish literature at a late date, but her influence continued a long time. Using Isa 34:14 for justification, Lilith became part of the labyrinthine structures of Jewish and then Christian demonology.

— D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66: Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 13

This is the one place that the word "lilith" is used, but there is no mention of Adam or Eve. There is no mention of this "lilith" being a woman, or being human, let alone being the original human woman. Again, all of these ideas about the identity of Lilith come from Middle Age Jewish literature, not from Isaiah 34:14 or from any other Scripture. As Watts writes:

[T]he mention of Lilith in Isa 34:14 had paved the way unintentionally for a remarkable "career." The passage itself is only trying to present a picture of a ruin more devastating than any before it. Thus the wild and spooky feel of the desolate land is powerfully portrayed. Ostriches, snakes, and

vultures will join the list of wild creatures and demons who possess the region where for generations to come “no one will be passing through.”

—D. W. Watts, Isaiah 34-66: *Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 14

So, there is no evidence in the Bible that Adam had a first wife named Lilith before Eve. Isaiah 34:14 is the only place that mentions Lilith, and all it says is that she inhabits the wasteland formerly known as Edom, along with some wild animals. Later Jewish tradition then greatly expanded on this figure far beyond what is described in the Bible.

Despite Lilith’s popularity in late Jewish tradition and pop culture, it seems the Bible simply doesn’t give much attention to her. She is briefly mentioned only once, and that’s in Isaiah 34:14. It should go without saying that the later Lilith traditions are theologically problematic, and the modern association of Lilith with occult imagery is troubling, to say the least. Obviously, believers should have nothing to do with so-called protective amulets and other such superstitious practices.

Instead, we should focus on what the Bible *does* teach and live that out as best that we can. As Isaiah writes, “[Lilith] settles and finds for herself a resting place.” So let’s leave Lilith to rest in the uninhabitable wasteland where she belongs.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

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