THE TRUE MYTH: THE STORY OF LILITH

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Every culture has had its myths, stories of how things got to be the way they are. Some of these stories catch on and become generally believed. Such was the ancient tale of how the sun jumps into a boat at the western horizon each night and rows itself back to the eastern horizon so as to be ready to begin its daily climb back to the western sky. Others remain in the realm of fiction, lovely stories told merely to delight the imagination like the tale of how the flower of the dogwood tree got a drop of red on its beautiful milk-white petal.

A myth contains an element of truth because its purpose is to give an explanation for some existing reality. The natural phenomenon, practice or institution explained by the myth is observably true, at least at the time. For example, that the sun each day sets in the West and rises in the East is seen by everyone to be true. What is false about the myth is the explanation of the reality it gives, for example, how the sun moves in the sky.

Myths would be harmless enough if after advances in understanding showed them to be false, they were dropped. This seems to have happened in the case of the sun myth. But other myths just will not die; they are taken for the gospel truth, believed, acted on and clung to long after scientific fact should have replaced them. These myths can become dangerous.

The story of Eve is such a dangerous myth. It was originally told by the patriarchs of an ancient culture not only to explain the origin of the human species but also to explain the subjection of the female to the male. Males have used this fabrication ever since to rationalize the subservient position of women. Through the story of Eve men have given divine sanction to their privileged place in society. By reducing the origin of evil to Eve and by saying that woman was divinely ordained to be naturally inferior to man, men have gotten things pretty comfortable for themselves. How convenient for men to have their version of the story taken so literally. Why should men want scientific fact to show up the falsehood of the basis of their supposed superiority? And since men, not women, had control of scientific fact, until now it has not been too difficult for men to maintain their myth.

But something strange is happening these days. The collective consciousness of woman is emerging and her memory is regaining its power. In looking back over the stories of the past there is another myth more privative and authentic and certainly more comforting to women. It is the story of Lilith, the truly first woman. Lilith was the woman God created equal to Adam. The true version of the story has been lost; perhaps it would be more accurate to say "deliberately suppressed" in a culture dominated by masculinity. The patriarchs of that culture rejected the story of Lilith. They refused to include it in the sacred writings of the people and to be sure the story would not survive, Lilith was made into a demon, a kind of vampire which devours the children of men.

Now women are taking hold and are remembering their true heritage. Instead of the male-made myth of Eve, women are adopting an old myth made new, the feminist version of Lilith. At the recent conference of "Women Exploring Theology" sponsored by Church Women United, four women, Ms. Karen Bloomquist, Sr. Margaret Early, Ms. Judith Goldenberg and myself, took up the task of analyzing the women's movement in terms of religious symbols. We decided to use a religious myth as explanation and we discovered the true story of Lilith was perfect if we dropped its male embellishments. So we re-told the story and brought it up to date. Judith Goldenberg hastily compiled our thoughts. Here is the “F” version of our joint project, my slightly altered re-edition of “The Return of Lilith."

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APPLESOURCE: THE RETURN OF LILITH

In the beginning, the Lord God formed Adam and Lilith from the dust of the ground and breathed the breath of life into their nostrils. Since they both came from the same source, they were equal in all ways. But Adam was not pleased with this situation and he complained to God about the uppity woman created as his companion. The Lord, trying to be sympathetic, told Lilith to shape up, or rather down, and subordinate herself to Adam or leave the garden. Lilith fled the garden. The Lord God sat down to consider what to do. Then he caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and out of one of the ribs of Adam created Eve.

For awhile Adam and Eve had a good thing going. After all, Adam had dominion over the garden and Eve shared in his status. With Adam directing the process they worked together in the garden cultivating it and they planted an apple tree. Although Eve occasionally sensed capacities within herself which remained undeveloped, she was basically satisfied to be Adam's wife and helpmeet. The only thing that really disturbed her was the relationship between God and Adam. Both being men, Adam and God seemed to have more in common and Eve was often excluded, but she usually got back into their company by making coffee for them after one of their frequent policy-making sessions. Nevertheless, Adam came to identify with God more and more. After awhile, God became a little uneasy about this too. He started to wonder if he had made a mistake in letting Adam talk him into banishing Lilith and creating Eve, seeing the power that gave Adam.

In the meantime Lilith, all alone outside the garden, attempted from time to time to re-enter the garden. After her first unsuccessful attempt to breach its walls, Adam built the walls higher, even getting Eve to help him. He told Eve fearsome stories about Lilith, accusing her of being a demon who steals away children from their cradles in the middle of the night. Lilith tried several more times to get into the garden. One time she stormed the main gate and a great battle between her and Adam ensued. She was defeated but as she fled Eve got a glimpse of Lilith and saw that Lilith was like herself.

Seeds of curiosity and doubt now began to grow in Eve's mind. Was Lilith indeed another woman? Adam had said she was a demon. Another woman: Eve had never seen another creature like herself. And more, Lilith was a warrior. Gradually Eve began to think about the limits and restriction of her own life within the garden. She was confused, but she was busy rearing her children.

One day, after many months of strange thoughts, when Eve was wandering around near the edge of the garden, she noticed the apple tree which she and Adam had planted. It had grown to a tremendous height so that one of its branches stretched over the garden wall. Before she knew it she had climbed the tree and had jumped down to the other side of the wall.

At first Eve saw no one. She ran in several directions hoping to catch another glimpse of Lilith. Then she became very frightened because she remembered the stories Adam had told her about Lilith. Suddenly she saw Lilith. Eve trembled with fear but Lilith greeted her with a smile. "Who are you?" asked Eve. "Where did you come from?" Lilith invited Eve to sit down and she told Eve her story. They talked for hours many times, each telling the other about herself. They taught each other skills as they told their stories; they laughed together and cried together over and over.

Meanwhile, back in the garden Adam was puzzled by his wife's comings and goings. He was disturbed by what he sensed to be a new attitude toward him. Finally he talked to God about it. Since God was God he could offer Adam some advice, but God was also somewhat confused. Something had not gone according to his plan. "I am who I am" thought God, "but I must become who I will become."

God and Adam were still discussing the situation when Eve and Lilith returned together to the garden, ready to rebuild it and bursting with possibilities.