

Sophia, Wisdom of God

The Lost Goddess in Judeo-Christian Tradition

By Jason Vey

Introduction

From the dawn of time, the concept of the divine feminine has been ingrained in human consciousness, psyche, and religious belief and practice. This is not necessarily a reference to any Jungian archetypal form, but to the simple idea that the sacred, just like the profane, takes on the duality of male and female. Some of the earliest examples of religious belief and ritual we have are of goddess worship. For example, we have the goddess of Willendorf, a statue that dates to circa 25,000 B.C.E., and the statue found in Lespuge, France that dates to circa 23,000 B.C.E. Both of these statues boast clearly feminine figures with exaggerated breasts, stomachs, and “fertile triangles,” indicating a reverence for the female form, and an association with women and fertility. ¹ Recently, evidence of the earliest religious ritual we have yet discovered indicates reverence and worship of a serpent, ² a figure long associated with wisdom and the goddess in ancient cultures, and only later “demonized” and made anathema to women by Judaism and Christianity. Indeed, the serpent was often seen as the consort of the goddess, and a figure of healing, life, and a guardian of trees. ³

It is indeed possible that goddess worship and reverence for the earth as a maternal, feminine figure predates patriarchal or even pantheistic religion. Even after the development of humanized, anthropomorphic deities in the early great civilizations, almost every religious tradition one comes across in the history of the

¹ Christ, Carol P. *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc, 1997), 51.

² World Science Home Page, “Oldest Known Ritual.”
<http://www.world-science.net/othernews/061130_python.htm>

³ Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991), 497-501.

world contains one or more powerful and important goddess figures in its mythology. From ancient Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Norse, Babylonian, Aztec, Mayan, and Shinto through modern Hinduism, religions known as “polytheistic” all are bursting with these dominant feminine figures. There is even recent archaeological evidence that in ancient times, goddess cults and matriarchal societies were dominant in at least some parts of the Classical world, as indicated by the Minoan ruins on Crete.⁴

Along with the widespread existence of the Goddess goes the tendency to personify the concept of wisdom in deific form, and almost universally, this personification is female. In Babylon, the mother goddesses Innana and Astarte embody elements of wisdom. In Egypt we have Isis and Ma’at. In Greco-Roman tradition we see Athena-Minerva. And in Greek philosophy the word “sophia,” literally, “wisdom,” is personified as Sophia, a goddess figure embodying those elements philosophers held most dear.

Even Judaism, Christianity and Islam could not escape this trend, though the divine feminine in these faiths is much diminished, expressing itself in ancient Judaism as Asherah and Hokhmah, and in Christianity at various levels in the form of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, as Mary Magdalene, and as certain important Saints in some traditions. In Islam, the Virgin Mary is mentioned thirty-five times in the Quran, more recognition than she gets in the Christian Gospels.

⁴ Schaup, Susanne, *Sophia: Aspects of the Divine Feminine Past and Present* (York Beach, ME: Nicholas-Hays, Inc., 1997) xvi – xix.

The Kabbalistic tradition which arose in the Middle Ages includes the Shekhinah, the feminine manifestation of God on Earth, also known as the Sabbath Bride.

The Canaanite tradition that would later grow into Judaism began as a system with more than one god, and indeed the act of creation was relegated to a divine couple, El and Asherah.⁵ Asherah would, even after monotheism became the order of Judaism, linger on in various references throughout the Hebrew Bible, where her worship was often demonized as idolatry through references to the tearing down of Asherah poles, structures dedicated to the goddess, such as in 2 Chronicles 34:4:

Then in his presence the altars of the Baals were torn down, and the incense altars that were above them he chopped down. The Asherah poles, the carved images, and the cast images he shattered, crushed to dust, and scattered over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them.

Still, there are indications that even after El became the God-Father YHVH (Yahweh) with whom we are familiar today, worship of Asherah continued, as indicated on a pottery fragment discovered in the Sinai Desert in 1975, which bore the inscription, "I have blessed you by YHVH of Teman and His Asherah." In this context, combined with the use of the possessive, "Asherah" seems to be a title and it has been posited that it means "consort."⁶ This would make it very similar in use to the Hindu term "Shakti," which refers to a feminine aspect of a nominally male deity, as for example, Parvati is to Shiva. Indeed, in Gnostic tradition, the divine

⁵ Rice, Kimberly Marie, "Asherah: Goddess of the Bible?"
<<http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/courses/nes275/studentproj/fall05/kmr38/>>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

beings called *aeons* are situated in male-female aspects called *syzygy*, a concept which is nearly identical to the Shakti of Hindu tradition.

Like many ancient goddesses in many traditions, as the Hebrew faith morphed from polytheism to monotheism, Asherah was removed from her lofty position as divine mother of creation, and relegated to the status of idol. But that was not to be the end of the story in the search for the Divine Feminine.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible there are hundreds of thinly veiled references to another divine feminine figure: Wisdom, called *Hokhmah* in Hebrew. While later Kabbalistic tradition would transform Wisdom into a masculine presence near the top of the *Sefirot*, the name is grammatically feminine and the concept comes from Hellenistic thought, a concept and personification of wisdom called Sophia.

Throughout the Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Wisdom, and other of the Wisdom Texts of the Hebrew Bible we see the praises of Lady Wisdom sung, not as an abstract concept, but as a distinctly feminine presence that walks with humanity as a direct manifestation of God. And yet, despite these clear references and admonitions regarding a creatrix who loves humankind and walks beside us on Earth, her presence as a goddess figure is suborned and ignored in favor of the monotheistic Yahwist outlook.

By the time civilization had spread across the world, and empires were built, a fairly universal patriarchy was in place, and any idea that threatened the status quo was to be quickly staunched. In Roman culture, women flocked to mystery

cults which offered them positions of authority not granted by normal religion. Dr.

Margaret Imber of Bates College writes:

Roman women of the senatorial elite frequently played major roles as patrons of and participants in mystery cults. While traditional Roman, public religion offered a place for women, it did not offer them... positions of religious authority. Male members of the Roman elite frequently complained about the superstition of ...the uncontrolled wives and daughters of others. This complaint was usually exaggerated. The exaggeration itself represents the fear members of the male, senatorial elite felt when confronting the "other," represented by the foreign, feminine mystery cult. The cult, they feared, would infect traditional Roman male authority first by infecting weak and susceptible women. ⁷

It was rumored that these rituals were debaucheries that were patently immoral in nature, and worse, they drew women away from their place in society. Without anyone to keep the home, society would fall into ruins. Worse, the cults reflected worship without Senate sanction. This terror of a change in the status quo, in a threat to a society where it was perceived nothing was broken, led to a movement to (sometimes violently) quell mystery cults wherever they turned up. This movement did not arise out of a simple fear of feminine empowerment, but rather out of terror of a change in the status quo, which it was feared could shake society to its core if allowed to continue unchecked. ⁸

The loss of the goddess figure in Jewish culture arose from a similar fear. The trend towards monotheism in the Hebrew Scriptures brooked no competing or

⁷ Imber, Margaret, "Roman Civilization".
<<http://abacus.bates.edu/~mimber/Rciv/cults.htm>>

⁸ Takács, Sarolta A, "Politics and Religion in the Bacchanalian Affair of 186 B.C.E." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 100, 2000, 301-310.

complimentary deities, and the entire identity of the Jewish people in the classical world hinged upon their monotheism, one of only two major religions in the world at that time that had a single god and a dualistic view of the universe, the other being Zoroastrianism. The rediscovery, re-introduction, or even continuance of polytheistic practices, then, became a threat to the cultural identity of the Jewish people, and had to be put down. The deletion of Yahweh's consort from scripture and ceremony, thus, is not related to gender bias, but rather to the desire for a single divinity.⁹ This would maintain a unique cultural identity for the Hebrew people, who had spent centuries in a pattern of exile and return.

It is true that the mother goddess was killed from tradition when the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled circa 500 B.C.E., a victim of the Yahwist taboo against idolatry. Still, influence by Hellenistic philosophy and a lingering desire or perhaps psychological need for the lost feminine aspect of the divine led to the inclusion of Wisdom in the Wisdom Texts and the Gnostic tradition. This later morphed in mainstream Christianity to the recognition of the Logos as a feminine presence and the conception of the Holy Spirit as a feminine aspect of God, amongst other divine feminine presences in the Christian tradition.

The Gnostic Christians specifically, influenced by the same Hellenistic thought that worked Hokhmah into the Wisdom Literature, would rediscover the idea of a divine creatrix, and adopt the Greek Sophia in a very different way. The Gnostic Sophia is a tragic figure that only humankind's reunion with the godhead can redeem, and a figure directly associated with Christ, through whom awakening

⁹ Baring and Cashford, 416-420.

could be found. Ironically, given that the origins of Sophia and Hokhmah both arise from the same Hellenistic Greek idea of Wisdom personified, the Gnostics suborned Hebrew texts, believing the story they told to be one of creation by a flawed, imperfect being, an illusion to entrap those with the spirit of God inside them.¹⁰ The Gnostics were declared heretics by the early Church Fathers, partially due to their attitudes towards abandonment of the Hebrew tradition and partially due to unorthodox views about the humanity or lack thereof, of Jesus Christ, and their teaching and writings were destroyed and driven underground for almost 1500 years.

What happened? Did women become such a threat that the Goddess needed to vanish and the gender demonized? Were the Gnostics empowering women to the point where they were a genuine threat to the status quo? Or was it simply necessary to quash divergent branches of the faith to ensure its overall survival? Was it a rising dominant, oppressive patriarchy attacking the ancient goddess tradition, or was there another motive behind it? Was, in fact, the goddess tradition as deeply ingrained in society as later feminist scholars claim, or was the movement to quell Gnosticism completely unrelated to the idea of a Christian goddess?

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: firstly, it will seek to examine the presence of Sophia-Hokhmah through the Wisdom Literature of the Hebrew Tradition and the Gnostic communities of Christianity. In doing so, it will explore an evolution of the figure in differing schools of thought and attempt to paint a

¹⁰ Matkin, J. Michael, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Gnostic Gospels* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 10-12.

picture of the fascinating existence of a female divinity within the structures of the nominally monotheistic Judeo-Christian tradition. Secondly, it will attempt to examine the behavior and attitudes towards women in Gnostic communities and orthodox Christianity, based on readings of several Gnostic texts, and on existing orthodox rhetoric and rationale, from a non-feminist point of view. In doing so, it will try to determine if the goddess was the target of scorn by Church Fathers, or if their agenda in attacking the Gnostics was based in profane, practical desires rather than faith-based issues.

Tradition and Gender Bias

Let us begin with a clarification and a concession. It is important to note that “non-feminist” in no way implies “anti-feminist.” Nor can the author of this paper claim that there is no gender bias in the Bible or in Judeo-Christian tradition. To do so would be ludicrous at best. The claim made herein, however, is that the loss of the overt divine feminine from Judaism and Christianity was not due to an oppressive patriarchy seeking to grind women into a submissive place through destruction of ancient goddess traditions. Rather, this loss arose from societal factors such as a fear of upsetting a system which, it was viewed, had worked well for a long time, and of a need for clear cultural identity.

To be clear: in the Classical World, it did not need to be established that women were inferior; society as a whole considered women a weaker “subspecies” of human. Jews and Christians long held that the reason for expulsion from Eden was the inherent female weakness of Eve, and the second century physician Galen even

declared men medically superior. Being of hotter blood and more perfect form, Galen said, men were stronger physically (and by association spiritually) than women. ¹¹

Such a concession, however, also helps to explain *why* the tradition chose a god over a goddess as a supreme being. Even Carol P. Christ, a profoundly feminist writer, concedes this point when she says:

Neither Jews nor Judaism are responsible for the development of patriarchy. Patriarchy existed in the Near East and in Europe long before the time of the writing of the Hebrew Bible. ¹²

Given that the editors of the Hebrew Bible were most certainly men, they would naturally gravitate towards the male choice, given two. This does not indicate a grand conspiracy to suborn women, but a natural subconscious tendency of human beings to identify with one's own gender over the opposite sex, as well as a clear fear of alteration in a system that already worked well, from the point of view of those in authority.

It was not that men feared empowered women; it was that the men making the decisions feared a drastic change in society, in a world where such upheaval could mean the loss of cultural identity and, it may be assumed, the loss of their own control over the teaching and beliefs of their followers. There is no doubt that ancient Hebrew society was largely controlled by the priesthood and prophets. As the Bible progresses from "Thou shalt have no other Gods *before* me," (Exodus 20:3)

¹¹ Martain, Susanne, "Sexuality & Modernity: The Pre-European Concepts of Sexual Difference".
<<http://www.isis.aust.com/stephan/writings/sexuality/euro.htm>>

¹² Christ, 47.

to the outright suppression of all other deities, the power appears more and more cemented in the hands of the prophets and priests, the educated elite, and certainly male-dominated to near exclusivity.

Finally, women being considered an inherently weaker form meant that placing them in positions of authority weakened those positions by association. Women were facing an uphill battle against the deeply ingrained cultural norm, a norm that even the Gnostic creation myths upheld in their presentation of Sophia, who, as we shall later see, was a slave to her own passion and desire, thus leading to her fall from grace.

Hokhmah: Wisdom in the Hebrew Tradition

There is evidence that early Yahwist cults were polytheistic and viewed God as the head of a pantheon, like other cultures in the Middle East at the time.¹³ We have two probable sources for, or at least major influences on, the development of monotheism in the Hebrew tradition: Egypt and Persia. In Egypt, early monotheism rose as worship of the Aten, the Sun Disk, under the reign of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, and Persia saw the rise of Zoroastrianism, the first monotheistic/dualistic religion. In addition, both of these cultures had strong pantheistic indigenous faiths, and along with the idea of monotheism, the Hebrews brought back with them influence from the older religions of these two areas, post-exile, and went on to become the only major monotheistic tradition in their world. Egyptian monotheism did not last beyond Akhenaten's reign, and Zoroastrianism was somewhat marginalized in the face of traditional Babylonian pantheism and in

¹³ Rice.

comparison to other religions of the world at the time, and would eventually go on to become all but extinct. In time, monotheism became the defining face of Hebrew culture.

This was not, however, an immediate process. In fact, we see distinctly inclusive phrasing used in early books of the Bible: Genesis 1:26 reads, “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’” This seems a strange bit of phrasing for a mythology that professes strict monotheism. Later, in Genesis 6:2, we read, “The sons of the gods saw how beautiful the daughters of man were, and so they took for their wives as many of them as they chose.”¹⁴

Likely, this tradition springs from the El cults of early Canaanite origin, in whose myths we see the consort of El, a goddess named Asherah.¹⁵ Indeed, following this trend, the Hebrew Bible is full of feminine aspects attributed to the supposedly masculine figure of Yahweh.¹⁶ This is especially evident in the Book of Isaiah, wherein the Father deity Yahweh is granted distinctly feminine qualities, such as Isaiah 49:15: “Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.” In her article, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” Phyllis Trible cites passages from Isaiah, Psalm 22, Nehemiah, Numbers, and other books in which Yahweh is imbued with clearly feminine qualities. Indeed, it seems clear that the traditional Canaanite goddess was syncretized into the form of Yahweh, who while referred to

¹⁴ Though often translated as “The sons of God,” the term “Elohim” may be more properly translated as a plural, “sons of the Gods”.

¹⁵ Rice.

¹⁶ Trible, Phyllis, “Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 41, 1973, 30-48.

as “He,” appears sometimes to be understood as an androgynous Creator figure embodying aspects of masculine and feminine.¹⁷ This becomes important in later Gnostic Christian tradition.

As Asherah becomes demonized by the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures, a victim of the new monotheistic thought, we see in later post-exile Wisdom Literature the rise of a new feminine divine figure: Hokhmah, the personification of Wisdom, who is specifically defined in the Wisdom of Solomon 8:3 as God’s lover and life-companion. Hokhmah is, in many ways, a descendent of the Great Goddess traditions of Egypt, Greece, and Babylon. As Baring and Cashford claim:

There is indeed a feminine presence in the Old Testament that is accorded a status so far-reaching as to evoke the feeling of the divine. This is Hokhmah, who, in Greek, was called Sophia.... ‘She,’ for so she was called, was invariably personified.... Behind the figure of Sophia stands the earlier Great Mother...casting her image forward in time. A goddess in all but name, and the feminine counterpart of the Supreme Creator, Wisdom speaks as Isis and Inanna did before her.¹⁸

Later, they point out that the book of Proverbs contains Sumerian, Babylonian, and Egyptian sayings as well as original reflections on Hebrew theology, and declare that “the imagery of the Great Goddess of Egypt and Sumeria is the foundation of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament,” and “Israel’s own Wisdom teaching is woven with the thread of these older traditions....”¹⁹

Due to the shift towards monotheism, Roland Murphy argues that Wisdom cannot be perceived as a person in the canon, and that attempting to reconstruct

¹⁷ Tribble, 30-48.

¹⁸ Baring and Cashford, 470-471.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 471.

Hokhmah-Sophia as such is only dealing with her “prehistory,” and not the reality of the textual presentation.²⁰

To take this stance is to approach the texts wearing blinders. Indeed, if this is true, that we are not to view Wisdom as a personified divine being, why then is she given the status of a proper name in the texts? There is a clear differentiation between “wisdom” as an “it” and “Wisdom” as a “she.” As Schroer claims in *Wisdom Has Built Her House*:

In Hellenism it is ultimately God who gives knowledge in all scholarly disciplines, but it is Wisdom who, as architect or constructor of all things, assumes the instruction of the wise.... Only Wisdom, because of her knowledge of the divine and of all things, can be the perfect counselor of a wise king.²¹

Schroer goes on to draw comparisons to the ancient Goddess traditions using the Book of Wisdom, chapter 9, which asks for Wisdom, who sits beside the Divine Throne. She points out that the image of the enthroned couple and this concept of divine paramours are closely connected with divine couples in polytheistic religions, and points out that the Hebrew authors do not hesitate to use such daring images in the face of apparent monotheism.²² While by this point in the Hebrew Bible the term “monotheism” has taken on the meaning to which we attribute it today, the existence of only one God, the Hebrew authors of the Wisdom Texts seem very strongly to be hearkening back to the original idea of monotheism, wherein Yahweh

²⁰ Murphy, Roland E, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 133-134.

²¹ Schroer, Silvia (Linda M. Maloney and William McDonough, trans), *Wisdom Has Built Her House: Studies on the Figure of Sophia in the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 100.

²² *Ibid.*

claimed not to be the only god, but the chief God, the one who must be worshipped before all others, as in Exodus 20:3. Baring and Cashford make a similar point, in that:

In some parts of Wisdom Literature Sophia (*sic*) speaks with the full authority of the former Goddess. Elsewhere, she personifies an attribute of the deity, as the Wisdom and creativity out of which emerges the active power that gives form to life. ²³

The most obvious reference to the consort of Yahweh appears in the Song of Songs, which is an entire hymn that some scholars believe is devoted to a divine union between the heavenly bride and bridegroom, and details the great love between the two: Yahweh and Hokhmah. Indeed, its inclusion in the category of Wisdom Literature encourages just such a reading. The Wisdom Texts of the Bible sing the praises and importance of Hokhmah, the feminine aspect of God on Earth, and the imagery therein is undeniably erotic, symbolic of the earthly spirit of humankind achieving sexual congress and union with this goddess figure, and in turn joining with God. ²⁴ Baring and Cashford claim:

The union of Bride and Bridegroom, so marvelously conveyed in the Song of Songs, is derived from the sacred marriage rituals of Sumeria and Egypt, and anticipates the later Gnostic teaching of the union of the soul (*sic*) and its heavenly counterpart, or Bridegroom [Christ and Sophia]. ²⁵

Still, there does appear to be some hesitation with the inclusion of Hokhmah in the stories, which is to be expected, as by the time of their writing, the Hebrews

²³ Baring and Cashford, 472.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 479-485.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 478.

already had adopted Yahwist monotheism as *the* defining element of their culture. Cady, Ronan, and Taussig point out that chapter 11 of the Book of Wisdom begins using Sophia (Hokhmah) as a narrator, retelling the story of Genesis but then abruptly switches voices so that Yahweh is the narrator. No explanation or rationale for this switch is given, which could indicate some trepidation on the part of the author or editor of the text.²⁶

Indeed, in other Wisdom Texts we see a concerted effort to make Hokhmah “okay” with the monotheistic view of the Hebrew people. Cady, et al, point out that “Ecclesiasticus...makes the point that Sophia is within God’s agreement with Israel,”²⁷ and go on to state that “Monotheism is carefully protected through the subtle metaphoric phrasing of Sophia’s relationship to the Hebrew god.”²⁸

Thus, where Asherah becomes demonized as a competitor for God’s attention, Sophia (Hokhmah) is made expressly acceptable within the bounds of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh.

In addition, one cannot overlook the clear Hellenistic influence on these texts; some of the later ones were even composed in Greek, in contrast to the older, Hebrew-language texts. We must remember that at this time, Hellenistic philosophy was not only prevalent, it was the single prevailing mindset of the civilized world, and in the late first century B.C.E., Hebrew scholars such as Philo of Alexandria were being called upon to explain the Hebrew Scriptures to non-Jews,

²⁶ Cady, Susan, et al, *Wisdom’s Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 27.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 32.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

in terms the Gentiles could understand. The best way to do this was to adopt Hellenistic ideals and draw comparisons. Such comparisons would invariably find their way into interpretation, Greek translations of Hebrew scripture, and later writings.

Since reason, understanding, and wisdom were three of the most revered ideals in Hellenistic philosophy, Philo found himself expounding on Hebrew writings in these terms, first by identifying Moses as Logos, and later by the personification of Hokhmah. It is indeed possible that, drawing from ideas of the World Soul put forth by Plato, and from earlier Isis and Athene traditions, both of which were still active in the world during his life, that Philo was the first (or at least among the first) to take the leap and actually deify Wisdom as a concept unto herself, rather than as one aspect among those championed by a goddess. Athene, for example, is the Greek goddess of wisdom, but also a goddess of war and victory; Isis represents wisdom, but also magic and motherhood. Philo, however, deified Wisdom herself. Caitlin Matthews claims:

[Philo] single-handedly reforged metaphors of Wisdom, drawing on a variety of images that were to hand.... Philo was one of the first to weave together the strands of philosophy and Judaic and Goddess lore, and in so doing promoted a theological exegesis that was to be a bridge on which early Christianity crossed over from Middle-Eastern obscurity into European Prominence.²⁹

Certainly Philo drew upon midrash to accomplish these ends, and certainly his interpretations went against established rabbinic tradition, but there is no arguing

²⁹ Matthew, Caitlin, *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom, Bride of God* (Wheaton, IL, Quest Books, 2001), 85.

that the philosophy in which he was steeped had a profound effect on the later books of the Hebrew Bible.

All of this becomes important later on as we examine the metamorphosis of Hokhmah in the Hebrew tradition into the Sophia of Gnostic literature, but Cady, Ronan and Taussig give us two major innovations that the introduction of Hokhmah brought to the Hebrew faith. First, they say, she (re)-introduces the idea of modernity and introspection, encouraging one to consider, contemplate, and adapt to current events in the world, rather than simply following rote and rituals. The meaning becomes again as important as the act. Secondly, though limited by monotheistic thought, they claim that Hokhmah re-introduces the feminine divine presence, accepted within tradition.³⁰

This opens the door to later evolution in Gnosticism, and the adoption of both Hokhmah and Shekhinah in the Kabbalistic mysticism in the Middle Ages. Hokhmah represents an evolution of Jewish monotheistic thought which, in the acceptance of a divine feminine figure, hearkens once more back to the commandment “You shall have no other gods *before* me,” in Exodus. Even still, the desire to maintain the identity (illusion, perhaps?) of monotheism is plain; the texts are sure to mention that Hokhmah is okay with God and his covenant with Israel, and her presence is often metaphorical and blurred as to her self-identity and her relationship to Yahweh. Instead of re-opening their beliefs to the idea of a divine couple, the Hebrew people hovered on the threshold, desperate to maintain their cultural identity. These people were not a military power. They weren’t economic

³⁰ *Ibid.*

giants. They didn't have a great deal of political pull in the world and spent thousands of years in cycles of exile and return. They needed something to hold on to, something to remind them who they were and from where they came. Yahwist monotheism was that anchor. Thus, while quietly and behind closed doors they may have revered Sophia-Hokhmah as a creatrix and consort of Yahweh, she is marginalized in scripture and her role downplayed so she never quite takes on the role of full deity.

But who *is* Hokhmah, and how does she compare to Sophia? To explore this, it helps to have something of a character profile of Hokhmah, and explore the way she is presented in the Hebrew Wisdom texts. In *The Tree of Life*, Roland Murphy uses textual references to give a character profile of Sophia as she appears in the Wisdom Texts of Hebrew tradition, which is an excellent start. He points out that she has a divine origin, existed before creation and seems to have had a role in creation. He says that she is identified with the spirit of God and is immanent in the world. She “accounts for the coherence and permanence of the cosmos,” has a love for and attraction to humanity, to whom she speaks and promises life and prosperity, and is associated with Israel where she dwells and is identified with the Torah. She is a gift from God but one that is attainable only through effort and careful attendance.³¹

Further, Proverbs defines her throughout as the only way to life and peace, and admonishes that going against her is to succumb to evil and sin.

³¹ Murphy, 145-146.

Adding to this “character profile” is Schroer’s declaration that “her instruction is indispensable for human salvation.”³² Finally, we must consider Hokhmah’s presentation in Proverbs, Wisdom, and Ecclesiasticus as both virgin and erotic lover of the divine, capable of creation on her own, a mother and bride, consort of both God and humanity. These factors present a Goddess who is transcendent and at the same time incarnate, unknowable but undeniably present among humankind, and paradoxically, one must know her in a spiritual-sexual union to obtain salvation. This is a direct link to the view of Asherah and Yahweh in the Canaanite tradition. In ancient polytheistic traditions, priestesses now known as “temple prostitutes,” would in fact re-enact a sexual union with the goddess by having intercourse with priests and/or postulates. This tradition, this attraction to sexual metaphors, speaks directly to the base nature of humanity, and as such remained useful for all incarnations of the Judeo-Christian tradition, despite efforts to present purity as desirable. As we will see, there are similarities between Hokhmah in the Wisdom Literature, and Sophia of Gnostic scriptures, though the role of this hidden goddess changes dramatically.

Sophia as Christian Goddess

By the time the Christian Church was being established and canonized, other branches and interpretations of the faith presented a great threat, not only to the new canon, but to the monotheism it sought to continue from ancient Hebrew scriptures. Perhaps the biggest threat seen by these early Church Fathers were the Gnostics, who believed that all physicality was evil, or at least an inherently flawed

³² Schroer, 101.

mistake, that the true Godhead, called the All or the Ineffable Parent, lay beyond Yahweh (an inherently imperfect creature also called Samael and Ialdabaoth/Yaltabaoth) in a realm called the Pleroma, or Fullness, and that the path to reunion with God was the aeon Christ and his syzygy, Sophia, who were one of several pairs of emanations, or expressions, of the All. ³³

These concepts were a danger to the orthodoxy and the emerging canon, and the early Church fathers sought to stamp out this heretical form of thought as quickly and efficiently as possible. In short, the target of the Church Fathers was not the goddess, but the Gnostics—and indeed, all so-called “heresies,”—as a group. Anyone who was outside the orthodoxy of which they were proponents was target, and not all of these heresies had a divine feminine principle as one of their defining elements. ³⁴

Why were the early Church fathers so concerned about the Gnostics specifically? Christianity, in its infancy, was struggling to survive and find its own identity, first as a continuance of the ancient Jewish tradition, and later as a faith unto itself. It is important to remember that early Christians saw themselves as the next step in the Jewish tradition, the new chosen people of ancient scripture. It was important, in the classical world, to have ties to the past; an ancient lineage gave a sense of legitimacy to a culture, tradition, or belief structure. Judaism, as an ancient faith, gave this sense of legitimacy to early Christians. Tied to the fact that

³³ Meyer, Marvin and Robinson, James, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2007), 103-122.

³⁴ Witcombe, “Eve and the Identity of Women”.
<<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/eve-women/>>

Christ was himself a Jew, and claimed (at least in the Synoptic Gospels) to be working within the Law of Moses, early Christianity saw itself as a natural extension of Jewish faith, and indeed, even the admittance of Gentiles into the Church was controversial among the Apostles, as we see in the book of Acts.

Once the door was open to Gentiles, it was necessary to present the faith to them in a way that they could easily understand, and given the culture of the day, as discussed earlier, Greek philosophy was a background in which many educated Gentiles were versed, at least in passing, and one that had influenced Jewish thought as well. The problem was determining how to present Christian ideas with familiar Greek themes, and how much was too much.

Early Church Fathers were deeply divided on these issues. Such core divisions in philosophy turned into arguments and confusion, which naturally was counterproductive to drawing new converts to the faith, and the Gnostics, whose use of Greek philosophical concepts was complex, detailed, and in many ways alien to the developing orthodoxy, were a prime target. This was particularly true due somewhat to a tendency to lump the Gnostics together and then attack their inability to agree. Tertulian wrote in *Against the Valentinians*:

Now, concerning even the Lord Jesus, how great a diversity of opinion are they divided! One party form Him of the blossoms of all the Aeons. Another party will have it that He is made up of only those 10 whom the Word and the Life Produced...Others, again, that He rather sprang from the 12...Such conceits are constantly cropping out Amongst them, from the redundance of their mother's seed. ³⁵

³⁵ Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* (*Ante Nicene Fathers Library, full text*), Chapter XXXIX. <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.vi.xxxix.html>>

This was the beginning of an inter-familial conflict that would in various names, branches, and ideas divide the burgeoning Christian faith for a long time. Indeed, within a few hundred years, the in-fighting amongst Christians became so bad that the emperor Constantine saw it necessary to call a convention of bishops at Nicaea to develop a canon for the faith, just to keep the peace.

One has to wonder, however, what specifically about the Gnostic Christians made them such a threat? So far as we can tell, this diverse group of Christians did not even have a canon of their own, and several different schools of thought arose from what most scholars now deem “Gnosticism.” Among these were the Sethian, Valentinian, and Thomas schools of Christianity. Indeed, in light of this some scholars have argued recently that the term “Gnosticism” itself should be dropped in favor of more individualistic categories for the various schools of “biblical demiurgical traditions.”³⁶ Still, even the Church fathers deemed followers of these traditions “Gnostics,” and indicated that communities of these people, where they existed, referred to themselves that way. Irenaeus of Lyons supposedly wrote his five-volume treatise *Against Heresy* after first-hand exposure to Gnostic communities, or secret communities within mainstream Christian communities.³⁷ Scholars are divided on whether actual, open Gnostic communities existed, and in fact, this paper posits that it was in part the very secrecy of Gnostics that made them a threat that needed to be quelled.

³⁶ Meyer, Marvin, *The Gnostic Discoveries: The Impact of the Nag Hammadi Library* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2005), 38-39.

³⁷ Matkin, 23-27.

Unfortunately, most of what we know about who the Gnostics were and how they lived comes to us through heresiologists such as Irenaeus, who, while they lived as contemporaries to the Gnostics, had a distinct agenda to quash their movement. It falls, then, to attempt to examine Gnosticism by balancing the biased accounts of the heresiologist with the actual writings of the Gnostics. Can we determine to what extent people took the teachings in these writings literally? Certainly the early Church fathers saw them as dangerous, indicating that the movement at least threatened a re-examination of societal taboos, strictures, and hierarchies.

We know that the Gnostic scriptures are steeped in Greek philosophy, and the Nag Hammadi Library even includes an excerpt from Plato's *Republic*. We can see from reading the texts that the Gnostic cosmogony and cosmology are more complicated and "mythic" than the orthodox Judeo-Christian counterparts, and seem to be concerned with larger issues, these being the nature and salvation not only of the soul, but of the divine spark that resides within certain people separately from the soul. The Christian heresiologist Tertullian, in *The Prescription Against Heretics*, rails against this complicated study of the nature of God, saying:

Away with all attempts to produce a mottled
Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!
We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ
Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our
faith, we desire no further belief. ³⁸

³⁸ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics* (*Ante Nicene Fathers Library, Full Text*), Ch. VII
<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.iii.vii.html>>

Tertullian believed that Christianity was best taken at face-value. He had the four Gospels, and the letters of Paul, and these were all he needed. They spelled out a way to live that would grant resurrection in the end, and he did not feel the need for any deeper reflection to complicate Christ's teachings.

Another major difference between Gnostics and Orthodoxy is the nature of the cosmogony presented in each. In Gnosticism, not only do we have a complex hierarchy of beings involved in creation, we see distinct and overt sexual imagery in the Gnostic view of the cosmos that is quite different from the orthodox Christian point of view. All these were ideas that, while they claimed to be Christian, were wildly divergent from orthodoxy and that needed to be quelled if the status quo was to be maintained and the faith solidly established. As the conflict grew, the Gnostics were seen as a great threat to the Christian community at large, particularly because above all else, they weren't simply heretics or separatists; they were clandestine and exclusive. Rather than breaking from the orthodoxy to form their own tradition altogether, we will see later that many Gnostics, particularly the Valentinians, endeavored to work within the overall hierarchy of the orthodox Christian Church, establishing a secret mystery cult of their own behind the scenes in which to share their secret gnosis. Because of this, they were viewed as elitist and threatening, as the defenders of orthodoxy were not privy to what was going on behind the closed doors of the Gnostic meetings, and worse, had no input into the teachings.

Finding Sophia

One of the biggest problems we have in trying to find the Gnostic Sophia, however, is that “Gnosticism” is little more than a blanket term covering many different schools of thought, some of which aren’t even Christian. Indeed, it is frankly mistaken to refer to the Nag Hammadi Library as a collection of Gnostic texts, as not all of the texts in the collection are inherently Gnostic. The Thomas Christian writings, for example, while they include some founding ideas that touch on basic Gnostic concepts, are not inherently Gnostic unto themselves.

There simply is not room here to do an expansive treatise on Gnosticism, a subject upon which volumes upon volumes have been written. Rather, we are seeking a character study of Sophia, and to do this it is best to explore two specific Gnostic schools of thought: the Sethian and Valentinian schools, specifically the Sethian *Secret Book of John*, *The Nature of the Rulers*, and *On the Origin of the World*, and the Valentinian *Gospel of Truth*, *Tripartite Tractate* and *Valentinian Exposition*. Each of these is steeped in Greek philosophy, and each has a complex and detailed mythology in which Sophia plays a key role. Each tells a similar story of creation and deals with the Fall and Redemption of Sophia. But the devil, as they say, is in the details. We will see in these two mythologies very different portrayals of the goddess, not only diverging from the Hokhmah of Hebrew literature, but from each other as well. We will also see why this figure was not attractive to Orthodox Christians, and that it had nothing to do with a reaction

against women. Indeed, it may even be that recent feminist efforts to “reclaim” the Gnostic Sophia as an archetype of the divine feminine are problematic, especially when dealing with the Sethian idea of Lady Wisdom.

The Sethian Fall

The *Apocryphon of John*, combined with *The Nature of the Rulers* and *On the Origin of the World*, tells us a dark and dismal story of creation, filled with pride, arrogance, evil, and deception even by the so-called good forces, and yet one with a ray of hope in the end. In these writings, creation begins with the Ineffable Parent in the Pleroma. The Parent begins to emanate portions of itself, its first emanation being a companion, a mother called Barbelo, or Forethought. Barbelo represents the duality of nature; the idea that the Parent has both masculine and feminine aspects, and it is with the help of the Parent that Barbelo, the Divine Mother, begins to emanate further, creating aeons, each a male/female pair representing concepts such as Truth, Intelligence, Love, Peace, Intelligence, and Wisdom. Indeed, Wisdom represents the final pair of aeons emanated: Christ (the male) and Sophia (the Female).³⁹

Unlike in earlier Hebrew texts, this Sophia, though her name literally means “Wisdom,” seems to be anything but wise, at least not at first. Indeed, she is prideful, willful, arrogant, and overly ambitious. She is presented as nearly a slave to her passions and desires. It is this arrogance that leads to her expulsion from the Pleroma. Sophia is aware that all aeons are created to be paired, and that while aeons can emanate, they must only do so with the permission of the Parent and

³⁹ Meyer and Robinson, ed., 103-126.

Barbelo, and through sexual union with their syzygy. But this is not enough for her; she wishes in classic Luciferian style to be like God, and decides to emanate on her own, not only without the permission of the Father-Mother, but without joining with the Christ. ⁴⁰

Because her emanation, Ialdabaoth, was born of shortsightedness and arrogance, it was deformed and full of arrogance and shortsightedness itself. Sophia was so ashamed of what she'd created that she hid her son in a cloud on a throne and Ialdabaoth, being unaware of his origins or of anything above him, decided he must be the only god in existence. He, in turn, emanated more archons, or rulers, to serve him, and together they created the physical world, which is in turn as evil and flawed as its creators, an evil which is made explicit through references to physicality and Ialdabaoth resembling an aborted fetus, and through the attempt of the archons to rape Eve and her daughter. ⁴¹

Sophia tried to return to the Pleroma, but could not get in; she had lost a piece of herself when she created Ialdabaoth and was now imperfect as a result. She cried out and her repentance was heard. Still, she could not be recovered to the Pleroma until she became full again, until all the pieces of her essence were recovered. To this end, Barbelo and the aeons helped Sophia, whose wisdom manifests here as cleverness and the ability to trick Ialdabaoth into creating humankind, thus passing Sophia's stolen divine spark onto people, who would then

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

have to awaken to true knowledge of the divine in order to escape physicality and re-unite with the Fullness. ⁴²

In essence, the ultimate goal is to rejoin with Sophia so that she (and we) can return to the Pleroma. Ialdabaoth, in his arrogance, seeks to keep us prisoner so that he doesn't lose his own divine spark, and is the God of the Israelites. Christ comes into the picture as the male part of Sophia who has a vested interest in reclaiming his syzygy, and who comes to Earth inhabiting the body of the man Jesus, to "wake up" humankind and provide the way to Gnosis, a process begun when Sophia used Eve to help her escape the prison of the Garden of Eden.

The Nature of the Rulers and *On the Origin of the World* explain further that when the archons attempt to remove the divine spark from Adam to get it back, the goddess, in the form of her daughter or incarnation as Zoe (Life) appears as a spiritual Eve. This tempts the archons, who attempt to rape the woman. Eve then transforms into the Tree of Knowledge, leaving a "Shadow" behind (the physical Eve) which the archons rape, and who becomes the wife of Adam. Epinoia, another of Sophia's offspring whose name means "Forethought," then appears to Eve in the guise of the serpent, leading Adam and Eve to eat from the tree, thus allowing them to regain the spark that was stolen. ⁴³ In brief, Zoe, the spiritual Eve, and Epinoia are representative of the three parts of Sophia that were lost when her Essence was stolen by Ialdabaoth, and these guide the physical Eve to the path to re-awaken this Gnosis that she may be one day rejoined with Sophia, who will be made whole.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.* 191-206.

Significantly, this changes what in canon Judeo-Christian myth is a fall for humankind, into the first step in salvation, an escape from the prison of ignorance in which Ialdabaoth has trapped humanity.

In this version Sophia is not only unwise, she is prideful and arrogant. Her own desire to strive to be more than she is leads to the greatest mistake in history: the creation of a flawed, imperfect, and fundamentally evil physical realm. Certainly there is much more to the story than what is outlined here, and later in *On the Origin of the World* we see matters complicated even further, including such elements as the binding of Ialdabaoth in Hell and of Sabaoth, Ialdabaoth's son, repenting and being responsible for the creation of angels, Israel, and the man Jesus, thus indicating that there can as such be some good even in the evil of physicality, but the general origin story remains largely consistent and is what is important to our understanding of Sophia in the Sethian tradition. This is not the creatrix and paramour of God who bestows her love upon all creation and offers great wisdom to those who join with her; that honor is bestowed upon Barbelo in the Sethian tradition. Rather, she is a being who in her passion made a grave mistake that caused everything from the Pleroma to the physical world to spiral out of control, and the rest of the aeons had to pull together to bail her out, a process which is still ongoing.

Sophia herself is undeniably good, in that she was created from the All and Barbelo, and in that she recognized and repented her grave mistake, but is also undeniably flawed in her passions. It is difficult to equate her with the Wisdom of

God we see in Hokhmah, though certainly we see in her wisdom gained from recognizing one's shortcomings. Where Sophia as divine wisdom seems to come into play is the idea that Sophia, through her essence and her daughter Eve / Zoe / Epinoia, is among humanity on Earth and it is through her that humanity can discover the Gnosis, or divine wisdom, that will lead us back to the Fullness. While Sophia herself is flawed, her essence within us is pure.

The Sethian tradition is firmly rooted in Hellenistic Jewish thought, drawing its supposed lineage (and the name scholars use to categorize this school of thought) from Seth the third son of Adam, and indeed it is essential to the follower of Sethian tradition that she considers herself a spiritual descendent of Seth, from whose spiritual line will one day arise the Perfect Human that will reunite the fractured pieces of the Goddess and thus destroy the archons forever. John D Turner claims:

Sethian Gnostic thought had its roots in a form of Jewish speculation on the figure and function of Sophia, Divine Wisdom, whom the Jewish scriptures sometimes personified as the instrument through whom God creates, nourishes, and enlightens the world.⁴⁴

However, the tradition places an entirely different emphasis on the nature of the Jewish God and on the Wisdom principle. Turner goes on to clarify that the Sethians split the Jewish Sophia principle into three separate figures: Barbelo, Sophia, and Eve (also Epinoia or Zoe), who need to be re-integrated for salvation. In this context, Eve becomes a hero rather than the root of all sin. She is a tool of the divine, guided by the goddess in the form of the serpent, to help Adam awaken to

⁴⁴ Meyer and Robinson, ed., 784-86.

the divine spark within and escape the prison of Eden.⁴⁵ Eden, in the Sethian myth, represents innocence just as in the Orthodox Christian myth, but to the Gnostics, innocence is equivalent to ignorance. It is a trap and a prison for the divine spark that hides within humanity and serves to keep the pleroma out of balance. Escaping innocence is the first step towards true salvation.

In *Sophia: Exile and Return*, Kathleen Damiani says of the goddess:

...the 'going apart' is as necessary as the 'uniting.' I interpret the 'going apart' as the extraction of vital energy from the concepts and images (including Sophia) that cling to the life force. Sophia is the symbol (in the sense of a living intuition of mystery and significance) of the motion of uniting and going apart. It is the conscious attainment of awareness of this motion that constitutes a special kind of Sophianic gnosis.⁴⁶

In other words, we had to be separated from the Fullness so that we could return to it, a sentiment which harkens back to the Hebrew pattern of Exile and Return. Whether the Sethians would agree with this estimation is doubtful; likely their interpretation was that the separation never should've happened to begin with, yet the idea is sound that Sophia in the Sethian context certainly represents the separation and re-unification with the Divine Parent. She is, in this sense, symbolic of everything that gnosis is: the act of finding one's way back home.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this version of the Creation story is that it reads far more like a Jewish exegesis than a different take on Christianity. The core difference in Christian conception within Sethian tradition is the idea that

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Damiani, Kathleen Granville, *Sophia: Exile and Return (Doctoral Dissertation)* (Cincinnati, OH: Graduate School of the Union Institute, 1997), 38.

Christ never had a truly human, physical form. Rather, his physical body was an illusion; he was an incarnated aeon come to awaken humankind, and then return home. This presented a problem to the developing idea of the Trinity, which held Christ as both completely human and completely divine. Elaine Pagels makes clear that the four canon gospels make a point of Jesus' profane nature when describing the passion, focusing strongly on the all-too-human suffering of Christ before he dies.⁴⁷ This focus on his suffering and death, as well as lines in the Gospels where Jesus himself refuses to actively acknowledge his own divinity, made his humanity quite important to the early Church Fathers, who wrestled with his nature and were unwilling to dismiss his humanity on this basis.

The Valentinian Fall

Valentinian Gnostics had a rather different view of the fall of Sophia, one that is less willfully evil and more accidentally flawed. Indeed, it is difficult to put together, as we have fewer clear mythological writings from the Valentinian school than from the Sethian school. Most of what we have is outlined by Irenaeus and Hippolytus, a system which seems to be preserved in the *Gospel of Truth*, *Valentinian Exposition and Valentinian Liturgical Readings* found at Nag Hammadi. Alas, this text is heavily damaged and provides an incomplete access to this myth.

The most complete exposition we have on the Valentinian myth is *The Tripartite Tractate*, which unfortunately differs largely from the myth outlined in heresiological outlines of the Valentinian system. In the Valentinian myth as

⁴⁷ Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, Random House, 1979), 83-84.

described by Irenaeus and his contemporaries (and possibly in *Valentinian Exposition*), all creation is organized into male/female pairings, and even the origin of creation began with a pair rather than a single Ineffable All. This pair was Bythos, the Primal Depth, and Sige, the Silence. Together these two began to produce aeons, thirty pairs in all, rather than the Sethian beginning being an act of emanation by the All, and then a coupling with Barbelo.

Like the Sethian version, Sophia is the youngest of the aeons. But rather than a willful attempt to create something without the consent of the Parent, Sophia desires to know the Mother-Father, something which cannot be done. In her efforts to reach the Parent, Sophia is stopped by a veil of sorts. Sophia's despair upsets the balance of the Pleroma and she is cast out, blocked from re-entry by a new boundary. At this point Christ and the Holy Spirit come into existence to restore the balance and to rescue Sophia, who is brought back into the fold while her despair remains outside, forming a sort of "lower Sophia," called Achamoth. Thus, here we have two Sophias, one that is knowable by humankind and flawed, but loving and full of hope, and the other, the Divine Wisdom that awaits humankind in the Pleroma.

In this version of the Valentinian myth, it is Achamoth who takes center stage, her passions and grief forming into the physical world and the soul. Her joy at being relieved of these passions then creates spiritual substance. Achamoth uses the soul to create the Demiurge, who in turn creates the world. In this myth, the Demiurge is not the evil Satan-like entity of the Sethian myth, but is ignorant,

working unknowingly for Achamoth by creating human beings out of the substance she provides. Achamoth then implants the spirit substance secretly in some humans. In the end, Achamoth will be re-united with Christ as a new pair of aeons, and the Spiritual people, the Gnostics, will be released of their physical bodies and restored along with Wisdom. At this time, the Demiurge will cease to exist.⁴⁸ Finally, it should be noted that the *Valentinian Exposition* disagrees in that it does not separate Sophia into two separate entities, but merely has her fall and become redeemed.

The *Tripartite Tractate* version of this system differs in several ways. First, the aeons, aside from Sophia, are not named or numbered. Like the *Exposition*, there are not two Sophias; in the *Tractate* the fallen aeon is the Logos, not Achamoth. The figure of Christ is every bit as incarnate in the *Tractate* as he is in orthodoxy; he suffers, dies, and finds redemption. Even still, the basic outline of the story follows a similar path to the one outlined by Irenaeus, and in his introduction to the text, Einar Thomassen posits that “These differences between the system of the *Tripartite Tractate* and those found in the church fathers...are merely local variants.”⁴⁹

Here we do not see a Sophia as fundamentally flawed in character as the one presented in the Sethian tradition; rather, this Sophia is hungry for more innate and intimate knowledge, the very defining characteristic of Wisdom. It is *because* Sophia is wise (and seeks to be more so) that she falls. Understanding is

⁴⁸ Matthews, 149-51.

⁴⁹ Meyer and Robinson, ed., 57-58.

paramount herein, and even in her fallen or lower form, be it Achamoth, Logos, or Sophia, Wisdom brings understanding and Gnosis to the table, enabling humankind to rejoin with the Fullness and all creation to be brought back into balance. This is much more a Sophia to be revered, one to whom humankind can relate in her sorrow and despair at feeling there is more to know than that which she possesses. It is, perhaps, upon this vision of Sophia that many of the feminist efforts have focused. Unfortunately, we do not know (and may never know) how accurate this portrayal is, as the only solid outlines we have are colored by the bias of Orthodoxy. The *Tractate*, *Gospel of Truth*, and *Exposition* are complex sketches at best, and fragmentary at worst. This makes it extremely difficult to put together a shared Valentinian creation myth. Unlike the Sethian myth, the various Valentinian writings we have don't posit nearly as complete or consistent a story; of the group, the *Tripartite Tractate* offers the most complete cosmogony, with the *Gospel of Truth* forming the most complete Valentinian explanation of the concept of God, the reason for Christ's descent, and the nature of forgiveness and repentance.

It is also thought that Valentinians made a concerted effort to remain within the canon Orthodox Christian Church, attending the same services as Orthodox Christians and accepting the same Sacraments. Much of the Valentinian literature we have is couched in orthodox language and terminology. On the surface, a Valentinian appeared to be no different than any other Christian. However, members of this school of thought would also meet behind closed doors and outside of the normal services and sacraments, to share Gnostic teachings and ideas. These

“Gnostic study groups” formed a sort of mystery cult within the larger framework of Christianity.⁵⁰ It is these Gnostics specifically that heresiologists such as Irenaeus sought to challenge, and their attitudes towards women during an age when patriarchy was the norm made for an easy target.

While we know far more about the leader of the Valentinian school, Valentinus, than we do about the leaders of the Sethian Tradition, we have less in the way of original writings in regards to this school of thought, possibly because it was more secretive and made more of an effort to establish itself within the grounds of the Orthodox Church. Still, the core difference here seems to be the idea of Christ as incarnate aeon rather than a completely human being and also completely divine.

The Goddess Suppressed?

The Church Fathers sought to attack and suppress this clandestine and exclusive Gnostic thought and return Christianity to its Hebrew roots, removing it from Greek influence. In *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels suggests that the role of women in the Gnostic communities had a great deal to do with the outrage of the Church Fathers. She notes that in the early Church there was almost an “open door” policy towards women; even Paul in his letters declares that the works of women are valid and that women are equals in the eyes of the Lord, and that it was common at Christian initiation to declare that there was no male or female in Christ. Even Clement of Alexandria, ca. 180-200 C.E., she points out, defined God in gender-neutral or bisexual terms and encouraged the acts of women within the

⁵⁰ Matkin, 118.

early Church. And yet, by the year 200, there are almost no records of women preaching or performing sacraments within the Church.⁵¹ Bart Ehrman summarizes the debate:

In some churches it was the equality in Christ that was emphasized; in others it was the need for women to remain subservient to men. And so in some churches women played very important, leadership roles; in others, their roles were diminished and their voices quieted... disputes arose about the roles women should play; eventually there came an effort to suppress the role of women in the churches altogether.⁵²

Even if there was an outrage against women holding positions of authority, was, in fact, the goddess Sophia viewed as a scapegoat for this? Certainly Gnostics were not the only heretical groups to be including women as equals. By her own admission, Pagels indicates that Marcionites⁵³ and Montanists comprise two such non-Gnostic heretical groups that included women in places of reverence, and that even within orthodoxy, Clement of Alexandria championed the equality of women within the eyes of God.⁵⁴ She then goes on to admit:

This [reaction against women] is an extraordinary development, considering that in its earliest years the Christian movement showed a remarkable openness toward women. Jesus himself violated Jewish convention by talking openly with women...Paul quotes [the lack of male or female in Christ] and endorses the work of women he recognizes as deacons and fellow workers.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Pagels, 70-83.

⁵² Ehrman, Bart, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story of Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2005), 181.

⁵³ Though Pagels considers them non-Gnostic, Marcionites could be considered "quasi-Gnostic," as they did include Gnostic elements in their teaching; they simply didn't subscribe to the notion of physicality as wholesale evil or mistaken.

⁵⁴ Pagels, 72-83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 73.

It is imperative to note that while Irenaeus, Tertullian, and their contemporaries attack the position of women within the Church, and attack the complex (and somewhat polytheistic) nature of the Gnostics, *we do not see them attack the specific idea of a representation of the feminine divine*. They do not say, “How dare they exalt a feminine principle!” Indeed, the orthodoxy later adopts their own ideas of the feminine divine through the Virgin Mary, several of the saints (including, it should be mentioned, the sanctification of Sophia), and the idea that the Holy Spirit has feminine qualities. As we have seen in our portrait of Sophia in all her various aspects, facets and presentations, if the Church Fathers wanted to target the divine feminine in their lambasting of the heresies, there was more than enough to target. But it seems that Sophia was of little to no concern whatsoever to these men. Rather, it is very specifically the position and authority of all-too-real and physical, human women in the Church that outrages the heresiologists. The practices, not the specific mythology, of the heretics, were at issue. As Tertullian wrote:

The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are!
For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact
exorcisms, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize. ⁵⁶

And in regards to the Montanists, a non-Gnostic heresy, Hippolytus said:

The Phrygians, however, derive the principles of their heresy from a certain Montanus, and Priscilla, and Maximilla, and regard these wretched women as prophetesses, and Montanus as a prophet. In respect, however, of what appertains to the origin and creation of the universe, the Phrygians are supposed to express

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *The Prescription Against Heretics (Ante Nicene Fathers Library, Full Text)*, Ch. XLI. <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.v.iii.xli.html>>

themselves correctly; while in the tenets which they enunciate respecting Christ, they have not irrelevantly formed their opinions. But they are seduced into error in common with the heretics previously alluded to, and devote their attention to the discourses of these above the Gospels, thus laying down regulations concerning novel and strange fasts. ⁵⁷

Clearly the Gnostics were not the only heresy empowering women and threatening the balance in the eyes of the Church Fathers.

Earlier we noted the mystery cult scandals involving women that took place around 190-180 B.C.E., at the level of the Roman Senate. It could be that what we witness with the quelling of the Gnostics is similar to earlier mystery cults, on a different scale. Allowing women into positions of authority challenged the patristic status quo. Not only would this development present a threat to their position of power and control in the hierarchy of the Church, but allowing women, viewed as the weaker gender both physically and spiritually, into positions of authority was a threat to the purity and sanctity of the Church itself. After all, was Eve (in the orthodox view) not tempted to her fall because of her feminine weakness?

Once again, however, it is important to note that this apparent attempt to grant women positions of religious authority, above all else, represented an “other,” an unknown factor, a change in the status quo. The attitudes of these men, while certainly patristic and misogynistic by today’s standards, were the common and widespread attitudes of the era in which they lived. A man in 200 C.E. expressing fear of female empowerment is entirely different than a man today expressing fear

⁵⁷ Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies (Ante Nicene Fathers Library, Full Text)*, Ch. XXI. <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iii.viii.xxii.html>>

of powerful women, despite what some may argue. The allowance of women into positions of religious authority could be seen in that era as a threat to Roman conventions by a religion already marginalized and fighting for legitimacy.

Indeed, when one adds the inherent secrecy and elitism attached to a mystery cult to the mix, it is in fact possible that the position of women in the heresies simply made for the most convenient means to attack the heresies. The Church Fathers had no shortage of reasons to want to quell heretical thought; to an outside observer the Christians were a disorganized mess. When combined with an emerging view of Christianity as a new faith, and not a true branch of Judaism, this threatened to rob them of any sense of legitimacy they might claim. In the colloquial, the Christians needed to get their house in order. It must be observed that the Jewish people considered themselves a race with a lineage and bloodline as well as a religious tradition; when the Christians opened the door to Gentiles this was another step away from being able to legitimately claim direct connection with Hebrew tradition, especially when Gentiles were permitted exception to certain of the Laws of Moses, such as circumcision (*Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians*).

This reaction on the part of the Church Fathers was not to crush women, it was to stop a movement before it began and to help organize their religion. It cannot be stressed enough: women did not have power or authority to begin with. The move to quell the Gnostics was not a move to take power away, but to stop it being granted in the first place. That the church fathers ignored the granting of status to women in certain accepted scriptures was nothing new—from the

beginning and even to today reading and teaching of the Christian scriptures has often been selective, for better or worse.

The real fear was not that the Church would somehow crumble from within, it was that such a drastic change in the way things were done represented a real unknown, and if the Roman Senate had in the past crushed mystery cults for granting power and religious authority to women, the Christians, already somewhat beleaguered, could not afford to have legal action taken against them.

Unfortunately, women in the Church had legal precedent working against them, and while we have no hard evidence that this line of thinking directly influenced Tertullian and Irenaeus, certainly any educated person at the time would have known about the suppression of mystery cults, and why the cults were suppressed. The similarity in reaction is at very least of note.

In any case, it seems clear that the real problems with the Gnostics, as with many of the heresies, were on the ground, not in the scriptures. In fact, getting rid of Sophia presented a problem to the Church Fathers. Sophia as a personification of wisdom showed up in Greek translations of the Wisdom Texts of the Hebrew canon they desired to keep, and even in passing as association with Jesus Christ in the Gospels and letters of Paul. She also was a well-established force in the prominent Greek philosophy of the time, and the Church Fathers, being intelligent men, had to know that her presence would not simply vanish because they said it should. How, then, to quash the apparent heresy of the Gnostics without losing chunks of text that they desired to keep, and without continuing to hunt and snuff

out secret mystery cults which may (and in fact did) linger for centuries? The simple answer was to grant feminine aspects to the Logos and the Holy Spirit, thus syncretizing Sophia, not as a goddess in her own right, but as an aspect of the androgynous nature of the word and the spirit, and also to acknowledge the close relationship of Jesus Christ with the Wisdom of God.

Susanne Shaup argues that this syncretization of Sophia into Logos and of granting her feminine qualities to the male deity lessens and effectively destroys the presence of Sophia as a separate entity, and she becomes lost to tradition as a result. Where there possibly should have been a quaternity, she claims, Sophia's aspects are absorbed namelessly into the Holy Trinity. This leads to a lopsided view of the divine which has required justification and "tweaking" ever since.⁵⁸ While it has some validity, in many ways this is a difficult point to support given the constant debates, argument and "tweaking" of Sophia that we see amongst the various Gnostic writings. And while it certainly is a lesser role, this point ignores the sanctification of Sophia, who was syncretized into Sainthood in the same manner as other so-called "pagan" goddesses; the Celtic goddess Brigid, for example, became the basis for the Catholic St. Brigid.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that reaction to women's place in the Church played a role in the desperation of the Church Fathers to attack and suppress the Gnostic schools of thought. However, there is no real evidence that the assault on the Gnostics was a conscious assault on a Goddess tradition, or even that the Gnostics sought to re-

⁵⁸ Shaup, 71.

establish a Goddess tradition based upon earlier models. Rather, certain heretical branches of Christianity that included, but were not limited to, the Gnostics, were granting positions of authority and religious clout to women. It is possible and perhaps likely that this was seen as a dangerous threat to the norm, and one that would weaken by its association with the inherently weaker feminine gender (so it was believed) the authority of the Church at large. It is, however, also possible that the perception of this threat made the heretics, including the Gnostics, an easy target during an effort to stabilize and organize the new emerging Christian faith.

More research should be done, but it seems clear that rather than a fear of the actual beliefs of the Gnostics, the fear was of the weakening of the Church's growing status in society. It was a fear of the alien, the other, and the unknown that drove the Church Fathers to rail against the Gnostics, not a desire to crush a previously (or even newly) empowered female population. Since women were not granted power to begin with, there was no power of which to rob them; the Church Fathers sought to keep things as they were, to maintain the status quo. Sophia as a goddess, revered angel, or symbol of the divine feminine was not even on the radar of the Church Fathers during their crusade against the Gnostics.

Sophia as a character is born of Greek philosophy, perhaps with elements drawn from various older goddess traditions, and as a goddess she evolves from the divine paramour of Yahweh in the Hebrew Wisdom Texts, through the corruptible, fallible, and quite stereotypical Classical Judeo-Christian female, to a somewhat tragic figure that despite its clear Christian intent nonetheless harkens back to the

ancient Hebrew pattern of exile and return. She enters the Gnostic cosmological view for many of the same reasons as Hokhmah in Hebrew tradition; Gentiles were looking for an understanding of a religion that in their world of Roman Imperial Cults was alien, and Greek philosophy provided a common point of reference. Sophia's story grew from there, as myths do, until what appears to be almost an entirely new religion arose from the story, albeit one hidden within Christian Orthodoxy.

If Sophia was a threat, it was as a manifestation of a hidden mystery cult, not as a goddess in her own right. And indeed, that she has survived in some form or another down through the ages even unto being embraced, studied, and "reclaimed" by neo-pagan and feminist writers of the modern era speaks to the idea that at least on some level, she is seen not only as nonthreatening, but as a positive element and perhaps a necessary part of human consciousness.

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