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# Lilith: How the Translation History of a 2,700-Year-Old Word Came to Impact 21st Century Culture

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**Abstract**: This paper reviews the translation history of the Hebrew word לִילִית *lilith*, found only in Isaiah 34:14, which has displayed powerful iconicity in the twenty-first century. Differences in interpretation are explored, and it is shown that modern iconicity derives from about one thousand years ago, while the original use of the word dates to before 700 BCE. An experimental approach from the psychology of group decision-making is reported, which identifies the original word as an onomatopoeia derived from the call of the Lilith Owl, *Athene (noctua) lilith*. A review of work on cognitive illusions linked to the behaviour of owls and occurrences of death in pre-modern societies shows how the superstitious connection between owls and death could be the result of an "illusion of causality". Thus, applied psychology has helped to uncover the original derivation of an ancient Hebrew word and illustrate how this became the basis for the modern elaborate iconicity of Lilith. It is argued that the correct translation of *lilith* in Isaiah 34:14 should be "Lilith Owl", while acknowledging that the iconic character of Lilith as portrayed in popular culture derives primarily from Greek mythology.
**Key words**: Lilith, onomatopoeia, cognitive illusions, owls, myth

## Introduction

This paper reviews the translation history of the Hebrew word לִילִית *lilith* over a period of some two millennia, and the powerful iconicity associated with this word in the present day. The disagreement among translators of Biblical Hebrew over whether *lilith* is a mythical creature similar to the modern iconic version or is instead an owl is presented. The Ancient Near East (ANE) archaeological

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evidence used to support the interpretation of *lilith* as a supernatural being is reviewed, as well as the changing of opinions concerning that same evidence. Experimental evidence using applied psychology and ornithology is presented which helps to identify the origin of *lilith* as an onomatopoeia. Using a group decision-making methodology demonstrates onomatopoeic (OP) correlations between one specific owl and the word *lilith*. It is further argued that cognitive illusions and biases related to owls in general underlie the mythicizing of *lilith* which eventually became linked to a mélange of characters from Greek mythology.

It will be shown that biblical scholarship has not kept up with revisions to the interpretation of key archaeological finds. Specifically, the earliest unambiguous interpretation of *lilith* as a supernatural figure which may be a precursor to modern iconicity is now only found in one Dead Sea Scroll fragment from the late first century BCE/early first century CE. This was seven centuries later than the date of the Isaiah passage (Oswalt 1986:4–5). In this paper, "Lilith" will generally refer to supernatural associations, while *"lilith"* transliterates the Hebrew word.

The archaeological, ornithological, and OP evidence when considered together show that *lilith* in Isaiah 34:14 was originally a bird, but one whose cognitive associations made the subsequent mythic interpretations not only possible but likely.

## Biblical Hebrew background

Biblical Hebrew poses many problems for the translator, including the fact that there are more than thirteen hundred words with only one known occurrence (Greenspahn 1980), one of which is לילית *lilith*, found in Isaiah 34:14. Despite this, *lilith* has become one of the best-known Hebrew words of modern times. Biblical scholarship is divided on the issue of whether *lilith* in Isaiah is a demonic being or a natural creature such as an owl. Here are two current English Bible translations where it is alternatively translated "screech owl" and "night monster":

> The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wolves, and the wild goat shall cry to its kind; the **screech owl** also shall rest there and find for herself a place of rest. (Isaiah 34:14 *Modern English Version 2014*)

> The desert creatures will meet with the wolves, The hairy goat also will cry to its kind; Yes, the **night monster** will settle there and will find herself a resting place. (Isaiah 34:14 *New American Standard Version 1995*)

The whole passage containing this verse (Isaiah 34) describes the coming desolation of Edom, a territory now in southwest Jordan that is mostly arid desert.

## The development of the Lilith myth

Interest in the Lilith myth today can be seen in many representations in literature, the visual arts, music, and film. Sanders (2018), for example, lists thirty-three film and television representations of Lilith produced between the years 2000–2018. An internet search for Lilith results in a vast number of hits, showing the interest in Lilith in modern times where "she" has become part of popular culture. Typical of many summaries is this explanation:

> Lilith's themes are freedom, courage, playfulness, passion, pleasure and sexuality. Her symbol is an apple. In Hebrew legends, Lilith is a dangerously beautiful Goddess who refused to subordinate Herself to Adam, feeling She was created as an equal. This makes Lilith perhaps the first true liberationist, and She resolves to make modern life similarly equal for all people. She also boldly instructs us to stand up for what we believe in, unbridled and courageous, no matter the cost. According to legend, Lilith was turned away from paradise for Her 'crime', and She has been depicted in art as a demon ...
> When Jewish patriarchy overtook the land, they made Lilith evil in order to stop the people from worshipping Her.
> In Kabbalistic tradition, Lilith was made the first wife of Adam. Some sources say that Lilith was Adam's spirit wife. Other sources claim that Lilith was fashioned from the earth at either the same time as Adam or before Adam. This made Lilith Adam's equal.[1]

Lilith has become an icon of the modern Women's Liberation Movement (Mondriaan 2005, Gaines 2001) and the modern witchcraft movement (Silver-Willner 2021). These sources all reiterate the same essential narrative, that "Hebrew legends" teach that Lilith was created with Adam and Eve, but she refused to accept submission to Adam, so she flew away and became a sexually promiscuous supernatural character active at night.

Kosior (2018) has traced the origins of the Lilith myth, showing that modern developments originated in the medieval Alphabet of Ben Sira (ABS), a pseudepigraphical work dated between the eighth and tenth centuries CE. He summarises the key elements of the myth of Lilith as it appears in the ABS as follows:

[1] https://journeyingtothegoddess.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/goddess-lilith/. Accessed 7 July 2025.

> (1) She is created equal to man and becomes his first wife before Eve. (2) She possesses knowledge of the divine name and its utilization. (3) She inhabits a desolate place, where (4) she engenders her own race of demons, probably with some substitute for Adam, and from where (5) she assaults children unless they are protected by special rites and paraphernalia.

The earliest unambiguous translation of *lilith* as a mythical figure is probably in the Septuagint version of the Bible (LXX), the earliest known translation of the Hebrew scriptures into another language (Greek). This was done in the third century BCE in Alexandria, Egypt, a major centre of the Hellenistic world. In the LXX, *lilith* is translated as ὀνοκεύνταυρος *(onokeuntauros)* 'onocentaur'. This was a creature from Greek mythology, half human and half donkey, usually considered male, which was not demonic or associated with nighttime (Payne 1990:75). This simply indicates that by the third century BCE Hebrew translators in Alexandria had lost the original meaning of the word and turned to Hellenistic sources.

There are no unambiguous references to Lilith as a demonic figure in Jewish writings before the Dead Sea Scrolls of the first centuries BCE and CE. After that time the theme became developed in rabbinic literature leading up to the radical developments in ABS (Kosior 2018). Kosior goes on to note that:

> The motif of Lilith and Samael as a perverted first couple appears in *The Treatise on the Left Emanation*, a kabbalistic work by R. Isaac Halcohen (thirteenth century), and is later on incorporated in the *Zohar* (I, 19b–20a and 148a–148b) ... also *Zohar* I, 55a and III, 76a, which portray Lilith as a great seducer of humans, spirits and angels, thus paraphrasing the tradition of women beguiling the heavenly emissaries in Jubilees 4.

This is the genesis of the "Hebrew legends" referred to earlier, and illustrates the full development of all the key attributes of the modern Lilith myth.

Some argue that this indicates the probable importation into Jewish writings of myths from other ANE traditions (e.g., Mondriaan 2005), but the possibility that Hellenistic influences are involved will also be considered.

Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate Bible ca. 400 CE, translated *lilith* as the Lamia, a female child-eating monster and night demon from Greek mythology, described as half-snake half-human (Bell 1991:270–271). While both the LXX and the Vulgate reference Greek mythology, they use quite different sources. The Lamia is also significantly different from the Jewish myth of the Lilith (especially in being ugly and repulsive), though they have in common killing children and being active at night.

## Greek mythology

Greek mythology dating from no later than the time of Homer and Hesiod (ca. eighth century BCE) supplies several supernatural female figures, such as the nymph Calypso, the sorceress Circe, and the Sirens, all of whom were attractive but dangerous to men. Circe and the Sirens (winged version) were capable of flight (Bell 1991:105–106, 125–126, 400–401). The Greek goddesses Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena were all sexually adventurous, and their myths involve a magical golden apple which is also reflected in the ABS Lilith myth (Bell 1991:53–57, 232–235, 84–88). When we include the Lamia, we have all the ingredients for the ABS Lilith from Greek myths, though it is possible that the Siren myths may have travelled from earlier Near eastern cultures as will be shown later.

It is probably only a curious coincidence, but with the onocentaur being half-human half-donkey (LXX) and the Lamia being half-human half-snake (Vulgate) we have from these Greek myths the only two creatures in the Hebrew Bible shown as speaking (snake in Gen. 3:1; donkey in Num. 22). In each case, the sex of the half-human part is the same as the persons being spoken to in the Bible, Eve and Balaam. This possibly indicates that the Biblical narratives influenced Greek mythology, as well as the converse.

## Biblical scholarship

Keil and Delitzsch ([1866–1891] 2001[7]:347) set the tone for the present controversy when they wrote in their commentary on Isaiah 34:14:

> *Lilith* (Syr. … *lelitho*), lit. the creature of the night, was a female demon *(shedâh)* of popular mythology: according to the legends, it was a malicious fairy that was especially hurtful to children, like some of the fairies of our own fairy tales.

This reflects a reliance on "popular mythology" and "legends", supported by reference to Syriac (a language known from the first century BCE). Knowledge of ANE languages has progressed enormously since the 1880s, and Syriac is not nowadays regarded as sufficient for determining Biblical Hebrew etymology.

Aharoni (1938) rejects the mythic interpretation of Lilith and asserts that it was a Tawny Owl on the basis that naturalistic explanations should take priority. Similarly, Oswalt (1986:616) for Isaiah 34:14 writes:

> *he-goat and night bird* are interpreted by some as demonic figures … and this meaning is possible. However, since both the preceding and following verses speak of regular animals, it seems best to remain with that interpretation … .

This view is shared by Clements (1980:274):

> The night hag (Heb. *lilit*) became a familiar figure of semi-religious mythology in later Judaism, but the context scarcely supports the idea of an uncanny and powerful supernatural creature … .

Conversely, Driver (1955:135–136) writes:

> There is no evidence for interpreting *sa'ir* "hairy one" = "satyr"' and *lilit* "female storm-demon" as respectively scops-owl and tawny-owl … the inability of *lilit* to find a home in the ruins contradicts the known habits of the owl … and the homelessness of the *lilit* strongly suggests the eerie whistling of the storm-wind in gusts in and out of ruined houses and deserted palaces.

Driver seems to suggest that *lilit* is a form of onomatopoeia here, with a possible correlation between the sound of *lilith* and the whistling noise of wind, as in "storm wind in gusts …". Altmann (2019:46–47) supports Driver's interpretation:

> With regard to threatening powers, the steppe or desert – easily associated with places of ruin – also represented places of demonic threats in Mesopotamian conceptions. The *lillu/lillitu* demons frequented such locations … .

Driver's remark about the "homelessness of the *lilit*" could be confusing, as it obviously does not refer to Isaiah 34:14 where the *lilith* specifically finds a "resting place", but he refers to "certain Aramaic texts", as does Altmann. This must be the Gilgamesh Epic tablet XII, which will be examined later. These two alternative perspectives continue to influence Bible translators, who are left to choose either a natural creature such as an owl or a mythical creature.

## Archaeological evidence for *lilith*

Three major Ancient Near East (ANE) archaeological finds during the twentieth century have been used to support the Lilith myth: the Burney Relief, the Arslan Tas tablet no. 1, and the Gilgamesh Epic tablet XII.

### The Burney Relief

Many web articles about Lilith are illustrated with the Burney relief from Mesopotamia, held by the British Museum, now dated around 1800 BCE.[2] This

[2] For example, see https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/lilith/. Accessed 7 July 2025.

shows a female goddess "Queen of the Night", voluptuous and naked, with eagle's wings and eagle claw feet, flanked by owls and lions. The identification with Lilith is now considered unlikely, and the goddess Inanna is a more probable candidate (Mark 2014). Many similar figurines have been found across the ancient world, dating over two thousand years between the Burney relief and the Greek figurine of a Siren from Myrina ca. first century CE (Louvre Museum Myr 148). If anything, the strong resemblances between the Burney Relief and the Myrina Siren show a continuity of the siren myth across cultures and time that is independent of the Jewish Lilith mythology.

**The Arslan Tas amulet No. 1**

This was acquired in 1933 and is believed to originate in the late Assyrian empire of the seventh century BCE. Some writers report that this amulet names Lilith as a "thief, breaker of bones", and connect this with fears for children due to high rates of infant mortality (e.g., Gaines 2001, Hurwitz 1992:62[3]). This translation follows the proposal initially made by Albright (1939) that line 19 mentions a flying goddess, but further examination of the amulet has discounted Albright's proposed readings and emendations, and removed the word "goddess", leaving the translation currently as "To the fliers in the dark chamber ..." with no naming of *lilith* (Häberl 2013, Fuad 2018).

**The Gilgamesh Epic tablet XII**

This is often cited as the earliest mention of *lilith* (e.g., Kosior 2018, Römer 2018, Gaines 2001). This first tablet discovered and designated Gilgamesh Epic tablet XII had seventy-three lines of text. Lines 4 and 16 were originally read as having the name *sikil-lil-la-gé*, which was translated "Lilith" by Gadd (1933), who was first to publish the details of this tablet. He translated lines 2 and 3 as describing a tree, with a serpent nesting in its roots and a storm bird *(im-dugud, Anzû)* at its top. His translation of Line 4 was as follows:

> In its midst Lilith built a house

He explains that this means that the Lilith is somehow in its trunk, which may have "some formation or appearance which suggests to the writer that a demoness inhabited it". He mentions a suggestion (Thompson 1908:201) that an owl is intended, which makes its nest in the cavities of the trunk and has a shrieking call, but discounts this (Gadd 1933:135–136). The reading in line 4 of *sikil-lil-la-gé* and its translation as Lilith was also accepted by Kramer (1938), who

[3] Hurwitz cites the translation by Theodor H. Gaster.

was the first to identify this whole text as a translation into Akkadian from Sumerian. Six more copies of this text were discovered subsequently, most of which came from Assurbanipal's library, and one of which has definitively been dated to 705 BCE. These are translations of a much older text which is now recognised as part of a much longer Sumerian poem about Bilgames and the Netherworld, quite distinct from the epic of Gilgamesh contained in tablets I–XI. The current translation of Gadd's line 4, now referenced as line 175 of the complete poem, reads:

> My ball has fallen down to the Netherworld, who will bring it up for me?

The references to a serpent and a storm bird in lines 2 and 3 have also disappeared, and the whole passage is now devoid of any allusion to a flying demon with a *-lil-* syllable in its name (George 2003:743–773).

In summary, none of these three discoveries now provide any connection with the word *lilith*.

**Other possible ANE Lilith references**

The idea that Lilith was a female goddess and night demon is reflected by many Biblical authorities such as Harris *et al* (1980:479), who state that the connection goes back to Ugaritic and other ANE literature. The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of Chicago (Civil *et al* 1973) incorporates words found in texts written in many different ancient Western Semitic languages from the entire region of Mesopotamia and Syria, including Babylon and Assyria. It lists several words containing a *lil-* sequence, including *lillanu, lillannu* ('grain'); *lillatu, lilladu, lillittu* ('offspring', 'mature young [of animals]'); *lillu* ('fool', 'demon', 'name of god', 'a qualification of horses'); *lillutu* ('foolishness', 'weakness'); *lilu* ('kind of sheep'). It is probably this range of linguistic possibilities that prompts Puech (1999) to write:

> The identification of a deity Lel in the West Semitic world is a very difficult subject for the historian of religions. The existence of the deity as such has been questioned and the meaning and etymology of the name are a matter of debate.

He notes that the deity has been related to *lyl – lylh* 'night' and also to the Akkadian *lil(lu)* known in Old and Standard Babylonian as a god and as a demon, also meaning 'fool', 'simple'; to be distinguished from *lilu*, fem. *lilitu* (from Sumerian *lil*, related to 'wind', 'breath'). He concludes that there is a strong argument in favour of an interpretation of Lel as a deity, but that the identity, character, and role of Lel are difficult to assess.

In her discussion of Lilith, Hutter (1999) states:

> The Heb term *lilit* as a demon in Isa 34:14 is connected by popular etymology with the word *layla* "night". But it is certainly to be considered a loan from Akk *lilitu*, which is ultimately derived from Sum *lil*.

She bases this on lines 3 and 4 of the Gilgamesh Epic tablet XII using the interpretation of *sikil-lil-la-gé as lilith* which, as we have seen, is no longer the accepted reading or translation. In any event, the Sumerian deity *lilu* is male, and there are no indications of the key characteristics of Lilith found in the later myths, that is, female, winged, beautiful, and killer of children.

## Dead Sea Scrolls

The next texts in historical sequence cited as referring to *lilith* are the Dead Sea Scrolls 4Q510–511 in Hebrew, and known as the Songs of the Sage, 4Q560 in Aramaic known as the Magical Booklet, and 11Q11 in Hebrew, apocryphal Psalms (Kosior 2018). These have been dated to the late first century BCE/early first century CE and are claimed to refer to the *lilith* as a type of demon.

Angel (2015) discusses the considerable difficulties involved in reconstructing 4Q511, with about two hundred fragments of what had originally been a scroll more than two metres long. His reconstruction supplies perhaps ten percent of the original text. He also states that it should not be assumed that 4Q511 is a copy of 4Q510, which has only one fragment with any text and only nine consecutive lines. The purpose of these two texts is "protection against demonic harm in the pre-determined period of evil just before the day of judgment …". In his reconstruction of 4Q511, Angel (2017) shows a clear reference to *lilith* on line 14 of Column 11 and provides this translation of lines 14–16 (square brackets [ ] indicate a letter or letters missing but assumed where possible from the context):

> The spirits of the ravaging angels and the bastard spirits, demons, Lili[th] ([לילי[ת]), howlers and [ ] and those who strike without warning to lead (people) astray (from) the spirit of understanding and to make their heart and counsel desolate during the present age of the dominion of wickedness … .

The equivalent passage in 4Q510 does not contain the word *lilith*, therefore its presence has been assumed. In 4Q511 *lilith* is clearly classed among demons and evil spirits, to be defeated in the final judgment, but with no additional information.

Text 11Q11 comprises six fragments with some legible text and is concerned with magical healing. Martinez (2002) has reviewed this text together with 4Q560 and shows how they witness a process of change in the approach to magic within the Jewish world, in effect rejecting:

> the blanket condemnation of magic in all its forms in the Old Testament ('You shall not practice divination' [Lev 19:26]; "You shall not let a sorceress live" [Exod 22:17]).

Fröhlich (2013) reports the identification of four songs ("pseudo-psalms") in 11Q11. In song 3 as best as it can be reconstructed are references to a demon that "comes to you in the night", and to horns as "symbols of power, which possibly connects with divine and semi-divine figures in Mesopotamia and Syria which Jewish tradition interpreted as malevolent demons." While this could reflect some aspects of the Lilith myth, the name *lilith* itself is absent.

The best-preserved of these four texts with possible *lilith* references is 4Q560, an "amulet formula against evil spirits" (Eisenman and Wise 1992:265). There are several examples of such amulets. Text 4Q560 comprises two fragments, and in fragment 1 column 1 line 3, it reads:

> the male poisoning demon and the female poisoning demon (is forbidden [to] enter the body ...) (Eisenman and Wise 1992:268)

where "male/female poisoning demon" is used to translate לחלח *lachlach* and לחלית *lachlith* respectively. *Lach* לח normally means 'moist', 'green', in Biblical Hebrew, and *lachlach* לחלח in modern Hebrew simply means 'moisten'. It is doubtful whether these words would have been connected with *lilith* in the absence of the later-developed Lilith myth. If indeed these are demons in this text, then they are clearly regarded as harmful to people, but there are no allusions to the enticing female form with wings.

It could reasonably be argued the medieval Jewish myth has been used as a prism to establish the meaning of many earlier texts (e.g., Arslan Tas amulet no. 1; Gilgamesh Epic tablet XII; 4Q560), which in turn have been used to interpret *lilith* in Isaiah 34:14 (e.g., Driver 1955, Hutter 1999, Altmann 2019). In the case of the first two texts, we have seen how the initial readings and emendations have been replaced with quite different readings following additional tablet discoveries and further research.

The archaeological finds from the period eighteenth to first century BCE used to support the Lilith myth have left only vague connections with a demon whose characteristics are very unclear, and words for 'night'. This appears to be another example of comparative linguistics as described by Johansson (2026) "many etymologies came to a dead end and were labelled as 'origin unknown' ...". Except that the original incorrect ANE-derived *lilith* etymologies have remained

stubbornly persistent, and continue to underpin modern descriptions of the Lilith Myth.

## Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeias are "rhetorical figures that imitate through the sound of spoken languages calls of animals, natural phenomena such as rain, and noises caused by actions" (Catricalà and Guidi 2015). These authors note, however, that "it is still difficult to accept a ... descriptive and explicative model of onomatopoeia because the rules that constrain processes of selection and construction remain idiosyncratic and variable."

Iconicity, "the mapping of forms onto meaning representations", is arguably an intrinsic property of onomatopoeias (Peeters 2016). The wider difficulty with onomatopoeias (as noted by Catricalà and Guidi 2015) lies in their derivation and ascertaining how they may develop as icons or symbols. Experimental evidence will show that *lilith* is an example of an onomatopoeia that displayed a distinct symbolism from the outset and then metamorphosed over a period of millennia producing a powerful iconicity. Its present popular form makes it a genuine "cross-linguistic vocal icon" (Johansson 2026).

## Group decision-making experiments

With OP naming of birds, the original bird call is rendered as the name of the bird, with some accommodations for the speaker's language. An important implication is that while various languages may have similar words for these birds, they are not derived from one another, but rather from the same bird call. Thus, the Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* was known as *rekhyt* in Ancient Egypt, which has a similar pronunciation to "peewit", the English vernacular name for the bird.[4] Here, a different consonant is used to initiate the sound, (<r> rather than <p>) followed by a long <e> vowel, a similar soft middle consonant, then the same short <i> vowel and closing hard <t> consonant. Incidentally, this shows that the Northern Lapwing's call has remained stable across four thousand years and two continents.

If *lilith* is indeed an owl, can OP research help identify it? The word breaks into two <lee> sequences closing with a soft dental fricative consonant <th>; the word possibly represents a double screech or shriek. Several owls make screeching calls, including the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) and the Little Owl (*Athene noctua*). These were both identified in the region by Tristram, who suggests that *lilith* was probably the Tawny Owl. However, the colour difference he describes

[4] John Wyatt, personal correspondence, 2020–2021.

(grey, not tawny) suggests he was actually looking at the owl now designated the Desert Owl (*Strix hadorami*) (Tristram 1884:90–94). Conversely, Hartert, one of the world's leading naturalists of the early twentieth century, identifies ten sub-species of Little Owl. He names one *Athene (noctua) lilith*, commonly found in the Middle East, and now known as the Lilith Owl (Hartert 1910–1922:999–1006). It seems likely that Hartert understood an OP correlation when he decided to name *Athene (noctua) lilith* as a separate sub-species, as its call is often a double shriek usually at the same pitch, and can be heard as <lee – lee> (cf. sound file link at Appendix A).

Deciding an OP correlation between a word and a bird call is the kind of complex decision in which imagination, judgment, and experience come into play. Group decision-making can be an effective tool for resolving such "cognition" problems (Surowiecki 2004:i–xxi, Furnham 2005:524–564). This approach requires no knowledge on the part of the test subjects of either the Hebrew language or specific bird calls, as they are asked simply to compare two sounds to decide if they detect any resemblance.

## Onomatopoeia test methodology

Two surveys were conducted using the Survey Monkey software. Bird calls for both surveys were from the online database www.xeno-canto.org established by Naturalis Biodiversity Center (Netherlands). For the first survey in 2020, respondents were asked to compare a transliteration of *lilith* <Lee-leeth> against the calls of a Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*, and a Lilith Owl, *Athene (noctua) lilith*. More than sixty people of all ages were invited to participate. Usable responses totalled twenty-eight (all anonymous).

For the second survey in 2023, voice files were obtained from both a male and a female speaker for the Hebrew word *lilith* using the Tiberian pronunciation tradition of Biblical Hebrew, the standard tradition of pronunciation as reflected by the medieval vocalization system. This pronunciation has its roots in oral traditions going back to the Second Temple period (sixth century BCE), and can be confidently reconstructed from a variety of sources. It is possible that more ancient forms of Hebrew pronunciation existed before that time, but these are not known.[5] This second survey enables direct sound-to-sound comparisons. More than two hundred people were invited to participate in the second series of surveys, and usable responses totaled forty-five (forty-four for questions 4 and 8). All survey responses were anonymous, so no ethics approval was required (no individual personal data are held by Survey Monkey).

[5] Geoffrey Khan, personal correspondence, 2023.

## Choice of owls

Owls commonly found in the region around Israel include the Desert Owl *Strix hadorami*, the Little Owl *Athene noctua* and the Lilith Owl *Athene (noctua) lilith* (a sub-species of the Little Owl). Aharoni (1938:470) follows Tristram (1884:92) in saying *lilith* was the Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*, a bird not found in desert regions, but possibly intending the grey-coloured owl described by Tristram, by then known as Hume's Owl *Strix butleri*. This has now been reclassified with the addition of the more recently designated species the Desert (Tawny) Owl, *Strix hadorami*, which is found in the region of Israel and Jordan and distinguished as a separate species from *Strix butleri*, which is now known as the Omani Owl.[6]

Shirihai thinks the Desert Owl should be identified with *lilith*, on the basis of habitat corresponding to that of Isaiah 34 and the very disturbing nature of its call in the night.[7] There has been confusion between the names Tawny Owl, Desert Owl, and Hume's Owl, which is reflected in a number of commentators of recent years. The essential difference is between writers who, following Aharoni, wish to identify *lilith* as a natural creature, and those who prefer a supernatural creature. On the assumption that Aharoni actually intended the bird now designated the Desert Owl, then we are considering a bird appropriate to the habitat described in Isaiah 34.

Hartert names the Lilith Owl, a sub-species of Little Owl, which is more likely than the Little Owl to be found in arid desert regions (e.g., Iran, Arabia). It is also less likely to nest in trees, preferring holes in rocks and buildings away from human habitation (Porter and Aspinall 2010:192–195). The other possible owl references in Isaiah 34 are the Eagle Owl *(yanshuph)* in v. 11 (nesting in cliffs and ravines), and the Desert Owl *(bath ya'anah)* in v. 13. These owl identifications and their identifications made via the LXX, Vulgate, and onomatopoeia are summarised in Appendix A (Johnson and Jenson 2023). Because owls are usually encountered in the nighttime, their call is a primary means of recognition.

The call of the Lilith Owl differs from the Little Owl, being less likely to change pitch in the second part of the call, whereas the Little Owl usually produces a higher pitch for the second part of its call. The Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*, while not so common in the region nowadays, was obviously once common in Ancient Egypt, because of the prevalence of images of owls with "ears". It nests in trees rather than in cavities and has a call that is a repeated single hoot. The Desert Owl gives a five-tone hoot with a longer first syllable (Porter and Aspinall

[6] See https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/species.jsp?avibaseid=612B4380, https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/species.jsp?avibaseid=F6F87349, and https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/species.jsp?avibaseid=6590EFD4. Accessed 10 August 2025.

[7] Hadoram Shirihai, personal correspondence, 17–19 April 2020.

2010:192–195). On the basis of the habitat described in Isaiah 34, current owl taxonomy indicates that in reality the most probable owls are the Desert Owl and the Lilith Owl.

Taking survey construction limitations into account and to test out voice-to-sound comparisons, five different owl calls were tested against both the male and female voices. To determine whether the preliminary survey could be validated by voice-to-sound comparisons, the same sound files for the Barn Owl and Lilith Owl were used again. The Little Owl, Desert Owl, and Long-eared Owl were also included. These sound file links are in Appendix A.

Each question invited the respondent to answer, "does [the name] sound like [the bird call]?" with four choices: Not at all, Possibly, Probably, and Distinctly. The three positive answers were treated as "Yes," against "Not at all" as "No." Because of the small sample size, a positive/negative value of 50 ± 10% "Yes/No" (mean average) was considered to indicate no significant OP correlation. An outcome of 60% (positive) was used as the threshold for weak positive correlations, and 75% (positive) for strong positive correlations. A summary of the responses is in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

| Survey/ Question No. | Comparison source | Bird | | % Yes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1/1** | Transliteration | *Tyto alba* | Barn Owl | 57.1 |
| **1/2** | Transliteration | *Athene (noctua) lilith* | Lilith Owl | 75.0 |
| **2/1** | Male voice | *Athene noctua* | Little Owl | 22.2 |
| **2/2** | Female voice | *Athene noctua* | Little Owl | 31.1 |
| **2/3** | Male voice | *Strix hadorami* | Desert Owl | 44.4 |
| **2/4** | Female voice | *Strix hadorami* | Desert Owl | 54.5 |
| **2/5** | Female voice | *Tyto alba* | Barn Owl | 33.3 |
| **2/6** | Male voice | *Tyto alba* | Barn Owl | 33.3 |
| **2/7** | Male voice | *Athene (noctua) lilith* | Lilith Owl | 44.4 |
| **2/8** | Female voice | *Athene (noctua) lilith* | Lilith Owl | 75.0 |
| **2/9** | Male voice | *Asio otus* | Long-eared Owl | 53.3 |
| **2/10** | Female voice | *Asio otus* | Long-eared Owl | 55.6 |

## Discussion

The strong positive correlations of 75% for *lilith* in the preliminary survey and 75% for *lilith* using the female voice in the second survey supports the

identification of the *lilith* as the Lilith Owl. In the second survey set, the strong correlation is only that between the call of *Athene (noctua) lilith* and the female voice, which is pitched about one octave above the male voice, thus closer in pitch to the actual call.

It is likely that in the preliminary survey, when respondents were asked to read a transliteration of the word *lilith* before listening to the call of the owl, they mentally adjusted the pitch of the word to the call of the bird. When comparing sounds with sounds the effect of framing the sound has occurred, so mental pitch adjustment becomes less likely.

Nine of the ten average responses in the second survey were below 60%, meaning neutral-to-negative. The most strongly negative results were for the Little Owl (M22%, F31%) and the Barn Owl (M33%, F33%). As "Screech Owl" is the English vernacular name only for the Barn Owl, this suggests that "Screech Owl" may not be a suitable translation for *lilith*.

The strong positive OP correlation of the word *lilith* with the Lilith Owl in both surveys and the strong negative correlation with the Little Owl in the second survey indicates that the distinction between the calls of the Lilith Owl and the Little Owl was recognised by the time of writing Isaiah. These calls appear to have remained distinctly different for the (probable) subsequent 2,700 years. These findings indicate that the writer of Isaiah distinguished the Lilith Owl from several alternative owls. The clear association in the second survey with the Lilith Owl and the female voice could account for the feminine ending ת- *Tav* for *lilith*.

## Owls and superstitions

The association of Owls with negative events should be seen in the context of a world before the invention of electric lights, and when the reasons for most sickness and death were opaque. There were also high rates of infant and child mortality, about 50% of children did not live to adulthood (Roser 2023). Owls are active at night-time, making calls that range from startling (e.g., Barn Owl) to mournful (e.g., Tawny Owl), and undoubtedly capture people's attention in the darkness. People are more likely to die of illness and disease during the hours of darkness than during the daytime, and often towards the end of the night after 2 a.m. (Mitler *et al* 1987). This means that some association between the appearance of owls with death and night is very likely to be made, especially since many deaths will follow sometime after hearing the owl's call in the first part of the night, and many of those deaths will have been of children. Owl associations with the supernatural were widespread in the ancient world from (at least) before the first millennium BCE. For example, the Little Owl was a sacred

bird in Athens, where Athena was often depicted in the form of an owl (Kitat 2019).

## Cognitive iIllusions and biases

People are prone to make systematic errors of judgment in decision-making depending on the way they perceive information and events. Tversky and Kahneman (Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Kahneman *et al* 1982) demonstrate numerous examples of "cognitive illusions", the possible explanations for systematic human errors in statistical and logical judgment. The cognitive illusions that they introduce then deliver empirical evidence that people's reasoning abilities are deficient with respect to the laws of logic and probability. Bruckmaier *et al* (2021) report psychological research over the subsequent decades confirming these findings, and also the methods that can be used to train people to overcome these inbuilt biases (known as heuristics).

One such heuristic that has been confirmed is the tendency of people to ascribe causality where events may correlate but not in a causal way. This is known as "illusions of causality". Matute *et al* (2015) state:

> Such illusions have been proposed to underlie pseudoscience and superstitious thinking, sometimes leading to disastrous consequences in relation to critical life areas, such as health, finances, and wellbeing. Like optical illusions, they can occur for anyone under well-known conditions.

This has been demonstrated experimentally and the difficulty of reducing such cognitive biases has also been demonstrated (Matute *et al* 2015). In addition, it has been shown that people are more likely to attribute external events to unrelated causes when those events are negative rather than neutral or positive (Morewedge 2009). We seem to be "hardwired" to attribute events to causes, even when there is no causal connection. This is how cognitive biases can result in superstitious belief. The attribution of negative events such as death at night to the presence of owls should be seen in this context. Thus the call of the Lilith Owl, heard as "lee-lee" could have become linked to לילה *laylah*, Hebrew for 'night' (e.g., Hutter 1999), and thence to the associations of death and evil, including the death of children, with darkness. Hartert gives a relevant example, explaining how superstitions become attached to a bird with the example of the Little Owl in Germany:

> It is not uncommon to hear a double sound, the second syllable of which is higher, and which sounds like 'coo-viff, coo-viff'; this call once gave the bird the name of the *Totenvogel* (Death Bird) with the

> superstitious peasants, because the 'coo-viff' was interpreted as 'come with' [i.e., *komme mit*]. (Hartert 1910–1922:1002, author's translation)

Totenvogel, therefore, is a vernacular name for the Little Owl based on the resemblance of 'coo-viff' with '*komme mit*'. The bird call is first modified in hearing to represent a known word or phrase, which is then interpreted as an invitation to death.

## Lilith timeline summary

1. The Hebrew word *lilith* dating from before 700 BCE is an onomatopoeia derived from the call of the Lilith Owl, *Athene (noctua) lilith*, but with a feminine ending that indicates a feminine symbolism from the outset.
2. At some time prior to 200 BCE, Hebrew scholars in the Hellenistic environment of Alexandria had lost the original meaning, and decided to appropriate a creature from Greek mythology, the onocentaur. This stands out as the only time *lilith* has not been associated with the feminine gender.
3. The Dead Sea scroll 4Q511 dating from late first century BCE/early first century CE is the earliest available evidence that *lilith* is identified in a Hebrew text as a demon.
4. Just prior to 400 CE, the Latin Vulgate translation gives *lilith* as the Lamia of Greek mythology, a female creature of darkness believed to kill children.
5. Written at an unknown date between 800 and 1000 CE, the Alphabet of Ben Sira conflates the features of several female figures of Greek mythology to create the figure of Lilith as now widely recognised.
6. From no later than the 1860s, European Biblical scholarship was divided on the identification of *lilith* and how the word should be translated. This debate appears to have influenced the reading and translation of a few ANE archaeological discoveries, and later corrections have been ignored.
7. During the later twentieth century, modern feminism adopted Lilith as an iconic symbol.
8. In the twenty-first century, Lilith has become a well-known figure that is very widely used in media and entertainment.

## Conclusions

The evidence from the onomatopoeia group decision-making experiments supplies strong positive OP correlations for the word *lilith* only with the call of

the Lilith Owl. This means that the original derivation of that word was probably the call of this bird, and quite possibly influenced in its spelling and vocalisation by the high pitch of the call and its resemblance to the Hebrew word לילה *laylah* 'night'. This has validated the decision of Hartert (1910–1922:1006) to name the Lilith Owl *Athene noctua lilith* as a distinct sub-species of the Little Owl. It has also validated translators who continue to prefer to translate *lilith* as an owl rather than a mythical creature.

The work of Matute *et al* (2015) has facilitated our understanding of how "illusions of causality" provide a plausible explanation for the popular connections of owls in general to death, including the death of children.

The fact that the LXX translators did not know the original meaning of the word only five hundred years after the original document may reflect the fact that the Lilith Owl was probably outside their experience, as their community in Alexandria, Egypt, had been separated from the territorial range of the bird for about two centuries by then.

There are possible linguistic connections between *lilith* and ANE words for night, wind, and perhaps the deity Lel (which would certainly be unlikely for the Hebrew scriptures), but nothing that relates to the distinct features of the later Jewish myths. This finding confirms the opinions of Kosior (2018), Aharoni (1938), Clements (1980), and Oswalt (1986).

Greek mythology supplies all the necessary ingredients required to develop the Lilith of ABS. It should be recalled that much of Jewish scholarship had been surrounded by Hellenistic culture for several hundred years by the time the ABS was written.

A preference for supernatural and iconic associations with attractive female forms does seem to have influenced the judgment of many archaeologists and Biblical scholars during the twentieth century, although the possible psychological factors involved in this set of cognitive biases are outside the scope of this investigation.

The Isaiah passage that refers to the presence of *lilith* only speaks about a condition of desolation and ruined buildings, a habitat where even today you could expect to find a range of owl species. If a warm dry climate is involved, then the Lilith Owl would be a strong candidate. The use of this specific owl in Isaiah 34:14 suggests that the writer was aware of the Lilith Owl's preference for nesting away from human habitation, thus emphasising the desolation coming to Edom.

While it is not possible to know what associations the writer of Isaiah may have had in mind concerning owls, the fact is that the name used had a feminine ending, unlike most of the other creatures listed in the surrounding passage. This suggests a possible awareness of mythology concerning owls in adjacent cultures. The implied assignment of a feminine gender while referring to a natural bird

(which they must have known came in both male and female sexes) also conveys a degree of symbolism.

There is a clear psychological logic behind the superstitions concerning owls, and our findings show the connection between the call of the Lilith Owl, female voices, and nighttime, and thus death.

The original identity of the *lilith* was lost at some point prior to 200 BCE, and the word was eventually transferred from a bird to a mythic female demon. Even so, the connection with an owl was retained, probably because of illusions of causality connecting owls with death.

The double shriek of the original Hebrew word became free to be connected with the female demon, an iconicity that now operates in parallel with the original meaning. The sound of Lilith as presently used in English with short vowel sounds and soft <th> ending probably also conveys a feminine iconicity.

The Hebrew word לִילִית *lilith* found (only) in Isaiah 34:14 should be translated Lilith Owl, but the identification of the character of Lilith as a beautiful flying female demon has some twelve hundred years of accumulated history behind it. Its popularity as a character for the entertainment media and movements such as feminism and modern witchcraft is such that this association is now ineradicable.

# Appendix A: Identifications of Birds Listed in Leviticus 11:13–19, and a Schedule of Sound File Links for Owls Tested Against *Lilith*

Proposed English translations of the nineteen birds in Leviticus 11:13–19

From Johnson and Jenson 2023: an attempt to identify the birds of Leviticus 11:13–19 using onomatopoeia. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 48:2, giving correlations with LXX, Vulgate, and Onomatopoeic (OP) tests.

| | **Hebrew** | | **Suggested translation** | **Correlations** (*with OP test, LXX and Vulgate*) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | נֶשֶׁר | *nesher* | Eagle | Weak OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 2 | פֶּרֶס | *peres* | Vulture | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 3 | עָזְנִיָּה | *ʻozniyah* | Short-toed Snake Eagle | Good OP. If Pliny's *haliaietos*, then LXX, Vulgate |
| 4 | דָּאָה | *da'ah* | Kite | Good OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 5 | אַיָּה | *'ayah* | Falcon | Strong OP |
| 6 | עֹרֵב | *ʻorev* | Raven | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 7 | בַּת יַּעֲנָה | *bath yaʻanah* | Desert Owl | Strong OP |
| 8 | תַּחְמָס | *tachmas* | Little Owl | Not OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 9 | שַׁחַף | *shachaph* | Seagull | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 10 | נֵץ | *nets* | Hawk | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 11 | כּוֹס | *kos* | Long-eared Owl | Good OP, LXX |
| 12 | שָׁלָךְ | *shalak* | Cormorant | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13 | יַנְשׁוּף | *yanshuph* | Eagle Owl | Strong OP (LXX, Vulgate, implied from *charadrios*) |
| 14 | תִּנְשֶׁמֶת | *tinshemet* | Flamingo | Good OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 15 | קָאַת | *qa'ath* | Pelican | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 16 | רָחָם | *racham* | Crane | Strong OP |
| 17 | חֲסִידָה | *chasidah* | Ibis | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 18 | אֲנָפָה | *'anaphah* | Heron | Good OP, LXX, Vulgate |
| 19 | דוּכִיפַת | dukiphath | Hoopoe | Strong OP, LXX, Vulgate |

Schedule of sound file links for *lilith* onomatopoeia surveys (accessed 8 August 2025)

| **Name** | **Latin** | **Sound file** |
|---|---|---|
| Barn owl | *Tyto alba* | https://www.xeno-canto.org/447058 |
| Lilith Owl | *Athene noctua lilith* | https://www.xeno-canto.org/329983 |
| Little Owl | *Athene noctua* | https://www.xeno-canto.org/454247 |
| Long-eared Owl | *Asio otus* | https://www.xeno-canto.org/277492 |
| Desert Owl | *Strix hadorami* | https://www.xeno-canto.org/181552 |

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