

**Thou Mother of Compassion, come
Come, thou revealer of the Mysteries concealed...
Come, thou who givest joy to all who are at one with Thee
Come and commune with us in this thanksgiving...**

—Gnostic hymn [Drinker, 150]

Before the Roman triumph of Christianity, serious disagreements had already appeared among the believers. Gnostics were the first Christians to be expelled from the church as heretics. But not all Gnostics were Christian. Jewish Gnosticism predated Christianity, and pagan Gnostics who praised Prometheus and the Titans for opposing the tyranny of Zeus. [Geger, 168; Godwin, 85] Persian dualism, Hellenistic Neo-Platonism, and Egyptian mysticism were all influential in shaping Gnosticism. There was no one unified body of Gnostic belief.

Though some Gnostic gospels were among the earliest Christian texts, all were banned from the orthodox canon that became the New Testament. Most people don't realize that the New Testament is a carefully screened selection from a much larger body of Christian scriptures. The others were not simply excluded from the official collection, but were systematically destroyed when Christianity became the state religion. [Epiphanius, in Legge, xliiii]

Egyptian Gnostics managed to protect an important cache of scriptures from the book-burners by burying them in large jars. Until the discovery of these Nag Hammadi scrolls in 1947, what little was known of the Gnostics came mostly from their sworn enemies, the orthodox clergy. [Pagels 1979: xxxv, xvii; Allegro, 108; Wentz, 363fn, lists a few surviving manuscripts known by 1900.] One of the few scriptures that did survive intact is the *Pistis Sophia*, while others are known fragmentarily from quotations in orthodox writings, especially those of Irenaeus and Hippolytus of Rome.

Among the anathematized scriptures were writings featuring Wisdom as a creative female divinity. Some highlighted female disciples of Yeshua, particularly Maryam of Magdala, as advanced initiates into secret teachings unknown to the male disciples. For example, the *Pistis Sophia* names Mary Magdalene, Salome and Martha. [Legge, 51, 55] Some Gnostics maintained that the three Marys were part of the inner circle of Christian disciples and that women were present at the Last Supper. (They must have been, since it was a Seder; the Christian bible says that Jesus “lay down at table” with the disciples—reclining was the custom at Seders). [Schussler-Fiorenza, 55] A woman, possibly Mary Magdalene, sits at the Last Supper in early murals of the Roman catacombs. [Drinker, 154-5]

Female leadership is a key theme in the writings, and in contemporary accounts about these communities. Tertullian complained that Gnostics elected women priests, bishops and prophets to baptize, teach, exorcize and heal. They rejected authoritarian priesthood and gave the kiss of peace to all: “they all have access equally, they listen equally, they pray equally—even pagans, if any happen to come.” [Pagels 1979: 42] Tertullian was horrified that females were not barred from priestly acts:

These heretical women—how audacious they are! They have no modesty; they are bold enough to teach, to engage in argument, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures, and, it may be, even to baptize! [*De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, in Pagels 1979: 60]

Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons noticed that women were especially drawn to heresy. He explained the female defections from his own congregation by calumniating the Gnostic Marcus as a sorcerer and seducer who used aphrodisiacs. The bishop refused to acknowledge the real reason for women’s attraction to this community: that Marcus encouraged women to prophesy (which meant to “preach,” in early Christian parlance). Another aspect of his congregation’s appeal were its prayers to feminine forms of the Divine—Wisdom, Silence, Grace. [Pagels 1979: 59] For Irenaeus these were just more reasons to disparage them.

The Gnostic approach to Christianity had a strong pagan tinge. Its symbolic teachings were transmitted “in secret and by a method of initiation and allegory which was directly copied from the Mysteries then current in the pagan world...” [Legge, iii, xli] For the institutional church, Jesus was divine in a way humans could never attain, and salvation came only through him. But Gnostics saw Jesus as a person who had attained realization, and they followed him in seeking the source of divinity in “the depth” of Being. [Valentinus, in Pagels 1979: 37]

In the *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus says, “I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling stream which I have measured out... He who will drink from my mouth will become as I am; I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him.” [Gospel of Thomas, 13, 108, online] Similar passages survived even in the canonical scriptures, here and there: “... you will do the same things I do. You will do even greater things than I do.” [John 14:12]

Gnostic spiritual practice aimed for reunion of human consciousness with the Pleroma, the “fullness” pervading the universe. [Allegro, 112-3] A saying attributed to Simon Magus describes “an infinite power... the root of the universe” living in everyone. [Hippolytus, in Pagels 1979: 134] The *Gospel of Truth* says “... in you dwells the light that does not fail...” [Pagels 1979: 128] The Arab Gnostic Monoimus taught that theology was not the right starting point, and counseled seekers to stop thinking about external matters, and to look for the divine within instead. Understanding would come from investigating the origins of the passions and involuntary states, and the discovery of Deity, “unity and plurality, in thyself.” The human is a reflection of the Mother-Father, which is like a musical harmony that “manifests all things, and generates all things.” [in Hippolytus, VIII, V, online]

These teachings were not new, nor were they uniquely Christian. In fact, when Yeshua says that “The kingdom of God is within you” he is speaking as a Jew, although his words are recorded in the Christian *Gospel of Luke*. Kemetic temple inscriptions exhorted the seeker to “Know thyself,” a saying later inscribed at Delphi. It was adopted by Greek sages like Socrates and Pindar, who wrote “Learn what you are and be such.” [Allegro, 223] Self-knowledge involved becoming aware of past lives, according to the Anatolian Theodotus, seeking consciousness of “who we were, and what we have become... from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth.” [Pagels 1979: xix]

Gnostics believed in the growth and perfectibility of the soul over countless lifetimes. They sought to progress through meditation, chanting, retreats to the wilderness, austerities, the praise of silence. Modern scholars remark on the similarities to Hinduism or Buddhism, something that the ancients recognized. Around the year 225, Hippolytus named the “brahmins” as an influence on Gnosticism, citing vegetarianism, the concept of god as light, and adepts wise in Nature’s mysteries. [Pagels 1979: xxi]

Many Christians believed in reincarnation, especially the Egyptians, including Origen and Synesius of Ptolemais. Origen's writings show his conviction that past actions bore fruit in later lifetimes. He was later declared a heretic for it, and others followed. Centuries later, the Church hierarchy was fighting this still-widespread belief. In 553 the council of Constantinople decreed: “Whosoever shall support the mythical doctrine of the pre-existence of the Soul, and the consequent wonderful opinion of its return, let him be anathema.” [Wentz, 359fn, 362]

Gnostics passed on secret, unwritten teachings about how to reach heightened states of consciousness. Traces remain in the Nag Hammadi scrolls, which recommend austerities, chanting, and meditation in silence. The sage Zostrianos went into the desert seeking visions of the eternal Light. He counseled seekers to overcome physical desires and still the “chaos in mind” through meditation. [Pagels, 135-6] In *Allogenes*, the glorious Youel speaks of a Triple Power which exists in silence, but emits a beelike sound: “zza zza zza...” Stilling the self is the secret to realizing this state. [Allogenes, online] The *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* also recommends seeking in silence. The teacher tells his disciple, “Language is not able to reveal this. For the entire Eighth, my son, and the souls that are in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence.” [Braschler et al, online]

Gnostics often conceived of the eternal mystic Silence as the Mother. Some said that Sige (Silence) was God's female partner, as bishop Irenaeus related, while the scripture *Eugnostos the Blessed* names her as “Sophia, Mother of the Universe, whom some call Love.” [Parrot, online] Here, and

throughout Gnostic scriptures, we find strong echoes of Hebrew traditions of Khokhmah, “Wisdom.” The Gnostic Valentinus paired the Primal Father, the Word, with “Mother of the All,” who was Grace, Silence, Womb. His disciple Marcus said that communion wine was *her* blood. [Pagels 1979: 52-3, 55] Paired divinities were characteristic of many Gnostic sects, including several that paired Jesus with Sophia. Other Gnostics declared that God was neither male nor female—or both. [Arthur, 54] Sige (Silence) was called “God the Father and God the Mother.” [Alexandre, 426] The *Apocryphon of John* refers to Deity as *matropater*, the “mother-father.” [Arthur, 7]

SOPHIA

Egypt, whose ancient religion deeply influenced Gnostic philosophy, still revered its goddesses. Isaac aretalogies (praise-songs based on the affirmation “I am”) made their way into several Gnostic scriptures. The *Gospel of Thomas* contains an invocation from ancient litanies of Isis: “Come, lady revealing hidden secrets...” [Holland-Smith, 68; find Budge cite] In an aretalogy embedded in the *Apocryphon of John*, a goddess descends into “the inner part of Emente”—Amentet, the old Kemetic name for the underworld—like Inanna or Persephone. [Arthur, 167]

Great Isis had become syncretized in Egypt with Judaic Wisdom traditions of Khokhmah, the female presence that took part in the creation. Her name was translated into Greek as Sophia and other Hellenistic names. The writings of Philo (a Hellenistic Egyptian Jew) and Plutarch identified Isis as Sophia (“Wisdom”). [Long, 46; Allegro, 157] The early, pre-Christian Gnostic scripture *Eugnostos the Blessed* hail “the all-wise Sophia, Genetrix.” The *Origin of the World* praises her as the being “who created great luminaries and all of the stars and placed them in the heaven so that they should shine upon the earth”. [Arthur, 65] This verse clearly echoes the Isis aretalogy of Cyme: “I divided earth from heaven, I created the ways of the stars...” [Long, 84]

The first words in the Bible are *Be reshít*: “In the beginning...” The Hebrew name Reshít represents Wisdom in the Palestinian *Targum* and the *Samaritan Liturgy*. Several Greek texts draw on these traditions in addressing the goddess as Arche (“beginning”). [Arthur, 61] Other scriptures name the Divine Female as Ennoia (Thought), Pronoia (Forethought) or Protennoia (Primal Thought), Pistis (Faith), Eidea (Image, Ideal), or Charis (Grace). [Long, 87ff; Arthur, 55; Legge, xxxix] These Greek titles were often used interchangeably with Sophia.

The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth emphasizes the primacy of Arche (the Beginning): “I have found the Arche of the power which is over every power, she who is without Arche. I see a spring which is bubbling over with life.” [in Arthur, 172] In another text, the waters reflect the image of Pistis Sophia, infused with animist power: “the holy water makes all things alive. It purifies.” [Pronoia intrusion, *Origin of the World*, in Arthur, 129] Irenaeus tells us that the Gnostics regarded Arche as a mother without origin: “another Monogenes.” This title of “singly-born” was still in play as a Goddess attribute, although the evangelist version of Jesus as “only-begotten son” was fast overtaking older pagan meanings. [Arthur, 61; see chapter 3]

Goddess traditions persisted among the Sethian Gnostics in Egypt. Hippolytus wrote that they celebrated rites “very closely bordering upon those orgies of the ‘Great Mother’ which are observed among the Phliasiens.” [Arthur, 32, 31; Hippolytus meant Phlya, known for its ancient Goddess mysteries, and not Phlious as the text implies.] (As I explain elsewhere in this series, *orgias* was an old Greek name for land ceremonies that, because of their association with women’s mysteries, underwent a



Isis Ermouthis, a serpent form, from Paym, Fayum.

strongly gendered reinterpretation as a sexually scandalous pejorative.)

Epiphanius reported that the Sethians revered “the Mother and Female.” They said that the “Mother of All” planted a seed of power in her creation, which became Seth, the ancestor of the Perfect and of Jesus. [Doresse, 39] The biblical god sent the Flood to punish humans for not worshipping him, but “Wisdom opposed him.” She saved Noah’s family by showering light on them. [Pagels 1979: 55]

THE DIVINE BARBELO

Barbelo is another syncretic goddess of Egyptian Gnosticism. Her presentation as a divine emanation of god resembles Khokhmah. The Sethian scripture *Allogenes* calls her “the first Arche of blessedness, the Aeon of Barbelo, full of divinity, and the first Arche of that one without Arche, the spiritual invisible Triple Power, the All that is higher than perfect.” [Arthur, 165] Many writers refer to Mother Barbelo as part of a trinity, along with the Father and Son. Here the Christian influence comes into view, but it is tempered by Egyptian themes: the trinity abides in the female sphere of the “Eighth.” [Pagels, 166; Arthur, 166. Epiphanius said that the Gnostics placed Barbelo with Christ in the Eighth heaven. [Doresse, 43]

The *Trimorphic Protennoia* exalts “Barbelo, the perfect glory, and the immeasurable Invisible One who is hidden.” She is called Protennoia—Primal Thought—who “dwells in the Light.” This scroll begins with an aretalogy that praises her as “the movement that dwells in the All...she who exists before the All.” From her originated a trinity of Father, Mother, and Son. [*Trimorphic Protennoia*, online]

I move in every creature... I am the Invisible One within the All... It is I who poured forth the water. It is I who am hidden by radiant waters. It is I who gradually put forth the All by my Thought. It is I who am laden with the Voice. It is through me that Gnosis comes forth.” [*Trimorphic Protennoia*, online]

Protennoia’s connection with the waters recalls the primal flood of Neith and Isis, who brought forth the Nile inundation. And like both goddesses gave birth to the sun, Neit to Ra and Isis to Horus, Protennoia proclaims, “I am the Womb that gives shape to the All by giving birth to the Light that shines in splendor. I am the Aeon to come. I am the fulfilment of the All, that is, Meirothea, the glory of the Mother.” [*Trimorphic Protennoia*, online]

Attempts to reconcile conflicting traditions generated contradictions in the Barbelo literature. The *Gospel of the Egyptians* says that Barbelo “originated from herself,” as the ancients had said of Neith, Mother of the Gods. [<http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gosegypt.html>] But the *Three Stelas of Seth* represent her as “the first shadow of the holy Father,” who existed before her. Its author addresses her with feminine pronouns, but paradoxically praises her as “the male virginal Barbelo.” [Arthur, 165-6] A later passage reverts to goddess imagery:

Thou art a Sophia. Thou art a Gnosis. Thou art truth. Because of thee, there is life. Life is from thee. Because of thee, there is mind... Thou art a cosmos of truth. Thou art a triple power... [Arthur, 166]

The Sethian trinity was made up of Light, Breath, and Darkness. The Peratae had it as Father, Son and Matter, with the Son mediating between the exalted Father and a passive female principle. [Both according to the *Philosophumena*, in Doresse, 52, 50] The male supremacist underpinnings are clear. But there is no single Gnostic doctrine, but an exuberant diversity of them. Frequently contradictory positions are even expressed within the same text, since many of the scriptures are layered composites that underwent revisions and interpolations.

The *Apochryphon of John* contains another aretalogy of “the perfect Pronoia of the universe,” who was the First. She represents “the light which exists in light,” but wandered in the great darkness, “into the midst of the prison,” and the depths of the underworld. [Arthur, 167] However, this book unfavorably compared “sister Sophia” to Barbelo.

A splitting of Gnostic goddess images was underway, in the process of subordinating the creative female Wisdom to “the Father.” Christian authors disparaged the independence of a goddess not firmly partnered to a male god. Their altered Gnostic aretologies reflect an emerging concept of a “fallen” goddess. Rose Arthur explains, “Themes such as the impossibility of the feminine to conceive by herself, of the dependency of Sophia upon Christ, of the ‘fault’ of the psychic woman, and the regenerative force of the male spirit are common and basic in developed Christian Gnosticism.” [Arthur, 59]

The very female-positive scripture Trimorphic Protennoia, does not assign fault to Sophia but speaks instead of her defeat by the archons: “from the time when the innocent Sophia was conquered, she who descended...” [TP, online]

The longest aretology appears in *Thunder, Perfect Mind*. It follows the form of the old Isis litanies:

**I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned one.
I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin
I am the mother and the daughter
I am the members of my mother
I am the barren one, and many are her sons...
I am the silence that is incomprehensible
And the idea whose remembrance is frequent
And the word whose appearance is multiple
I am the utterance of my name.**

[Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of an Ancient Religion*, 1984, in Long]

Further on there is a veiled but pointed reference to Isis:

**I am the Sophia of the Greeks
And the Gnosis of the barbarians
I am one whose image is great in Egypt...**

But unlike the pagan aretologies, *Thunder* is dualistic, pairing negatives—“ignorance... shame... fear”—with the divine qualities of the goddess, who it treats with much more ambivalence. Still, it can also be regarded as lifting up the despised; Elaine Pagels calls the conception of the Divine “a presence found not only in palaces but also where one least expects it: “cast out upon the dung heap... among those who are disgraced ... among those violently slain.” [Pagels 2012: 98]

Rose Arthur reasons that *Thunder* was originally titled *The Divine Barbelo*, based on the abbreviations used and the association of Barbelo with the title “Perfect Mind.” [Arthur, 7, 164, 173-5] She points out that some lines in *Thunder* also resemble verses in the “Song of the Woman” in another Gnostic text, *Origin of the World*. That scripture attributes the song to Eve, and assigns her a male lord not present in *Thunder*. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Eve no longer speaks; now similar declarations about her are put in the mouth of Adam. [Arthur, 162, 148]

FEMALE CREATORS AND CULTURE SHEROES

To understand the demotion of goddesses that accumulated in Gnostic mythology, we need to examine the older strands in which Egyptian Gnostics go out of their way to affirm the creative power of a Mother of All, and to critique her omission from the biblical account. These Gnostics embraced the Wisdom goddess as a power higher than the god who created the world. A markedly Egyptian sensibility is expressed in the *Origin of the World*, a Sahidic Coptic scripture among the Nag Hammadi scrolls. It mixes Greek names in with Hebrew ones, reflecting the influence of these cultures in Egypt at the time.

Although this text has been Christianized, it still shows a goddess as the major force in creation. It restores Eve to her primordial sacred status as the Mother of All Living. Negative comments about the male creator are embedded in the beginning and end of this text, but conflict with its main thrust. Its author is keenly aware of the Genesis account, but poses a counter-interpretation. The biblical name for god, Elohim, is taken as a plural indicating multiple entities (rather than the ending *-im* acting as a grammatical intensifier). This text uses *elohim* to stand for the archons (elemental powers).



Snake Goddess Gives Eve Fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting is one of several European representations of the Serpent as a woman, long after the Gnostic era.

Sophia is described as existing in the beginning, even before Chaos. She flowed out of Pistis ("faith") in the form of "primeval light." And immediately her will manifested itself as a likeness of heaven, having an unimaginable magnitude..." Her wish brought a great power into being, which became like a veil between the immortals and those who came into being after them. A shadow arose, that gave birth to envy and wrath, and became like dark waters of immeasurable deepness. Pistis appeared over it, and was disturbed at what had come into being "through her fault." [Arthur, 188-89; Young, 54]

Then Pistis Sophia caused a lion-like spirit to come into being out of the waters, to rule over the world of matter. She called him Yaldabaoth, Aramaic for "child of chaos" (*yalda bahut*). ["Ophites," in the Jewish Encyclopedia, online] He had power, but did not know how he came to be, and was "ignorant of the power of Pistis." And she "withdrew up to her light." The godling concluded that he alone existed. Now the author makes a direct link to the Genesis creation story: Yaldabaoth's thought becomes the word, and moves over the waters as a spirit, and he separates the waters and land, making heaven and earth. But this male godling is unaware of the goddess who brought him into being, saying, "I am God, and there is none other existing beside me." [Arthur, 193]

Pistis retorts, "You are wrong, Samael [blind god]... there is an immortal light man that exists before you." (Here Neoplatonism surfaces in the mix of traditions.) The god later realizes the truth of her words when he glimpses her image on the water, and he repents. [*Origin of the World*, online] This story

is repeated by Irenaeus in his description of Ophite cosmology; there, when Ialdabaoth proclaims himself sole god, Sophia shouts, “Do not lie!” [Doresse, 38] A similar counter-narrative appears in a Buddhist critique of Hinduism, where Brahma imagines that he is the creator. [Klein, 158]

Next comes a section on the Christian trinity, with Israel (later called Sabaoth) enthroned in light, Jesus at his right, and the virginal Holy Spirit at his left. Sophia daughter of Pistis instructs “him”—it later becomes clear that Sabaoth is meant—“about all the things that exist in the eighth heaven.” More creations follow, with Death creating various demonic passions, and Life (Zoë) creating good powers, all of which are androgenous. Then Pronoia’s unrequited desire for the light-man causes her to emit radiance that engenders the Adam of Light. The text, drawing on Hebrew linguistics, ties Adama to Earth (Adamah) and blood (adom). The Pistis Sophia calls this “the blood of the virgin,” which in turn engenders Eros, another androgynous power, and the grapevine, and fig, and pomegranate, and later the rose, and all other plants. The intermix of Hebrew, Greek, and Christian concepts is obvious, with longstanding Goddess symbols like the pomegranate still prominent amidst the Neoplatonism.

The seven archons molded a man, but he had no spirit, and they left him. After forty days, “Sophia sent her breath into Adam.” Yaldabaoth and his archons were disturbed when they found their man, but rejoiced when they found that Adam was not able to rise. After a day of rest, they “withdrew up to their heavens.” Now, in a section known as the “Eve intrusion,” Sophia creates “the Living-Eva, that is, the Instructress of Life,” by letting a droplet of light flow onto the water. It became an androgynous human, which Sophia molded first as a female body. Then she molded this body in the likeness of the mother, who bore another androgynous being. The text says that the Hebrews call this mother “Eve of Life (Zoë), namely, the female instructor of life.” Eva proclaims her identity with Sophia, and assumes titles of Isis, such as “consoler of the labor pains.” [Arthur, 99, 117, 131] The text calls her “Life” both in Hebrew (Eva standing for Chava) and in Greek (Zoë).

“Sophia sent her daughter Zoë, who is called Eva, as an Instructress to awaken Adam in whom there was no soul,” so that his offspring would become “vessels of the light.” [Arthur, 205] Eve saw her co-likeness lying there, and she took pity on him. She said, “Adam, live! Rise up on the earth!” And he rose and opened his eyes. When he saw Eve, he said, “You will be called the mother of the living because you are the one who gave me life.” [Arthur, 205; Young, 54] So *The Origin of the World* utterly reverses the primacy of Adam over Eve in Genesis. In fact, it goes further that that, making Eva herself the ensouling life-giver.

Now the archangels beheld Eve and compared her to Sophia, “the likeness which appeared to us in the light.” Still jealous, they plotted to rape and “pollute” her, and to cast Adam into a sleep, teaching him that she came into being from his rib “so that the woman will serve and he will rule over her.” But Life / Eva laughed at their scheming, darkened their eyes and left her likeness beside Adam. “She entered the tree of knowledge, and remained there. She revealed to them that she had entered the tree and become tree.” The archons ran away in fear, then came back to defile Eva’s likeness through rape. “And they were deceived, not knowing that they had defiled their own bodies.” (What a profound truth is said there.) Later, the first couple ate fruit, and the archons cursed them, the earth, and its fruit. At this, Sophia became furious and cast down the archons from heaven. [Young, 54; Arthur 207]

This section known as the “Eve-Intrusion” contains its own aretalogy called “Song of the Woman.” [*Origin of the World*, 114.4-15] Rose Arthur points out that it repeats lines from the famous aretalogy *Thunder, Perfect Mind* [VI, 2, in Arthur, 99] It has the same paradoxical flavor. However, *Origin* attributes the song to Eva, and assigns her a male lord not present in *Thunder*. Fragments of this “Song of the Woman” are repeated in a related text, the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. But in that version, Eve no longer speaks these verses; it is Adam who speaks them about her. [Arthur, 131, 162, 143] A marked recession of female agency is visible in these later scriptures. *Origin of the World* ends with strongly Christian themes: savior, word, and apocalyptic judgment.

Several other Gnostic scriptures present Eve in a similar light, as a culture hero rather than the culpable temptress of the Church fathers. In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Eve is “the spirit-endowed Woman.” Adam calls her his own mother as well as “Mother of the Living,” the original Hebrew title of Eve. “It is she who is the physician, and the Woman, and She Who Has Given Birth.” The “Female

Spiritual Principle” entered into the Snake—the Teacher—and she explains that god's threat of death came out of jealousy. She promised the couple that they would be able to tell good from evil. [Pagels 1979: 31]

Other Gnostic scriptures show androgynous archons, or pair them off in syzygy (mystic couples), in a manner reminiscent of the Shiva-Shakti of India. The *Sophia Jesu Christi* reveals the Christian savior himself “as bisexual” (a better word might be “co-gendered” given current usage of this term) and paired with “his female Sophia, ‘Mother of All,’ whom some call Pistis.” [Schussler-Fiorenza, 52]

THE OPHITES

Gnostic sects often reversed meanings of biblical myths. The villains of the Bible, such as Cain and Esau, were heroes to the Cainites and Ophites. The Ophites (“Snake-people”) revered the Serpent of paradise as the source of Gnosis, and saw Jesus as its incarnation. The serpent entwined around an egg



was their divine symbol. The Ophites “kept and fed [snakes] in baskets; they held their meetings close to the holes where they lived. They arranged loaves of bread upon a table, and then, by means of incantations, they allured the snake until it came coiling its way among these offerings...” [Doresse, 44] This scene closely resembles the old Goddess Mysteries, in which women held and danced with snakes. Late Greco-Roman art shows the persistence of these ritual practices, and depicts the snakes coiling around baskets or circular chests.

According to bishop Epiphanius, the Eleusinian and Phrygian Mysteries also influenced the Naassene sect of Christians. They took their name from Naas, a Hebrew word for “serpent.” [Doresse, 47-8] The Perates also embraced the Serpent as the true savior. [Couliano, 128] In the heavens they saw “the beautiful form of the Serpent coiled up in the grand beginning of the heavens and becoming, for all born

Beings, the principle of all movement.” [Doresse, 51] Sethians agreed that generation began with the serpent, who was the (male) Instructor. They also compared the heavens to the belly of a pregnant woman. (This sky-mother symbolism has very ancient Kemetic origins in Neith, Hathor, and Nut.) All pregnant beings carry this “imprint of heaven, of earth, and of all that is situated immovably in the midst.” The wind born of water stirred the waves, which were like a womb bringing forth. Sethians compared the wind to the hiss of a serpent. [Doresse, 51-2; Arthur, 137]

A Nag Hammadi scroll called the *Testimony of Truth* is sympathetic to the Serpent in the Genesis account of the Tree of Knowledge. The wise Serpent convinces Eve to eat the fruit of wisdom: “the eyes of your mind will be opened.” The author points out that the lord's threat of immediate death didn't come true, but the Serpent's promise of knowledge did. He calls the god of Genesis “a malicious envier” who begrudged humans the power of knowing. [Pagels 1979: 30] The theme of an imperfect creator god recurs in other Gnostic texts. Sophia rebukes this god as a liar and fool for claiming sole divinity. Provoked to anger by his hubris in refusing to acknowledge the female principle, or grieved that he created inferior beings, she withdraws to the upper heavens. [Hubbs, 253; Pagels 1979: 58]

The *Apocryphon of John* says that by proclaiming his jealousy, this god proved that another Power did in fact exist, “for if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?” This jealousy caused “the mother” to become distressed. [Apocryphon of John, 61:8-14, in Pagels, 1992: 113] In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Wisdom and her daughter Life cry out that the arrogant god is wrong to proclaim his supremacy. Sophia answers his challenge by sending forth light into matter, all the way down to the realm of Chaos. [Pagels 1979: 58]

THE FALLEN SOPHIA

Though Sophia was prominent in the Gnostic creation accounts, she was being stripped of the radiant holiness the Egyptians attributed to Isis, and the Hebrews to Khokhmah. The very meaning of her name, Wisdom, was in the process of being abrogated and reversed. In her groundbreaking book *The Wisdom Goddess*, Rose Arthur showed how the positive view of Sophia in the early, pre-Christian scriptures was gradually broken down and degraded by a masculinizing, Christianizing narrative. Her work shows that "...the fallen Sophia appears to be a specifically Christian soteriological [salvational] motif." [Arthur, 4, 50, 67]

Arthur demonstrates that the older texts were consistently re-edited to reduce and subordinate female divinity, while exalting the male god. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* is no more than "a Christianized, patriarchalized and defeminized summary of *On the Origin of the World*." It blatantly replaces the original goddess with the Christian god. The line "But all this came to pass according to the Pronoia of Pistis" becomes "But all these things came to pass in the Will of the Father of the All." [71, 94, 152]

The pre-Christian scripture *Eugnostos the Blessed* was revamped as the *Sophia Jesu Christi*, in which Sophia rebels against the "Father of the Universe," repents of her fault, and is saved by her male partner, Jesus Christ. [Arthur, 4-5] The revisionist text repeatedly refers to the "fault of the woman." [Couliano, 80-5. He estimates that 80% of the Gnostic Sophia myths are negative or ambivalent.] The same process was at work on the *Pistis Sophia*, where the fallen Sophia is made to sing thirteen hymns of repentance before Jesus helps her to regain the Heights. [Legge, xvii] *The Origin of the World* also shows signs of editorial revisions in the same patriarchalizing direction, out of character with the main text.

An earlier view of the goddess as god's perfect partner gave way to myths casting her as a flawed and lower being needing his pardon and salvation. New authors developed themes of a deluded and foolish Sophia (this despite the meaning of her name, "Wisdom"). They describe her creations as defective, and accuse of her of breaking cosmic law by creating without a male partner. [Couliano, 78-9]

Hippolytus described Sophia as a junior aeon who tried to imitate the Father's generation without a partner. Due to her inferior powers, her creation was "devoid of form and perfection." The Father then emanated the aeon Limit-Cross to bar her from the Pleroma ("Fullness"). As a result Sophia undergoes a four-fold passion—Anguish, Pain, Confusion, and Supplication—and must be rescued by other aeons. [Couliano, 78] The *Apocryphon of John* also converted Sophia into an inferior, fallen power: "... when the mother understood that the veil of darkness had come into being imperfectly and she knew her partner had not agreed with her, then she repented..." [Arthur, 70] These texts preach female abnegation and inferiority.

The *Exegesis of the Soul* took an even more extreme position. The female soul was debauched by "many robbers" and bore defective offspring. The author blames these events on Aphrodite, and compares the soul to a prostitute who must repent and pray to the father god. Her genitals are presented as defective, being on the outside like the male genitals. But if the soul repents and prays to the father, he will turn her organs back to the inside "so that the soul will regain her proper character." Then she will fulfill the Father's will, receiving a salvific male partner and bearing good children. [Arthur, 36-8, 40-8. This prescribed "correction" of female genitalia looks like a justification of the late Egyptian practice of clitoral excision practiced by this period. The account of Strabo, in *Geography*, Book VII, chapter 2, 17.2.5, dates to about 25 BCE. Keep in mind however that the term "pharaonic circumcision" is ahistorical, since solid evidence is lacking for female genital excision in classic Kemetic times.]

These patriarchalizing discourses are still contending with a deep-rooted conviction that Goddess is the ultimate source of life. Even hostile writers acknowledge that Sophia gives the breath of life to Adam, although they often show her doing it indirectly. But the prestige of the creatrix is compromised by the Gnostic view of the material creation as evil, imprisoning the souls who live in it. [Arthur, 64, 88]

The scriptures often show Sophia herself falling into bondage. In one Gnostic myth, Sophia is taken prisoner by the seven archons. They subject the essence of Wisdom made flesh in female form to every indignity, including forcing her into whoredom. In another account, Sophia mistakes the lion-

headed archon for an emissary of the Pleroma and he swallows her power, depriving her of her light. Weakened, Sophia “repents repeatedly” and calls to the Pleroma to rescue her. The aeon Christ is sent to her aid. [Couliano, 79]

In another version, Simon Magus rescues “Helena” from a brothel in Tyre. In actuality she is the creator of the angels who made the world. She is called Kyria (Lady), a Greek title exactly corresponding to the Christian god as Kyrios. [Allegro, 141-2, 145; Eusebius II, 13, 4] The Roman theologian Hippolytus also emphasized a pairing of Simon with Helena. [Hippolytus, VI. 17] One form of this story appears in the *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*, which says that Simon fell in love with a woman named Luna. He went around presenting her as Wisdom herself, the Universal Mother who had fallen from the clouds, and himself as god born of a virgin. This account identifies Luna with Helena, bound by the archons into physical form and fallen into a Phoenician brothel. By freeing her, Simon claimed to free all humanity from the archons. Christian patriarchs regarded him as the founder of Gnosticism, [Ogden, 73-76] and invented endless stories of his downfall. Eusebius called him “the author of all heresy.” [II, 13, 6]

A Gnostic sect of Simonians existed in 2nd century Syria. Their teachings were a fusion of Hellenistic concepts with Hebraic themes. From the Silence come two roots, the male heaven and female earth (who is also called Ennoia, Thought, as in some other Gnostic accounts.) The male principle is granted primacy: he creates her from himself, and never the reverse: “the male-female having the female in itself.” [Hippolytus, VI. 17] How much this actually had to do with an actual Simon Magus is anybody’s guess, but orthodox heresiologists conflated the two, to the point of calling some Simonians the Heleniani. [Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 62] In any case, we are looking at another form of the “fallen” Sophia.

The theme of androgyny running through many of these texts is in fact gendered. It passes itself off as even-handed, but as Jane Schaberg makes clear, the androgyny being prescribed is a male-dominant androgyny: the female contained within the male. The prescription is that women should become like men, never men like women. [Schaberg, 158] “It is a world in which women learned to double-think and see themselves as included even (and especially) when they were not... to learn to tune out.” [Schaberg, 190] Some women dealt with anti-female prejudice by passing as men, as Thecla had. Mariamne does so in the *Acts of Philip*. Jesus instructed her to put on male garments for her journey to Greece, to prevent the serpents from mistaking her from Eve. One version of this scripture even has Mariamne declaring outright that she is not a woman. [VIII, 94, in Schaberg, 157-9]

The Kukeans said that god was born out of the Awakened Sea in the midst of the World of Light. He looked into the waters of his mother and saw his own image. He had sex with this image, the Mother of Life. She gave birth to “a multitude of gods and goddesses,” creating seventy worlds and twelve aeons. God animated a great dead image using the life of these worlds. By breathing on the Mother of Life, this image caused her fall: “its breath penetrated even to the sexual organs of the Mother and defiled her.” She was no longer able to enter the divine planes, and remained in an impure state for seven days. The Savior came to rescue her and her seven virgins. [Doresse, 59] Again the female is singled out for sexual defilement, and made to symbolize spiritual inferiority—even when she is presented as senior to the god.

In the *Origin of the World*, Sophia sends forth a drop of light “upon the water,” and it takes shape as a divine female. The *Sophia of Jesu Christi* repeats this creative act, but then retracts it and replaces Sophia with a male creator. It is he who sends forth the drop of light over the veil between the worlds, says the revisionist scripture, “so that the fault of the woman should be made manifest, and that she should come into being contending with error.” [Arthur, 83, 75-6] These Christianizing scripts encoded male supremacy into religion in ways that generated pain, alienation, and demoralization for women.

DOCTRINES OF THE FLAWED FEMALE

Under the oppressive climate of imperial society, with its heavy taxation, displaced populations, urban crowding, plagues, and arena executions, a profound negativity had seeped into religious consciousness. This sense of hopelessness manifested in what has been called Gnostic pessimism. People

felt like prisoners in the world, and a conviction arose that creation itself was flawed. The taint reached back to the Goddess herself, since she manifested herself in matter, in birth, in bodies. The prejudice against the female as lower than the male, material as against his supernal mind, was already present in Plato. Now Gnostic doctrines identifying the female with bondage, weakness, inferiority and fault became the final means of overthrowing the Goddess Mysteries.

This process was erratic. Judaic Wisdom mysticism, so influential in early Gnosticism, exalted the creative power of Khokhmah, and held that creation was good. The two creation narratives in Genesis offered opposing views of gender relations, one with both women and men in the image of god. (But god curses Eve and all her daughters with the lordship of men who would rule over them.) However, as Gnostics increasingly gravitated toward a “value-inversion,” they did not only revolt against the Biblical god in a rejection of Judaism: they rejected creation itself. They saw the world of matter as hopelessly corrupt and evil. [Geger, 168] Naturally, this view contradicted not only Judaism but the pagan cosmovision in which the Divine was present in the natural world.

Even before Christianity, Judaism had become a powerful influence in the pagan Mediterranean. Jewish communities were present around the Mediterranean in sizeable numbers, and many gentiles (known as “god-fearers” attended Shabbat services in synagogues. Gem amulets with Hellenistic inscriptions often invoke Sabaoth, IA, IAO, IAIA, Sabaoth—all drawn from names of the Judaic god. These names even appear as magical formulae engraved on goddess images. But slurs against the Hebrew god were circulating among Romans and the Egyptians, who portrayed him as ass-headed. [Doresse, 42 n. 101; 43] Although Gnostic Christians were strongly influenced by Judaism, many of their writings evince a strong animus against it.

Many Gnostic scriptures reinterpret the biblical cosmogony, casting its creator as a deluded archon called Ialdabaoth or Saklas or Authades. Junior to the creating Wisdom goddess, he is unaware of her presence but works with her light. This theme may have originated as a reassertion of the Egyptian goddess, whose scattered signatures are visible in the Gnostic amalgam of Hellenistic, Judaic and Persian cosmologies. Many people have interpreted Gnostic cosmologies as an affirmation of Goddess. But they too subject her to massive reinterpretation, although in different ways than the orthodox clergy (especially in the polytheism that persists in some texts). In the end, however, they ultimately degrade and deny the female Divine.

Gnosticism's rejection of the “lower” world ended up dragging down Goddess in the midst of its attack on Judaism. Christian Gnostic doctrines stripped Sophia of her divine qualities and subordinated her to the Father, and to Christ who is introduced as her male better and savior. Later writers dropped the name Sophia altogether. Many if not most equated the Goddess with matter, darkness, ignorance and fault. She was literally subjected to erasure on a 2nd-century Italian relief of Aeon surrounded by the zodiac. The inscription Felix Pater (“auspicious father”) remains intact, while a female name beside the figure has been removed. [Godwin, 170-1]

A Christian Gnostic editor revised the *Origin of the World* scroll, slapping on an introduction and conclusion with a negative tone and very different values than the bulk of the work. These passages assert that the universe suffers from *shta* (“lack, flaw”), which they blame on an “envious” Sophia. By conceiving alone, without a partner, she “brought forth envy.” The revisionist author declares Sophia's need for redemption by the male Logos, the “Father.” He predicts that in the apocalypse she will return in “mindless fury” to drive out chaos and uproot fault. [Arthur, 103-5, 122]

In the *Apocryphon of John*, Sophia created Yaldabaoth alone, without a partner or approval from the male Spirit. (This need for the male to “agree” is repeated in the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and other sources.) Because of this her creation was imperfect, occluding her power, and she cast it away. The writer rebukes the Wisdom goddess several times for creating without male help, but never reproaches the male deity for doing that same thing. He shows Sophia as dependent on the male god who is, despite the very meaning of her name, wiser than her. “And she became dark because her consort had not agreed with her.” Then the holy spirit poured on Sophia “that he might correct her deficiency.” [Buckley, 43-46]

But this text is ambivalent; Sophia yet remains a creator. Yaldabaoth receives power from her, and the angels trick him into transferring Sophia's light to Adam. Christ gets Adam to eat from the tree of

Epinoia (Thought) rather than that of the archons, “and the Epinoia of the light hid herself in [Adam].” Again the vivifying principle is imagined as female. And while the supreme Spirit is called male in some places, in others it is “the Mother-Father.” [Buckley, 49-51]

As Sophia is mythologically cast down, new female figures such as Epinoia appear and pick up aspects of her power. An Egyptian text introduces Eve's daughter Norea as “the virgin whom no power hath defiled.” Norea is a redeemer whose blood is salvific. Rose Arthur convincingly shows that she is a substitute for the now-discredited figure of Sophia. [Arthur, 136-7] She also foreshadows the syncretistic deification of the Virgin Mary.

The *Apocalypse of Adam* calls the fallen goddess “Eve.” One of the Nine Muses—more syncretism—sat on a high mountain for a long time: “she desired herself in order to become androgynous. She fulfilled her desire, and became pregnant from her desire...” By parthenogenesis, she became Eve, Mother of All Living, the “great creative power from whom all things originate.” But her desire violated the pairing principle and again, because she has no male partner, what she produced is called defective. [Pagels, 54]

The Christian *Gospel of Truth* replaces Sophia with Plane (“error”), who “fashioned her own matter out of vanity without knowing the truth.” She created disorder and terrors, capturing souls in matter, but the Father saves them. In a similar vein, the *Tripartite Tractate* blames a female archon for creating an imperfect world by parthenogenesis. Its author specifically names “the sickness which is femininity, and “the Church” as a group of people who have left this “sickness” behind. [Arthur, 178-9, 181-6] These texts could not be more explicit in their rejection of all that is female.



Ermouthis, also known as Isis Bubastis, in a triptych with Isis Lactans and Serapis. The snake goddess symbolism was very current at the time the Egyptian Gnostic scriptures were composed, in late antiquity. It's likely that Bubastis was conflated with Eve and the Biblical snake. Mandaean scriptures from Iraq emphasize a female Holy Spirit (Ruha d'Qudsha) as a serpent and mother of the zodiacal powers, now being rejected as demonic.

The Gnostic *Book of Baruch* shows a tripartite “power of the All”: two male powers, called the Good and Elohim, and the deceitful, less powerful Eden. (One source calls her “the duplicitous Eden-Israel.” [Couliano, 76] She had two bodies, “women to the hips and snakes below.” She and Elohim desired each other, and united “in heart-felt love.” Twelve of their offspring—the angels—were his, while the twelve demons—archons, malignant zodiac spirits and the four rivers of paradise—belonged to her. [Buckley, 4-6]

Eden is earth; the angels create man for her. She gives him soul, and Elohim the spirit. Then Elohim ascends to the superior light. It comes as a surprise to him; he wants to go back and destroy the world he created. The Good intervenes, saying, “let Eden have the creation so long as she will.” She tries to lure Elohim back, without success. Thwarted and vengeful, she unleashes her anger on humanity. Her angel Naas (the Serpent again) causes adultery, divorce, and pederasty. [Buckley, 5-9] This story demonizes all forms of sexuality uncontrolled by male ownership of the female, and the Earth herself. It also combines neoplatonic formations of “the Good” as the superior, nonmaterial power with the Hebrew god, both counterposed to a goddess who is a negative and inferior figure.

Contemporary Mandaean scriptures debase the goddess in a similar manner. She is still named Ruha, “spirit,” or even Ruha d’Qudsha, “the holy spirit,” but demonized as “leader of the dark forces.” Her name no longer means what it means, because female divinity is no longer accepted, in any form, and can only be understood as demonic. But it is the exact Eastern Aramaic equivalent to Ruach haKodesh, the Biblical name for the Holy Spirit. Ruha is taken up out of the dark underworld and imprisoned in the earthly realm. There she gives birth to the monster Ur, and by him bears the evil planets and zodiac spirits. She also seduces the son of Adam. [Buckley, 22-3]

Some Iraqi texts specifically name Ruha as Simat, Earth. They recognize that “She raised up physical life and she is the Great Mother, from whom all swarming creatures, burgeonings and increase proceeded and were maintained.” But she is called deficient and defective, needing to be uplifted by the Father. He takes the form of the Jordan river, which she calls “My Father.” She cries aloud to him, “Do not penetrate me!” but he ignores her, “and her baser mysteries he drew upwards, he steadied her babbling tongues, cleared her vision and turned the spheres.” [Buckley, 23-24] The theme of masculine mastery as natural and rightful pervades the text.

One of these scriptures depicts Earth/Ruha as a spirit that tries to entangle beings with her wiles. She and her seven sons cause the building of Jerusalem, which she later offers to destroy, in a strongly anti-Judaic section. Other passages dismiss Ruha as a lying, demonic seductress. A demigod from the “lightworld” scolds her: “Thine eyes are eyes of falsehood, whilst my eyes are eyes of truth.” [Buckley, 24-7] Ruha is shown as fallen, like the christianized Sophia, and like her must be redeemed.

The goddess is still present, not yet banished; but derided as fallen, erring, inferior, and tainted. A corollary belief claims that creation and bodies are evil. This pessimistic form of Gnosticism eventually prevailed. [Allegro, 109] It confused the evils of an oppressive social order with a presumption of evil inherent in Nature. The revisionist scriptures go out of their way to declare that the rightful position of the Goddess is always beneath the masculine godhead, to be ruled by him. As in orthodox Christianity, the truly Divine must be—can only be—masculine:

The hidden assumption of Gnosticism would thus be that femaleness is equated with weakness, error and imperfection... [Couliano, 85]

This is a far cry from the Great Mother of the ancient mystery religions, whom the Pythagoreans called “the great soul of the world who gives birth, preserves and renews... the divine Goddess who bears along all souls in her mantle of Light.” [Arthur, 5]

The *Pistis Sophia*, which is so often quoted as an exemplar of pro-female Gnosticism, presents pagan deities as demons who torment souls in the realm of Chaos. Goddesses figure prominently in this roster of fiends: the planet Venus “called Bubastis” (one of the names of Isis); “three-faced Hecate,” Persephone, and “the counterfeit spirit with the Fate also, whose name is ‘The Moira’ [Greek for ‘Fate’].”

[Legge, 186, xxv, xxvii-iii, 173; Schmidt /MacDonald, 362, have “Bubastis who is called Aphrodite”] In the second rank of archons, is an African figure “Ariuth, the Ethiopian Woman”; and this black female archon is portrayed as chief of the demons who cause killings and wars. [Schmidt/MacDonald, 362]

As several examples above show, astrology comes under heavy fire from many Gnostic writers, who tie the planets to the evil archons and cursed matter. In the *Apochryphon of John*, Yaldabaoth unites with his twin sister Ignorance or Insanity, who gives birth to the twelve signs of the zodiac. [Couliano, 97, 106ff] This myth parallels the Mandaean demonization of Ruha d’Qudsha. In the *Pistis Sophia*, Jesus ascends to the Second Sphere of Destiny to punish the rebellious zodiacal aeons. He changes things so that humans can no longer foretell the future through astrology and magic. [Couliano, xv-xvii] But the Peratae and Archontici invoked the seven planets and laid great emphasis on Chaldaean and Ptolemaic astrology. [Doresse, 50-1] The veneration of the stars was still widespread in late antiquity, and astrology was still studied by eminent Egyptian astronomers and philosophers such as Hypatia and her father Theon.

MARY MAGDALENE OF THE GNOSTICS

Some of the most eloquent testimony about Gnostic ideals and attitudes toward women appear in scriptures highlighting Maryam of Magdala as a leader. Certain scrolls present her as the most advanced disciple of Yeshua, endowed with profound understanding and visionary power. The *Dialogue of the Savior* describes Maryam of Magdala a “woman who knew the All” (also translated as “a woman who had understood completely.”) [*Dialogue of the Savior* 139, 12-13, in Schaberg, 149, fn. 144] Some communities even represent her as a successor to Jesus, like the group that claimed “a secret tradition from Jesus through James, and significantly, through Mary Magdalene.” [Hippolytus 5.7, in Pagels 1992:108]

As Jane Schaberg writes, Maryam “represents women’s prophetic power in the Gnostic / apocryphal literature...” [Schaberg, 9] She points to five of the Nag Hammadi scriptures that emphasize the importance of Maryam: the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Dialogue of the Savior*, the *First Apocalypse of James*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. [Schaberg, 122] (We’ll look at a sixth, the *Pistis Sophia*, below.) These texts often show Maryam taking the lead in questioning Jesus, marshaling the apostles to action or gathering them together after Roman repression scattered them: “A net-caster is Mary, hunting for the eleven others that were wandering.” So says the *Manichaean Psalm Book*, in which Maryam personifies Sophia, “the spirit of wisdom.” [II, 192, 21-22, in Schaberg, 135-6]

The *First Apocalypse of James* “suggests that James should turn to Mary and the other women for instruction.” [King, 143] Antti Marjanen’s reconstruction of this damaged section reads, “When you speak these words of [per]ception, be persuaded by the [word of] Salome and Mary [and Martha and Ars]inoe.” [King, 143] *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* lists Mary among seven female and twelve male disciples. In *Dialogue of the Savior*, Maryam appears with Judas Thomas and Matthew, speaks often, and as King says, “acts as a representative of the disciples as a group...” She is “a woman who had understood completely.” [139:11-13, in King, 143-44]

That sounds good, but the same text has Jesus saying, “Pray in the place where there is no woman.” Matthew repeats this, then adds a theme found in other apocryphal scriptures, “Destroy the works of womanhood.” This relates to his demand that women should stop giving birth. But Mary responds, “They will never be obliterated.” [144:15-22, in King, 146-47. King and Ann Brock see this line as female pushback, and with good reason.] Another passage from the same text underscores the misogynist theme: “Whatever is from the truth does not die; whatever is from woman dies.” [59, in King, 147]

Karen King is right to caution that “...we must be careful not to appropriate these works uncritically as feminist resources simply on the basis of a positive portrayal of Mary, for they can also employ feminine imagery that denigrates femaleness.” [King, 147] The *Pistis Sophia*, for example, is often put forth as a strongly feminist text. It does make Maryam a prominent figure, though not without ambivalence, but the content of what she and others say is a very different story. Once again, they speak

of a fallen and defective Sophia who needs a male savior to uplift her.

The 3rd-century *Pistis Sophia* emphasizes Maryam's prominence—in fact her leadership—among the disciples: “Sprang up in front again Mariham, she came into the midst...” Calling her “Mariham the Happy,” Jesus encourages her: “Speak in boldness, because thou art she whose heart straineth toward the kingdom of the heavens more than all thy brothers.” He even calls Mariham “she who will become the Pleroma of all the Pleromas and the completion of all the completions.” [Legge, 36, 13-14] Lest anyone missed the point, Jesus declares that Mary Magdalene and John the Virgin “will surpass all my disciples and all who shall receive mysteries in the Ineffable...”

In the many dialogues in the *Pistis Sophia*, Mary Magdalene asks more than half the questions, gives many interpretations, and teaches the other disciples. Sometimes she recites at length, and is praised for her insight. She “both experiences and interprets visions,” preaches, performs ritual acts, and functions as spokesperson for the apostles. [Schaberg, 149, 134; Schüssler-Fiorenza, 53] Her questions often imply a deeper level of understanding, affirmed by Jesus, as when she asks him “to reveal to us in what manner the souls are carried off by theft, so that my brothers also understand.” [IV, in Schaberg, 135]

Many Gnostic texts project a strong image of female agency, as Maryam literally rises up to speak and act, urge and teach: “Sprang up Maryam again...” or, in other translations: “Mary again came forward and said...” [*Pistis Sophia*, 33, 74, 90, and passim] What was at stake, as Schaberg observes, was not just the role of Maryam of Magdala “but the spiritual authority of women in general.” [Schaberg, 190] The immense female attraction to Thecla exerted a similar forcefield of demand, as did all of the popular (and often apocryphal) female saints. A countervailing forcefield was the pressure from male clergy who insisted on reducing females to sexuality, like the 4th century church fathers who made much of the apparition of Jesus telling Mary not to touch him. [John 20:17, in Schaberg, 86]

But there was trouble in the Gnostic paradise. Four major texts—the *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Mary*, and *Pistis Sophia*—show “male protests against Mary’s importance and even presence.” [Schaberg, 130] In the *Pistis Sophia*, Peter opposes Maryam three times, challenging her standing as a disciple. One of these interruptions comes after she delivers a long discourse. Maryam tells Jesus, “Peter makes me hesitate; I am afraid of him because he hates the female race [*genos*].” (In modern English, this would translate as “womankind.”) Jesus responds with an affirmation that speech is divinely ordained, through inspiration by the Spirit, and not by gender. But he does not reprimand Peter, who is soon at it again. Complaining that the women are speaking too much, Peter demands that they cease to question. Jesus asks them to “Give way to the men, your brethren, that they may question also.” [Schmidt/MacDonald, 377] Women talk too much, you know.

King sees Jesus’ defense of Maryam after Peter attacks her as weak, and it is. He reaffirms that women are worthy disciples but passes over the masculine hostility to Maryam. [King, 148] It is highly unlikely that women dominated in mixed group settings. This reversal of social norms, and its rebuke in the texts, highlights a growing ambivalence with Maryam’s leading role. Jesus states that whoever receives revelation must speak. [Schüssler-Fiorenza, 53] But Maryam is noticeably nervous about doing so; she repeatedly prefaces her questions with appeals to Jesus not to be angry at her. [See Schaberg, 163-68]

The *Gospel of Mary* presents an even more extreme situation, flipping 180 degrees from respectful acceptance of Maryam as a wisdom-bearer to open hostility from some of the male disciples. First it says that Maryam alone received secret teachings from Jesus. After their teacher’s crucifixion, the disciples are wallowing in their grief and hopelessness. “Then Mary stood up.” She encouraged them, and “turned their minds toward the Good.” Peter is warm and respectful here, and asks her to teach her the words of the savior “that you know but which we haven’t heard.” And she does: “Where the mind is, there is the treasure.” The manuscript is damaged, and four pages are missing from her narration of the teachings. When the thread resumes, Maryam is speaking of the soul’s ascent past the four powers of matter and the seven powers of wrath.

At the end of her discourse, Andrew challenges Maryam, saying that he did not believe that Jesus had ever said those things. Peter goes into a rage: “Did he really speak privately with a woman, not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her?” Maryam protests, crying in frustration. Levi

defends her. He accuses Peter of being given over to anger, and “contending against the woman like the adversaries.” If Jesus found her worthy, who was Peter to reject her? No response is forthcoming, and no resolution. The book ends with the disciples going forth to preach. [*Gospel of Mary*, online. See Schaberg, 169-70. She comments (175) that Maryam effectively acts as the replacement for Jesus.]

The *Gospel of Mary* is one of the oldest Gnostic texts, written in Coptic, possibly as early as 120 CE. A 4th century copy was found, wrapped in feathers, in the wall of a Nubian cemetery in Akhmim. Two additional fragments of this text exist in Greek, proving that it was not a one-off, but was circulating among early Christian communities. Karen King reminds us of the historical context: “It is important to remember, too, that these first Christians had no New Testament, no Nicene Creed or Apostles Creed, no commonly established church order or chain of authority, no church buildings, and indeed no single understanding of Jesus. All of the elements we might consider to be essential to define Christianity did not yet exist.” [<http://www.gnosis.org/library/GMary-King-Intro.html>]

The *Gospel of Mary* is unique in rejecting rulership as a goal, writes Karen King, and differs from the canonical scriptures in other ways. It does not teach suffering for salvation; or hell, or punishment of sins. Instead it emphasizes freeing people from suffering and death. [King, 105, 127] But death and resurrection are not central to the book, which is concerned about what happened after the execution of Yeshua. It shows his disciples grieving and freaking out, afraid that they will be arrested next. It is Mary who steps forward to encourage them, who “turned their hearts toward the Good.”

King calls attention to the fact that this text does not talk about “god the father” but “the Good,” a non-gendered concept of the Divine. It is also a Platonist concept, discussed not only by Plato but by Neoplatonists who were the leading pagan philosophical school at the time when Christianity was developing. (The word “Hellene” was the leading term for “pagan” in this era.) One of its leaders was Plotinus, whom Hypatia admired so much, and in fact she too was a Neoplatonist. In this philosophy, spirit was everything, taking the form of Idea/Image, while matter was irrelevant and base. There was no mortality or evil in “the Good,” the divine realm, and the highest goal was to realize that divine. For Plato that meant the masculine, because he saw the female as low and cowardly, as he explained in the *Timaeus*, and so believed that cowardly and unrighteous men would be reborn as women. [King, 42, 60]

Karen King demonstrates how deeply Neoplatonist ideas influenced certain Christian scriptures. The *Gospel of Philip* declares: “Truth did not come into the world naked, but it came in types and images. The world will not receive truth in any other way.” [69:7-11, in King, 52] The *Gospel of Mary* begins with Jesus instructing his disciples, with a verse that has always intrigued me for its evocation of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism: “Every nature, every modeled form, every creature, exists in and with each other. They will dissolve again into their own proper root. For the nature of matter is dissolved into what belongs to its nature.” [2:2-4] Jesus adds that the Good will set the good of every nature within its own root. [13] Here’s a different translation:

All nature, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their own roots... Be of good courage, and if you are discouraged be encouraged in the presence of the different forms of nature. [*Gospel of Mary*, 4.22; 4.31, online]

This sounds very much like Shakti as the foundation of all being in Indian Goddess tradition, or Taoism. But King compares this passage to Cicero’s description of what the Platonists believe: that matter is formless and devoid of quality, can be shaped and be transformed, and “even suffers dissolution, not into nothingness but into its own parts.” [*Academica Posteriora* I.27, in King, 45] She goes on to show that the *Gospel of Philip* also says in speaking of good and evil, life and death: “That is why each one will dissolve into its original source.” [King, 50]

The next saying is more problematic: “Matter gave birth to a passion which has no Image, because it derives from what is contrary to nature.” [3:10 (14)] This gets into the anti-sexual and anti-body direction that was so extended within Catholicism and Gnosticism, though in different ways. So does another passage, which begins with Jesus saying, “There is no such thing as sin.” [King, 49] (This is reminiscent of Hindu discourses on what is real and unreal, in which everything bound by time and space

is defined as ultimately unreal, because it is not eternal.) The writer understands sin as arising from mixing material desires with spiritual nature; but instead of calling it “sin,” he describes it as “acting according to the nature of adultery” (3:4) [King, 50] Here sin is equated with a specific type of sexual transgression: the kind that offends the contract of marriage, the foundation of patriarchal order.

Unlike King, I do see Gnostic themes in the *Gospel of Mary*. It talks about the soul’s struggle with the Powers of Wrath—desire, ignorance, death, flesh, foolishness, and wrath—which seek to bind it. In Gnostic thought these Powers are called archons or hypostases or aeons. “Like other Christian works such as the New Testament Book of Revelation, the Gospel of Mary holds that the world is under the control of malevolent beings.” [King, 79] Revelation uses symbolic language to criticize the Roman empire, but the archon ideology is quite distinct, and prominent in the Mary text.

The *Gospel of Mary* has another striking feature. When Levi says that Jesus knew Maryam “very well,” he adds, “That is why he loved her more than us.” [9.9, online] This idea is expressed in one other Gnostic text, the *Gospel of Philip*, which goes farther still. It appears in a section of the codex that is fragmentary and therefore missing key words:

As for the Wisdom who is called ‘the barren,’ she is the mother of the angels. And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] loved her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples [...] They said to him “Why do you love her more than all of us? [Gospel of Philip, online]

Jesus responds in classic Jewish style with another question, turning it around: “Why do I not love you like her?” Then he speaks a parable about the blind not being able to see in darkness or in light, implying that they do not understand what Maryam sees, while she does see what he sees.

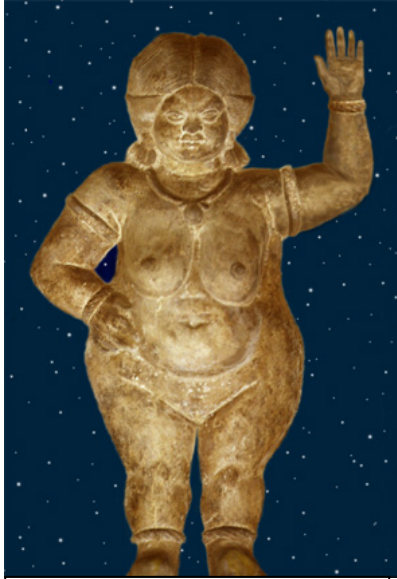
These passages have been hugely controversial, especially the line about Jesus kissing her on her lips (and who else would “love her more than all the disciples”?). These themes of the kiss and Mary as companion are the first statement of a partnership between Jesus and Mary. They have fueled a burgeoning literature about a marriage of Jesus and Maryam. But the question is, does this really represent a historical memory of a partnership suppressed by both the dictators of canons, and those that they persecuted, the Ebionites and other heterodox groups? Or is it a later projection of a longed-for female counterpart, a hypostasis of Sophia as some of the codices have it, by communities distant from Galilee or Jerusalem? (The Gospels of Mary and of Philip, in which the companion theme is most developed, were both found in Egypt, written in Greek or Coptic.) Karen King and Jane Schaberg remark that in the canonical scriptures, Maryam of Magdala is a near-cipher, like a blank slate on which an active female presence missing from those scriptures could be inscribed. [King in Schaberg, 234-35]

The *Gospel of Philip* explains the kiss further: “For it is by a kiss that the perfect conceive and give birth. For this reason we also kiss one another. We receive conception from the grace which is in one another.” [58:34-59:6, in King, 146] The text also implies that Maryam is Sophia, “Wisdom who is called ‘the barren,’ she is the mother [of the] angels and the companion of the S[avior].” [King, 145] Who are these angels whose mother is Sophia? King suggests that they are the archons or cosmic powers, and because they are seen as evil, she is called barren. That is, until she became Jesus’ companion. This idea correlates with Christian Gnostic texts that make Jesus the savior of Sophia who cannot be complete, or legitimately create, without him—but never vice versa. The erotic partnership theme comes up again in Hippolytus, who used the Song of Songs as an allegory of Mary (church-bride) and Jesus (savior-groom). [King, 153]

But then the Gospel of Philip also speaks of Three Marys, a theme that persisted in much later Provençal tradition. “There were three who always walked with the lord: Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who was called his companion. For Mary is his sister and his mother and his companion.” [59:6-11, in King, 144]

In the lost scroll *The Great Questions of Mary*, Jesus takes Maryam alone up a mountain to impart secret teachings. [Schüssler-Fiorenza, 53; *Panarion* 26, 8. 1-3] There is no direct sexual contact, but Jesus does a sexual demonstration in the presence of Maryam. Our sole source for this story is the heresiologist bishop Epiphanius. His hostile witness resembles to standard slurs against Gnostics. It is

possible that this group did revere menstrual blood (“the scarlet thread”) and semen. [Marjanen, 189-94] If so, they resemble Tantriks more than the anti-reproductive stereotype of Gnostics (providing yet another example of how unworkably huge that category is). In any case, no hint of Maryam’s sexuality appears in this text. What Schaberg calls “the harlotization of Mary Magdalene” came later, from the orthodox clergy, not from Gnostics. [Schaberg, 9]



Barbelo? Egyptian ceramic, 100-300 CE (right arm reconstructed)

Epiphanius gives several names for the group who produced *The Great Questions of Mary*. One is “Barbelites,” after the Egyptian Gnostic goddess Barbelo. (Another, “Borborites” or “muddy ones” may just be a pejorative twist on “Barbelites.”) The bishop’s description of this allegedly “libertine” Gnostic group is highly suspect for its sexual calumnies, including his claim that “They have their women in common,” and that they ritually consume semen and menstrual blood. [*Panarion* 26.4.1, in Amidon, 76] Female leaders were prominent among this group according to Antti Marjanen: “Out of the eight books Epiphanius mentions by name five are attributed to a female figure...” (*Norea, The Gospel of Eve, the Great Questions of Mary, the Little Questions of Mary, and the Birth of Mary*). [Marjanen, 199]

In the novelistic *Acts of Philip*, Jesus calls Mariamne “thou chosen among women,” and instructs her to dress in male guise to accompany Philip, so that she might curb his wrath and rashness. He is going to preach in a country where people “worship the viper, the

mother of snakes.” This city Ophioryme (“snake street”) is identified in the text as “Hierapolis of Asia,” which was the site of the great Syrian temple of the goddess Atargatis. Folded into the story are condemnations of the cruelty of slavery and husbands who batter. The sorcery charge looms large—and here it is being directed against Christians. The proconsul’s wife came to hear the preaching and was healed by it. [*Acts of Philip*, IX, 107-122, online]

But her tyrant husband came and said: How is this? who has healed you? And she said: Depart from me, and lead a chaste and sober life. And he dragged her by the hair and threatened to kill her. And the apostles were arrested, and scourged and dragged to the temple, and shut up in it ... The people and priests came and demanded vengeance on the sorcerers. [IX, 118-22]

The text does not dispute that Philip is acting as a sorcerer; it shows him uttering magical formulae and causing harm to others. The author portrays him as a Christian magician. The authorities stripped and searched the apostles for charms, and hung the missionaries upside down and tortured them. They withstood it well, smiling at one another. “But Mariamne on being stripped became like an ark of glass full of light and fire and every one ran away.” John arrives and is seized as well; at which point Philip loses control and begins uttering mystic words of power that cause their tormentors to be swallowed up by the earth. Jesus has to come and fix things.

This story forms part of a much larger pattern that includes the sorcery charge against the virgin martyrs; sorcery accusations against Paul in the legends of Thecla; the duels of Simon Peter against Simon Magus. We could go all the way back to the magical contests of Moses against Pharaoh’s magicians. In the *Acts of Philip* this theme turns to anti-Jewish polemic. It shows Philip in magical duels with Ananias, “the great high priest of the Jews at Jerusalem.” [II, 12] Ananias calls him a sorcerer and wizard, and tells the Greeks “how Jesus destroyed the law and allowed all meats.” Philip strikes him and all his men blind, and earthquakes follow.

Ananias holds to his faith, declaring that he cannot be convinced by witchcraft. Philip causes the earth to progressively swallow him up to his knees, then his waist, then his neck, but Ananias refuses to

yield. So Philip causes him to go entirely into the earth. All those who accompanied him are converted by these sorcery “miracles,” and the missionary ordains priests and bishops at Athens. [II, 12-29] What is striking in this story is that Ananias, villainized as he is, simply defends his religion and never attempts to use magic or even divine force against his opponent. The Christian sorcerer’s battle is one-sided, reflecting the historical reality of this 4th century work, in which Jews had little alternative to non-retaliation in an aggressively supercessionist Christian society.

MISOGYNY IN THE TEXTS

While most Gnostics allowed a greater scope to women (and female godhead) than the institutional church, a severe patriarchal bias is visible in many of their scriptures. Some of it is ambient sexism, like this quote from *The Gospel of Philip*: “A bridal chamber is not for the animals, nor is it for the slaves, nor for defiled women; but it is for free men and virgins.” Women who are not virgins are “defiled,” in this view, but not the men. The baldest statement of male supremacy appears in the *Gospel of Thomas*, which ends with a declaration that femaleness conflicts with spiritual attainment:

Simon Peter said to them, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of Life.” Jesus said, “I myself shall lead her, in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.” [*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 114, online]

It’s quite striking that this misogynist statement appears in what many scholars think is the oldest gospel, Gnostic or otherwise. (However, many also see it as a patched-on addition.) The claim that women need to become male in order to become enlightened also occurs in Buddhist scriptures (and is responded to in the Tara literature). In later Gnostic scriptures, the anti-woman thread is explicitly based on opposition to female reproductive power.

In the *Greek Gospel of the Egyptians*, Salome asks how long death will prevail. Jesus replies, “As long as you, women, bear children, for I have come to destroy the work of women.” [Markale, 139] The *Dialogue of the Savior* repeats the same formula: “destroy the works of femaleness.” [Pagels 1979: 66] Maleness is the default, considered as good or neutral, while femaleness is posited as an absolute negative, and equated with reproductive sex, the very root of evil and material bondage according to many Gnostics. But at the next turn, the text shifts to embrace androgyny—as long as sexuality is out of the picture. Jesus goes on to tell Salome that all would be known “when you have trampled on the garment of shame; when the two become one and the male with the female is neither male nor female.” [Fox, 358]

This garment-trampling first appears in the *Gospel of Thomas*, when the disciples ask Jesus, “When wilt thou be revealed to us and when will we see thee?” Jesus answers, “When you take off your clothing without being ashamed, and take your clothes and, like little children, put them on the ground and tread on them; then [shall ye behold] the Son of the Living and ye shall not fear.” [Saying 37, in Allegro, 117] The title “Son of the Living” recalls Eve, who certain Gnostic texts call “Mother of the Living.” This expression offers a female-centric parallel to the Aramaic expression usually translated as the “Son of Man.” The same idea is expressed in Saying 22 of the Thomas gospel.

But this apparent gender neutrality is contradicted by the virulently anti-female conclusion [*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 114]. Even if this is tacked-on, other instances appear in the same scripture: in Saying 46, Jesus rebukes a woman in the crowd for praising him in traditional terms: “Blessed are the womb which bore you and the breasts which nourished you.” He responds, “Blessed are those who have heard the word of the Father and have truly kept it. For there will be days when you will say, ‘Blessed are the womb which has not conceived and the breasts that have not given milk.’” [Buckley, 95] This passage directly counterposes reverence for women’s life-giving potency with “the word of the Father.”

Other Gnostic texts preach female inferiority and exclusion. In the *Questions of Bartholemew*, Mary

tells women that they ought to pray standing behind the men. Similarly, in the *Apostolic Church Order* Peter says “We have gone too fast in making ordinances” about the eucharistic rite. John says that the brethren have forgotten that the Teachers did not allow women to stand with the men during the blessing of bread and cup at the last supper. Martha said that was because Mary was smiling (or laughing). Mary protests that she did not laugh, and that she smiled upon hearing Jesus say that the weak would be saved by the strong. [Schaberg, 166. Schüssler-Fiorenza, 56, points out that no one would have “stood,” since scripture says that they reclined at table, in longstanding Passover custom.]

While some Gnostic scriptures do emphasize Mary Magdalene as the most advanced of the disciples, and even as their leader, there is another consideration: what she is saying. In the *Pistis Sophia*, for example, Maryam narrates a story of the fallen Sophia. In other texts that highlight Maryam, “the feminine is undeniably spoken of with contempt (*Dialogue of the Savior*) or the masculine is used to symbolize what is divine and the feminine what is merely human (*Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Mary*).” [Marjanen 1996: 9]

The surviving Christian Gnostic texts display intense gender conflict. The tension is more open in the Gnostic gospels precisely because the female presence is so much more pronounced than in the canonical scriptures, where the discipleship of Mary Magdalene is either missing, or greatly de-emphasized, or tainted by a backstory of demonic possession. The Gnostic debate on these issues is more visible in large part because of the apostolic role accorded to Maryam of Magdala.

The figure of Maryam underwent further challenges after the bishops succeeded in suppressing the Gnostics. In the 4th century, church fathers began to define her as a prostitute. They reinterpreted Jesus telling Maryam not to touch him (in John 20:17) as a rebuke of an impure and wanton woman. [Schaberg, 86] Earlier patriarchs were anxious that ban on touching might suggest that the resurrection was not of the flesh, but the new tack was to treat Mary as a fallen woman unworthy of touching Jesus. Catholic theologians began to identify Magdalene with the unnamed “sinner” who anointed the feet of Yeshua, projecting her as an adulteress or, increasingly, a prostitute. They emphasized her weakness, and started calling her the second Eve, whose faith overcame the sins of the first. [King, 149-50]

Eastern Orthodox clergy never adopted this ideology of Magdalene as a prostitute; for them the female ascetic Mary of Egypt filled this slot. By the 6th century stories of penitent whores—Pelagia, Thais, Mary of Egypt—became widespread, and sometimes got blended with Mary Magdalene. [Schaberg, 82, 87] The slur became so widespread that it made its way into the Talmud too: “Magdala was destroyed because of prostitution (*znut*).” [yTa’anit 4, 69c, in Schaberg, 55] Karen King recounts how the story of Magdalene’s whoredom was used to counter older traditions of her attainment and leadership. Clergymen begin to conflate her first with the sinful woman and Mary of Bethany, both of whom anointed Jesus; then with the adulteress in John 8:1-11, and with the Phoenician woman with many husbands in 4:7-30. [King, 152. Surprisingly, in light of all this, King thinks repentant prostitute theme is “symbolically appealing” (153) and defends it.]

Late in the 6th century, Gregory I made official a conflation of three different women in the Gospels: “the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark,” the female “sinner” of Luke 7, and Mary of Bethany who anointed Yeshua before his arrest (John 12). The pope now claimed that they were all the same person. “It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts.” But since “she now immolated herself,” she was redeemed. [Homily XXXVIII, in Schaberg, 82] Through the Middle Ages Mary Magdalene became identified first and foremost as a prostitute who had been “saved.” Thus, in progressive stages, did the clergy dispose of the figure of a female leader.

As above, so below. As the Goddess became degraded in Gnostic scriptures, so women in the movement suffered misogynistic attacks, demotions, and erasures. The formal subordination of women, and the stories of the “fallen” Sophia, are a far cry from the unifying vision of the great Gnostic mystics: “One Power that is above and below, self-generating, self-discovering, its own mother, its own father; its own sister, its own son: Father, Mother, unity, Root of all things.” [*The Great Announcement*, in Pagels



Isis defaced, under the new order

1992: 111] It was in Egypt and other centers of the Mysteries that the last stand for open Goddess worship was fought, and ultimately lost, on the battleground of Gnosticism.

Eradicating the Goddess proved to be a long and complex process. She survived in a myriad of vestigial forms in popular belief, veiled as Mother Mary or disguised as other female saints. In Church doctrine and scriptures, the Virgin Mary occupied a much less powerful position than the ancient goddesses. But she escaped the degradation that the Gnostics ended up heaping on Sophia, and the stigma that Christians cast over Eve. While Gnosticism gradually shed Goddess veneration, Catholicism ended up swallowing the Goddess, through progressive engagements, over the coming millennium. It absorbed aspects and

titles and symbols and even rites of various goddesses, under the cover of (often-apocryphal) female saints.

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More background on Khokhmah can be found in this earlier version:
<http://www.suppressedhistories.net/articles/sophia.html>



*Goddess crowned by moon and surrounded by stars
in a zodiacal naos, Argos, Greece, late pagan era.*