



*"For anyone acquainted with religious phenomenology it is an open secret that although physical and spiritual passion are deadly enemies, they are never-the-less brothers in arms, for which reason it often needs the merest touch to convert one into the other. Both are real, and together they form a pair of opposites, which is one of the most fruitful sources of energy."*

— C. G. Jung

## **The Role of the Sacred Feminine in the Gnostic Pantheons and the Mystery of the Bridal Chamber**

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## Introduction

Hierarchies that developed in the Gnostic magical pantheons were constructed on an etiology of a fallen, corrupted cosmos. Springing from a syncretic Hellenistic culture with Platonic, Oriental, Jewish and Christian influences, these cosmologies were extremely versatile; but generally were composed of 30, 12 or 8 pairs of *aeons*, called *syzygies*. (Although these concepts are explained in various places in this article, a quick reference of commonly used Gnostic terms can be found at the end of the article.) In this essay we will be examining the relationship between the male-female figures in the magical pantheons of Gnosticism, i.e., the syzygies of the *Pleroma*, or the "Fullness." Special emphasis will be on the principal female figure in Gnostic mythology, Sophia, the transcendent goddess who emerges in the Hellenistic world.

For Plato, the true home of the soul was in the stars, and the object of human experience was to climb through the various planetary spheres and return the soul to its disembodied spiritual existence. This philosophy is now seen by many to be the origin of western dualism. In much Gnostic speculation, even the upper realms of the cosmos have been demonized. Spiritual goodness is far above the heavens; it dwells beyond human concept in the realm of "depth and silence." The upper planetary region is frequently viewed as a place of evil spirits; heaven has become a place that is as unsafe as earth.

The human being, in most Gnostic cosmologies, cannot pursue the life of the earth and the spirit simultaneously and a recurring theme is how to balance transcendence and sexual power. We see this reflected in the preoccupation Gnostic writers had with the Genesis story, and will examine this problem in more depth in part two of this article.

In general, the Hermetic and Kabbalistic writings which evolved (simultaneously and subsequently) from Oriental Hellenism rejected the Gnostic theme of anti—cosmic dualism, affirming instead that the cosmos is an expression of the immanence of God, within which human beings stand in intermediary relationship, mediating microcosm to macrocosm. I personally see a number of philosophical differences between the magical pantheons in Kabbalistic and Gnostic cosmologies, a principal one being this problem of dualism. However, numerous scholars have sought to uncover the more redemptive aspects of Gnosticism, such as the role of women in the social hierarchy as well as philosophical revelations which point to a more unified view of nature and cosmos, God and humans. In particular, as I hope to demonstrate, the problem of Gnostic dualism is beautifully resolved in the Gospel of Philip.

Most "syzygos" of the Gnostic pantheons are composed of one of two kinds of pairs: those of opposite gender and those who reflect the upper and lower images of each other. The ambiguities of the Pleromatic beings are often revealed in these pairings. In the Apocryphon of John, for instance, Sophia's image, Pronoia, is seen as a feminine higher self and as Sophia's mate: the "First Man," perhaps another name for Adam. On a lower level, Adam's mate is Epinoia, whose function is to act as his spiritual savior. In turn, Adam and Eve's marriage seems to be based on the relationship between Sophia and the First Man.

The final redemptive scheme is in both a spiritualized, sexual partnership and in the identification of the lower Sophia with her higher Pleromatic image. Nonetheless, the text is unclear (or at least ambivalent) regarding the female's own innate capacity to save herself. In many Gnostic texts, she clearly is deluded, and in need of redemption; in others, like this one, she is sometimes spoken of as "male," who, in restoring herself to the world of the aeons, redeems humankind. This example demonstrates some of the thorny problems inherent in Gnostic cosmologies when attempting to formulate some kind of coherent identity of the sacred feminine and her role in the redemptive process.

The image of Sophia/Wisdom as goddess in the ancient world and role model for women is fraught with ambivalence and engenders strong arguments from feminist researchers in both directions. Some see her as a mere object of a misogynist bias which served only to reinforce the deepening dualistic paradigm perpetrated by a virulent patriarchalism. This theory holds that the myth denigrates the body, matter, and other associations traditionally thought of as 'female.' The other theory asserts that Gnosticism held many options for interpretation based on an endless variety of personal inclinations and, as an ancient religion, thus held open many opportunities for women not available in the orthodox Christian church. (1) Because the myths contain a plethora of images of Sophia—sometimes confusing or contradictory, to be sure--the avenue is open for an investigation into themes which challenge the stereotypical associations of an 'anima' image as fertility goddess or nurturing Mother or passive recipient of a masculine Logos. Indeed, as we will see, the images of Logos and Sophia become thoroughly immeshed in Gnostic myth and, in my opinion, this happens for reasons other than social or political—reasons which reflect the more esoteric or arcane dimension of this mystery tradition.

I will begin this exploration by examining the dual nature of Sophia in her upper and lower aspects, follow with an analysis of the ambivalent image of the Sophia figure, particularly in her relationship with Mary Magdalene and her intimate association to Christ and the role of the 'redeeming Logos,' and conclude with an explanation of why I believe the ritual of the bridal chamber was such an important element in early Gnostic sects. Throughout, we will be searching for themes of the transcendent feminine and consciousness evolution in the ancient world.

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## **Evolution of the Cosmology and the Ambivalent Roles of Sophia**

Gnostic scholar Hans Jonas tells us that the principal ideas pervading all of Gnosticism, and perhaps all of the mystery religions of the Hellenistic world are dualism and divine tragedy. He notes:

*"A Gnosticism without a fallen god, without a benighted creator and a sinister creation, without alien soul, cosmic captivity and a cosmic salvation, without the self-redeeming of the Deity—in short: a gnosis without divine tragedy will not meet specifications."*(2)

The themes of a "bad" creation or Creator need not remind us of some demonic plot: it is, rather, part of the grand tragedy. This idea was prevalent in many of the ancient mystery religions which postulated magical initiations as a means of releasing the soul from its entrapment in matter. Returning again to the Platonic concept of dualism, we must view it in light of an awakening consciousness: if something indeed survives the body (rather than simply returning to the earth, as in the ancient fertility rites), then that something must be an immortal soul. For Plato, the human rational faculty is the pre-existent part of the soul. The truly wise turn away from the conflicts of human striving to the archetypal Idea.

Humans participate in the world of ideas through the power of the Logos, the rational Word. Religious scholar Rudolf Bultmann, in his *Primitive Christianity*, sees this vision of Ideas as indeed the new religion of the age from which emerges the image of Transcendent Deity and ever—expanding cosmos. In the face of the existential dilemmas of the time "life is turned in upon itself and anxious about itself. . . it loses its sense of security against the external world and feels overwhelmed by its environment. Hence it must learn anew its origin and goal.. This explains Plato's adoption of the teaching of the mysteries on the journey of the soul, its pre—existence and fall." (3)

The image of the Transcendent cannot exist without such philosophical speculations that are inherently dualistic, however negative these dualisms came to be perceived as history developed. It is the radical nature of dualism that influences most theologies which concern themselves with the doctrine of salvation. Gnosticism, in particular, is a *redemptive* religion based on dualism. In Gnostic, Christian, and Platonic philosophy, dualism evolved as an important part of salvation doctrine. However, in orthodox Christianity, the body is not viewed in the negative light accorded it in Gnosticism, for resurrection implies salvation for the body as well. This is, perhaps, one of its most unique features, and was a chief reason why orthodoxy condemned Gnosticism as heresy.

Hans Jonas identifies three principal outside influences which impacted this most revolutionary period in Hellenic development: Jewish, Babylonian, and Persian religion. (4) From these ancient cultures we see the beginnings of theological abstraction, e.g., in the concepts of monotheism, cosmology and dualism, which many identify as indications of the evolving ego in humanity. This takes form as the spirit of the individual which recognizes itself as a unique soul which chooses the return journey to its transcendent home in the stars. In the late Hellenistic world and in early Christianity, where religion was becoming more individualistic, transcendent, and salvation—oriented, we would expect to find goddesses compatible with these other—worldly goals and expectations. And in fact, the feminine, earth—centered goddess of fertility gives way to more transcendent images of the sacred feminine, e.g., Isis, Sophia, Mary, etc.

Gnosticism, then, was a movement that, like other emerging religions of transcendence, was individual rather than collective—its spiritual principles went beyond denominational or ethnic boundaries. Ireneus, an early church father who lived about 130 c.e., wrote fiercely against the Gnostics, especially in *Against Heresies*, because he felt that they were so absorbed in their individually created myths that essential dogmatic

truths were carelessly tossed by the wayside. However, there are many similarities connecting Gnosticism to both Judaism and Christianity, e.g., the *sacramental* implications of salvation as well as the distinct contrast between the "folly" of this world contrasted with transcendent Wisdom or Sophia.

What is perhaps most apparent about Gnostic dualism is that opposing forces could not be reconciled into one personality; otherwise it would create an extremely ambivalent cosmic creator. If Yahweh was the one true God, then he had a wretched, jealous side as well as a good, compassionate one. So Gnostics postulated a higher, unknowable Perfect Father—figure and made the Biblical Yahweh a *demiurge*: the creator or craftsman of the world, but certainly not the highest God. When Gnostic texts speak of "Father" therefore, what is meant is an ineffable God—head, not a Biblical personality.

The divine attributes of this God emanate forth abstract qualities that are at the same time *hypostases*: metaphysical ideas that take on a life of their own. These are the aeons, and their pairings often mirror each other. Thus, in one schema, Depth is paired with Silence; Mind with Truth; Word with Life, and so on. These celestial beings have a variety of powers and functions, occupying and officiating over the management of their various heavens. The archons or rulers come from the lowest heaven. They are generally hostile. The first archon is usually the demiurge. According to a famous Gnostic teachers of the era, Valentinus, the cosmos owes its existence to the presence of error and ignorance, i.e., the demiurge and the archons. The archons ruling the planetary zones are Pride (hubris), which belongs to Jupiter; Envy, the archon of the Moon; Wrath, associated with Mars; Lust, which is under the auspices of Venus; Sloth, related to Saturn; Greed, the archon of the Sun; and Falsehood, which belongs to Mercury.

Separating the lower worlds from the higher world is "horos," the Boundary. At the top of the pantheon is usually a 3-fold Deity, which Christians identified as the Trinity; however, it rarely was perceived as all male. Its 3-fold categories of thought were generally characterized as Nous (Mind), Ennoia (Thought) and Logos (Reason or Word).

The Valentinian Gnostic demiurge has much in common with Platonic myth and has inherited its dualism in the split between transcendent Wisdom and Achamoth, the manifest or immanent daughter of Sophia. However, unlike their Platonic counterparts, Gnostic myths generally represent the second member of the divine triad as female. The natural result of this is that the redemptive functions of the feminine principle are stressed, alongside her own fallen nature. However, the structure of Gnostic cosmology does not generally need to explain fall and alienation from God in terms of sinful disobedience, a common interpretation of the Adam—Eve myth. Rather, it seeks to explain the distance between the divine world and this one, and therefore postulates a cosmological structure—its magical pantheon—which acts as the intermediary agents bringing humanity knowledge of the divine world. Throughout Gnostic literature, the stage is set for various enactments of the descent and restoration of the female heroine, Sophia, albeit she often appears under other names: Barbelo, Zoe, Psyche, Achamoth.

Like Isis, Sophia's existence becomes split into a multiplicity of forms; in fact, Valentinus, who promulgated perhaps the most popular form of Gnosticism, could well have been influenced not only by Platonic parallels in the formation of creation myths, but also by Plutarch, the author of *On Isis and Osiris*, and, of course, the famous Jewish patriarch in the ancient world, Philo (13 BCE - 45 CE).

However, although similarities may exist between Philonic and Gnostic anthropologies, there are also clear distinctions which should be kept in mind: according to Philo's world view, the human being is the crown of creation; to the Gnostic, humans are little more than aliens in the world. For Philo, God is the monotheistic creator and preserver of the world; for the Gnostic, God is divided into a transcendent Deity and an inferior Creator. As June Singer explains, the Gnostic God is "neither begotten, nor does he create worlds, and in this respect, stands in contrast to all other tribal gods and world gods of the historic religions." (5)

However, because even to Philo, God as transcendent abstract Deity was incomprehensible, intermediary figures were needed to connect the created world to the ineffable. Philo was perhaps the first to clearly elaborate upon the connection between Word or Logos with Wisdom/Sophia:

*"This issues forth out of Eden: the Sophia of God, and this is the Logos of God."*(6)

Elsewhere he describes Sophia as the "first-born Mother of all things" and the Logos as "the eldest-born image of God." (7) His precedent for making these associations, however, was already clearly in place, for Old Testament literature also associated the "Wisdom which formed humans" (*Wisdom* 9:1-2) and the Word, as divine intermediary, by whom all things were made. Elsewhere Philo speaks of an androgynous Deity, the 'metropator' or 'father-mother.' (8)

Gnostic scholar Gilles Quispel sees this same androgynous figure of a father-mother goddess in the figure of Barbelo in the *Apocryphon of John* and other pre-Valentinian texts. In analyzing the hypostatization of the mythic Sophia figure, Quispel finds the most obvious precedent to be Simon Magus and his Helen. Simonean Gnosis relates how Sophia "is said to have shown herself to the archons, the rulers of the world, sometimes in the form of a man and at other times in the form of a woman." (9) In the more Christian Gnostic pantheons, this androgynous nature of Sophia is most fully developed, perhaps, in the figure of Christ, which we will examine more in due course.

The church father Irenaeus assumed that Simon Magus was the founder of Gnosticism. The prototype of the goddess Sophia was none other than the mythic Helen. And, in the *Clementine Homilies*, we are told that "Simon goes about in the company of Helen and, even until now, stirs up the crowds. He says that he has brought down this Helen from the highest heavens to the world; she is the Queen, since she is all-maternal Being and Wisdom (Sophia)." (10)

Helen was purported to have been a historic person, therefore, who was later mythologized. She was envisioned as a moon virgin who had been abducted and made to live on earth. She is thus the prototype of the Greek concept of the soul, the anima. The "garments of glory" once worn by the soul before its descent into matter is the recurring Platonic theme in the mythology, as in all transcendent goddess images of the period. Furthermore, this anima image carries with it the light of Wisdom/Logos: in Samaria, there was excavated a statue of Helen with a torch in her right hand.

Historically, Simon was said to have lived in Samaria and was married to a prostitute named Helen. Simon Magus said that Helen was the "first conception of his mind, the Mother of all" (11) who had been trapped in a female body and held captive by lesser beings whom she had created, Transmigrating from body to body, she finally became a prostitute who was redeemed by Simon, the great magician. Thus there arises the association of Sophia as both Pisits (Faith) and Prunikos (Whore) who continually appears in different Gnostic texts wearing varying nuances of this ambivalent nature.

In Valentinian Gnosis, we see the development of two aeons that are both called Sophia: the upper Sophia, who is high above in the world of the Pleroma, and the other, sometimes called the daughter or virgin of light, is found at the lower end.

The Gnostic myth of the cosmic drama tells of the fall of the lower Sophia, which succumbed to the temptation of the hyle (matter) and fell from the Pleroma into the lower worlds, where it still remained a luminous being. Some versions see Sophia's need to know the Unknowable Father to be her hubris; in other versions, she tries to imitate him by attempting to create without a partner, and ends up with an abortive image of herself, the demiurge. This fallen Sophia remains related to pneuma (spirit), however, but she now needs to be redeemed. How does this desire to know God turn into such a perverted cosmic drama? Quispel explains that:

*"this desire becomes excessive and turns to passion. It is a sort of disease that first develops in one part of the body and then breaks out in another place. . .The emergence of Evil was therefore a process that took place in the divine. According to Valentinus, Evil was a kind of neurosis in the Pleroma that developed in the aeon of Wisdom."(12)*

Because the principal concerns of Gnosticism were the question evil and suffering in the world, and their preoccupation with Genesis and origins, some interpret the main intention of the Gnostic Sophia myths to provide a more metaphorical or esoteric explanation of the Genesis text. (13) To the Gnostic, the world itself started in disorder with the fall of the aeons from the Pleroma, and the fall of man is but an inferior copy. Dualism is, in a sense created from dualism. The human is dual because there was a split in the original God-energy.

The motif of the androgynous Adam-Eve metaphor thus plays an important role in the cosmology, since all syzygies in the magical pantheon need to be re-united for the fullness of the Pleroma to be restored. Now, there are many variations of this myth in other Gnostic stories. In *Exegesis of the Soul*,(14) the soul is the subject of the discourse,

which is, however, spoken of as a feminine fallen woman whose adulterous nature is emphasized. So long as she remained with the Father, she is virginal and bisexual; when she falls into a body, she loses her virginity and is "defiled" and "seduced" by the "wanton creatures" below. (127: 25-30)

In *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Sophia is simply accused of attempting to imitate the Father, rather than to know him:

*"Sophia, who is called Pistis, wanted to create something alone without her consort.. .and what she created became a product in Matter, like an aborted fetus. . ."(Hy. Arch. 94. 5—15)*

In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* Sophia is saved by her spiritual mate, Jesus. Here, she is also the feminine being who gave birth to the world. Before her 'conjunctio' (a theme we will return to later), she is taken captive by the arrogant demiurge, Ialdoboath, who imprisons the 'light—drops' of Sophia.

In some Gnostic texts, Christ is said to be the offspring of Sophia: in others, she is his consort, or the fallen woman whom he redeems. Thus there grew up in Gnostic myth the association of Sophia/Christ and Magdalene/Jesus and some texts point to the intimate association between the latter. Marjorie Malvern (15) argues that in the text *Pistis Sophia*, the universal archetype of the holy prostitute takes particular manifestation in Magdalene, who, like Helen, was redeemed from prostitution and became the woman to whom Jesus would reveal the fullness of his mysteries. We will return to a more elaborate examination of the Sophia/Magdalene theme in the next section.

It is this *revelation of the word* which becomes salvation to the early Gnostic Christian. To quote Quispel:

*"In Valentinus' interpretation of these existing Gnostic myths, Christ carried and revealed the awareness of the unconscious Self to mankind. According to Valentinus, spirit is present in man, but it is dormant. Only the word of Christ, which awakens and reveals it can lead to self—knowledge.. .we might say that revelation is also an 'opening up,' which might be equated with giving birth. Through the word of revelation we are reborn, that is, opened up in order to receive the self. By means of a Gnostic interpretation of the Christian religion Valentinus provided us with a very original approach, which is not the Word and the Spirit.. .but the Word and the Self."(16)*

We will explore the relationship between the "Self" and the divine Image in [Part 2](#).

An important theme that emerges here is that of the very feminine characteristic of giving birth which is attributed to the Logos, the revealing Word. Some feminist writers have analyzed that Wisdom (Sophia) turned Word (masculine Logos) was part of the 'patriarchal takeover,' where Wisdom was usurped by Christ, and Wisdom functions were absorbed by the Logos. However, there seems to be an almost natural association of the two images in the androgynous character of the Gnostic Deity. In the *Apocryphon of*

*John*, the Savior is revealed as both Logos and Sophia, who descends in order to redeem. He announces that He is the Father, the Mother and the Son. (2:10-15)

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, Sophia is, from the beginning, the Divine Logos, whose process of devolution is not a rash act but actually a fulfillment which brings forth the dispensation. In the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, she is frequently called the 'Voice.' She is the first thought who descends as the Word and, in fact, encompasses the whole Trinity:

*"Now the Voice that originated from my thought exists as three permanences: the Father, the Mother, and the Son. A Sound that is perceptible, it has within it a Word endowed with every glory." (Tn. Pro. 37: 20—25)*

Her revelation is associated with the true knowledge which reveals the ignorance of the demiurge. Her call to self-knowledge reveals that she is quite active in sustaining order in the universe that stems from her.

In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the most compelling set of savior figures in the text are female, represented variously as the Holy Spirit, Incorruptibility, the Instructress, Norea, etc. Norea carries the potent image of fire, (traditionally masculine) whose breath scorches the archons, and Sophia is portrayed as sowing the *seed of light* in matter. These two images certainly challenge the stereotypical associations of the feminine as passive recipient of salvation.

To the Gnostics, Christ had both a male and a female aspect: He was First Begotten Son and also "First Begetress Sophia, Mother of the Universe." (*Hy. Arch.9:5*) Because of the divine androgynous character of Christ, it should not be surprising that a male figure should be equated with the incarnation of Wisdom. In a confusing plethora of images, both Christ and Mary are perceived as a manifestation of the Sophia-Wisdom throughout Church theology and liturgy. The depiction of Sophia in Gnosticism as divine feminine intermediary is not recognized by Orthodox Christianity; out this same role is there played by Mary, the Mother of Christ, who seems to be ignored in the Gnostic texts.

Both Eve and Mary have subtle associations with the 'lower,' more human Sophia-figure: this 'demoted' Sophia was the hypostatic image destined to have a unique relationship with the Christ—Savior figure. The 'Spirit' of Achamoth is derived from the light which radiated from Christ. Like Mary, the human agent of the bearer of salvation, Achamoth imbues creation with pneuma to enable it to attain restoration to the primordial unity. Caitlin Matthews has noted that like Eve, Sophia becomes the unwitting mover of the Fall who welcomes back all that she unwittingly set loose. (17)

In Valentinian Gnosis, it is Achamoth who inserted the embryo of light into the demiurgic figure so that, with the creation of human beings, the material world might become a vehicle for the reception of the Logos. The demiurge was not able to breathe pneuma, the soul of life, into the beings which he had created, but Achamoth performed this function in order that all of the material creation could find its way back to the Pleroma.

In the *Tripartite Tractate*, the wandering of creation back to the fullness of God takes place because spirit needs psyche. Quispel (18) sees this treatise as an extremely important document which identifies education and evolution as critical themes. The universe exists, in fact, in order to educate the spirit. Spirit needs to go through various ethical, religious, and material exercises so that it may become conscious of itself, and the world will exist until all human beings have become conscious of God. The Gnostic philosopher who wrote this text looked at history as “the evolution of mankind from the inferno of sensuousness to the freedom of the spirit via religion and morality.” (19) This portrait differs markedly from the one painted by many of the church fathers concerning the lack of morality in the Gnostics of the day.

For much of the early period of the Church, the Gnostic "mysteries" were the same sacraments celebrated by the Orthodox Church. However, in general, the Gnostics were not inclined to have any special appreciation for ritual or cultic activities except as it supported Gnosis. They believed that not only baptism, but knowledge was the vehicle for salvation. However, sacramental language was of vital importance in Gnostic ritual, as it was in other magical and Hermetic circles of the day. Particularly in the Gospel of Phillip, stress was laid on the profound sacredness of the Name:

*"One single Name they do not utter in the world, the Name which the Father gave to the Son, which is above all things, which is the Name of the Father. For the Son would not become the Father except he clothe himself with the Name of the Father."(Philip 54:6—12)*

There are hints of the power of Christ's name in New Testament writings, (e.g., *John* 17:11, *Gal.* 3:27) but Quispel has noted that the curious terminology of being *clothed* with the Name has particular parallels in Jewish mystical circles. (20) In the Odes of Solomon we read, "Put on therefore, the Name of the Most High." And in another magical Jewish writing, the initiate is said to:

*"impregnate himself.. .with the Great Name of God... [and] perform a symbolic act by clothing himself in a garment into whose texture the Name has been woven."(21)*

This vivid imagery is similar to the metaphorical garments in the mythologies of both Isis and Sophia, which are shed with the descent, and the ritual of bestowing new clothes on the initiate as a symbol of soul's ascent. In each case, the re-discovery of the garments represents the transformation of the individual. Ernst Cassirer, in *The philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, has noted that, in myth, there is an interesting association between 'name' and its owner:

*"[F]or original mythical thinking, the name is even more than such a skin: it expresses what is innermost and essential in the man and it positively is this innermost essence. Name and personality merge."(22)*

The *Pistis Sophia* is replete with imagery of the names' and the 'vestures' of the souls ascent. In the *Gospel of Phillip* it is said that "in this world, those who put on garments are

better than the garments. In the kingdom of heaven, the garments are other than those who put them on" (57: 15—20), referring to the glory of the garment of Light which the soul dons who escapes the flesh and the cycles of this world forever.

Many Gnostic sacraments were practiced in conjunction with a variety of magical formulas, symbols and signs. Gnostics were familiar with the occult practices of the day related to sound, numbers and letters, and some of the vocalizations they used were undoubtedly derived from ancient sources, or taken from other mystery cults of antiquity. The Acts of John describes a mystical chant which Jesus taught to his disciples before his passion, accompanied by a circle dance.

The purpose of the savior figure was not only to awaken the soul from its sleep deep in the tomb of matter, and to remind it of its heavenly home, but to teach the way of return via sacred passwords.' Generally, the souls must pass the different planetary spheres, the "watch—posts" of the demonic cosmic powers. Often the Gnostic redeemer—figure delivers discourses which are also revelations, i.e.: 'I am the shepherd,' 'I am the truth' , etc. , thus preparing the way for his own to follow him. In the *Apocalypse of James*, Jesus imparts to his disciples secret revelations for avoiding the Archons, telling them to say:

*"I shall call on the imperishable knowledge which is Sophia who is in the Father, and who is the mother of Achamoth. . . Then they will fall into disorder (and) will raise a clamor against their root and the race of their mother. But you will go up to what is yours."(Apoc. James 35: 10—25)*

Gnostic practice was as organized as of the other early mystery cults, including in its ritual component baptism, eucharist and other sacraments, as well as various ascetic rites of purification. Perhaps most important, however, were the traditional formulae which were granted to the initiate to prepare the self for its ascent. Sometimes miracles were regarded as proof of mastery over the world, as Bultmann has noted:

*"Sometimes this superiority was displayed in the miraculous odours or radiant light which exuded from their persons, symptoms which became very important later on in monastic mysticism."(23)*

These same kinds of "odors" and "lights" continue to be a part of the Church's miraculous tradition, and are becoming so common today that, at any given time, there are nearly 300 Catholic commissions investigating miracles and apparitions.

It is the Sophia who emerges as the principal magnet at the heart of these mysteries, for, as the ancient church father Hippolytus tells us, it is for her sake that "Jesus asks the Father to send him forth with the seals that enable him to pass through the Aeons and to unlock their Mysteries." (24) Other Gnostic texts represent the Sophia herself as the savior, the awakener, the Spirit; in *Hypostasis of the Archons* for example, the Eve/Sophia figure is the one who awakens Adam, who represents the psyche in need of redemption. (89:11—20)

Here the roles of feminine psyche and masculine spirit are reversed. She is called the perfect primal Intelligence in the *Apocryphon of John*, attributes which are clearly manifestations of the Logos principle, which seems to move fluidly back and forth between male and female incarnations.

From my point of view, it is impossible to separate the Christ/Logos figure from Sophia, or to envision the feminine as being usurped by the masculine principle through some kind of conscious misogynistic manipulation. This is not to say that misogyny did not run rampant in certain cycles of patriarchal development, and specifically in certain church fathers. However, I do not believe that Sophia/Wisdom was buried by the masculine Logos, as some feminist writers do; but rather that there was a particularly symbiotic relationship between the two of them which was necessary for the development of Gnosticism as a mystery religion in the ancient world.

Jungian analyst June Singer tells us that "the separation of the feminine principle from the masculine principle results in the incomplete or one-sided being...wholeness or completion comes about symbolically in the mystical marriage between the Christ...and the Sophia figure." (25)

This leads us to one of the most elusive of all the Gnostic teachings: the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene and the mystery of the bridal chamber.

### **The Mystery of the Bridal Chamber in the Gospel of Philip**

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#### **TERMS**

**AEON:** Hypostasi, or celestial being that makes up the Pleroma.

**ARCHON:** 'Ruler' or power, of a lower nature than the aeons (which were pure emanations of God. The first archon was usually the Demiurge.

**DEMIURGE:** World creator, or craftsman; not the highest God.

**ESCHATOLOGY:** Theology concerning the final events in world history, or the ultimate destiny of humankind.

**GNOSIS:** Knowledge, usually of secret or initiatory nature.

**HYPOSTASIS:** Deification or personification of an abstract concept, or the elaboration of divine parts or powers into active entities.

**HYLE:** Matter

**LOGOS:** The Greek word for "Word" or "Reason."

PLEROMA: The Fullness of the God-head, opposed to *kenoma*, or emptiness, the Void.

PNEUMA: Highest spark of the soul. Pneumatics (opposed to psychics or hylics) were those who had Gnosis.

SOPHIA: The Greek word for "Wisdom."

SYZYGY: A pair of Aeons, e.g., Unbegotten Father, or Depth of Silence (sometimes characterized as separate entities, i.e, Logos and Zoe).

VIRGIN'S MILK: The 'milk of Wisdom' (Sophia), a metaphor for the food of the philosophers (the lovers of Sophia), the Gnostics, as well as the alchemists.

ZOE: The Greek word for "Life."

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### References

1. See for example, Marjorie Malvern, *Venus in Sackcloth: The Magdalen's Origins and Metamorphosis* (Carbondale: Southern Ill. Press, 1975) who particularly focuses on the dualism perpetrated in the relationship of the Gnostic Sophia to Magdalen; Joan Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), who perceives the Wisdom function of Sophia to be usurped by the masculine Logos; and Karen King, "Sophia and Christ" in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) on the social relevance of Gnosticism for Hellenistic women. See also her "Ridicule and Rape, Rule and Rebellion: the Hypostasis of the Archons" in *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World*, ed. James Goehring, et al (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press). For a more positive view, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (NY: Random House, 1988); and *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (NY: Random House, 1988); and June Singer, *Seeing Through the Visible World: Jung, Gnosis and Chaos* (NY: Harper & Row, 1990).
2. Hans Jonas, "Response to G. Quispel's 'Gnosticism and the New Testament'" in *The Bible in Modern Scholarship*, quoted in Rose Harman Arthur, *The Wisdom Goddess* (NY: University Press of America, 1984), 111.
3. Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity* (NY: Meridan Books, 1956), 125.
4. Hans Jonas. *Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).
5. June Singer, *Seeing Through the Visible World*, 96.

6. Quoted in Engelsman, *Feminine Dimension of the Divine*. 97.
7. Ibid.
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9. Ibid., p. 163.
10. Quoted in Robert Grant, *Gnosticism: A Sourcebook of Heretical Writings* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 27.
11. Grant, *Gnosticism*, 24.
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13. For example, Elaine Pagels, (#1, above). For a more esoteric explanation, see Benjamin Walker, *Gnosticism* (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Aquarian Press 1983) and Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom* (Bath, Avon, Great Britain: Mandala, 1991).
14. All references to Gnostic texts are from the *Nag Hammadi Library* ed. James Robinson (S.F.: Harper & Row, 1977) unless otherwise noted.
15. Marjorie Malvern, *Venus in Sackcloth*, 43-51.
16. Quispel, Vol. 1, 164-5
17. Matthews, *Sophia*, 156
18. Quispel, Vol. 1, 169.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 208.
21. Ibid.
22. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Vol. 2 Trans. by Ralph Manheim 1966), (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1966), 40-41.
23. R. Bultmann, *Primitive*, 169
24. quoted in H. Jonas, *Gnosticism*, 67.

25. J. Singer, *Seeing*, 91 & 101.

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