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# From Eden to *Ednah* - Lilith in the Garden

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### **Abstract**

For centuries, the paradise described in Genesis 2-3 has been a formative myth in Judeo-Christian culture. The creation of the woman from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:21-23) both projected and validated women's inferior and secondary role in Western society. Therefore, the new interpretation of the Hebrew word *tsela*, shifting its meaning from rib to *baculum* (penal bone), which Alan Dundes and Ziony Zevit have proposed, is nothing short of revolutionary, shifting the mythic paradigm from an obscure derivation of woman from man, to her primary and equal role in procreative bonding.

With their insightful analyses, Zevit and Dundes challenge a fundamental tenet of Judeo-Christian culture, and a basic principle that has underscored social gender relations for generations. In recent public and academic discourse these relations have been subject to intense examination, generating changes in the family and in public spaces of modern society. What may appear only to be a pedantic philological hair-splitting argument is, in fact, a radical changes in the mythic model for relations between men and women. Dundes and Zevit still recognize that in paradise woman was created from man, but instead of the sexually neutral rib, their interpretation recasts this creation in concrete sexual terms that are the basis of human regeneration. Let me unpack this.

### **Disciplines**

Biblical Studies | Cultural History | History of Gender | History of Religion | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion | Social History

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# Lilith in the Garden

Dan Ben-Amos

**FOR CENTURIES, THE PARADISE** described in Genesis 2–3 has been a formative myth in Judeo-Christian culture. The creation of the woman from Adam’s rib (Genesis 2:21–23) both projected and validated women’s inferior and secondary role in Western society. Therefore, the new interpretation of the Hebrew word *tsela’*, shifting its meaning from rib to *baculum* (penal bone), which Alan Dundes and Ziony Zevit have proposed, is nothing short of revolutionary, shifting the mythic paradigm from an obscure derivation of woman from man, to her primary and equal role in procreative bonding.

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In his recent **BAR** article,\* Ziony Zevit examines the basic philological aspects of his proposal. He points to the extensive

\*Ziony Zevit, “Was Eve Made from Adam’s Rib—or His Baculum?” **BAR**, September/October 2015.

use of the lexeme *tsela'* in the Hebrew Bible, from Genesis to the Prophets; yet it occurs only twice (in Genesis 2:21, 22) in the challenged meaning, that is, rib. In all the other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, it clearly refers to the side of a structure, an object, or a mountain. This is its meaning in Biblical Hebrew from Exodus to Ezekiel (early sixth century B.C.E).

In post-Biblical Hebrew, the meaning changed. From the Hebrew of the Mishnah until the present time, *tsela'* has come to refer to either a rib or side, depending on its context, or metaphorically—drawing upon the traditional interpretation of the Biblical text—to wife.<sup>1</sup> It is quite true that in the Biblical texts there are no other examples of the use of *tsela'* as penal bone, but words with unique meanings are not a rarity in the Hebrew Bible.

A philological approach to the problem would examine linguistic changes over time and seek out word meanings in their historical contexts. A mythological analysis, however (especially in the structural method of Claude Lévi-Strauss [1908–2009]), would collapse historical times into structures of binary oppositions that represent thought, belief and imagination in oral societies.<sup>2</sup> (For this kind of analysis, the literate record of myth is accidental, depending on a literate person, who happened to be a witness to the verbal or ritualistic articulation of a given mythic theme. Successive recordings of myth do not necessarily demonstrate its historical changes, however, but only expose the development of existing mythic thought.)

The myth of the Garden of Eden and the story of creation of humanity is a prime example. They rest upon a structure of binary oppositions that unfold in three versions:

In the first, the binary opposition is sexual, *zakhar u-nekevah bara 'otam* (“male and female He created them”) (Genesis 1:27).

The next two versions describe the respective creation of man and woman. Man is created from earth—the land that farmers till—forming an affinity between the man and his labor; this is explained by an etiological pun (see underlined Hebrew words): *'adam 'afar min ha-'adamah* (“man from the dust of the earth”) (Genesis 2:7).

The third version tells about the creation of woman out of *tsela'*, whom the man names, employing a similar etiological pun (see underlined Hebrew words): *'ishah ki me-'ish lukhah* (“Woman, for from man she was taken”) (Genesis 2:23). The man perceives her as *basar* (“flesh”), projecting a male’s sexual desire. Here we find an expansion of the initial gender opposition between male and female in the

first version of binary oppositions into an oppositional projection from the man’s perspective between matter and desire, and then labor and pleasure.

In addition to the binary oppositions that the Biblical text articulates, there is another that is implicit in the unfolding versions of the myth. In the instances of binary opposition that tell us about the creation of woman, human fertility is part of the story. But in the first version God’s blessing of fertility and increase is *not* confirmed, while in the third version it is confirmed both as a punishment and as the singular attribute of the woman. She becomes “the mother of all the living” (Genesis 3:20), and Adam names her individually, employing the same literary device of the etiological pun, Eve: *Vayikra ha-'adam shem'ishto havah ki hi haytah 'em kol-hay*. (“The man named his wife Eve [*havwā*], because she was the mother of all the living [*hay*]” [Genesis 3:20]). The name *Havah* in Hebrew puns with *hay*, and both are a derivation from the root *hyh* “to live.”

But who is this woman of the first version of binary opposition, whose fertility is not confirmed, and whom the Biblical text does not name? Her story seems to hover at the edges of literacy with sporadic references. Isaiah mentions her name at one point, but not her mythic identity, referring to a demonic female in the desert: “Wildcats shall meet hyenas, goat-demons shall greet each other; there too the lilith shall repose and find herself a resting place” (Isaiah 34:14). Later, in the post-Biblical period, the sages identify the lilith several times, not by name, but as “the First Eve,”<sup>3</sup> indicating that her full story was well known in oral tradition, yet barred from the canonized Biblical text. Finally, in the tenth century C.E. in Babylon, an anonymous writer, who was not bound by normative traditional principles and who included in his book some other sexually explicit tales, spelled out the lilith’s adventures in paradise. The apocryphal work known as *The Tales of Ben Sira* recounts Lilith’s creation:

The young son of the king took ill. The king Nebuchadnezzar demanded, “Heal my son. If you don’t, I will kill you.” Ben Sira immediately sat down and wrote an amulet with the Holy Name, and he inscribed on it the angels in charge of medicine by their names, form and images and by their wings, hands and feet. Nebuchadnezzar looked at the amulet. “Who are these?”

Ben Sira answered, “The angels who are in charge of medicine: Snyi, Snsvi and Smnglof. After God created Adam, who was alone, He said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone’



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(Genesis 2:18). He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith immediately began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie below,' and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air, Adam stood in prayer before his Creator: 'Sovereign of the universe,' he said, 'the woman who you gave me has run away.' At once, the Holy One, blessed be he, sent these three angels to bring her back.

"Said the Holy One to Adam, 'If she agrees to come back, fine. If not, she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day.' The angels left God and pursued Lilith, whom they overtook in the midst of the sea, in the mighty waters where the Egyptians were destined to drown. They told her God's word, but she did not wish to return. The angels said, 'We shall drown you in the sea.'

"Leave me!' she said. 'I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days.'

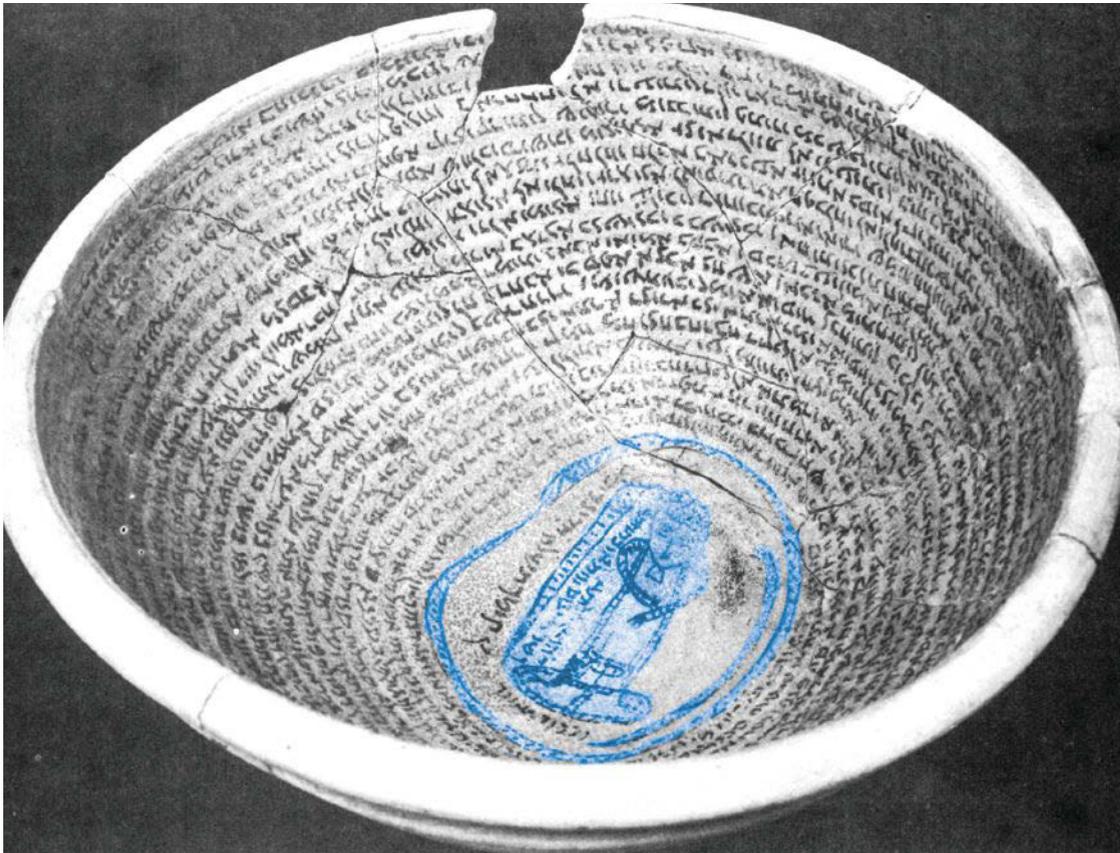
"When the angels heard Lilith's words, they

**WILY TEMPTER.** In Genesis 3, the serpent is described as being "more crafty than any other wild animal." While the serpent is depicted as a trickster in this passage, it was often a symbol of regeneration or immortality in the ancient Near East. This 5-inch-long copper serpent was uncovered at Timna (in southern Israel) inside a 13th- or 12th-century B.C.E. Midianite temple. The serpent is partially gilded with remnants of gold tape still wrapped around its head. Many draw parallels between the Timna serpent and the bronze serpent described in Numbers 21:9 that Moses fashioned and placed on top of a pole to cure the Israelites of their snakebites.

insisted she go back. But she swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God: 'Whenever I see you or your names or your form in an amulet, I will have no power over the infant.' She also agreed to have one hundred of her children die every day. Accordingly, every 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."<sup>4</sup>

Since then, she seduces men at night—and even scholars at their desks. She became the most explored and analyzed demoness.<sup>5</sup>

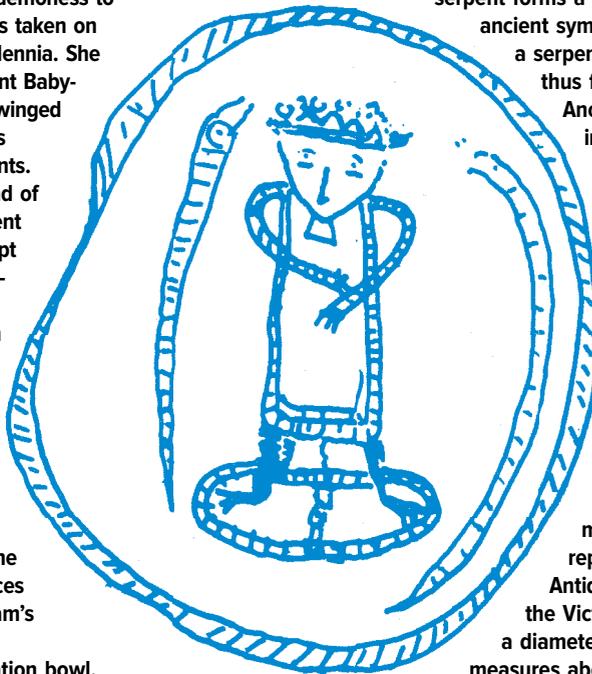
In their sexuality and fertility, Lilith and Eve are inversions of each other: Lilith has pleasure without children, and Eve delivers children not simply without pleasure, but in pain.



COURTESY V. KLAGSBALD, JERUSALEM

**NIGHT DEMONESS.** From demoness to Adam's first wife, Lilith has taken on many shapes over the millennia. She is first mentioned in ancient Babylonian texts as a class of winged female demon that attacks pregnant women and infants. From Babylonia, the legend of "the lilith" spread to ancient Anatolia, Syria, Israel, Egypt and Greece. In this guise—as a wilderness demoness—she appears in Isaiah 34:14 among a list of nocturnal creatures who will haunt the destroyed kingdom of Edom. This is her only mention in the Bible, but her legend continued to grow in ancient Judaism. During the Middle Ages, Jewish sources began to claim her as Adam's first—and terrifying—wife.

In this Aramaic incantation bowl, depicting Lilith in its center (highlighted in blue), her arms appear to be crossed. A circle is drawn around her feet. Two serpents surround her. The first



serpent forms a circle around her. (This ancient symbol, the ouroboros, shows a serpent or dragon eating its tail, thus forming a complete circle.)

Another serpent is pictured inside the ouroboros; this serpent appears on three sides of Lilith, but not the bottom. Although the central figure looks androgynous, we know it is Lilith because she is identified by an inscription inside the circle. A text that mentions Lilith and other evil spirits is written on the inside of the bowl in spiral concentric circles.

Incantation bowls were meant to both capture and repel evil spirits. This Late Antique incantation bowl from the Victor Klagsbald Collection has a diameter of about 13 inches and measures about 6 inches tall. Compared to other Aramaic incantation bowls, it is both unusually large and inscribed with a remarkably long text.

Narratologically, the Garden of Eden story consists of several episodes that are embedded within each other. Regardless of whether the narrative is an editorial patchwork or a creative composition by a single hand, its storytelling art involves the interlocking of several themes told within different possible frames. Such is the account of the representation of nature in language. The creative acts of God, great as they are, require human recognition and affirmation which are achieved through language. The story begins with two prefatory verses, “The Lord God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.” And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name” (Genesis 2:18–19). Then, the actual story begins with the verb *vayikra* (“and the man gave names,” [Genesis 2:20] to all the creatures upon the earth) and concludes with the same verb, *vayikra* (“the man named his wife Eve” [Genesis 3:20]).

Three stories are embedded within the narrative of the first manifestation of human linguistic ability: (a) the creation of the woman; (b) the serpent in the Garden of Eden; and (c) the expulsion from paradise.

The serpent in paradise may be a symbol of regeneration in ancient Near Eastern cultures<sup>6</sup> or of immortality<sup>7</sup> as some scholars suggest, but in this particular story, it is a trickster (*arum*, “shrewdest”), a ubiquitous figure of transformation in many cultures.<sup>8</sup> Wittingly, in the text this adjective puns with the description of the naked (*arumim*) man and woman. The serpent does not give the man and the woman a lesson in sexual education. They were sexually active before they met it (Genesis 2:24). The serpent transforms nature into culture, making them aware of their nakedness, in consequence of which they produced (*vayitperu*, “sewed”) some clothing, differentiating between them and the entire animal world. Following this transformation, God enters into a dialogue with both of them, at the conclusion of which the man accuses his wife for their transformation from a natural to a cultural state.

Dundes’s and Zevit’s interpretation of the woman’s creation story suggests that Adam consistently blames his wife in this story. The first time he speaks in his own voice after they are a couple, it is in the context of sexual copulation. Both the standard King James and the Jewish Publication Society translations render the Hebrew word *davak* as “shall cleave” and “clings,” respectively. While such a translation is psychologically and spiritually correct, the narrative context suggests that the verb refers to a

graphic description of sexual intercourse, since it is followed by the phrase “so that they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).<sup>9</sup>

Ideally intercourse is an act of love and couple harmony, but too often the man fails to recover himself, precisely at the point in which the woman wishes the continuation or the recurrence of her orgasmic bliss. For his failure to satisfy her, the man also accuses the woman. She is “bone of [his] bones” (Genesis 2:23) which was removed from him, according to Dundes’ and Zevit’s interpretation, thus preventing him, according to his thinking, from prolonged intercourse like other animals. Perhaps not accidentally the Hebrew Biblical term for orgasm is “*ednah*,” a word constructed from the same root as “Eden” in the compound Hebrew term for Paradise (see Genesis 18:12). The King James and the Jewish Publication Society translations of this word are “pleasure” and “enjoyment,” respectively.

The expulsion from paradise humanized Adam and Eve. Without his penal bone, man became less virile than the animals to which God made him superior, but he obtained a wife, a mate. What really happened in the Garden of Eden was the creation of man and woman. Outside its gates, the family—the foundation of human culture—was created. Eve became not only *em kol hay* (mother of all living), but also the mother of humanity. ■

<sup>1</sup> See “The Historical Dictionary Project” of The Academy of the Hebrew Language ([maagarim.hebrew.academy.org.il/Pages/Pmain.aspx#](http://maagarim.hebrew.academy.org.il/Pages/Pmain.aspx#)) that represents the philological development of Hebrew language from the post-Biblical texts (200 C.E.) until the present.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss was one of the most prolific and influential anthropologist of the 20th century. Among the many books and articles by and about him, probably the most pertinent is Edmund Leach’s *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> *Genesis Rabba* 22.8; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–1946), pp. 88, 138; Eli Yassif, *The Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle-Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 64–67.

<sup>4</sup> David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, eds. *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 183–184. The passage appeared in *The Tales of Ben Sira*. A critical edition of this book is Yassif, *Tales of Ben Sira*, see in particular p. 232 for the original Hebrew text and analytical comments about it in pp. 63–69.

<sup>5</sup> For a selection of Lilith scholarship, see Nitzza Abrabanel, *Eve and Lilith* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 1994) [Hebrew]; Joseph Dan, “Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980), pp. 17–40; R.P. Dow, “The Vengeful Brood of Lilith and Samael,” *Bulletin of the Brooklyn Entomological Society* 12 (1917), pp. 2–9; G.R. Driver, “Lilith,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 91 (1959), pp. 55–57; Mordechai Gafni and Ohad Ezrahi, *Who’s Afraid of Lilith: Re-Reading the Kabbalah of the Feminine Shadow* (Moshav Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2005) [Hebrew]; A.S. Freidus, “A Bibliography of Lilith,” *Bulletin of the Brooklyn*