EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

Demons of Mesopotamian Mythology in the Hebrew Bible

The Genesis and Character of the Process of Influence

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1 Demons of Mesopotamian Mythology in the Hebrew Bible. The Genesis and Character of the Process of Interactions

Exegetical Analysis

1.1 Thesis and Scope

The question of "demons of Mesopotamian mythology in the Bible" first requires a correction of how the problem is framed. The Hebrew Bible does not contain a ready-made and autonomous demonology adopted from Babylonia or Assyria. Nor is it a collection of texts completely isolated from the religious imaginary of the ancient Near East. A more accurate statement is intermediary: biblical authors used words, figures, ritual patterns, and images of threat known in the broader Semitic-Mesopotamian world, but subordinated them to their own vision of God, cult, and history. As a result, similar elements do not function in the Bible in the same way as in Mesopotamian incantation texts, but are reformulated polemically, ritually, and poetically.

> ***Main thesis:*** *Mesopotamian influence does not take the form of a simple "import of demons," but rather a* ***selective transformation of the shared repertoire of the ancient Near East****. In the Bible, menacing entities and personifications are most often stripped of cultic autonomy, associated with the wasteland or ruin, and ultimately subordinated to the exclusive sovereignty of YHWH.*

In the present study, the term "Bible" primarily denotes the Hebrew Bible, with auxiliary consideration of the Septuagint as an early testimony of reception. Furthermore, "Mesopotamia" is not treated as a uniform culture: it encompasses the long history of Sumerian-Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian traditions. In addition, some of the most important biblical analogies—especially Resheph—belong more properly to the West Semitic, Syrian, and Ugaritic environment than to Mesopotamia in the strict sense. This distinction is necessary because a simple axis of "Babylon → Bible" obscures both the role of the Levant and the active work of Israelite and Judean tradents.

Degree of Conclusion	Significance in Further Analysis	Example
Strong	lexical convergence or a clear, well-attested historical context	possible connection between the Hebrew *šēdîm* and the Akkadian *šēdu*; the late Babylonian environment of incantation masses
Probable	similarity of word, function, and image, but without proof of direct borrowing	*lilît* in Isa 34:14 and Akkadian *lilītu*
Possible, yet disputed	the parallel requires several uncertain philological or historical steps	connection of *rōbēṣ* in Gen 4:7 with Akkadian *rābiṣu*; the specific status of Azazel

Degree of Conclusion	Significance in Further Analysis	Example
Unwarranted	later tradition is anachronistically introduced into the biblical text	Lilith as Adam's first wife in the exegesis of Isa 34:14; Azazel from 1 Enoch as the direct meaning of Lev 16

1.2 1. The Problem of Definition: What Was a "Demon" in the Ancient World?

In modern, and especially popular Christian usage, a "demon" generally denotes a personal, radically evil adversary of God belonging to a coherent kingdom of darkness. Such a definition cannot be applied without remainder either to Mesopotamia or to the Hebrew Bible. Akkadian and Sumerian texts employ numerous designations: *udug/utukku*, *rābiṣu*, *asakku*, *alu*, *gallu*, *līlû*, *lilītu*, *Lamaštu*, and others. These names do not refer to a single ontological class. They may designate agents of disease, the spirit of the dead, a dangerous desert entity, a liminal being, an executor of a deity's decision, or a figure integrated into an apotropaic ritual. Furthermore, their relationship to the gods is not uniform: some are entirely malevolent toward humans, others are ambivalent, and still others operate within the order established by the gods.[1] [2]

C. L. Crouch rightly points out that the category of "the demon as an inherently evil entity" can distort the sources. In her analysis of the Akkadian *rābiṣu*, the researcher demonstrates that a dangerous lower-tier entity can be understood as an executor of a divine mission rather than an independent rebel against the supreme god. "Evil" then describes the experience of a human afflicted by disease, misfortune, or judgment, rather than the absolute moral essence of the agent.[3] This observation does not remove the reality of conceptions concerning entities attacking humans, but it requires caution: in ancient texts, the supernatural threat is often above all a **function** within the cosmic and ritual order.

Similar caution should be maintained regarding the Bible. Hebrew does not possess a single technical term corresponding to the Polish word "demon." Instead, various terms appear: *šēdîm* (Deut 32:17; Ps 106:37), *śeʿîrîm* ("goats / goat-like entities"; Lev 17:7; Isa 13:21; 34:14), *lilît* (Isa 34:14), *ʿăzāʾzēl* (Lev 16), as well as personified names of destructive plagues: *deber*, *qeṭeb*, and *rešep*. Their literary status is diverse. *Šēdîm* appear in polemics against sacrifices to "no-gods"; Azazel in the description of the purification ritual; *lilît* in the catalog of ruin inhabitants; while *deber*, *qeṭeb*, and *rešep* in poetry where pestilence, burning heat, and death form God's retinue or instruments. Thus, one cannot propose a single answer for the entire material.[4] [5]

1.3 2. Mesopotamian Comparative Horizon: Disease, Threshold, House, and Ritual

The best-documented area of Mesopotamian demonology is the practice of defense against misfortune. Incantation texts, amulets, and figurines do not construct an abstract treatise on evil, but rather respond to specific threats: fever, insomnia, shortness of breath, pregnancy complications, childbirth, child mortality, animal disease, curses, and witchcraft. In this world, misfortune could have a physical cause, but its enigmatic and violent nature allowed it to be perceived as an attack by a supernatural entity or force. The

response consisted of identifying the perpetrator, uttering their name, invoking a higher deity, performing an incantation, and applying a material protective measure.[1] [2]

A particularly vivid example is Lamaštu. The canonical series of incantations and rituals against this entity belonged to the central texts of Mesopotamian apotropaic practice. Lamaštu is depicted as a menacing female entity threatening pregnant women, women in labor, and infants, sometimes as the "daughter of Anu." Her hybrid iconography—lion-like features, claws, bird-like elements, and naked breasts—visualizes the transgression of boundaries between the human, the animal, and the divine. Objects and texts concerning Lamaštu show that for the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, the house, the birth bed, doors, windows, and thresholds were spaces particularly vulnerable to the intrusion of danger.[6] [7]

In rituals against Lamaštu and related threats, figurines, knots, amulets, incantations, and protective images of Pazuzu were used. A preserved ritual description provides for the manufacture of a Lamaštu figurine, placing it near a sick child, and subsequently carrying it out and burying it outside the house or by a wall. Other procedures placed dog figurines at thresholds and windows to ward off evil.[7] This does not prove that every biblical motif of the wilderness, removal, or impurity derives directly from Lamaštu texts. However, it demonstrates a widely disseminated logic: the threat is localized, named, materially separated, and banished outside the protected space.

It is precisely at this point that the biblical difference becomes visible. Lev 16 knows the act of carrying away guilt and impurity into the wilderness, and Ps 91 speaks of nocturnal and diurnal terrors. However, these descriptions lack the technique proper to Mesopotamian exorcism: there is no incantation negotiating with the entity, no list of its names, no figurine serving as a surrogate "body" of the demon, nor an amulet as a normative means of defense. Lev 16 presents the liturgy of the sanctuary of YHWH, while Ps 91 bases protection on dwelling "in the shelter of the Most High." The similarity in function—the removal of evil, protection against disease—does not cancel out the differing theology of agency.[7] [8]

1.4 3. The Genesis of Contact: Not a Single Path, but Three Overlapping Layers

Considering influence requires distinguishing at least three levels. The first is the **common resource of the ancient Near East**. Semitic languages, trade, migrations, dynastic marriages, military service, administration, and scribal practice ensured that words and images could circulate long before they were recorded in surviving texts. In such a horizon, the similarity of a term does not necessarily indicate a unidirectional borrowing. It may signify a common linguistic heritage, parallel development, or mediation by North Syrian and Canaanite cultures.

The second layer consists of **actual imperial and scribal contacts**. From the 8th century BC onwards, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah remained under strong Assyrian pressure; subsequently, the fall of Judah, deportations, and the life of a portion of the elites in Babylonia created direct conditions for more intense contact with Akkadian culture. This does not automatically mean that every subsequently edited text was composed in exile or that every motif is "Babylonian." Rather, it means that biblical authors and editors operated in a world where Mesopotamia's administration, languages, wisdom traditions, and literary repertoires were accessible, albeit unevenly so for various social groups.[9] [10]

The third layer is **later Jewish reception**. In the Second Temple period, and especially in Enochic literature, Qumran writings, rabbinic traditions, and Aramaic incantation bowls from Babylonia, Azazel and Lilith acquire much clearer demonic biographies. This is a real process in the formation of Jewish

demonology, but it cannot be projected directly back onto the meaning of Lev 16 or Isa 34. Therefore, one must distinguish between the **impact on the language of the Bible** and the **later use of the Bible in the environment of Babylonian magic and demonology**.11 12

Layer of Process	Type of Contact	What It Can Explain	What Must Not Be Derived from It
Common Semitic-Near Eastern environment	language, symbols, folklore, rituals	similarities of names, desert, disease, threshold entities	theses about a specific author copying a single Mesopotamian text
Levant, Ugarit, Syria	West Semitic cultures and trade channels	Resheph, steppe imagery, part of religious vocabulary	reduction of all analogies to Babylon
Assyria and Babylonia	empire, administration, deportations, scribes	intensification of contact and possible lexical borrowings	the assumption that the entire Bible is a product of exile
Second Temple reception and later	interpretation, translation, magic, exegesis	the demonization of Azazel and the development of Lilith	attribution of these late features to the Masoretic text

1.5 4. *Šēdîm* and *śeʿîrîm*: Cultic Polemic, Not a Mesopotamian Demon Catalog

The closest candidate for a Hebrew term with a Mesopotamian background is *šēdîm*. The noun occurs in the Hebrew Bible only twice: in Deuteronomy 32:17 and Psalm 106:37. The Song of Moses states: "They sacrificed to *šēdîm*, no-god; to gods whom they had not known." The Psalm, meanwhile, commenting on Israel's idolatry, states that sons and daughters were sacrificed to *šēdîm*. The context of both passages is unequivocally cultic and polemic. The term does not describe an episode of possession or an independent mythology, but rather delegitimizes the recipients of the forbidden cult: they are a "no-god" in opposition to YHWH.13

The etymology of *šēdîm* is often linked to the Akkadian *šēdu*. The Akkadian term can denote a spirit, genius, or protective being; it is not restricted to a being that is evil by nature. For this reason, the transition from *šēdu* to the biblical *šēdîm* is not simple proof that the Israelites adopted a belief in evil demons. It is more likely that a known word for foreign supernatural beings was negatively charged within biblical discourse because it referred to objects of sacrifice outside the exclusive cult of YHWH. Thus, the polemic does not necessarily deny the existence of foreign powers; it strips them of divine dignity and cultic legitimacy.3 13

This case clearly illustrates the character of the process. If the relation *šēdîm* — *šēdu* is correct, we are dealing with a possible borrowing or adaptation of a **lexeme**, rather than the adoption of an entire myth. Hebrew semantics effects a shift: a being that in Mesopotamia may also be protective becomes in the biblical text the name of foreign recipients of forbidden sacrifice. Biblical monotheism does not necessarily create a word from scratch; rather, it reorganizes its value within the framework of the dispute over covenantal fidelity.

Another group is formed by *śeʿîrîm*, literally "hairy goats" or "goat-like beings." Leviticus 17:7 forbids the Israelites from sacrificing to *śeʿîrîm*, after which they "whore," and 2 Chronicles 11:15 links this term with the illegitimate cult established by Jeroboam. In Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14, *śeʿîr* already belongs to the landscape of desolate ruins: it calls out to its companion among wild animals, in a place where no human city endures. The translation "goat-demons" is possible, but not compulsory; the semantic field encompasses both the animal and the conception of a caprine desert being.

However, there are no good grounds to consider *śeʿîrîm* primarily as "Mesopotamian demons." The image of the goat, the satyr, and the wild, hairy inhabitant of the wasteland has deep roots in the local Levantine world and in the biblical symbolism of places outside the camp and outside the city. The fact that later translations and reception demonize these beings is an important testimony to the history of interpretation, but it does not determine their original status. In the analysis of influences, one should therefore adopt a distinction: *šēdîm* are a stronger example of a possible connection with Akkadian vocabulary, while *śeʿîrîm* illustrate primarily the biblical topography of the desert and illegitimate cult.5 6

1.6 5. Azazel in Leviticus 16: The Ritual Removal of Impurity, Not a Sacrifice to a Demon

The ritual of Leviticus 16 is among the most frequently cited texts in discussions of biblical demonology. Two goats stand "before YHWH" at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; Aaron casts lots: "one lot for YHWH and the other lot for Azazel" (Lev 16:8). The goat for YHWH is offered as a purification offering. By contrast, the live goat is presented before YHWH to perform the rite of expiation over it, after which it is sent away into the wilderness. The priest confesses the sins of Israel over it, and the animal "shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land" (16:21–22). The person leading the goat then purifies themselves before returning to the camp.14

The syntax "for YHWH / for Azazel" suggests that Azazel may be a personal name. However, this parallelism does not determine that Azazel is a deity equal to YHWH or that it receives a sacrifice. The animal is not killed in the wilderness for Azazel; it is sent away outside the sphere of the sanctuary, the camp, and the ordered community. The foundation of the ritual is the purification of the temple, the priests, and the people from impurity and sins, rather than negotiating with God's desert adversary. Even if the text assumes the existence of a personal entity or a specific place named Azazel, its status in the ritual is subordinate to the liturgy of YHWH.6 14

In scholarship, there are four main solutions. The first sees Azazel as a supernatural desert entity, perhaps a demon or a degraded deity. The second understands the name as a place, specifically an inaccessible, rocky wasteland. The third derives the meaning from the function of the "scapegoat" (or "goat of dismissal"), although the details of the etymology are debated. The fourth treats the term as a preserved proper name whose original meaning has faded, but whose function in the composition remains legible: the antithesis between the sanctuary and the chaos of the wilderness. Exegetically, it is safest to leave the referent of the name open, while what remains certain is its **ritual effect**—the removal of guilt outside the boundaries of the holy community.6 15

The Septuagint testifies that the name already posed a difficulty for the Greek translators. In its initial occurrences in Leviticus 16, it uses forms based on the root *apopomp-*, associated with the driving away or sending away of evil, and in verse 26 it renders the meaning as "for the release / sending away" (*eis aphesis*). This is not proof that the Hebrew text did not know the figure of Azazel; rather, it is testimony

to a hermeneutical decision to understand the name through the function of the ritual rather than to perpetuate an obscure proper name. Later Greek and rabbinic interpretations as a "rocky place" follow a similar path.14

In particular, Leviticus 16 must be separated from the later Azazel of 1 Enoch 8–10. In Enochic literature, Azazel/Asael is a fallen angel, a teacher of violence, weapons, ornaments, and iniquity; he is bound and cast into the wilderness. This narrative creatively develops elements present in Leviticus 16—the wilderness, the removal of sin, and the unusual name—but it is not a straightforward explanation of the intention of the priestly ritual. The direction of dependence is more likely the reverse: the later tradition reads the obscure rite through the myth of the fallen beings and makes Azazel a fuller figure of cosmic evil.14 16

Comparison with Mesopotamia has a limited but real value here. Mesopotamian rituals are familiar with the removal of a threat through a substitute figure, the transfer of evil, and its removal outside the protected space. However, one must not conclude from this that the goat of Leviticus 16 is a copy of a Lamaštu figurine or that Azazel is an Akkadian demon in Hebrew disguise. The character of the biblical transformation lies precisely in the fact that the ritual of purification is incorporated into the sole cult of YHWH and the theology of holiness, rather than into the exorcism system of a magic specialist.

1.7 6. *Lilît* in Isa 34:14: Night Creature, Bird, or Echo of *lilītu*?

Unlike Azazel, *lilît* appears only once in the Hebrew Bible. Isaiah 34 is an oracle against Edom. The imagery of destruction is extreme: the land transforms into a scorched wasteland, fortresses become overgrown with thorns, and the place of humans is taken over by wild animals and creatures associated with the night. In verse 14, we read that desert animals will meet with hyenas, the *śeʿîr* will call out to its companion, and there *lilît* will "repose" and find a resting place for herself. Verse 15 continues the catalog of nesting and reproducing animals. Therefore, it must first be noted that the function of *lilît* in the current text is to complete the picture of **total desolation**: the ruins are not an alternative demonic world, but rather an anti-city, a place of the absence of human life and political order.6 17

The connection with the Akkadian terms *līlû*, *lilītu*, and *ardat-lilî* is linguistically and culturally probable. In Mesopotamian sources, these names designate distinct yet related beings and dangers, associated, among other things, with the night, wind, eroticism, disruption of sexual relations, or danger to the family. Their image is not identical to Lamaštu. It would be particularly erroneous to merge all female entities into a single unchanging "Lilith": the traditions of *lilītu* and Lamaštu are distinct, although later Jewish, magical, and artistic imagination repeatedly combined them.1 6

Does *lilît* in Isa 34:14 therefore designate a specific female demon? The answer must remain conditional. Supporting the demonic reading are the phonetic convergence with *lilītu*, the feminine form, and the presence in the landscape of nocturnal, non-human inhabitants of the wasteland. Supporting the zoological reading, in turn, are the immediate context of the animal catalog, the parallelism with nesting and reproduction, and the uncertainty as to whether the author expected the audience to recognize a specific Mesopotamian figure. Judit M. Blair defends the interpretation of a "night bird"; this is a necessary counter-voice against the automatic identification of the word with the later Lilith.6

The most honest exegesis therefore preserves the ambiguity: *lilît* may be the name of a nocturnal creature whose sound and connotations evoke the broader Near Eastern imaginary of nocturnal beings. However, one should neither eliminate all supernatural associations nor introduce the full biography of Lilith into

the text. The verse itself does not speak of seducing men, killing infants, disobedience to Adam, or Lilith's conflict with angels. All these motifs derive from later layers of tradition and have their own history.6 18
The Septuagint well illustrates the creative difficulty of translation. The Greek text of Isa 34:14 does not transliterate *lilît*, but transforms the entire catalog into the language of *daimonia* and fantastical *onokentauroi* ("onocentaurs"). The Greek version does not constitute a neutral lexicon of Hebrew animal names; it testifies that the translators or the translational tradition read the landscape of ruins through the categories of demons and hybrids familiar to them. Thus, a significant difference obtains between the Masoretic Text and the LXX: the Hebrew preserves a single, obscure term *lilît*, whereas the Greek demonizes and mythologizes the landscape more broadly.17

> "*There lilît shall repose and find for herself a resting place*" (Isa 34:14, translation of the sense of the Hebrew text). This is not a definition of her nature; it is an element of the poetic image of the world after judgment.17

1.8 7. *Deber*, *qeṭeb*, and *rešep*: Disease as a Person, But Not an Independent Opponent

The most complex group is formed by *deber*, *qeṭeb*, and *rešep*. These terms are translated respectively as "pestilence," "destroying plague / destruction," and "flame, arrow, scorching pestilence." In certain contexts — especially Deut 32:24; Ps 91:3, 6; Hab 3:5; Hos 13:14 — they are so strongly personified that some scholars see in them traces of ancient deities or disease demons. Others emphasize that these are metaphorical personifications of the consequences of judgment. The debate is significant, but it should not be resolved by the method of "either pure metaphor or a fully-fledged demon." Ancient poetry can use substantive personification without creating an autonomous pantheon.5 19
Deber appears multiple times in the Bible, primarily in catalogues of disasters alongside the sword and famine. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it signifies a destructive disease or pestilence as an instrument of punishment for unfaithfulness. In these contexts, it is usually a noun describing misfortune, but misfortune is not an impersonal contingency: YHWH "sends" it. In Hab 3:5, the image becomes more dynamic: "Before Him goes *deber*, and *rešep* goes forth at His feet." The scene belongs to a theophanic hymn in which YHWH arrives as a divine warrior and moves mountains and nations. The pestilence and the destructive heat form His retinue.5 19
This approach has clear analogies in the literatures of the ancient Near East, where disease, pestilence, or personified catastrophe can accompany a great deity. However, the analogy does not lead to polytheism in the text of Habakkuk. On the contrary: the poem constructs a hierarchy. *Deber* does not make independent decisions, does not receive cultic worship, and does not enter into combat with YHWH; it "goes before Him." Even if the vocabulary retains a trace of an older conception, it is integrated into the language of theophany. This is an example not so much of simple "demythologization" as of **the recomposition of myth as poetry about the dominion of YHWH**.5 19
In Ps 91, the situation is even more subtle. The psalm assures the person who dwells under the protection of the Most High that they will not fear "the terror of the night," "the arrow that flies by day," *deber* "walking in darkness," nor *qeṭeb* "wasting at noonday" (Ps 91:5–6). The four threats form a rhythmic series: night and day, air and movement, disease and catastrophe. In many ancient societies, such an enumeration could evoke specific demons of times of day or diseases. However, there is no need to presume that each term

was a proper name. The key result is: security does not consist in knowing the demon's name, but in a relationship with God, who is a "refuge and fortress."5 19

Qeṭeb appears only four times: Deut 32:24; Ps 91:6; Isa 28:2; Hos 13:14. Its etymology and exact meaning remain uncertain. In Isa 28:2, it resembles a violent downpour and a destructive flood; in Ps 91, it signifies the noonday plague; in Hos 13:14, it stands in parallelism with *deber* in a speech directed to Death and Sheol. This convergence does not justify automatically postulating a "demon Qeteb" with a uniform biography. It is more likely that a poetic word for destruction can assume personal dynamics depending on the context. Such a cautious assessment is proposed by both Blair and Jancovic's more recent semantic study.6 19

Special attention is required by *rešep*. Outside the Bible, Resheph is a well-attested West Semitic deity, known from Ebla, Ugarit, Phoenicia, and Egypt; he was associated with war, heat, arrows, disease, and royal protection. Ugaritic lists of deities juxtapose him with the Akkadian Nergal, which opens the way for Mesopotamian comparisons, but does not allow reducing Resheph to an Akkadian "plague demon." He is primarily a god of multiple functions, not a simple equivalent of a demonic figure.19

In the Bible, *rešep* is also ambiguous. It can mean fiery arrows (Ps 76:4), the flame of love (Song 8:6), sparks flying upward (Job 5:7), and in Deut 32:24 and Hab 3:5 — a destructive, perhaps pestilential force. It is precisely this plurality of uses that weakens the view that in every instance we are dealing with a hidden name of a deity. At the same time, the fact that *rešep* in Hab 3:5 appears alongside *deber* in the retinue of YHWH, and in Deut 32:24 alongside *qeṭeb*, allows us to recognize the conscious use of imagery with numinous intensity. The author does not remove these images from language; he uses them to state that even the most threatening heat, pestilence, and death are at the disposal of the God of Israel.6 19

1.9 8. *Rābiṣu* in Gen 4:7: The Limits of the Philological Argument

Gen 4:7 contains an enigmatic statement addressed to Cain: "sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." The Hebrew participle *rōbēṣ* ("crouching, lying in wait") is sometimes compared with the Akkadian *rābiṣu*, the designation of a lurking entity associated with the threshold, the wind, or an attack. The comparison has a certain appeal: the scene at the door, the threat awaiting the human, and the Semitic proximity of the root create a chain of associations. Crouch suggests treating Akkadian texts as an aid in reading the functional nature of the threat, rather than as proof that Gen 4:7 describes a demon of unambiguously evil nature.3

Nevertheless, restraint must be exercised. The subject of the Hebrew sentence is primarily "sin" (*ḥaṭṭāʾt*), rather than a named entity. The grammatical ambiguity may signal the imagery of a predator or a personified force, but it does not in itself prove the borrowing of Akkadian demonology. The most valuable aspect of this parallel is not that it "discovers a hidden demon," but that it recalls the ancient experience of the threshold: the door is a boundary point where chaos, illness, bad fortune, and social violence can "wait" to break into the ordered world. In Gen 4, the text transfers this imagery to the ethical plane. Cain is not required to perform a ritual, but to master sin.3

1.10 9. Four Mechanisms of Biblical Transformation

The analyzed material does not form a uniform path of development, but four recurring mechanisms can be distinguished. The first is **cultic polemic**. The *šēdîm* are not described from within as a group of demons, but from the perspective of exclusive loyalty to YHWH. The term becomes a label for the alien recipients

of forbidden sacrifice. The ontological question—"do they exist?"—is secondary to the covenantal question—"to whom is sacrifice permitted?".13

The second mechanism is **topographical banishment of chaos**. The wilderness, the "cutoff land," the ruins of Edom, and the nocturnal wasteland are places to which guilt is banished or inhabited by beings that do not belong to the ordered city and sanctuary. Azazel and *lilît* operate in this register differently: the former through the ritual of removal, the latter through the image of poetic desolation. In both cases, the wasteland does not constitute a parallel kingdom of evil with a power symmetrical to God. Rather, it is a negative space outside of holiness, order, and human protection.

The third is **personification of negative power**. *Deber*, *qeṭeb*, and *rešep* are not merely abstract words, because the texts make them walk, stride, devastate, attack, or accompany God. However, in these texts they are not autonomous figures with their own cults and narratives. Their "personality" is poetic and functional: it actualizes the horror of disease and destruction while allowing it to be presented as a force subject to God. This is far more complex than a simple designation as "demon" or "metaphor".5 19

The fourth mechanism is **monotheizing hierarchization**. The Hebrew Bible does not necessarily remove all traces of lower beings, angels, spirits, chaos monsters, or foreign deities. However, it repeatedly places them on a lower level: they are "non-gods," elements of the landscape, agents of judgment, or names of impurity removed from before the face of YHWH. In this perspective, the most important difference from many Mesopotamian texts does not consist in the absence of threatening entities, but in the reorganization of their power. The Mesopotamian *āšipu* must recognize and ward off many threats using specialized rituals; the biblical poet can name the plague and the midday destruction, but confesses that humanity finds safety in God.2 5

Element	Mesopotamian Environment	Hebrew Bible	Character of Transformation
Disease and misfortune	possible attack by many entities; diagnosis and exorcism	plague as catastrophe, sometimes agent of YHWH's judgment	subordination of agency to God
House and threshold	amulets, figurines, spells, protection against intrusion	threshold as an image of threat; lack of a normative catalog of exorcisms	ethicization and literary personification
Wasteland	place of remoteness, danger, and foreign entities	Azazel, ruins of Edom, *śeʿîrîm*, *lilît*	symbolic opposite of sanctuary and city
Names of entities	knowledge of the name is part of ritual control	names are rare, unclear, and do not form a practical manual of magic	restriction of the demonological system

Element	Mesopotamian Environment	Hebrew Bible	Character of Transformation
Deity and evil	complex network of gods, demons, and ritual specialists	YHWH as the supreme judge, defender, and source of salvation	monotheizing hierarchization

1.11 10. Later Demonization: Why Azazel and Lilith Seem More "Biblical" Than They Are

For the modern reader, Azazel and Lilith are almost automatically demons. This stems from a powerful history of reception. Azazel acquired the persona of a fallen angel, a teacher of evil, and a desert prisoner in Second Temple texts; later he became a figure close to the devil. Lilith, on the other hand, was developed in rabbinic and magical traditions as a nocturnal assailant, a threat to women in childbirth and children, and in the medieval *Alphabet of Ben Sira* she received a narrative about conflict with Adam. In late antiquity, Jewish incantation bowls from Babylonia show that biblical names and texts participated in a world of protective practices with a distinct Mesopotamian heritage.14 20

However, this is not a reason to ignore the biblical text. On the contrary, later reception proves that its dark, obscure, and suggestive figures possessed immense interpretive potential. Lev 16 provided the schema of the desert and the transfer of guilt; Isa 34:14 — an enigmatic nocturnal female name; Gen 6:1–4 — a possible starting point for myths about fallen angels; Ps 91 — the language of defense against nocturnal and diurnal threats. Late texts are therefore not a worthless addition, but rather testimony to the **afterlife** of biblical imagery. The only mistake is replacing their meaning in the original context with these later interpretations.

In this light, the process is bidirectional. On the one hand, the ancient environment of Mesopotamia and the Levant provided the Bible with words and imagery recognizable to its audience. On the other hand, the Bible itself, having reworked these images within the theology of YHWH, subsequently became a resource from which Jewish and Christian demonologies crafted more developed figures. Therefore, we do not merely have "Mesopotamian influence on the Bible"; we have a long history of reciprocal tradition-processing in the region.

1.12 Conclusion

An exegetical response to the question regarding demons of Mesopotamian mythology in the Hebrew Bible must reject two simplifications. The first maintains that the Bible knows no demons whatsoever because it is monotheistic. The second claims that all difficult terms are evidence of a hidden, repressed Babylonian demonology. The former fails to perceive the real presence of menacing beings, personifications, desert names, and cultic polemics; the latter fails to read the function of these elements in specific texts with sufficient attentiveness.

The strongest result of the comparison is as follows. The Bible remains in dialogue with the religious language of the ancient Near East: the possible Mesopotamian background of the *šēdîm*, the probable connection of *lilît* with the *lilītu* family, the Mesopotamian-West Semitic analogies to the personification of diseases, as well as the shared logic of expulsion rituals, point to genuine cultural contacts. However,

the biblical text disposes of each of these elements differently than does Mesopotamian incantatory ritual. The *šēdîm* are the "no-gods" of a foreign cult; Azazel functions as part of the purification ritual, not as a recipient of sacrifice; *lilît* inhabits literary ruins; *deber*, *qeṭeb*, and *rešep* make terror present, yet they walk in the shadow of the warrior God.

> ***The nature of the process is therefore selective, polemical, and theological.*** *Shared motifs are not erased, but rearranged within a new hierarchy. They are not independent powers with which humans must bargain through magic; they are names, images, or boundary agents in a world whose ultimate Lord remains YHWH.*

It is precisely this transformation—rather than simple borrowing—that best explains both the similarity and the difference between Mesopotamian demonology and the Hebrew Bible.

1.13 Bibliography and Sources