

The Feminine Face of God in Judaism and Christianity

John F. Nash



Michelangelo, "The Creation of Adam" (c.1511)

Summary

Judaism and Christianity officially proclaim a masculine Deity. Yet notions of a Feminine Face of God can be discerned from the dawn of biblical Judaism to modern esoteric Christianity. Typically such notions arose on the fringes of religious orthodoxy, though in a few cases, they were endorsed by religious leaders. The Feminine Face of God can be seen in goddesses that are categorically distinct from humanity, in at least one historical figure, and in the corporate body of Jews or Christians.

This article examines evidence of the Feminine Face of God in biblical and later Judaism; in the Kabbalah; and in Gnostic, mainstream and esoteric Christianity. Emphasis is given to two individualities who serve as particularly clear expressions of divinity: Sophia and Mary. Among much else, the article offers insights into the enigmatic relationship between Sophia and Mary.

Introduction

In Genesis 1, "God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... male and female created he them."¹ The first reference to humanity in the Bible also makes an important statement about God: if human sexual polarity reflects the divine image and likeness, then God must also be both male and female. Notwithstanding that bold affirmation in their joint

About the Author

John F. Nash, Ph.D., is a long-time esoteric student, author, and teacher. Among his published works, *Quest for the Soul*, *The Soul and Its Destiny*, and *The One, the Many*, have been reviewed in the *Esoteric Quarterly*. Another book, *The Sacramental Church*, was published in 2011. His latest book: *Mary, Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess*, was published in 2020. For further information see the advertisement in this issue and the website <http://www.uriel.com>.

creation story, institutional Judaism and Christianity projected only masculine attributes onto their deity.

Consequently, it may seem challenging to look for signs of a Feminine Face of God in the two world religions. Yet, throughout Judeo-Christian history, people yearned for a *goddess*—and in multiple contexts found one. Attempts were made to suppress that yearning, or to channel it into less threatening forms, like the corporate body of believers. But a more substantial and personal goddess kept coming back, showing how deep the hunger ran, and continues to run.

Belief in a Feminine Face of God has sometimes been most prevalent among the masses; at other times it involved sophisticated individuals and groups. Important insights were shared by prominent Gnostics and Jewish Kabbalists; by Christians like Hildegard of Bingen, Jakob Böhme, and Sergei Bulgakov; and by twentieth-century Theosophists. Finally, we have the work of modern scholars searching for evidence of the Feminine Face of God in scripture and other ancient texts.

Gods and Goddesses of Antiquity

The feminist movement of the 1970s and '80s popularized the belief that, in prehistory, the Great Goddess reigned supreme in a peaceful, matriarchal society. The Goddess was identified with both the Earth and motherhood. Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor claimed that goddess worship emerged naturally from the child-mother relationship. “The first love-object for both women and men,” they noted, “is the mother.” Sjöö and Mor added: “In matriarchal society ... there is a close identification with the collective group of mothers, with Mother Earth, and with the Cosmic Mother.”² The goddess religion focused on the seasons of the year, and on the lunar cycle, with its associations with the menstrual cycle.³ Allegedly the goddess culture ended when invading Indo-European tribes from Central Asia imposed a warlike patriarchy.⁴

Over time the scenario lost some of its credibility. Among other considerations, the matriarchal society must have been limited in geographical extent; it could not, for example, have

included Central Asia. But the Indo-Europeans did introduce male warrior gods, like Indra, Yahweh, Ares, Mars, and Odin. Those deities represented physical strength and prowess in battle, to which men were said to aspire and on which their own, their family's and their tribe's survival depended.

Even in increasingly male-dominated pantheons, some powerful goddesses held their own. A few reigned alone, like the Hindu Ushas, goddess of the dawn; the Greek Athena; and the Roman Cybele, known as *Magna Mater* (“Great Mother”). The Celtic Danu and the Aztec Coatlicue were the mothers of male gods. Others were consorts of male gods; all three persons of the Hindu *trimurti* had consorts. In Egypt, Osiris and Isis were not only husband and wife but also siblings. Isis was revered as a mother goddess, and artwork of her holding her son Horus provided a prototype for the Christian Madonna and Child.

Of particular relevance to the present study is the ancient Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna. Inanna was known as the “Lady of Heaven,” or “Queen of Heaven,” and was associated with the planet Venus and the eight-pointed star.⁵ Later, Inanna was worshipped by the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians under the name Ishtar. Inanna probably inspired the Chaldean-Hebrew goddess Asherah. Inanna had a sister, Ereshkigal, “Queen of the Underworld,” whose characteristics were the polar opposites of Inanna's. Today we might suggest that Ereshkigal represented Inanna's shadow side.

The Burney Relief is often said to depict Inanna or Ereshkigal.⁶ The terracotta relief, dated between 1800 and 1750 BCE, shows a nude, female figure with wings, bird's talons instead of feet, and dewclaws on her lower legs. Her raised hands hold “rod and ring” symbols that customarily represented sacrificial offerings. She is flanked by owls and perched on the backs of two lions. Traces of pigment suggest that her body was once painted red, and the background black; hence the modern name “Queen of the Night.”⁷

The figure in the Burney Relief is not immediately threatening; the face and body are attractive, and her hairstyle, headdress, and jewelry

suggest high social status. But detractors could have seized upon the combination of wings and clawed feet to demonize her as a bird of prey, a bloodthirsty seductress. She may lie behind the evil Lilith of Judaic tradition. Significantly, one of her possible points of origin was Abraham's homeland, Ur.

What Does the Feminine Face Mean?

What precisely do we mean by the Feminine Face of God? In antiquity, people may have perceived it in the Moon, the sea, a forest, or the wind; or in a quality like fertility, nurturing or compassion. Perhaps the element or quality suggested femaleness, or female attributes were projected onto it. Over time it acquired a name and became a personage, an object of worship, a goddess. Sophia evolved from the quality of wisdom.

A goddess might be created solely by storytellers, eventually to take a prominent place in a culture's mythology. Or a particular culture might honor a human woman and raise her to the level of a deity; Mary was raised to divine, or near-divine, status. She brought her femaleness and attributes with her, though new attributes were projected onto her too.

Goddesses are created or discovered, and in every case we can detect human aspiration or need. Both in prehistory and throughout Judeo-Christian history people have yearned for a divine queen and/or mother, and their yearnings generally have been rewarded. However, this does not necessarily mean that goddesses—and gods—are mere figments of primitive imagination. Divinity also seeks to reveal itself, and deities may emerge from the intersection of human aspiration and divine revelation. Human aspiration may create a form into which divine essence can flow; the more noble the form the more fully the divine essence can ensoul it. Esoteric and some Christian teachings describe ways in which human beings can evolve sufficiently to serve as forms for divine ensoulment.

Esoteric teachings also speak of a feminine Principle that precedes, underlies or conditions the manifestations of deities, or logoi, from the unmanifest Godhead. At the other end of the conceptual spectrum, some modern "post-

religious" writers reduce the Feminine Face of God to a mere slogan or symbol of women's revolt against patriarchy.

In this study we shall observe the development of manifestations of the Feminine in diverse cultures, over a period of four millennia. At the same time, we shall gain a better understanding of what we mean by the Feminine Face of God.

The Feminine Face in Judaism

Moses proclaimed that Yahweh (Hebrew: *Yhvh*) was the one true God. Yahweh was a tribal warrior god, and the Jewish people projected unmistakably masculine qualities onto him. He led them in battle against their many enemies, including the inhabitants of the lands they conquered and occupied.

Yet the Feminine Face of God can be discerned in a number of forms in Judaism. Some of them had pre-Judaic roots. Some have strong roots in scripture, while others were later creations, projected back onto scripture; one later creation was projected back onto the very first chapter of the Bible. Some found their way into medieval and modern Judaism, into the Kabbalah, or into Christianity.

Asherah

The mother goddess Asherah was worshipped in various parts of the Middle East. She and her consort El, or El Shaddai ("the High God") allegedly gave birth to a pantheon of gods, from seventy to eighty-eight in number.⁸ Asherah was also a goddess of the trees or the groves, and her cult symbol was a stylistic tree: a wooden post.

Abraham and his wife (and half-sister) Sarah, then known as Abram and Sarai, were told by God to leave their home in Ur of the Chaldees and journey to the Land of Canaan. Abraham's God was El, and he brought El and Asherah with him to Canaan.

We read in *Genesis* that "the Lord" gave Abram the new name Abraham and told him: "I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered."⁹ Thus was born the Jewish nation. But "the Lord" was not El but Yahweh.¹⁰ Abraham may have lived

early in the second millennium BCE, but the Hebrew Bible is no older than the sixth century BCE, and by that time El had been replaced by, or transformed into, Yahweh.

While El may have survived under a new name, the prophets and priests found no place for Asherah in their vision of Judaism. But it seems that she continued to find a place in the hearts of ordinary people. Worship of Asherah continued below the surface of mainstream Judaism. Asherah may be related to the Semitic mother-goddess Ashtoreth, or Astarte, who also appears in the Old Testament.¹¹

Asherah appears some forty times in the Hebrew Bible. The same word was used for the goddess and for one of her sacred trees, groves, or ritual posts; and since Hebrew has no capitals, distinguishing between them is not always easy. But at least five instances can be identified where the context indicates a reference to the goddess.¹² Even then, most translators still hesitated to name her, instead rendering *asherah* as “the grove” or another cult symbol, or retaining the Hebrew word uncapitalized. Two examples from the King James Bible are: “Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal ... and the prophets of the groves [prophets of Asherah]”; “And he set a graven image of the grove [image of Asherah].”¹³

The prophets and temple priests regarded the worship of Asherah as idolatrous. By then El had been forgotten, and Asherah was defamed by associating her with foreign gods like Baal. In *Judges* Yahweh commanded Gideon to “cut down the grove [*asherah*],” next to an altar of Baal, and to “offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood.”¹⁴ Gideon had to destroy the shrine in the night to evade the people’s wrath. Similarly, in *2 Chronicles* Asa, king of Judah, found favor with God when he “took away the altars of the strange gods, and the high places, and brake down the images, and cut down the groves [*asherim*].”¹⁵ (Like the goddess, *asherah* is grammatically feminine, but the plural took the masculine form *asherim*). The “high places,” mentioned several times in the Hebrew Bible, seem to have been sacred mounds where Asherah and other deities were worshipped.

Asherah seems to have been primarily a deity of the household, and her devotees were predominantly women, even royal women. Thus, in *1 Kings*, we read that Asa deposed Maachah, the queen mother, on grounds of idolatry and burned her statue of Asherah.¹⁶

In *2 Kings* 23 King Josiah ordered Hilkiah the high priest to destroy cult objects, including *asherim*, in multiple locations.¹⁷ The text also mentions that “women ... wove hangings for the grove [*asherah*]” and complains about “the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had builded for Ashtoreth.”¹⁸

In *Jeremiah* we find: “The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough, to make cakes to the queen of heaven.”¹⁹ In a later chapter, Jeremiah lamented the change in Israel’s fortunes “when we burned incense to the queen of heaven, and poured out drink offerings unto her, did we make her cakes to worship her, and pour out drink offerings unto her, without our men?”²⁰ The “queen of heaven” is not identified, but most likely she was Asherah, or even Inanna. This reference is especially important. First, we find again the heavy involvement of women. Either Asherah really was a “woman’s” goddess, or the prophets were indirectly blaming women for Israel’s travails. Second, the sacrificial offering of cakes foreshadowed the Eucharist. We shall see that a cult of women made sacrificial offerings of cakes to Mary in early Christianity, nearly a millennium later.

The frequency with which priests and prophets spoke out against the cult of Asherah testifies to its broad extent and endurance. Some scholars have detected signs that Asherah survived in popular Judaic devotion until late biblical times, possibly as Yahweh’s consort.²¹ Meanwhile, some of Asherah’s maternal duties were reassigned to Yahweh himself; for example: “Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?”²² Efforts were being made to soften Yahweh’s warrior image.

Lilith

Lilith appears once in the Hebrew Bible, in *Isaiah*. But at least until recently, translators referred to her indirectly, using terms like “the screech owl,” “the night creature,” or “the night.” For example, the King James Bible renders the verse: “The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the wild beasts of the island, and ... the screech owl [Lilith] also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest.”²³

Lilith appears by name in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in a passage that *Isaiah* may have inspired: “I, the Instructor, proclaim His glorious splendor so as to frighten and to terrify all the spirits of the destroying angels, spirits of the bastards, demons, Lilith, howlers, and (desert dwellers) ... and those which fall upon men without warning to lead them astray.”²⁴ Lilith is also mentioned by name in the Babylonian Talmud, written between the third and fifth century CE. Five such references are harshly critical. Lilith is described as a demonesse who killed her own children and might kill or maim the children of others.

The most influential contribution to Lilith’s story appears in an anonymous eighth-or-tenth century text known as the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. Suspected by some scholars as being satirical, the text claims that Lilith was Adam’s first wife. The claim exploited a possible time interval between *Genesis* 1:27, when God created “them” male and female, and *Genesis* 2:22, which specifically mentions the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib.

Lilith allegedly refused to submit to Adam, claiming that they were created equal. They quarreled, after which Lilith “uttered God’s ineffable name and flew away into the air.”²⁵ Three angels were dispatched to bring her back to Eden, but she refused:

“Leave me alone! I was only created in order to sicken babies: if they are boys, from birth to day eight I will have power over them; if they are girls, from birth to day twenty.” ... She swore to them [the angels] in the name of the living God that whenever she would see them or their names or their images on an amulet, she would not overpower that

baby, and she accepted that a hundred of her children would die every day.²⁶

Thus, Lilith became the “screech owl,” the evil Goddess of the Night, who preyed upon newborn infants.

The thirteenth-century Spanish rabbi Isaac ha-Kohen linked Lilith with Samael, the satanic personage of Talmudic and post-Talmudic Jewish tradition. He declared that the “evil Samael and wicked Lilith are like a sexual pair who, by means of an intermediary, receive an evil and wicked emanation from one and emanate to the other.” Their offspring is “a great defiled serpent ... a blind prince.” Rabbi Isaac warned: “If he were created whole in the fullness of his emanation he would have destroyed the world in an instant.”²⁷ Suggestions that the serpent in *Genesis* 3 was Lilith herself are supported by an early fourteenth-century French illustration showing the serpent with the head of a woman.²⁸

Lilith may not always have been an evil goddess. As noted earlier, she may have been a derivative of Inanna, her sister Ereshkigal, or the personage in the Burney Relief. During the early biblical period, she may have been defamed to stamp out worship of a deity who was competing too successfully for the hearts and minds of Jewish people. The weight of calumnies heaped on her may have been a measure of her popularity.

Whatever her origins, Lilith reigned supreme as the vilest and most feared female deity of Jewish tradition. In the Middle Ages, Jewish babies wore amulets, and families buried incantation bowls to ward off Lilith’s wrath. The circumcision of boys after eight days, and the *zeved habat*, or naming ceremony, for girls, evidently put infants beyond danger.²⁹ Lilith amulets are advertised for sale to this day.

Chokmah

If Asherah’s support came primarily from ordinary people, Chokmah’s came from an intelligent elite. From humble beginnings as an abstraction, she went on to become the powerful Sophia of Hellenic Judaism, the Kabbalah, Gnostic and mainstream Christianity, and

feminist theology. Interestingly, too, Chokmah/Sophia was promoted enthusiastically by men.

In about the tenth century BCE, King Solomon asked God for wisdom (Hebrew: *chokmah*), and *1 Kings* 4 records God's response:

God gave Solomon wisdom (*chokmah*) and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore. And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt.... And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom.³⁰

Whether Solomon understood the grammatically feminine *chokmah* to mean anything more than the quality of being wise is unclear. But certainly, he had a reverence for the feminine: “[H]e had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines,”³¹ and he did not disdain the adoration of the Queen of Sheba. More significantly, as we have seen, he built a temple to Asherah/Ashtoreth.

By the late biblical period, Chokmah had become personified; she became an *entity*, a divine feminine individuality. English translations render her as “Wisdom,” capitalized, and use the feminine pronoun. Chokmah made several appearances in scripture. In *Proverbs*, she boldly declared:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth.... Then I was by him, as one brought up with him [Hebrew: *aman*]; and I was daily his delight [*riri*] rejoicing always before him.³²

Some translations—including Martin Luther's—render *aman* as “master worker” or “architect,” while others suggest “trusted confidante,” even “darling.” *Riri* generally means “object of delight, desire or pleasure.” In the very next chapter of *Proverbs* Chokmah invited

the townspeople to a proto-Eucharist: “Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.”³³

The personified Chokmah is conspicuous in the Old Testament Apocrypha. The latter books, written after about 200 BCE, were excluded from the Hebrew canon but included in the Greek Septuagint.³⁴ For example, Chokmah is described in the *Wisdom of Solomon* as

the breath of the power of God ... a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty ... the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness.... For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it.³⁵

In the next chapter, the Lord declared: “I loved her, and sought her out from my youth, I desired to make her my spouse, and I was a lover of her beauty.”³⁶

Chokmah seems to have been Yahweh's consort. Michelangelo's painting, *The Creation of Adam* (c.1508–1512), shows God with his arm around a young woman (see the detail at the beginning of this article). Who could that be but Chokmah?³⁷ Even more importantly, Chokmah was with Yahweh at the creation of the world—and not just in a passive role. As “master worker” and “architect,” she was co-creator.

The personified Chokmah appeared relatively late in the biblical literature. Several explanations can be offered of her origins. She may have entered Judaic consciousness during the Babylonian Exile, when Jews came into contact with various Middle Eastern goddesses. Alternatively, her lineage may extend back within Israel to Asherah. In *Ecclesiasticus*, Chokmah not only repeated the claim: “He [the Creator of all things] created me from the beginning before the world,”³⁸ she also declared her affinity for trees:

I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus, and as a cypress tree upon the mountains of Hermon. I was exalted like a palm tree in Engaddi, and as a rose plant in Jericho, as a fair olive tree in a pleasant field, and grew up as a plane tree by the water.... As the turpentine

tree I stretched out my branches, and my branches are the branches of honor and grace.”³⁹

Chokmah even identified herself as a mother figure: “I am the mother of fair love, and fear, and knowledge, and holy hope: I therefore, being eternal, am given to all my children which are named of him.”⁴⁰ *Ecclesiasticus*, also known as *Sirach*, was written in Hebrew in Palestine around 180–175 BCE.

The *Wisdom of Solomon* was written in Greek, probably in the first century BCE, and there we see Chokmah assuming her Greek identity, Sophia. *Sophia* is the direct Greek translation of *Chokmah*. By that time, the Septuagint was more than a century old, and Hellenic Jews already knew Chokmah/Sophia by her Greek name.

Chokmah/Sophia’s emergence during Judaism’s Hellenic period might suggest that she was of Greek origin. Plato famously proclaimed *philo sophia* (“I love wisdom”!)” thereby coining the word *philosophy*. But there is no evidence that he was thinking of a particular woman or goddess. While the Greeks did personify wisdom as the Lady Sophia, historians do not believe that she was ever worshipped. Athena was the traditional goddess of wisdom in classical Greece. One challenge to this historical opinion is cited later in the article, when we take up Sophia’s story again.

On the other hand, the Septuagint was written in Alexandria, suggesting that Chokmah/Sophia’s origins might lie among Egyptian goddesses. Isis would be a leading candidate, and esotericists and others have devoted much attention to her as an expression of the Feminine Aspect of Deity.

Chokmah/Sophia continued to attract attention in Hellenic Judaism in the first century CE.⁴¹ Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, referred to Sophia as the “Daughter of God.”⁴² Elsewhere, he reaffirmed Sophia’s role in the creation: “[T]he Creator of the universe is also the father of his creation; and... the mother was the knowledge of the Creator.”⁴³ Philo continued:

[T]his knowledge having received the seed of God, when the day of her travail arrived, brought forth her only and well-beloved son ... this world. Accordingly Wisdom [Sophia] [speaks] of herself in this manner: “God created me as the first of his works, and before the beginning of time did he establish me.” For it was necessary that all the things which came under the head of the creation must be younger than the mother and nurse of the whole universe.⁴⁴

“Mother and nurse of the whole universe” makes an interesting contrast with “master worker” and “architect.” Philo was fascinated by the concept of the Logos, which had evolved from Plato through the Stoics. He saw the Logos as a god-man, the intermediary between the Divine and the human; his writings probably influenced the author of the fourth gospel. But Philo wrestled with issue of how the Logos related to Sophia; perhaps they were one and the same.⁴⁵ The equation of Sophia with the Logos would influence early mainstream Christianity.

Other Manifestations

Three other divine feminine manifestations should be mentioned: the *ruach ha-kodesh*, or holy spirit; the *shekinah*, the indwelling glory of God; and the *bat tzion*, or “Daughter of Zion.” Personalized—and capitalized—the Shekinah and the Holy Spirit would go on to play major roles in Judaism and Christianity, respectively. The *bat tzion* was an example of corporate personalization.

The grammatically feminine *ruach* (“breath,” “wind,” “spirit”) appears 378 times in the Hebrew Bible. For example, we find: “[B]ehold, I ... bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life [*ruach*] ... and every thing that is in the earth shall die.”⁴⁶ And “Then the Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord came upon Jephthah.”⁴⁷ Sometimes *ruach* could simply denote a mood or disposition: “Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit [*ruach*].”⁴⁸

The more significant *ruach ha-kodesh* (“holy spirit,” “holy breath,” even “holy wind”) appears three times. For example: “Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit [*ruach ha-kodesh*] from me.”⁴⁹ *Ruach ha-kodesh* was a divine force or activity, not a personage, but it was destined to be personified and to play a major role in Christianity.

During the Rabbinic period, following the destruction of the temple, references were made to the *shekinah*, the feminine indwelling glory of God, contrasting with but also complementing *kavod*, the masculine transcendent glory. *Shekinah* was derived from the root verb *shakan* (“to dwell or abide”), which had much deeper roots in Judaism. *Shakan* denoted the divine immanence: God’s abiding presence in sacred locations like the Ark of the Covenant, the Holy of Holies, or Mount Sinai. In *Exodus*, for example, we read: “[T]he glory of the Lord abode [*shakan*] upon mount Sinai.”⁵⁰ And in *Isaiah*: “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth [*shakan*] eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell [*shakan*] in the high and holy place.”⁵¹

The *Shekinah* eventually became personified and attracted attention through the Middle Ages and into the modern period. The eleventh-century Talmudic scholar, Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona, made an interesting statement that referred both to a personified *Ruach ha-Kodesh* and to the *Shekinah*:

When the thought arose in God of creating a world, He first created the Holy Spirit to be a sign of his divinity.... And He created the image of the Throne of His Glory... which is a radiant brilliance and a great light that shines upon all His other creatures. And that great light is called the Glory of our God.... And the Sages call this great light *Shekinah*.⁵²

Polish Rabbi Avraham Heshel (c.1745–1825) also expressed his reverence for the *Shekinah* as the revealed glory of God: “When [God] desired to reveal the glory of His kingship and power in the lower worlds, He first caused His light to bring forth the upper worlds.... From there, He continued step by step.... This continued until His Light reached the level that we call the *Shekinah*.”⁵³

In addition to her place in mainstream Judaism, we shall see that the *Shekinah* featured prominently in the Kabbalah.

The Jewish nation was often personified as a female figure. The term “Daughter of Zion” (*bat tziyon*) appears multiple times in the Old Testament. Variants are “Daughter of Jerusalem,” “Daughter of Judah,” and even “Daughter of Babylon.” The collective female figure was sometimes represented as the bride of Yahweh.

In *Zephaniah*, we find: “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.”⁵⁴ In *Isaiah* “virgin” is added: “This is the word which the Lord hath spoken concerning him; the virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee.”⁵⁵ In *Amos* and in *Jeremiah*, we find “Virgin of Israel,” for example, “Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.”⁵⁶ Israel is God’s chosen one, the virgin betrothed to Yahweh, needing protection lest she go astray or be ravished by enemies.

The *Song of Solomon*, or *Canticle of Canticles*, included in the canonical Hebrew Bible, is of uncertain intent and origin. Structured as a dialogue between two lovers, it resembles the erotic mystical poetry found elsewhere in the Middle East and which reached its peak in Sufism. A representative passage, in which the male character extols his lover’s virtues, is as follows:

Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead.... Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense. Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.... How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!⁵⁷

Mainstream Judaic tradition identified the female character in the *Song of Solomon* as the

Jewish people, and the male character as God. But one could easily envision the dialogue taking place between a male devotee and his female divine Beloved.⁵⁸

The female personification of the Jewish nation may have been a strategy to provide an acceptable substitute for worship of more tangible goddesses. We shall see that a similar strategy was adopted in Christianity to channel hunger for a goddess into a more acceptable form.

The Feminine Face in the Kabbalah

The Kabbalah, an esoteric branch of Judaism, developed from origins in the rabbinic schools established after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. It is a broad field that includes the ecstatic Kabbalah; the practical Kabbalah; the Hermetic, or “Christian,” Kabbalah; and the modern Kabbalah that emerged in the nineteenth century.⁵⁹ Our present focus is on the Judaic *theoretical Kabbalah*.

Two “golden ages” can be identified in the development of the theoretical Kabbalah. One spanned the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when three classical texts were published in southwest Europe. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (“Book of Creation”) and the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (“Brilliance”) were published in Provence, and the monumental *Sefer ha-Zohar* (“Book of Splendor”) in Castile. The other golden age was in sixteenth-century Palestine, with the work of Moses Cordovero (1522–1570), Isaac Luria (1534–1572), Chaim Vital (1543–1620), and others. The scholars of the Safed school built upon the classical texts to produce the theoretical Kabbalah as we know it today.

Sephiroth and Worlds

Kabbalistic doctrine asserts that the transcendent Godhead, or *Ain Soph*, manifests, or reveals itself, through ten *sephiroth* and four “worlds.”⁶⁰ The sephiroth (Hebrew singular: *sephirah*, “number”) are: *Kether*, *Chokmah*, *Binah*, *Chesed*, *Geburah*, *Tifareth*, *Netzach*, *Hod*, *Yesod*, and *Malkuth*.⁶¹ The sephiroth can be conceptualized as divine manifestations, hypostases, perhaps even logoi; as stages in the divine emanation; or as the vessels into which the

emanations flow.⁶² The divine light descends from *Kether* to *Malkuth*, cascading like water from one sephirothic vessel to the next. At each stage the light encounters denser levels of reality, until in *Malkuth* it reaches our everyday physical level.

Kether, *Chokmah*, and *Binah* form a trinity. In the Tree of Life, the schematic diagram of the sephiroth, *Chokmah* lies atop the Pillar of Mercy, *Kether* on the Middle Pillar, and *Binah* on the Pillar of Severity.⁶³

Kether (“the Crown”) is considered androgynous or presexual, while *Chokmah* and *Binah* form a gender polarity. *Chokmah* and *Binah* (“Wisdom and Understanding”) appear in combination many times in the Hebrew Bible. But *Chokmah*—in an odd transformation from its biblical form—is envisioned as the primeval masculine force: the archetypal Father. *Binah* becomes the primeval feminine vessel which captures that force: the archetypal Mother. Notwithstanding the names attached to them, *Chokmah* and *Binah* form a polarity comparable to that of the Logos and Sophia in Gnosticism. *Malkuth*, the lowest sephirah, is also considered feminine, establishing a relationship with *Binah*. An alternative name for *Malkuth* is the *Shekinah*, the indwelling glory of God.

How *Chokmah* lost her traditional feminine form to become the primeval masculine force in the Kabbalah is unclear. However, the author of the *Zohar* suggested that the word *chokmah* can be divided into two root words: *koach* (“potential”) and *ma* (“what is”).⁶⁴ Thus *chokmah* could be interpreted as “the potential of what is,” or “the potential to be.” Certainly, the personified *Chokmah* showed remarkable potential to evolve over a period of three millennia.

Two other pairs of sephiroth also form polarities: *Chesed* and *Geburah* (“Mercy and Severity”), and *Netzach* and *Hod* (“Victory and Splendor”). The Pillars of Mercy and Severity take their names from *Chesed* and *Geburah*, respectively. The lower polarities are less gender-based than the *Chokmah*–*Binah* polarity is; but the whole Pillar of Severity, linking *Binah*, *Geburah*, and *Hod*, is often considered feminine.

In addition to the sephiroth, the *Zohar* identified four levels of reality, or “worlds” (*olamin*; singular *olam*): *Atziluth*, *Briah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Assiah*. Just as the divine light descends through the sephiroth from Kether to Malkuth, it also descends through the worlds, from *Atziluth*, the archetypal World of Emanation, to *Assiah*, the human World of Action. Cordovero explained: “[E]manation (*Atziluth*) comes from the Emanator, creation (*Briah*) from emanation, formation (*Yetzirah*) from creation, and action (*Assiah*) from formation.”⁶⁵ *Briah* is considered feminine, complementing the masculine *Atziluth*. According to one interpretation, all ten sephiroth exist in each of the four worlds.

Kabbalistic thought, as it emerged from the *Zohar* and the Safed school, produced a creation story. In the beginning, the story recounts, there was nothing but the Ain Soph—eternal, infinite, and self-sufficient. Then, the Divine decided to manifest or reveal itself, and the universe was produced by a process of emanation, or outpouring, of the divine light.⁶⁶

The divine light flowed into the sephirothic vessels in the highest world of *Atziluth*, but they were not strong enough to withstand the impact. The upper three sefirot were damaged but survived; the lower seven did not: “All seven [lower] vessels shattered and collapsed, for they were not able to contain the light.”⁶⁷ The shattering of the vessels was a catastrophe of cosmic proportions. Much of the divine light was withdrawn into the Ain Soph, while the shards from the broken forms fell into the lower realms to form the *kliphoth* (singular: *kliyah*, “husk” or “shell”).⁶⁸ Separated from the Creator, the *kliphoth* constituted the seeds of evil. In some versions of the creation story *Lilith* appears as an embodiment of the *kliphoth*.⁶⁹

God had to reconstruct the sefirot. The cosmic catastrophe was followed by the “repairing of the world.”⁷⁰ Chaim Vital explained: “[I]t arose in His will to recreate all these worlds so they could bear the light.... As a result, the lights returned more concealed; thus these worlds were sustained and enabled to contain the light.”⁷¹

The Shekinah

The Shekinah is mentioned in the *Sepher ha-Bahir*, published in the twelfth century, but

possibly containing material as old as the second century CE. After quoting from *Isaiah*: “The whole earth is full of his glory”⁷² its author went on to speak of the indwelling divine glory thus: “This is like a royal princess who came from a far place. People did not know her origin, but they saw that she was a woman of valor, beautiful and refined in all her ways. They said, ‘She certainly originates from the side of light, for she illuminates the world through her deeds.’”⁷³

The Shekinah is mentioned more than 1,000 times in the *Zohar*.⁷⁴ The *Zohar* asserts that “Malkuth is a body to the Shekinah.”⁷⁵ As noted, “Shekinah” is often considered an alternative name for Malkuth. The feminine gender of the lowest sephirah is not surprising when we recognize that it receives the divine force from all higher sephiroth; receptivity is a primary feminine archetype. The Shekinah of Malkuth is the “lower Shekinah,” contrasting with, yet connected to, the transcendental, “supernal Shekinah” of *Binah*.⁷⁶ In her entirety, the Shekinah serves as a channel of feminine divinity—of divine glory—reaching from the very highest level of reality to the plane of earthly existence.

A common theme in Kabbalistic teaching was the Shekinah’s role during the Jews’ exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. According to the *Zohar*: “When the children of Israel were in exile ... the Shekinah was in exile with them.”⁷⁷ Elsewhere we find: “the angels escorted the Shekinah to Babylon, sat there and wept with Israel”—a reference to *Psalms* 137:1-2.

The Shekinah is referred to in the *Zohar* as the “Mother of Israel.”⁷⁸ As the Jews of Safed looked back over history, they began to weave the Shekinah into their own stories of diaspora and suffering. The Shekinah wandered with them and shared their suffering; but she also expressed the Jewish people’s unbreakable link with God and served as the guarantor of the Covenant.

As the story of creation and redemption gathered momentum, the Shekinah’s exile was associated with the shattering of the vessels. Just as the vessels had been shattered and must be restored, the Shekinah was lost and must be found. She was a bride, defiled before her

wedding, and her grieving bridegroom awaited her. She must be adorned once more in her finery and brought to the wedding.⁷⁹ The Shekinah's bridegroom was "the Holy One," son of Chokmah and Binah and identified with Tiphareth.⁸⁰ Significantly, in the Christian Kabbalah, Tiphareth is identified with Christ the Son of God.

The *Zohar* urged "we should to make a beautiful canopy with beautiful decorations to invite the Supernal Bride, who is the Shekinah."⁸¹ Cordovero's mentor, Solomon Alkabetz, encouraged Jews to "go forth to welcome the Sabbath Queen."⁸² Every Sabbath becomes an opportunity for the wedding. Significantly, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, and the Shekinah/Malkuth is the seventh lower sephirah.

The Feminine Face in Christianity

Christianity embraced the patriarchal monotheism of Judaism. But it also absorbed Greek theological themes which produced the doctrine of the Trinity. The question then arose whether the Trinity might incorporate some expression of the Feminine Face of God.

The Father and Son were readily identified as the first two *hypostases* (Greek singular: *hypostasis*, or "person") of the Trinity, but it was not immediately clear who should be the third. Asherah was ruled out, given her condemnation by the prophets and her association, real or imagined, with Baal. And the Shekinah lacked direct scriptural roots.

Chokmah/Sophia was a strong candidate; she had a rich scriptural pedigree and was already believed to be Yahweh's consort. Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (d.183), who coined the term "Trinity," suggested that the three persons should be *Theos*, *Logos* and *Sophia*.⁸³ His successor, Paul of Samosata (200–275), agreed. A feminine Third Person of the Trinity could serve as God the Mother; and the divine Father and Mother together could beget the Son.

Instead, the nascent church chose *ruach ha-kodesh*, whose Greek form was *pneuma hagion* (literally "holy wind" or "holy spirit"). That

choice presented two major challenges. One was to personify what, in Judaism, had been simply a divine force or activity; the other was to assign a gender and role to that person.

Pneuma Hagion ("Holy Spirit," or "Holy Ghost"), or simply *Pneuma* ("Spirit"), appears some ninety times in the New Testament, implying that personification had already taken place. In a few cases, the words are attributed to Jesus himself, as in *John* 14:26. But Jesus spoke Aramaic, a variant of Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek between 70 and 110 CE, and the earliest manuscript fragments date from the late second century. We do not know whether Jesus personified *ruach ha-kodesh*, or even whether the original authors of the New Testament books personified its Greek equivalent.

Personification may have crept in over a period of centuries, as manuscripts were copied and re-copied in an environment of developing Trinitarian doctrine.⁸⁴ The results were not always consistent. *John* records Christ's promise to send a personalized "Comforter [*Parakletos*], which is the Holy Ghost [*Pneuma*], whom the Father will send in my name."⁸⁵ Yet in *Acts*, the Paraclete arrived in impersonal form: "a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" and "cloven tongues like as of fire."⁸⁶ Interestingly, the word translated therein as "wind" was not even *pneuma* but *pnos*.⁸⁷

Then there was the issue of gender. *Ruach ha-kodesh* was at least grammatically feminine and could, upon personification, have become a divine mother. Unfortunately, *Pneuma Hagion* was neuter, and its Latin equivalent *Spiritus Sanctus* masculine. The result was a Trinity without any trace of femininity, grammatical or otherwise, and the church fathers seemed comfortable with that outcome.

The development of Trinitarian doctrine formally ended with the First Council of Constantinople in 381. The council affirmed that God the Son was "begotten of the Father before all worlds" but did not give him a mother. Separately it affirmed belief "in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified."⁸⁸ To this day

theologians struggle to explain the precise nature and function of the Holy Spirit.

Not everyone saw the matter as settled. In the sixth or seventh century “Mariamite” sects in Arabia allegedly believed in a trinity of God, Jesus, and Mary. Muhammad may have come into contact with them, leading to a rebuke in the *Qur’an*: “And beware the Day when Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people: Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?’”⁸⁹

Attempts were made to project feminine qualities onto Christ or even God the Father. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) prayed to Christ: “like a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.”⁹⁰ Anchorite Julian of Norwich (1342–c.1416) famously proclaimed: “[A]s truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother.”⁹¹ We recall that late-biblical Judaism tried to project feminine qualities onto Yahweh.

Renaissance physician and alchemist Paracelsus (c.1493–1541) suggested that the First Person of the Trinity was actually a male–female duality: “God made from himself from his person a woman.” But this was no ordinary woman, she was a goddess (German: *ein Göttin*), “a Queen.” In turn the Son and Holy Spirit proceeded from this divine duality: “[T]he Son is born of two persons, namely from God and the goddess, the Holy Spirit from God the Father and from the Son.”⁹² The most recent attempts to add a female element to the Trinity involved Sophia, and we shall discuss them later in the article.

A more cautious approach was to leave the Trinity intact and simply recast the Third Person as feminine. A twelfth-century fresco of the Trinity in the Chapel of St James, Urschalling, Upper Bavaria, depicts the Holy Spirit as female. In our own time, Bede Griffiths (1906–1993) boldly identified the Holy Spirit as a feminine aspect of Deity:

It is in the Holy Spirit that the feminine aspect of the Godhead can be most clearly seen. She is the Shakti, the power, immanent in all creation, the receptive power of the Godhead. The world comes forth from the

Father, the eternal Ground of Being, in his Word.... In him the ideas and archetypes of all created beings are hidden, he is the exemplar of all creation. But it is the Spirit who conceives these “ideas” in her maternal womb and brings them forth in creation. She is the Great Mother ... who nourishes the seeds of all beings and makes them grow. Still more, she is the mothering Spirit in humankind, who receives the Word, the Wisdom of God, in her heart, of whom in the Christian tradition Mary is the figure, receiving the Word of God in her heart and bringing him forth in his earthly manifestation.⁹³

Griffiths, a British-born Benedictine monk, settled in India and adopted the life of a Swami; his work showed the potential for incorporating South Asian religious concepts into Christian teachings.⁹⁴ Ingeniously, he managed to identify the Holy Spirit as the Divine Mother without needing to reorder the persons of the Trinity to “Father, Mother, Son.” Bede also related the Mother directly to Mary, “receiving the Word of God in her heart.”

Christianity came closest to unveiling the Feminine Face of God in its devotion to Sophia and Mary. We now turn our attention to these two important personages.

Sophia

Christ made one reference to Sophia: “[W]isdom is justified of all her children.”⁹⁵ The feminine pronoun seems to confirm that he was using the name in the tradition of Chokmah/Sophia. Also, that was one of the rare instances in antiquity in which Sophia was assigned a maternal role, more specific than serving as co-creator of the world. Subsequently, Sophia acquired great importance in Gnosticism, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and elsewhere.

Sophia in Gnosticism

Sophia was greatly revered among Gnostic Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era.⁹⁶ Like Philo, Gnostics affirmed Sophia’s status as a divine personage and her role in creation. The author of *Eugnostos the Blessed*, one of the Nag Hammadi texts, called her “Mother of the Universe, whom some call ‘Love.’”⁹⁷ She

is also mentioned in the *Book of Enoch (1 Enoch)* and the *Book of the Secrets of Enoch (2 Enoch)*.⁹⁸

The prominent Gnostic Basilides (d.140 CE) rejected Philo's conflation of Sophia and the Logos. Rather, he proposed that the masculine Logos and the feminine Sophia were paired in a gender polarity residing in the *Pleroma*, or heaven world.⁹⁹ Basilides identified the Logos with Christ, as the fourth gospel does.

The *Book of the Secrets of Enoch* presents a creation story in which God proclaimed: "On the sixth day I ordered My Wisdom [Sophia] to make man of seven substances... and I made [Sophia] a ruler to rule upon the earth, and to have My wisdom."¹⁰⁰ According to *1 Enoch*, Sophia sought "to make her dwelling among the children of men;" but, rejected by sinful humanity, she "found no dwelling-place" and "returned to her place and took her seat among the angels."¹⁰¹ The Sophia of *1 Enoch* may have been able to return to "her place" by choice, but in other accounts Sophia fell from grace and was rescued only after much suffering.

The most elaborate account of Sophia's fall and rescue is found in the *Pistis Sophia*, a text conventionally dated to the third or fourth century.¹⁰² According to the *Pistis*, Sophia fell into the depths and was held captive for a long time, tormented by evil spirits or *archons*. They stripped away her power and light, whereupon Sophia cried out for help, but "my voice did not penetrate the darkness. And I looked to the height, so that the Light in which I had believed might help me."¹⁰³ Sophia's plight eventually came to the notice of Christ, and after much effort the archangels Michael and Gabriel escorted her back to the *Pleroma*. There "she rejoiced with a great joy." "I will give thanks to thee, O Light," she exclaimed, "for thou art a Savior... I will speak this song of praise to the Light, for he has saved me from the height and depth of the chaos; and from the eons of the archons of the sphere."¹⁰⁴

In the *Pistis Sophia*, the story of Sophia's fall from grace and subsequent rescue emerges from a long series of allegorical dialogues between the risen Jesus and his disciples. Mary

Magdalene featured prominently in the dialogues, and a strong connection seemed to exist between her and Sophia.¹⁰⁵ Sophia's fall and rescue may have formed a prototype for the exile and rescue of the Shekinah in Kabbalistic teachings.

Gnostic Christianity thrived for some three centuries before succumbing to its own organizational weaknesses and relentless repression by the mainstream church. Neo-Gnostic sects preserved some of its fundamental teachings throughout the centuries, but Sophia never regained the position she enjoyed in the Gnosticism of the early centuries.

Sophia in Western Christianity

Philo's conflation of the Logos and Sophia influenced mainstream western Christianity. Church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) argued that references to Chokmah/Sophia in the Wisdom literature of the Pentateuch were actually prophecies pertaining to Christ and the church. An example was the verse in *Proverbs* 9: "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars."¹⁰⁶ "Here," Augustine declared, "we perceive that the Wisdom of God [Sophia], that is, the Word [Logos] co-eternal with the Father, hath builded Him an house, even a human body in the virgin womb, and hath subjoined the Church to it as members to a head."¹⁰⁷ The seven pillars were the seven churches of *Revelation*, or seven churches of Asia Minor.

Yet, in another instance, Augustine spoke of Sophia in her traditional feminine form. She served as co-creator and might even be eternal: "Wisdom [Sophia] by whom all these things are made, and what have been, and what shall be... [S]he is not made, but is ... and so shall she be ever."¹⁰⁸ Augustine even shared his experience when reflecting on her: "[W]hile we were discoursing and panting after her, we slightly touched on her with the whole effort of our heart; and we sighed, and there we leave bound the first fruits of the Spirit."¹⁰⁹

In the Middle Ages, abbess and mystic Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) wrote several poems on Sophia, whom she referred to by her

Latin name *Sapientia*. One of the poems includes the following:

O power of Wisdom [*Sapientia*]
You encompassed the cosmos,
encircling and embracing all
in one living orbit
with your three wings:
one soars on high,
one distills the earth's essence,
and the third hovers everywhere.
Praise to you Wisdom, fitting praise!¹¹⁰

Elsewhere Hildegard wrote:

She is Divine Wisdom. She watches over all people and all things in heaven and on earth, being of such radiance and brightness that, for the measureless splendor that shines in Her, you cannot gaze on Her face or on the garments She wears. For She is awesome in terror as the Thunderer's lightning, and gentle in goodness as the sunshine. Hence, in Her terror and Her gentleness, She is incomprehensible to mortals, because of the dread radiance of divinity in Her face and the brightness that dwells in Her as the robe of Her beauty. She is like the Sun, which none can contemplate in its blazing face or in the glorious garment of its rays. For She is with all and in all, and of beauty so great in Her mystery that no one could know how sweetly She bears with people, and with what unfathomable mercy She spares them.¹¹¹

Whereas Philo and Basilides saw a polarity between the Logos and Sophia, Hildegard saw a close relationship between Sophia/*Sapientia* and *Caritas* (Latin: "Love"); indeed she regarded *Caritas* as *Sapientia*'s "alter ego."¹¹² Hildegard's perception of a union between love and wisdom anticipated by nearly a millennium the emergence of "Love-Wisdom" as the descriptor of the Second Aspect of Deity in trans-Himalayan teachings.¹¹³

Lutheran mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) spoke of Sophia, using her Greek name.¹¹⁴ Echoing a theory usually attributed to Aristophanes, Böhme asserted

that Adam initially was androgynous and virginal. That virginity was embodied in Sophia: "not a female, but a chasteness and purity without a blemish."¹¹⁵ Adam lost his primeval virginity through the fall, and Sophia's place was taken by his earthly companion Eve. Here Sophia seems to be a positive version of Lilith!

After the fall, Böhme declared, man remained in an incomplete state, yearning for his primeval wholeness. But the solution did lay not in withdrawal into ascetic celibacy, as the church urged. Rather, it lay in a spiritual reunion of the masculine and feminine; through woman man could once again find his primeval Sophia.¹¹⁶ The masculine-feminine tension might be the source of much suffering, but it provided an environment in which our spiritual potential could be realized.

Like Basilides, more than a millennium earlier, Böhme explored the notion of a Logos–Sophia polarity. He identified Sophia with the Trinity but saw a special relationship between her and Christ: "[T]he Virgin, the divine Wisdom, has given me her promise not to leave me in any misery; she will come to help me in the Son of Wisdom."¹¹⁷

Böhme was denounced by Lutheran Church authorities. Nevertheless, he influenced the English mystic Jane Ward Lead (1624–1704), who experienced visions over a period of sixteen years. In one of them a female figure told her:

Behold I am God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, whom thou hast been enquiring after; I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as Rebecca was unto Jacob, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again.... Now consider of my Saying till I return to thee again."¹¹⁸

In a later vision, the same figure told Lead: “[B]e watchful, and to thy Mother Wisdom’s Counsel give good heed, and thou shalt greatly prosper, and succeed the Prophets and Apostles to perfect what was left behind, for completing as to Christ the Fullness of God’s great Mystery.” Unfortunately, Lead did not describe the female figure she saw. Lead considered herself a “Bride of Christ” and went on to cofound the Philadelphian Society of London, which served as conservator of her diaries.

Sophia in Eastern Orthodox Christianity

In the eastern churches, the title *Hagia Sophia* (“Holy Wisdom”) was first masculinized and applied to Christ. Sophia eventually recovered her femininity to become an object of popular devotion, particularly in the Russian Orthodox Church. But her identity remained ill-defined. She became conflated with a mysterious St Sophia of Rome who, along with her three daughters Faith, Hope, and Love, allegedly was martyred under the Emperor Hadrian (r.117–138).¹¹⁹ Historians have had difficulty locating this latter Sophia and suggest that she may have been legendary rather than real. Be that as it may, Russian Orthodoxy portrays the composite “St Sophia” as a figure transcending ordinary saints.

Numerous churches are dedicated to St. Sophia, and she is the subject of many icons.¹²⁰ The Russian Orthodox liturgy for the feast of the Dormition of Mary, August 15, includes a reference to an icon of Sophia: “Let us behold the miraculous icon of the Wisdom of God.... I dare to sing in praise of the Patroness of the World, the most innocent Bride and Virgin... Sophia,

the Wisdom of God.”¹²¹ The reference to Sophia on a Marian feast is one of many instances in which the two personages seem to be conflated.

Sophia attracted the attention of several Russian Orthodox writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Philosopher and poet Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), whose work was influenced by Böhme, had three visions of Sophia, the first when he was nine years old. He wrote a poem many years later recalling the experience: “Blue all around. Blue within my soul. Blue pierced with shafts of gold. In your hand a flower from other realms. You stood with radiant smile, Nodded to me and hidden in the mist.”¹²²

This description sounds very much like an apparition of Mary, and perhaps he also conflated the two. In his second encounter, the now-adult Solovyov saw Sophia again in blue and gold: “Her face shone before me. But Her face alone. And that instant was a long happiness.”¹²³ In the third encounter he awoke from sleep “To a scent of roses from air and earth... I saw all and all was one. One alone in the image of female beauty.”¹²⁴ Solovyov’s poetry blended his devotion to Sophia with sentiments of unrequited love, some of it recalling the songs of the medieval troubadours or Dante’s yearning for Beatrice.

Solovyov leaned toward Gnosticism in regarding Sophia as the feminine complement of the masculine Logos. Together, he believed, they comprised the overshadowing cosmic Christ. Russian theologian and scientist Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) was more cautious, hesitating to place Sophia on the same level as Christ. He saw Sophia as the Bride of the Logos; she represented God’s love for his creation, even providing the channel through which creation was accomplished. But that ability was not hers by right: “One in God, she is multiple in

Both in prehistory and throughout Judeo-Christian history people have yearned for a divine queen and/or mother, and their yearnings generally have been rewarded. However, this does not necessarily mean that goddesses—and gods—are mere figments of primitive imagination. Divinity also seeks to reveal itself, and deities may emerge from the intersection of human aspiration and divine revelation.

creation and is perceived in creation in her concrete appearances as the ideal person of man, as his Guardian Angel.”¹²⁵

Early twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theologians came closest, in Christianity, to conscripting a divine feminine personage to represent the corporate body of believers. They identified Sophia with the *Ekklesia*—not the church we actually know but an idealization of Christianity, a kind of Platonic Form. Florensky described the *Ekklesia* as “the unifying, preexistent, heavenly, mystical form,” contrasted with the “historical church” that evolved over the centuries.

Russian Orthodox priest Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) wrote: “The Church in the world is Sophia in process of becoming, according to the double impulse of creation and deification.” He added:

The Church is... not only the body of Christ, but also the temple of the Holy Ghost... [T]he conjoint revelation of the Son and the Spirit in the Church... is effected by the two-fold mission of the two divine persons from the Father to the world. This is what makes the Church the revelation, in terms of created Wisdom, of the divine.¹²⁶

Bulgakov’s reference to “deification” of the church must be understood in terms of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.¹²⁷ Theosis, the spiritual goal of the great saints, is a process of enlightenment that enables the soul to “partake of the divine nature.”¹²⁸ Christ’s transfiguration on Mount Tabor is regarded as the supreme example. Theosis normally is considered an individual goal. But Bulgakov envisioned the whole *Ekklesia*, even the whole of humanity, achieving theosis. That collective theosis would be the final manifestation of Sophia.

Bulgakov also took an interest in an individualized Sophia. He saw a close association between her and the Glory of God, perhaps establishing a link with the Shekinah of Judaic tradition. Sophia, he argued, “is the glory of God and either expression could be used indiscriminately of divine revelation within the Godhead, for they both refer to the same divine essence.”¹²⁹ Commenting on the passage in

Proverbs in which *Chokmah*/Sophia was with God “from the beginning,” Bulgakov identified her as the “prototype of creation.”¹³⁰ Correspondingly, he saw creation—and particularly humanity—as the “creaturely Sophia,” the actualization of that prototype.¹³¹

Florensky took on the difficult task of trying to relate Sophia to the Trinity, without displacing the Holy Spirit. He identified Sophia as a “non-consubstantial” fourth person of the Trinity, suggesting that she “enters into the interior of the Trinity, and enters into communion with Divine Love.”¹³² He added:

From the point of view of the Hypostasis of the Father, Sophia is the ideal *substance*, or ground of creation.... From the point of view of the ... Word, Sophia is the *reason* of creation.... From the point of view of the... Spirit, Sophia represents the *spirituality* of creation, its holiness, purity, and immaculateness, i.e., its beauty.¹³³

Needless to say, church authorities reacted negatively to Florensky’s suggestion of a fourth person of the “Trinity,” but he was executed in a Soviet purge before they could silence him.

Bulgakov initially held views similar to Florensky’s on Sophia’s relationship to the Trinity. He fled to the West to escape political repression, thereby also avoiding censure by the Russian church. However, the Orthodox Church in France forced him to retreat to a position that Sophia is the “nonhypostatic essence” of God. Since all three hypostases share the divine essence, Sophia is neither a fourth hypostasis nor an expression of any one of them to the exclusion of the others.¹³⁴ Bulgakov acknowledged distinct manifestations of Sophia through the three Trinitarian persons, however. Her expression through the Son and Holy Spirit is “immediate,” while the “relation of Sophia to the Father is mediated through his relation to the other hypostases.”¹³⁵ Interestingly, Bulgakov saw Sophia as the mediator between God and the world, arguing that “the hypostasis of the Logos cannot provide such a unifying principle.”¹³⁶

Other Perspectives on Sophia

Historians do not believe that Sophia was worshipped in classical Greece. Nevertheless,

Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), founder of the Anthroposophical Society, projected Sophia back into ancient Greece, as an embodiment of the consciousness of the time:

[T]he Greeks confronted Sophia, or Wisdom, as a being, so to speak, whom they could encounter standing before them in a particular place, Two beings then—Sophia and the Greek—faced each other, as if Sophia were a definite objective entity, to be looked at, with all the objectivity of the Greek’s way of seeing.¹³⁷

Elsewhere Steiner suggested that Sophia was the “esoteric name” of Mary the mother of Jesus.¹³⁸ In another work, he declared that, in Egyptian mystery initiations, the “astral body was called “Virgin,” or “the Virgin Sophia.”¹³⁹

Robert Powell, who followed in the Anthroposophical tradition, speculated that Sophia incarnated along with Christ: “She is truly represented on the one hand in the figure of the Virgin Mary, and on the other hand by Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha who were close companions of Jesus.”¹⁴⁰ The reference to Mary Magdalene is interesting, considering her appearance in the *Pistis Sophia*. Powell went on to explain: “[T]he Virgin Mary [is] a complete embodiment of Divine Sophia on a spiritual level, with Mary Magdalene on the soul level, and with Martha on the bodily level.”¹⁴¹ From Powell’s perspective, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an *avatara* of Sophia. Avatars will be discussed later in the article.

Sophia has attracted much attention among modern feminist theologians seeking a goddess to serve western religion. In their view, she has returned from obscurity to champion women’s empowerment. Some writers offer a history of Sophia, as we have done here. But in almost every case the outcome has been to turn her from an entity into an impersonal presence, even an abstraction. Susanne Schaup expressed it well:

Her return has no traffic with theological hairsplitting. Whether created or uncreated, emanation or hypostasis, helpmate of creation or divine creatrix, projection of Jesus or the Virgin Mary or the Church—these intellectual differentiations and theological

niceties have lost all meaning. The deeply ambiguous terminology concerning the nature of her divinity is of no interest any more. Sophia is here, a fully empowered presence.¹⁴²

No longer a being who could appear to Hildegard, Jane Lead, or Florensky, Sophia has become something resembling the Hebrew *ruach ha-kodesh*—perhaps to await re-personification as a future Holy Spirit.

Mary

Mary is unique among the personages discussed, insofar as she was, most probably, an historical person. But within three centuries of her death she had attained divine or near-divine status. How Mary acquired that status so rapidly is unclear, but the primary impulse may have come from ordinary people.¹⁴³ Theological opinion may have reacted to, rather than led, popular devotion. When it did, the result was to declare Mary close to, but not quite, divine. Esoteric teachings subsequently confirmed her deification, establishing that Mary was either a divine *avatara* or had progressed on the initiatory path to the point where she could serve as an expression of the Divine Feminine.

Mary in Scripture

The New Testament provides few details of Mary’s life in Palestine. She is mentioned by name twelve times in *Luke*, five times in *Matthew*, once in *Mark* and once in *Acts*. *John* does not name Mary, though it describes three incidents in which she was involved. The epistles never mention her.¹⁴⁴

Yet Mary, more than any other individual, spanned Judaism and Christianity. She was born and raised according to Jewish tradition, and fulfilled Judaic prophecy by giving birth to the Messiah. Christianity was established in the name of her son and, within 400 years, became the official religion of the Roman Empire; today it claims two billion members.

What little attention Mary receives in the New Testament focuses almost entirely on her role in the Incarnation. In *Luke*, we find the story of the Annunciation, in which the Archangel Gabriel said:

Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women... [T]hou hast found favor with God.... The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.¹⁴⁵

Matthew draws upon *Isaiah* 7:14 to declare: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.”¹⁴⁶ The assertion that Mary was a virgin was based on a selective interpretation of the Hebrew word *almah* which could also mean simply “a young woman.”

Mary raised Jesus to manhood and saw him take up his ministry. Scripture places Mary at the crucifixion but does not record that she saw the risen Christ.¹⁴⁷ It concedes, however, that she was present when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles at Pentecost.¹⁴⁸

Separate from the biographical narrative, *Revelation* speaks of “a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”¹⁴⁹ The woman was in childbirth, threatened by “a great red dragon” bent on devouring her child. But the child, “who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron,” was taken up to the throne of God, and the woman was given the wings of an eagle and flew to safety in the wilderness.¹⁵⁰ The dragon was driven out of heaven by Michael and “and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵¹

The woman clearly had celestial status, but *Revelation* does not identify her. By the fourth century Christian writers were associating her with Mary, and in due course the text would be cited as scriptural support for her glorification as Queen of Heaven. Yet the reference to “the remnant of her seed” might suggest that the woman originally was intended to represent the Jewish people.¹⁵² Or she might have been Chokmah/Sophia.

Extracanonical texts from the same general period describe Mary’s life in greater detail. The *Infancy Gospel of James*, which dates from

about 145 CE, describes her conception, birth, and childhood. Further emphasizing her Jewish roots, it asserts that Mary was presented to the temple at three years of age, to be raised as a temple virgin.¹⁵³ The *Gospel of Bartholomew*, whose date is more uncertain, suggests that she played a leadership role among Jesus’ disciples after his death.¹⁵⁴

Mary in the Early Church

Mary may have been venerated by the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem, but the community did not survive the destruction of the city by Roman forces in 70 CE. A few comments were made by theologians in the second century CE; church fathers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, portrayed Mary as the Second Eve.¹⁵⁵ By the mid-third century, a sufficiently sophisticated Mariology existed to inspire an intercessory prayer in which Mary is addressed as *Theotokos*, or “Mother of God.”¹⁵⁶ Mary’s intercessory role is also hinted at in a hymn written by Ephrem the Syrian (306–373), where we detect tension between a judgmental God and a merciful Mary, recalling the Chesed–Geburah polarity in the Kabbalah.¹⁵⁷

Epiphanius of Salamis (c.315–403) condemned a sect, “brought to Arabia from Thrace and upper Scythia.” On certain days of the year, he alleged, the sect’s priestesses performed a kind of eucharistic ritual in which small loaves or cakes (Greek: *kollyris*) were sacrificed to Mary. Appropriately, he called them the *Collyridians*.¹⁵⁸ No other writer mentioned the Collyridians, and historians are unsure whether they really existed. They could probably be relegated to a footnote in history were it not that their customs closely mirrored those of the cult condemned by Jeremiah. In both cases, the cults were comprised, or at least led, by women. Within a few centuries of Epiphanius’ comments, Mary acquired the title of “Queen of Heaven,” which appears in *Jeremiah* and may have referred to Asherah, Ashtoreth or Inanna.

Nobody would suggest that the Collyridians were part of an unbroken lineage dating back one thousand years to the time of Jeremiah. But the two groups may have been linked by ongoing patterns of ritual involving the sacrifice of cakes to a goddess. And it is entirely possible

that, with the spread of Christianity, members of certain goddess cults preserved their liturgical customs and simply allowed Mary to take the place of their former patrons. Thrace and upper Scythia were Celtic lands with a rich history of goddesses.¹⁵⁹ Epiphanius wrote in the late fourth century, and if, as he claimed, the Collyridians migrated all the way to Arabia, the sect may have been active in their original homelands a century or more earlier.

Beginning at the end of the fourth century, a vast literature appeared—in languages ranging from Irish to Greek, to Ethiopic, to Old Georgian—offering a wealth of information on Mary’s earthly life and death. It claims, for example, that Mary had an ecstatic experience at the foot of the cross,¹⁶⁰ and another on the night of the resurrection in which she saw the risen Christ:

Christ Himself, when He rose from the dead and appeared to her and the other women at the tomb mounted on the chariot of the Father of the Universe, cried out, saying ... “All Paradise rejoiceth in thee. I say unto thee, O My Mother, He who loveth thee loveth Life. Hail, thou who didst sustain the Life of the Universe in thy womb! I will give My peace, which I have received from My Holy Father, to My disciples, and to every one who shall believe in My Name and in Mary.”¹⁶¹

The literature also asserts that Mary engaged in an active post-Pentecost ministry and played a leadership role in first-century Christianity: counseling Jesus’ disciples, baptizing converts, healing the sick, and performing sacred ritual.¹⁶²

Further testimony of Mary’s role in the nascent church is provided by artwork from the fourth century until well into the second millennium. When depicted in the company of others, like Jesus’ disciples, Mary occupies the central position, or is portrayed larger than them. She looks directly at the viewer, hands raised in blessing. Surviving images, some in the most important centers of Christian authority, like Rome, Ravenna, and Constantinople, show Mary in clerical robes.¹⁶³ She is even shown wearing the attire of a bishop, or vested to celebrate the Eucharist.¹⁶⁴

Texts collectively referred to as the “Dormition literature,” from the Latin *dormire* “to sleep,” describe the circumstances of Mary’s death. Allegedly, as Mary neared the end of her earthly life, the disciples—alive and deceased—were miraculously summoned to her bedside to receive her last blessing. Then Christ himself came and carried her soul to paradise:

[T]he Lord held forth his right hand, blessed his mother and said to her: “Let your heart rejoice and be glad, O Mary blessed among women, for every grace and gift has been given to you by my heavenly Father, and every soul that calls on your name with holiness will not be put to shame but will find mercy and comfort both in this life and in the age to come. You, however, come forth to the eternal dwelling places, to unending peace and joy, to the treasure houses of my Father, so that you will see my glory and rejoice by the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶⁵

The disciples laid Mary’s body in the tomb. Three days later, according to one source, they opened the tomb to find it empty:

[W]hen they opened it, they did not find the glorious body of the holy mother of Christ, for it had been translated wherever her son and God wished.... They found only the burial wrappings and the shroud in which they had laid her to rest ... the body of the immaculate Virgin was not there ... it had been raised up to her son and God.¹⁶⁶

The *Transitus Mariae*, a text dating from about 500 CE, describes Mary’s assumption into “the heavenly Jerusalem.” The celestial city had twelve gates, named for the twelve apostles, and attended by cherubim and seraphim. “[A]t the outer gate,” we read, “all the prophets were standing and singing praises with their harps; Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and David the Psalmist. And they worshipped before the King ... and before his Mother.”¹⁶⁷ As she progressed through the gates Mary was worshipped by angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim—and also by thunder, lightning and fire.¹⁶⁸

Much of this literature from the fifth century onward attributed its records to earlier sources, sometimes to named persons, though we

suspect the liberal use of pseudepigraphy. Assessing the factual status of the content is not easy, but the remarkable degree of coherence among texts from across the Christian world testifies that Christian communities at great distances from one another were familiar with, and interacted with, a well-developed narrative of Mary's life and death. The communities also shared ecstatic visions of Mary's ascent into heaven and the reception she received there. Words like "worship" were not used lightly—and testify to the level of Marian devotion that was developing.

Marian Doctrine and Devotion

The term *Mariology*, the branch of theology concerned with Mary, was coined in the nineteenth century. But the theological study of Mary began with the comments of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the second century, and became an established part of institutional Christianity in the fourth century.

The First Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) decreed that Mary was a virgin when she conceived and gave birth to Jesus. They left open the question of whether she remained a virgin. Subsequent discussion included the issue of whether Jesus had siblings, as three scriptural passages might suggest.¹⁶⁹ No subsequent council issued a decree binding on the whole of Christianity, but the preponderance of opinion is that Mary was "ever virgin," and the "siblings" were either cousins or Joseph's children from a previous marriage.

In 431 CE, the Council of Ephesus decreed that Mary was the *Theotokos* (Greek: "God-bearer" or "Birthgiver to God"). We have seen that the term was used as early as the third century, but its implications remained unclear until a theological debate—tinged by politics—arose between Cyril (c.378–444), Patriarch of Alexandria, and Nestorius (c.386–450), Archbishop of Constantinople. The theological issue was whether the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ were joined in an *hypostatic union*, or union within a single *hypostasis*, or "person." Cyril believed that they were, and in consequence, Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, must be the *Theotokos*. Nestorius believed that Mary only gave birth to Jesus in his human nature.

The Council of Ephesus was convened to resolve the matter. It sided with Cyril, and Nestorius was deposed and sent into exile.

Mary officially became *Theotokos*, a term used to this day in the Eastern churches. In the West, it was translated into the Latin *Mater Dei*, and eventually into "Mother of God." The Ephesus decree came closest to acknowledging the divinity of Mary. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Mary could be the mother of God without herself being divine. Yet, the church stopped short of drawing that conclusion; the decree's full implications were never explored.

The Council of Ephesus was held on the site of a temple of Artemis, and according to legend, a crowd gathered outside the building, during the proceedings, chanting "give us back our goddess!" Clearly, the bishops complied. Aside from their theological accomplishment, they satisfied people's long-felt hunger for a Feminine Face of God in Christianity. The masses now had permission to trade their pagan goddesses, as the Collyridians may have done two centuries earlier, for Mary.¹⁷⁰

Mary acquired titles, like Queen of Heaven and Star of the Sea, previously bestowed on pre-Christian goddesses. In the eleventh century, Peter of Damascus affirmed: "All generations proclaim you [Mary] blessed as the only Mother of God, more honored than the cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the seraphim."¹⁷¹ A century later, Hildegard affirmed: "Mary, you are the bright matter through which the Word breathed all the virtues forth, as once he led forth, in the primal matter of the world, the whole of creation."¹⁷²

Marian devotion reached its high-water mark in the thirteenth century. Churches and cathedrals were dedicated to Mary. People prayed to her. Hymns were sung, music composed, and artwork created in her honor. Mary's shrines became favored pilgrimage destinations, some the sites of reported apparitions.¹⁷³ England became known as "Mary's Dowry." Marian icons graced the churches of the East. Fifteenth-century mystic Thomas à Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*, urged people to bow at the name of Mary, as well as of Jesus.¹⁷⁴

Officially Mary was just less than a goddess; she was still a creature, but one in a category distinct from all other creatures. The Second Council of Constantinople (787) affirmed that Mary was “higher than every creature whether visible or invisible.”¹⁷⁵ It also created a special level of reverence for her. Termed *hyperdulia* (literally, “above the level shown by slaves to their masters”), it was distinguished from *dulia*, owed to ordinary saints, and from *latria* (“service” or “worship”), owed to Christ and God.

One of the clearest expositions of Mary’s official status was offered by the Spanish abbess María de Ágreda (1602–1665). In her *Mystical City of God*, published posthumously, she identified six “instants” in the manifestation of God. The first three were concerned with the manifestation of the Trinity. The fourth instant brought forth “the Mother of the Divine Word incarnate”:

Thus, before all other creatures, was She conceived in the divine mind, in such manner and such state as befitted and became the dignity, excellence and gifts of the humanity of her most holy Son. To Her flowed over, at once and immediately, the river of the Divinity and its attributes with all its impetuosity, in as far as a mere creature is capable and as is due to the dignity of the Mother of God.¹⁷⁶

The fifth instant brought forth the angels, and the sixth, humanity. Abbess Maria emphasized that “this most holy and pure Creature,” Mary, was “formed and conceived in the divine mind from the beginning and before all the ages.”¹⁷⁷ This statement is so similar to *Proverbs* 8:22–23 to suggest another conflation of Mary with Chokmah/Sophia. The statement is also notable because it affirms the preexistence of Mary’s soul: that is, its existence before the conception of her physical body. The church has never ruled definitively against belief in the preexistence of human souls, but Thomas Aquinas’ opposition to such belief is generally regarded as definitive.

The ecumenical councils not only propelled Mary toward deification, they also shaped what kind of goddess she would become. They did so, not so much by what they said about Mary

herself, but by what they said about Christ. The Nicene Creed, product of the First Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, affirmed that Jesus Christ was “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.”¹⁷⁸ That statement may have rebutted the Arian heresy, which claimed that Christ was created in time, but it meant nothing to ordinary Christians. Rather, it turned the Jesus who walked the backroads of Galilee, chose simple fishermen for his disciples, talked to the woman at the well, and laid his hands on little children into a theological abstraction.

Deprived of the Jesus people thought they knew, people turned to Mary. Cyril was the first to speak for them. In his homily to the Council of Ephesus, he declared: “[I]t is you [Mary] through whom the Holy Trinity is glorified and adored throughout the earth; through whom the heavens exult; through whom the angels and archangels rejoice.”¹⁷⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), renowned for the great volume of his Marian devotional works, commented: “So great a Mediator is Christ that we need another to mediate between Him and us.”¹⁸⁰ As noted, Sergei Bulgakov made a similar claim about Sophia eight centuries later.

Like God himself, Mary was both transcendent and immanent. She might be a goddess, but she was also accessible, compassionate, and sympathetic to human weakness. Christ had died for our sins and would return to “sit upon the throne of his glory,”¹⁸¹ but Mary was our mother now. She was on the people’s side and could protect them from an angry God—as well as from other hostile powers. To quote a modern writer:

For the people of the Middle Ages, devotion to the Blessed Virgin offered an experience of a female figure intrinsically related to God, along with an experience of the power of love to blot away sin and the power of mercy to ameliorate deserved justice, experiences that were not otherwise readily available in the situation of the times.¹⁸²

Not only was Mary sympathetic to those who prayed to her, she was believed to have a measure of power over Christ to grant favors to those

who sought her intercession. The Second Council of Constantinople affirmed those who “with sincere faith seek her [Mary’s] intercessions” can have “confidence in her access to our God, since she bare him.”¹⁸³ Appeal was made to *Luke 2:51* to argue that Jesus was still in some way obedient to his mother. It was also noted that Mary had persuaded Jesus to perform his first miracle.

More than a millennium after the Collyridians, people in the Scottish highlands baked barley cakes, or *bannocks*, for Mary’s feast on August 15. The man of the house handed out portions of the bannock to family and neighbors, while all sang the hymn *Iolach Mhoire Mháthair* (Gaelic: “The Paean of Mary Mother”):

On the feast day of Mary the fragrant,
Mother of the Shepherd of the flocks, I cut
me a handful of new corn, I dried it gently in
the sun.... I toasted it to a fire of rowan, And
I shared it round my people.... In the name
of Mary Mother, Who promised to preserve
me.... In peace, in flocks, In righteousness of
heart.¹⁸⁴

The custom may have developed from the Celtic tradition of “Beltane cakes,”¹⁸⁵ and we note that the pagan festival of Beltane evolved into May Day, or “Mary’s Day.” Jeremiah, who condemned a cake ritual in his own time, would immediately have recognized the maypole as Asherah’s cult symbol. It is also worth noting that the Collyridians may have been ethnic Celts.

Marian devotion was never universally embraced. A few individuals treated her with indifference, even outright disrespect. As early as the eighth century, the Byzantine emperor Constantine V declared: “When she bore Christ within her womb, Mary was like a purse filled with gold. But after giving birth, she was no more than the empty purse.”¹⁸⁶ Others used even less complimentary metaphors.

The Reformation took its toll. Marian devotion continued in the Roman and Orthodox churches. And Martin Luther and Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli retained their personal devotion to Mary. But elsewhere in western Christianity, a shadow fell across the Feminine

Face of God. Later generations of Lutherans, as well as Calvinists, and most Anglicans sought to strip away all beliefs and practices that lacked direct scriptural support. Marian devotion and intercession were stigmatized as “Mariolatry.” Mary also became a casualty of anti-Roman sentiment. Today, most Protestants simply ignore Mary—except at Christmas, when she appears as a plaster figure in the manger scene.

Mary in Modern Christianity

The Church of Rome defined two Marian dogmas in recent centuries: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The former, affirming that Mary was conceived without original sin, received tangential support from the *In-fancy Gospel of James*, which asserts that her conception was the result of divine intervention because of her mother Hannah’s age. Various scriptural passages were also cited as prophetic, such as: “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.”¹⁸⁷ The church never commented on whether other imagery from the *Song of Solomon* might be applicable to Mary.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was fashioned primarily by theological speculation, beginning with the work of the ninth-century Paschasius Radbertus and the eleventh-century Anselm of Canterbury.¹⁸⁸ Pope Pius IX finally decreed in 1854 that: “the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ ... was preserved free from all stain of original sin.”¹⁸⁹

The assertion that Mary was conceived without original sin, in anticipation of her giving birth to the Redeemer, raises questions concerning her free will at the time of the Annunciation. If Mary had said “no,” would she still have been conceived without sin? Was the Immaculate Conception somehow retroactive? Or had Mary, in some way, already made the decision before she was conceived, in which case her consent at the Annunciation was just a formality? Not necessarily; even if Mary was “formed and conceived in the divine mind from the beginning and before all the ages,” her consent might still have been necessary at the personality level.

The doctrine of the Assumption—the assertion that Mary was taken up body and soul into heaven—received limited support from the Dormition literature, though the texts do not all agree that her body vanished from the tomb, and still fewer assert that her body and soul were united and taken up to heaven. The impulse to declare the dogma came primarily from popular piety; people wanted to spare Mary the ignominy of death. In response, Pope Pius XII decreed in 1950 that “the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.”¹⁹⁰ The Eastern Orthodox churches continue to follow the narrative that Mary died a natural death, but allow their members to believe in the Assumption according to personal judgment.

Theological speculation on other matters continues, with the potential for new dogmatic decrees. In 1894 Pope Leo XIII mused: “The recourse we have to Mary in prayer follows upon the office she continuously fills by the side of the throne of God as Mediatrix of Divine grace; being by worthiness and by merit most acceptable to Him, and, therefore, surpassing in power all the angels and saints in Heaven.”¹⁹¹ Leo went on to call Mary “our co-Redemptrix.” A campaign developed during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II (r. 1978–2005) pressing for a decree asserting that Mary is “Co-Redemptrix with Christ, Mediatrix of all Graces, and Advocate of Humanity.” John Paul is believed to have supported the initiative, but no action was taken.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) put the brakes on traditional veneration of Mary. It spoke of her with “affection and piety as a most beloved mother,” and approved of “the liturgical cult of the Blessed Virgin,” but it also warned of “Marian excess” that might impede ecumenical outreach to other western denominations.¹⁹² The council exhorted “theologians and preachers of the divine word to abstain zealously both from all gross exaggerations as well as from petty narrow-mindedness in considering the singular dignity of the Mother of God.” “Let them,” it continued, “assiduously keep away from whatever, either by word or deed, could lead separated brethren or any other into error regarding the true doctrine of the Church,”

adding that “true devotion consists neither in sterile or transitory affection, nor in a certain vain credulity.”¹⁹³

Neither the council nor its spokesman, Pope Paul VI, cited examples of what might lead separated brethren into error, or might constitute gross exaggerations, sterile affection, or vain credulity. But numerous statues and pictures were removed from Roman Catholic churches or moved to less conspicuous locations.¹⁹⁴ Marian devotional practices were curtailed. Ironically, the new policy came at the very time when many Anglicans, Lutherans, and others were paying new attention to Mary and incorporating Marian devotions into their own religious practices.

Another irony came twelve years after Vatican II with the election of John Paul II, one of the most pro-Marian popes in recent times. In 1987 John Paul echoed the thoughts of María de Ágreda, writing that Mary was “present even ‘before the creation of the world,’ as the one whom the Father ‘has chosen’ as Mother of his Son.”¹⁹⁵ The statement raised eyebrows because not everyone, even in his own communion, agreed that Mary was predestined to be the mother of Jesus. Separately, the statement bears such a close resemblance to *Proverbs* 8:22-23 to suggest yet another conflation between Mary and Sophia.

Praying before an icon in Rome, three years later, John Paul declared: “You [Mary] who serve as Mother of the whole family of the children of God, obtain for the Church that, enriched by the Holy Spirit with the fullness of hierarchical and charismatic gifts, she [the Church] may continue with constancy towards the future.”¹⁹⁶ His words came close to embracing the concept of Mary as World Mother. As noted earlier, Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths referred to the Holy Spirit as “the Great Mother” and identified Mary as her earthly “figure” or representative.

Although the highest honors were conferred on Mary, from the Renaissance onward she was portrayed in devotional artwork with head covered, eyes lowered in humility, and hands clasped in prayer: the epitome of obedient, self-sacrificial piety. Because of that submissive

demeanor, Mary was rejected by feminist theologians seeking a role model for empowered women. As Susanne Schaup wrote: “The figure of Mary, the blessed virgin and obedient servant of God, however gracious and comforting she may appear to many has become a problem. Women are no longer willing to identify with Mary’s disembodied humanity.”¹⁹⁷

Schaup may not have realized that other scholars were examining the ancient texts and artifacts, mentioned earlier, that reveal a very different picture.¹⁹⁸ They found that much of the literature describing Mary’s post-Pentecostal ministry had been suppressed or redacted over time to diminish her importance. Artwork showing her priestly activity had been defaced, covered over, or explained away; a common explanation was that the figure in the images was not Mary but represented the church.¹⁹⁹

Rediscovery of the early portrayal of Mary led Ally Kateusz to declare that Mary’s true story “has long been repressed.”²⁰⁰ She and other scholars concluded that the self-sacrificial image was the church’s own creation, designed to inspire female subordination. By contrast, the real Mary was an assertive woman, exercising leadership responsibility in first-century Christianity—one with whom Schaup’s modern women might readily identify.

Mary in Esoteric Teachings

Mary was essentially ignored in the western esoteric tradition until the late nineteenth century. The first esotericist to take an active interest was Anna Kingsford (1846–1888), a Hermeticist, Theosophist, and Roman Catholic.²⁰¹ She was also a feminist, and in her view Mary, would play a role in a new world order in which women would have political power:

For the woman is the crown of man, and the final manifestation of humanity. She is the nearest to the throne of God, when she shall be revealed. But the creation of woman is not yet complete: but it shall be complete in the time which is at hand. All things are thine, O Mother of God: all things are thine, O Thou who risest from the sea; and Thou shalt have dominion over all the worlds.²⁰²

Kingsford influenced Annie Besant (1847–1933), whose landmark book *Esoteric Christianity or the Lesser Mysteries* (1901/1905) launched the Christianization movement within the Theosophical Society; hitherto the society had leaned heavily toward the religions of South Asia. Besant identified Mary with the World Mother,²⁰³ an individuality with a long tradition in Hinduism and who would feature in Theosophical writings over the next several decades. Helena Roerich (1879–1955) also wrote extensively about the World Mother, but not in a Christian context.

Theosophists conceptualized the World Mother as a divine entity who had sent a sequence of *avataras* (using that form to denote the feminine) to Earth. Kuan Yin and Isis were such *avataras*, and Mary might be one too. As the Christianization movement gathered momentum in the 1920s and beyond, Besant and fellow Theosophists Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934) and Geoffrey Hodson (1886–1983) became convinced that Mary was the latest and most important of the *avataras*. Besant saw Mary as a mother to every child being born:

Hers is the tender mercy that presides at the birth of every child, whatever the rank or place of the mother. The sacredness of Motherhood brings Her beside the bed of suffering. Her compassion and Her tenderness, Her all-embracing Motherhood, know no differences of caste, color or rank. All, to Her, are Her children—the tenderest of all human movements and, because the most compassionate, the greatest power in the civilization.²⁰⁴

Hodson eventually took a different perspective, viewing the World Mother as an office in the Planetary Hierarchy: “That Official is the World Mother for a planet and a period.... There is such a Being, there is such an official.”²⁰⁵ Hodson added: “Mary the mother of Jesus now holds that Office, as Isis held it in earlier days.”²⁰⁶ Other mother-goddesses may have held the office before Isis.

Hodson also focused attention on Mary’s earthly life in Palestine. He declared that Mary

attained the fifth initiation during that lifetime, overcoming unusual challenges to do so:

Having been ... the Mother of Jesus in the reality of His appearance amongst men and His attainment of Adeptship whilst using that body, She did Herself attain to Adeptship, took the Fifth Initiation in the Egyptian Mysteries, having also been trained in their Chaldean form, as a woman, meaning in a female body. The tests were very severe in those days, especially for beginners, even for males, but She passed through them all successfully, almost overriding them as it were, instead of being subjected to them. She was then one of earth's Adepts.²⁰⁷

Hodson did not comment on when Mary might have attained the fourth initiation. But her participation in the Crucifixion, and the ecstatic experience she allegedly had there, point to that time. It would not be unusual for an individual to attain two major initiations in the same lifetime. Mary probably came into her Palestinian lifetime as a third-degree initiate, primed over the course of several lifetimes to serve as the mother of Jesus.

That possibility that Mary “came up through the ranks of humanity” does not disqualify her from being considered an avatara. Esotericist Alice Bailey (1880–1949) defined an avatar as:

a Being Who—having first developed His Own nature, human and divine, and then transcended it—is capable of reflecting some cosmic Principle or divine quality and energy which will produce the desired effect upon humanity, evoking a reaction, producing a needed stimulation and, as it is esoterically called, “leading to the rending of a veil and the permeation of light.”²⁰⁸

She added: “The response or reaction of humanity ... establishes in due time the recognition of something transcendent, something to be desired and striven for, something which indicates a vision which is first a possibility and later an achievement.”²⁰⁹

Mary's mission to serve as the mother of Jesus reflected “divine quality and energy.” Few would question that her mission “produced the

desired effect upon humanity,” rent a veil and permeated light, and evoked “the recognition of something transcendent ... a possibility and later an achievement.” In due course she developed and transcended her human nature in attaining adeptship; she also demonstrated her ability to reflect the cosmic Principle of motherhood in her role as World Mother.

In addition to serving as the World Mother, Mary serves—apparently in more than a devotional sense—as Queen of the Angels. As early as 1928, Theosophist Charles Leadbeater declared that, at the end of that life, Mary made the rare transition from the human kingdom to the deva evolution: “finding the seven paths open before her, she [Mary] chose to enter the glorious Deva evolution and was received into it with great honor and distinction.”²¹⁰ Corinne Heline, whose background lay in Rosicrucianism as well as Theosophy, concurred: “Upon the completion of her earth mission, the holy Virgin was lifted out of the human stream and translated into the angelic evolution.”²¹¹ In 1975, Hodson affirmed Mary's transition, stating that, after her death, she “left the human kingdom altogether and entered the Angelic Hierarchy, being naturally moved to do so, knowing that with Her nature She could best help onward the evolution of human beings and animals as a Member of the Angelic Hosts.”²¹²

Hodson reflected on the feminine archetype, “the Eternal Woman,” which he asserted is a Cosmic Principle. All women have the potential to develop a relationship with that Principle, but in Mary the relationship is fully realized:

In the holder of the divine Office of World Mother, a conscious union occurs between the archetypal woman fully manifest in the woman Adept and the cosmic principle of womanhood. This constitutes a descent, fiery, pentecostal, of the Eternal Woman into its own purified and exalted superhuman manifestation in time and space.²¹³

Precisely what qualities does the feminine archetype represent? The author of the *Song of Solomon* sought answers in erotic poetry. Institutional Christianity suggested immaculate virginity. Jungian psychologists speak of seven

forms: the maiden, mother, queen, huntress, wise woman, mystic, and lover.²¹⁴ Hodson chose the ideals of compassion, graciousness, “joyous radiant girlhood” and “transforming motherhood.”²¹⁵

Hodson described Mary as an “Embodiment on earth of the Feminine Aspect of the Deity ... in whom all the highest qualities of womanhood and motherhood shine forth in their fullest perfection.”²¹⁶ Anglo-Indian scholar and mystic Andrew Harvey affirmed that Mary serves as “the bridge between heaven and earth, between the human and the divine worlds.”²¹⁷ Bede Griffiths declared that the Holy Spirit “is the mothering Spirit in humankind ... receiving the Word of God in her heart and bringing him forth in his earthly manifestation.”²¹⁸

Nearly a century before Hodson shared his insights, Helena Blavatsky drew upon the Shakti tradition of Hinduism to assert that the first manifestation of the Godhead is the “Celestial Virgin,” “the immaculate Virgin-Mother, who is overshadowed, not impregnated, by the Universal Mystery [the Godhead].”²¹⁹ Elsewhere, Blavatsky declared: “The first emanation becomes the immaculate Mother from whom proceed all the gods, or the anthropomorphized creative forces.”²²⁰ Blavatsky was referring to a cosmic Feminine Principle, but the correspondences were obvious, leading to the conclusion that Mary, hailed as the Virgin Mother of our age, is an expression of that mighty principle or entity.

Contrasting with the Theosophists’ confident portrayal of the World Mother, Alice Bailey offered a more sobering message. Writing for the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul, Bailey dismissed notions of a World Mother as purely symbolic, adding:

Such an individual has never existed in our particular planetary life, though the avatars of a previous solar system, expressing itself through planetary life, always took this form. But not in this solar system.... This symbolism has come down from the far-off period of the Matriarchate, which had a religion that recalled the ancient ways of the earlier system and in which period of time

Lilith symbolized the World Mother, until Eve took her place.²²¹

Bailey’s comments might not apply to the World Mother viewed as an office or position. But reconciling her understanding with that of the Theosophists remains an outstanding challenge. Meanwhile, the references to Lilith and Eve are interesting in light of the discussion earlier in this article.

Esotericists recognize that the intense devotion bestowed on Mary throughout the centuries has created a powerful thoughtform. Many people who believe they are communicating with Mary are probably interacting with the thoughtform. A similar situation exists with respect to Jesus and the Christ. We do not know how prominent members of the Planetary Hierarchy deal with the problem, but it does seem possible that they can make use of the thoughtforms in some way to further their work.

An interesting comment with potential relevance to that issue appears in a work attributed to Hermeticist and one-time student of Rudolf Steiner’s, Valentin Tomberg: “One meets the Blessed Virgin inevitably when one attains a certain intensity of spiritual aspiration, when this aspiration is authentic and pure.” In order to pass through the “sphere of mirages” or the “zone of illusion”—presumably the astral plane—one requires the protection of the Mantle of the Holy Theotokos.²²² This is a reference to a tradition in the Eastern Orthodox churches in which Mary is revered as the protectress of the Byzantine and Slavic people. The work’s author goes on to anticipate a new feast in the liturgical calendar: “the festival of coronation of the Virgin on earth.” “For then,” he says, “the principle of opposition will be replaced on earth by that of collaboration.... And intellectuality will then bow before Wisdom (SOPHIA) and will unite with her.”²²³

Synthesis and Conclusions

Judeo-Christianity assigned masculine attributes to its Deity, but hunger for a glimpse of the Feminine Face of God persisted throughout the ages. A succession of divine and semi-divine personages emerged, often sharing similar

characteristics and serving similar human needs. Conspicuous needs were for a divine mother and a queen. Interestingly, where institutional Judaism and Christianity tolerated such personages they usually imposed virginity on them.

The Old Testament prophets constantly railed against the worship of “foreign” goddesses, including Asherah, consort of Abraham’s god El Shadai. Asherah and her Sumerian forerunner Inanna were both revered as “Queen of Heaven.” The wrath unleashed by the Jewish leaders against Asherah and the frequent destruction of her sacred symbols suggest that she had a large, loyal following. Jeremiah identified women, including some of high social status, as Asherah’s principal devotees and blamed their “idolatry” for his nation’s misfortunes.

Judaism created the evil Lilith, “the Screech Owl” and “Goddess of the Night,” and eventually identified her as Adam’s rebellious first wife. Long feared as the slayer of infants, Lilith has more recently become an object of fascination. Some modern writers have portrayed her as an embodiment of the shadow, “unredeemed,” side of the female psyche, even as an early champion of women’s rights. To quote one writer: “Lilith is a younger aspect of the Goddess and does not have to wrest the power of the word from the father Gods. She already knows it.”²²⁴

Chokmah may have roots extending back to King Solomon. But more likely, she was personified during Judaism’s Hellenic period, possibly taking Asherah’s place but also absorbing characteristics of Egyptian or Greek goddesses. Chokmah was hailed as a divine being, co-creator, and Yahweh’s consort. In her Hebrew form, she went on to play a major role in the Kabbalah; in her Greek form, Sophia, she would play a significant role in Gnostic and

mainstream Christianity. Interestingly, she would be masculinized at times in both forms.

The Judaic theoretical Kabbalah incorporated some of the feminine personages of biblical Judaism into its cosmological schema. It transformed Chokmah into the primeval masculine archetype and restored gender polarity by identifying Binah (“Understanding”) as the feminine archetype. The Kabbalah provided a clear picture of gender emerging from an androgynous divine ancestor. It also gave prominence to the Shekinah, the indwelling glory of God discussed in rabbinic Judaism. A creation story depicts Shekinah/Malkuth as a lost bride who must be found and reunited with the Holy One.

Today there is growing awareness of the Feminine Face as expressed by Sophia and Mary, either separately or understood as a single entity. The “return of Sophia” and what seems to be Mary’s initiative to reveal herself are seen as consequences of, but also as driving forces behind, the empowerment of women.

Sophia attracted much attention in Gnosticism. In the epic *Pistis Sophia* she fell into the abyss and was rescued after much effort by Christ and his archangels. Sophia’s fall—echoing the words of *Revelation*: “Babylon the great is fallen”²²⁵—suggests a sexist agenda. Significantly, Mary Magdalene, whom mainstream Christianity would associate with the “woman in the city” of *Luke 7:37*, was allied with her. Both may have been cast as “second Eves,” without the favorable contrast implied when Justin Martyr bestowed the same title on Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Sophia was a strong candidate for Third Person of the Christian Trinity. Instead the church chose the *ruach ha-kodesh*, or holy spirit, which had been an impersonal force or activity in biblical Judaism. In addition to hypostasizing the Holy Spirit, the church erased her gender to create a Trinity without a feminine element.

Sophia continued to be revered in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, though she was never clearly defined. The late nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in “Sophiology” among leading theologians in the Russian Orthodox Church. Ecclesiastical authorities supported the

use of Sophia as a metaphor for the universal church but rejected speculation on Sophia's place in, or relationship to, the Trinity. Nevertheless, efforts to restore the Third Person to a feminine form may finally be bearing fruit. We may even discover that ruach ha-kodesh and Chokmah/Sophia were one and the same.

Sophia caught the attention of feminist theologians looking for a goddess, but their efforts have not clarified who or what Sophia is. By nature the Feminine may resist rigid dogmatic definition, but we are mental beings and we insist on some understanding of the Divine. At the least we need to know whether Sophia exists beyond human aspiration. In many feminist writings she seems to have degenerated into a metaphor for female spirituality—as though that were categorically different from male spirituality.

Mary was an historical figure, raised to near-divine status in Christianity. The historical Mary received limited but significant attention in the New Testament. Then, after being largely ignored for three centuries, she became the focus of a vast biographical literature, formulation of doctrine, and most importantly, devotion by the masses of the faithful. Literature and related artwork retroactively depicted Mary as a prominent figure in the first-century church, pursuing an active ministry that included the enactment of sacred ritual. The strong, assertive Mary depicted therein contrasts sharply with the demure, pious, self-sacrificial images of later times. Charges that the church intentionally constructed the latter persona to support its suppression of women are not unwarranted.

Scripture went to considerable lengths to present Mary as a virgin, and the first Marian dogma affirmed her virginity. The motivation may have been to connect her with the “virgin daughter of Zion” in *Isaiah*, or the “virgin of Israel” in *Amos* and *Jeremiah*. Notions of the “Virgin Mother” also connect Mary with many other personages of the ancient world as well as with the astrological sign of Virgo; her nativity is celebrated September 8. In esoteric astrology, Virgo is considered “the emanator of energies which nourish and aid the growth of the Christ consciousness.”²²⁶

The second, and more significant, dogma proclaimed Mary to be the *Theotokos*, or “Mother of God.” Although the Ephesus dogma lacked theological clarity, ordinary people saw it as permission to worship Mary. In a real sense, it launched the “cult of Mary.” The masses turned to Mary as queen and mother, seeking an advocate to intercede with a stern God—and in some cases even investing her with coercive power over Christ or the Father.

The masses also saw Mary as a worthy successor to their pre-Christian goddesses, who lingered below the surface despite nominal conversion to Christianity. As one commentator wryly observed: “God has the people one day a week; the pagan deities still have them the other six!” The ritual offering of cakes, in one instance to Asherah, and in two instances to Mary, have interesting connections, and all three probably evolved from pagan precedents.

Devotion to Mary rose to a crescendo in the high Middle Ages and continued in the Roman and Orthodox churches. Church leaders tried to limit Marian devotion to something less than worship—ignoring the testimony of the Dormition literature that the prophets, apostles, and even the seraphim worshipped her. Interestingly, the church leaders' pleas found a more receptive audience among Protestants than among their own followers.

Even then, Protestantism reacted against “Marian excess” or saw Mary as a symbol of Roman iniquity. Its rejection of Mary and of any trace of the Divine Feminine dealt a crippling blow to western civilization, in addition to impoverishing its own theology and liturgy. Today, Christians are sharply divided in their attitudes toward Mary, and in the 1960s, even Rome wavered in its traditional loyalty. Indifference or hostility toward her remains a major obstacle to recognition of the Feminine Face of God in Christianity.

The divine feminine personages in Judaism and Christianity are often portrayed as elements in a polarity, for example, we find Chokmah and Binah, the Logos and Sophia, Christ and Mary. But they were not accorded equal status. In the Kabbalah, (the masculinized) Chokmah is the

second emanation from the Ain Soph, and Binah the third. The Shekinah was lost in the wilderness, but not the Holy One. The Logos was eternally begotten of the Father, while Sophia was created in time. Sophia fell into the abyss and needed to be rescued by Christ. Mary was the Mother of God, but not herself divine; she might be Queen of Heaven, but was crowned by her son.

If we suspect gender asymmetry in these relationships, in other areas we find evidence of outright misogyny. Lilith was the epitome of evil, feared in Judaism more than Satan. Yahweh was the true God, while Asherah/Ashtoreth was a false, “foreign” goddess. It was women who worshipped Asherah and sacrificed cakes to her and Mary. Women were blamed for bringing sin into the world,²²⁷ for the woes of Pre-Exilic Israel, and for men’s concupiscence in Pauline–Augustinian Christianity.

Judaism and Christianity never hesitated to shed the blood of enemies or their own martyrs, but they recoiled from the naturally flowing blood of menstruating women. As late as the twentieth century, new mothers required “purification” before readmission to the life of the synagogue or church. Major segments of Judaism and Christianity still exclude women from the clergy—consciously or unconsciously following a tradition that their blood might defile sacred worship spaces.²²⁸

A fear of women may well account for Judeo-Christianity’s reluctance to recognize the Feminine Face of God. The ancient Mother Goddess may have been overthrown by frightened, misogynistic priests rather than by invading Aryan armies. The Feminine was permitted only in the Daughter of Jerusalem, in the immaculate, ever-virgin Mother of God, and in the corporate “Bride of Christ,” the church—whose most important members were celibate males.²²⁹

Institutional Christianity earned its patriarchal stereotypes during the Middle Ages and did little to dispel them until the mid-twentieth century.²³⁰ Since then, major segments of Christianity have committed themselves to gender inclusiveness, welcome female clergy, and are removing masculine pronouns in their references to God. These are important steps toward

recognizing the Feminine Face of God, but more remains to be done. Other major segments adhere to patriarchal tradition. Even in the more progressive denominations little progress has been made toward representing Mary in devotional artwork as an assertive, liturgically relevant figure.

Despite its shortcomings the medieval church did raise Mary to near-divine status, second only to Christ. Modern esoteric teachings affirmed Mary’s divinity and offered new insights into her ongoing global ministry. Traditional Christians and esotericists may diverge sharply in their understanding of other issues, but they display remarkable agreement in their descriptions of Mary.

Neither esotericists nor traditional Christians offer a definitive answer to the question of whether the historical Mary was an “ordinary” member of the human family who made extraordinary progress on the spiritual path, or should be placed in a separate category—the incarnation of a divine being, or the mother of God, to whom flowed “at once and immediately, the river of the Divinity.”

As a member of the human family Mary would still be an individualized monad, a unique fragment of divine essence. Her deification or divinization would rest on the expression of that inherent divinity to an exceptional degree. Eastern Orthodox theologians’ assertion that she attained *theosis*, and the assertion by esotericists that she attained the fifth initiation, point in that direction.²³¹

Even as a member of the human family Mary can legitimately be considered an *avatara*. She was probably groomed over multiple lifetimes for her Palestinian mission. Her birth seems to have been auspicious, and as a child she received special training in the temple. After giving birth to Jesus, Mary watched him grow to adulthood and take up his ministry, overshadowed by the Christ. She shared in the sacrifice of the cross, experienced a personal revelation of the Resurrection, and then went on to pursue her own ministry in the early church.

The Nicene Creed insists that Mary conceived “by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Neoplatonists viewed the Third Aspect of the Trinity

as the link between the divine and physical worlds; modern esotericists do likewise. The very word “mother” (Latin: *mater*) has etymological connections to “matter” (*materia*). Accordingly, it was fitting for Mother Mary to facilitate Christ’s descent to Earth. Perhaps it is no coincidence that many Marian apparitions take place in natural settings like mountainsides or grottos and involve phenomena like healing springs. Marian devotion takes its cue from those settings to place statues in beautiful gardens. Mary’s devic hosts no doubt appreciate it.

Several esoteric writers claimed that Mary made the rare transition to the deva evolution, to become—as Marian devotion had long styled her—“Queen of the Angels.” They also asserted that she assumed the role of World Mother. Mary serves as a living archetype, an “[e]mbodiment on earth of the Feminine Aspect of the Deity ... in whom all the highest qualities of womanhood and motherhood shine forth in their fullest perfection.” Summarizing Hildegard of Bingen’s understanding of the archetype, religious historian Barbara Newman declared: “Woman’s primary significance in the divine scheme of things is to reveal the hidden God by giving him birth. In the meantime, she gives birth to his image in every child that she bears.”²³²

To return to the issue of gender disparity in the Logos–Sophia, it is interesting to note Blavastky’s assertion that the first manifestation from the Godhead is feminine; clearly she would disagree with Augustine. Regardless of who is right, it seems evident that a Feminine Principle emerges at the very earliest “moment” and the highest level. We recall the words of the Psalmist: “[F]rom the womb of the morning; thou hast the dew of thy youth”—often rendered more poetically as “I bore you from the womb before the morning star.”²³³

As it descends into manifestation, the Feminine Principle expresses herself as beings or entities at successively lower levels. All are linked by a channel of energy that communicates the essence and qualities of the Divine Feminine to our level of consciousness. In parallel, the Christ communicates the qualities of the Divine Masculine.

Sophia remains an enigma, and her portrayal by different constituencies has been fragmentary, even inconsistent. She has received little attention among esotericists, except in Anthroposophical circles. Perhaps Sophia is the World Mother, though Besant’s and Roerich’s extensive discussion of the World Mother never mentioned her. Yet the World Mother sent avatars to Earth, and Robert Powell suggested that Mary was an avatars of “Divine Sophia.”

The Russian theologians’ work on Sophia was important, but Hildegard may have shared the best insights. Hildegard’s writings may have been inspired twelfth-century miniature, which depicts Sophia/Sapientia surrounded by patriarchs and prophets and holding a medallion of Christ. Newman commented on the image: “This Sapientia ... is a mysterious persona prefiguring Christ and Mary but distinct from both; she embodies God’s decision to create a universe in order than he might enter it as a man.”²³⁴ The critical question is how distinct? Newman quoted from another medieval source: “[H]ow could the Mother not preexist with the Son, whose conception and birth opened the way for the whole rational creation to be sanctified, unified, and restored to peace?”²³⁵

The precise relationship between Sophia and Mary remains a mystery. But a case can be made, based on the testimony examined herein, that Chokmah/Sophia/Sapientia is the entity that overshadowed, or incarnated as, the historical Mary.²³⁶ Or perhaps in some sense, Mary was always an integral part of that entity.

The possibility that Sophia/Mary existed “from the beginning” allows us to revisit the tradition of Mary’s perpetual virginity. The Hebrew word *almah*, on which the claim of Mary’s earthly virginity rested, more generally meant “a young woman.” Accordingly, we might suggest that Sophia/Mary enjoys perpetual youth. For context, Sanat Kumara, Lord of the World, is described in Hindu, Buddhist, and trans-Himalayan teachings as the “Eternal Youth” or “Youth of Endless Summers.”²³⁷

Upon completion of her earthly mission, and attainment of theosis/adeptship, Mary may have merged or remerged with the entity, bringing

her human experience and human nature with her. Not surprisingly descriptions of Sophia and Mary overlapped, and multiple commentators intentionally or unintentionally conflated them. Yet, Christianity promoted Mary rather than Sophia, through devotion and intercession, the arts, and theological speculation. Apparitions overwhelmingly involved Mary. We gained additional insights into Mary's ongoing ministry through esoteric teachings as well as through communications to selected individuals, like Bridget of Sweden and Geoffrey Hodson.²³⁸ If indeed Sophia/Mary is a single entity, evidently she has allowed herself to be known primarily as Mary and to be associated with her Palestinian incarnation. In other cultures and religions, Sophia/Mary is known by other names, and attributes and titles are freely exchanged.

The Feminine Face of God has been discernable throughout Judeo-Christian history. Today there is growing awareness of the Feminine Face as expressed by Sophia and Mary, either separately or understood as a single entity. The "return of Sophia" and what seems to be Mary's initiative to reveal herself are seen as consequences of, but also as driving forces behind, the empowerment of women. Esotericists emphasize that we are in transition from the patriarchy of the Piscean Age to the inclusiveness of the Aquarian Age. Accordingly, we can expect the veil over the Feminine Face of God to be lifted further as we contemplate the human and heavenly realms.

¹ *Genesis* 1:26-27. All biblical quotations are from the King James Bible.

² Monica Sjö & Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 67.

³ The liturgical calendars of more modern religious traditions are still based on solar and lunar cycles. For example, the dates of Passover, Easter and Ramadan are all determined by the intersection of solar and lunar cycles.

⁴ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

⁵ Paul Collins, "The Sumerian Goddess Inanna (3400–2200 BC)," *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, (Nov. 15, 1994), 103–118. The flag of Iraq bore the image of the Star of Inanna from 1959 to 1963.

⁶ The relief is currently displayed in the British Museum in London.

⁷ For more on the Burney Relief see <https://www.ancient.eu/article/658/the-queen-of-the-night/> (Last accessed July 20, 2020).

⁸ Susan Ackerman, "Asherah/Asherim: Bible," *Jewish Women's Archive*. Online: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/asherahasherim-bible> (Last accessed Aug. 2, 2020).

⁹ *Genesis* 13:16.

¹⁰ The name YHWH was too sacred to utter, and the authors of scripture frequently substituted "the Lord."

¹¹ *1 Kings* 11:5, 33; *2 Kings* 23:13.

¹² "Asherah and Ashtoreth." Online: <http://oldtestamentstudies.datascesdev.com/languages/asherahandashtoreth.asp?item=4&variant=0> (Last accessed Aug. 20, 2020).

¹³ *1 Kings* 18:19; *2 Kings* 21:7.

¹⁴ *Judges* 6:25-26.

¹⁵ *2 Chronicles* 14:3.

¹⁶ *1 Kings* 15:13.

¹⁷ *2 Kings* 23:1-16. Hilkiah vented his wrath against "sodomites" as well as "idolatrous priests."

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 23:13. It will be recalled that "Solomon loved many strange women" and "went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians" (*1 Kings* 11:1, 5).

¹⁹ *Jeremiah* 7:18

²⁰ *Ibid.* 44:19. Between verses 17 and 25 Jeremiah made the same complaint four times, each time specifically mentioning the "queen of heaven."

²¹ Susan Ackerman, "Asherah/Asherim: Bible."

²² *Numbers* 11:12.

²³ *Isaiah* 34:14. Some modern translations, including the *New Revised Standard Version*, now use the name Lilith.

²⁴ "Songs of the Sage," Dead Sea Scrolls, 4Q510 Fragment 1. Michael Wise *et al*, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 527. Insertions by translators.

²⁵ "Alphabet of Ben Sira 78: Lilith," *Jewish Women's Archive*. Online: <https://jwa.org/media/alphabet-of-ben-sira-78-lilith> (Last

accessed June 13, 2020). An example of “sub-
mission” to Adam, spelled out in the text, con-
cerned the positions they occupied in coitus.
26 Ibid. It is unclear where the 20 days, mentioned
in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, came from. The
zeved ha-bat traditionally was performed after
80 days.
27 Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, *Treatise on the Left
Emanation*, 13th. century. Reproduced in Jo-
seph Dan (ed.), *The Early Kabbalah* (Mahwah,
NY: Paulist Press, 1986), 180-181.
28 Peter of Peckham (attrib.), *La lumiere as lais,
and Apocalypse* (“The Welles Apocalypse”),
British Library, Royal MS 15 D II folio 2r.
29 Barbara B. Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (Lake
Worth, FL: Nicolas-Hays, 1986), 91-92. See
also “Amulets,” *Jewish Virtual Library*.
Online: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/amulet> (Last accessed July 26, 2020).
30 *1 Kings* 4:29-30, 34.
31 *1 Kings* 11:3.
32 *Proverbs* 8:22-30.
33 Ibid. 9:5.
34 The *Septuagint* contains Greek translations of
the books of the canonical Hebrew Bible and
the additional books referred to as “apocry-
phal” or “deuterocanonical.” Some of the apoc-
ryphal books were originally written in Hebrew
and translated into Greek; others were written
in Greek. Christian denominations disagree on
which of the apocryphal books should be in-
cluded in the Old Testament
35 *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:25-26, 29. It should be
emphasized that the “Wisdom” literature was
not written by King Solomon.
36 Ibid. 8:2.
37 Psychologist Carl Jung saw Chokmah/Sophia
as an archetypal goddess, one who softened
Yahweh and helped him develop compassion.
See Bernice H. Hill, “Sophia and Sustainabil-
ity,” 2006. Online:
[http://www.cgjungpage.org/learn/articles/tech-
nology-and-environment/810-sophia-and-sus-
tainability](http://www.cgjungpage.org/learn/articles/technology-and-environment/810-sophia-and-sustainability) (Last accessed June. 26, 2020).
38 *Ecclesiasticus* 24:9.
39 Ibid. 24:13-16.
40 Ibid. 24:18.
41 For more on Sophia see John F. Nash, “Sophia:
the Gnostic Heritage,” *The Esoteric Quarterly*
(Fall 2009), 29-39.
42 Philo Judaeus, *De Fuga et Inventione* (trans; C.
Yonge), (London: Bohn, 1854-1890), IX, 52.
43 Philo Judaeus, *De Ebreatate* (trans; C. Yonge),
(London: Bohn, 1854-1890), VIII.
44 Ibid.

45 See the discussion in Robert Powell, *The So-
phia Teachings: the Emergence of the Divine
Feminine in Our Time* (New York: Lantern,
2001), especially 39-40.
46 *Genesis* 6:17.
47 *Judges* 11:29.
48 *1 Samuel* 1:15.
49 *Psalms* 51:11.
50 *Exodus* 24:16.
51 *Isaiah* 57:15. For more information on the She-
kinah see John F. Nash, “The Shekinah: the In-
dwelling Glory of God,” *The Esoteric Quar-
terly* (Summer 2005), 33-40.
52 Quoted in Gershom Scholem, *The Mystical
Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken,
1991), 155. Italics by translator.
53 Avraham Yehoshua Heshel, *Ohev Yisrael*.
Quoted in Aryeh Kaplan, *The Light Beyond*
(New York: Moznaim, 1981), 35.
54 *Zephaniah* 3:14.
55 *Isaiah* 37:22.
56 *Jeremiah* 31:4. A tabret is a timbrel or tambou-
rine.
57 *Song of Solomon* 4:1, 6-7, 10.
58 In Christianity, Spanish Carmelite John of the
Cross wrote erotic mystical poetry.
59 The practical Kabbalah is a form of magic. The
modern Kabbalah, largely the work of the Her-
metic Order of the Golden Dawn, is closely al-
lied with the Tarot. For a discussion of the ec-
static Kabbalah see John F. Nash, “Abraham
Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah,” *The Eso-
teric Quarterly* (Fall 2008), 51-64. For a dis-
cussion of the Christian Kabbalah see John F.
Nash, “Origins of the Christian Kabbalah,” *The
Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2008), 43-58.
60 John F. Nash, “From the Zohar to Safed: De-
velopment of the Theoretical Kabbalah,” *The
Esoteric Quarterly* (Summer 2009), 21-46.
61 Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim* (trans; E.
Getz.), (Monfalcone, Italy: Providence Univer-
sity, 2007), treatise 1, 45-49.
62 Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 4, 145-
223. See also the discussion in Gershom Scho-
lem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1974),
402. In later versions of the Kabbalah the se-
phiroth took on the meaning of stages in the
disciple’s path to enlightenment—each se-
phirah offering its unique experience.
63 Nash, “From the Zohar to Safed: Development
of the Theoretical Kabbalah,” 21-46.
64 See the discussion in Moshe L. Miller, *Zohar:
Selections Translated and Annotated* (Morris-
town NJ: Fiftieth Gate, 2000), 45.
65 Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 2, 80.
Parenthetical inserts by translator.

- 66 Some commentators have attributed the Kabbalistic emphasis on emanation to Neoplatonic influence.
- 67 Chaim Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, ch. 1 (trans; E. Klein.), quoted in Eliahu Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2000), 17.
- 68 In one reference, the kliphoth were described as the “bark” on the Tree of Life.
- 69 Lilith is mentioned several times in the *Zohar*. See the discussion in Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith*, especially 4-7.
- 70 In rabbinic Judaism the term simply meant “maintaining social order.” The early Kabbalists gave it its cosmic meaning.
- 71 Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, chap. 2, 31. Italics removed.
- 72 *Isaiah* 6:3.
- 73 *The Bahir*, 132 (trans; A. Kaplan), (New York: Weiser Books, 1998), 48.
- 74 Statistic based on the Berg edition, which includes some interpolated commentary.
- 75 *Zohar*, 49, *Ki Tetze*: 21:102, Berg edition. Online: <https://www.zohar.com/zohar> (Last accessed Aug. 1, 2020). In *The Secret Doctrine* theosophist Helena Blavatsky identified the Shekinah with the “primordial light” and associated her with Kether: “The Spiritual substance sent forth by the Infinite Light is the first Sefirah or Shekinah. [Exoterically it] contains all the other nine Sephiroth in her. Esoterically she contains but two, Chokmah ... and Binah.” Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical Univ. Press, 1888), vol.1, 355, vol. 2, 107.
- 76 *Zohar*, 33, *Kedoshim*: 4:36.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 9, *Vayetze*: 27: 272.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 2, *Bereshit A*: 25:268.
- 79 In another version the bride adorns herself for the wedding. See Moses Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan* (trans; R. Afilalo), (Quebec, Canada: Kabbalah Editions, 2004), 229.
- 80 Some Kabbalists associate the Holy One with Jacob, son of the “archetypal parents” Abraham and Sarah, and father of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- 81 *Zohar*, 21, *Trumah*: 80:789.
- 82 Solomon Alkabetz, “The Pious Customs of Moses Cordovero,” quoted in Lawrence Fine, *Safed Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 36, 40.
- 83 Theophilus of Antioch, *Epistle to Autolychum*, II, 15. Theophilus used the term *trias* (Greek, “three”), which was translated into the Latin *trinitas* and, in turn, into the English “trinity.” Theophilus of Antioch is not to be confused with the fourth-century patriarch of Alexandria of the same name.
- 84 For example, *Matthew* 28:19 reads “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” But many scholars believe that the reference to the Trinity is a later interpolation, and that the verse originally read: “Go ye, and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you.”
- 85 *John* 14:26. Personification is emphasized in *John* 16:5-9.
- 86 *Acts* 2:2.
- 87 The Hebrew equivalent of *pnoe* is *neshamah*, which appears in *Isaiah* 42:5—together with *ruach*—and elsewhere in scripture. Shortly after the Pentecost event, however, Peter quoted from *Joel* 2:28: “I will pour out my spirit [*ruach*] upon all flesh.”
- 88 Nicene Creed (381). Note that the statement relating to the Holy Spirit did not include the *filioque* clause “proceeds from the Father and from the Son.” That was a later interpolation which led to the East–West schism of 1054. Nor did it use the male pronoun that appears in modern versions: “He has spoken through the Prophets.”
- 89 *Qur’an* 5:116. Whether the Mariamites ever existed is unclear, but significantly the *Qur’an* was written at a time when Mary was being raised to near-divine status.
- 90 “A Song of Anselm,” *Common Worship: Daily Prayer* (Westminster, UK: Church House, 2005).
- 91 Julian of Norwich, “Third Meditation,” *Showings: the Long Text*, ch. 59.
- 92 Quoted in English translation by Andrew Weeks, *Paracelsus: Speculative Theory and the Crisis of the Early Reformation* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997), 83-84.
- 93 Bede Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West* (Singapore: Medio Media, 1982), 192.
- 94 Fr. Griffiths continued his priestly duties in an environment that may have been familiar to the Apostle Thomas but was unfamiliar to most western Christians. Importantly, he worked within the framework of the Church of Rome, giving his ideas credibility in circles that might otherwise have dismissed his comments out of hand.
- 95 *Luke* 7:35.
- 96 John F. Nash, *Christianity: the One, the Many*, vol. 1 (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2007), 255-284.

97 *Eugnostos the Blessed*. III, 80, James M. Robinson (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Library*, Revised Edition (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 231.

98 The two books were not included in the canonical Bible, but *1 Enoch* was widely referenced by the early Christian fathers. Tertullian referred to it as “scripture,” and there is even a reference to it in *Hebrews* 11:5. Attribution to Enoch, grandfather of Noah, was pseudepigraphic; the authors were probably Hellenic Jews writing somewhere between 200 BCE and 100 CE.

99 Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis* (trans; R. Wilson), (San Francisco: Harper, 1977/1984), 311.

100 *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, XXX:8, 12, (trans; W. Morfill), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896/1999), 39-40.

101 *The Book of Enoch*, XLII:1-2, (trans; R. Charles), (San Diego, CA: The Book Tree, 1917/1999), 61.

102 Violet MacDermot, Introduction to *The Fall of Sophia* (trans; V. MacDermot), (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 2001), 22-25. *Pistis* is usually translated as “faith” or “faithful;” but another meaning, more appropriate in the circumstances, would be “hostage.” For an interpretation of the symbolism of the *Pistis Sophia* see: <https://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/2395-the-pistis-sophia-an-introduction?gclid=EAIaIQob-ChMI4abwt76M6wIVhI7iCh0TIghmE-AAYASAAEgJ6afD> (Last accessed Aug. 20, 2020).

103 *Pistis Sophia*, MacDermot, *The Fall of Sophia*, book 1, § 32, 122.

104 *Ibid.*, book 2, § 81, 174.

105 Mary Magdalene asked 39 of the 46 questions in the first two books of the *Pistis Sophia*. See Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993), 47. Interestingly, Jesus’ reference to Sophia in *Luke*, cited earlier, is followed two verses later, by a reference to the “woman in the city” who brought an alabaster box of ointment to anoint his feet. In 591 CE Pope Gregory I conflated Mary Magdalene with the “woman in the city” to produce the western church’s icon of the “penitent sinner.” In 1969 the Church of Rome formally acknowledged that they were two different women.

106 *Proverbs* 9:1.

107 Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (trans; M. Dods), (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 604.

108 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (trans; E. B. Pusey), book IX, Project Gutenberg.

109 *Ibid.*

110 Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Oakland, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1978), 64. See also Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 157. Like the Hebrew *Chokmah* and the Greek *Sophia*, *Sapientia* is a feminine noun in Latin.

111 “Writings of St. Hildegard von Bingen ... on the Holy Spirit.” Online: http://holyspirit-shekinah.org/_writings_of_st_hildegard_von_bingen.htm (Last accessed July 25, 2020).

112 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 49. We do not know whether Hildegard was aware of the comment in *Eugnostos the Blessed* cited earlier.

113 See for example, Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human & Solar* (New York: Lucis, 1922), xv.

114 Böhme, who lived in Silesia in what is now Poland, had a limited formal education, but he studied medicine, the Kabbalah, and the Hermetic arts.

115 Jakob Böhme, *The Threefold Life of Man*, quoted in: N. Berdyaev, *Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme*, etude II, 1930, 34-62. See also Böhme’s *Mysterium Magnum* (London, 1654), chapter 18.

116 For a discussion of Böhme’s teachings on gender see: Désirée Hirst. *Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 92-96.

117 Jakob Böhme, *Confessions* (trans; W. Scott Palmer), (San Francisco: Harper and Bros., 1954), 97.

118 Jane Lead, *A Fountain of Gardens*, Journal Entries: 1670-1675, The Philadelphian Society, 1696. See also Julie Hirst, “The Divine Ark: Jane Lead’s Vision of the Second Noah’s Ark,” *Esoterica* (vol. VI), 16-25. Lead’s name was often spelled “Leade.”

119 “Martyr Sophia and her three daughters at Rome,” Orthodox Church in America. Online: <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2017/09/17/102638-martyr-sophia-and-her-three-daughters-at-rome> (Last accessed Nov. 22, 2019). According to some accounts, only the three daughters were martyred. Other accounts identify this Sophia with the fourth-century St Sophia of Milan.

120 See for example, Thomas Schipflinger, *Sophia-Maria: A Holistic Vision of Creation* (New

- York: Weiser Books, 1998), Plate 17. Some of the older icons show a male figure.
- 121 Source: Sophia Foundation of North America. Translated from Old Slavonic by Natalia Bonetskaya.
- 122 Vladimir Solovyov, "The Three Meetings," Quoted in Eugenia Gourvitch, *Vladimir Solovyov: the Man and the Prophet* (Great Barrington, MA: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992), 25.
- 123 Ibid., 32.
- 124 Ibid, 34, 36.
- 125 Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth*, (trans; B. Jakim), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), 239. Emphasis in original.
- 126 Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God*, (trans; P. Thompson *et al.*), (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne, 1993), 138-139.
- 127 See for example Gregory Palamas (14th century), "Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetic Life," §105, *Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 393; also Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1963/1977), 33-34.
- 128 2 Peter 1:4. For a discussion of theosis see John F. Nash, "Theosis: a Christian Perspective on Human Destiny," *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Spring 2011), 15-33.
- 129 Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 50.
- 130 Ibid., 65..
- 131 Ibid., 72.
- 132 Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth*, 252.
- 133 Ibid., 252-253. Emphasis in original
- 134 Bulgakov, *Sophia: the Wisdom of God*, 35-37.
- 135 Ibid., 52.
- 136 Ibid., 74.
- 137 Rudolf Steiner, "The Being of Anthroposophy," lecture, Berlin, February 3, 1913.
- 138 Rudolf Steiner, *The Gospel of St. John* (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 1908/1940), 191.
- 139 Rudolf Steiner, "Sophia: the Holy Spirit, Mary, and Mary Magdalene," lecture, Munich. Nov. 1, 1906, Included in *Isis Mary Sophia* (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2003), 52.
- 140 Powell, *The Sophia Teachings*, 46-47. It should be noted that the identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha is not universally accepted.
- 141 Ibid., 48.
- 142 Susanne Schaub, *Sophia: Aspects of the Divine Feminine Past and Present* (York Beach, ME, 1997), 212.
- 143 Geoffrey Ashe was a major proponent of that theory. See his *The Virgin: Mary's Cult and the Re-Emergence of the Goddess* (London: Arkana, 1976/1988).
- 144 By contrast, Peter is mentioned 191 times in the New Testament, and John 48 times. Mary receives substantially more coverage in the *Qur'an*; in addition to numerous individual references, a complete *surah*, or chapter, is devoted to her.
- 145 *Luke* 1:28, 30, 35.
- 146 *Matthew* 1:23. *Isaiah* 7:14 reads: "Behold, a virgin (Hebrew: *almah*) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." In addition to questioning the interpretation of *almah*, some scholars challenge the assertion that the passage was even intended to be a messianic prophecy.
- 147 Despite Paul's claim that Christ appeared to multiple people—including "above five hundred brethren at once" (*1 Corinthians* 15:6) and himself—the New Testament never acknowledges that Mary saw her risen son.
- 148 *Acts* 1:14.
- 149 *Revelation* 12:1.
- 150 Ibid. 12:5, 14.
- 151 Ibid. 12:17.
- 152 See for example the discussion in Ashe, *The Virgin: Mary's Cult ...*, 121-122.
- 153 *Infancy Gospel of James* (trans; A. Roberts & J. Donaldson), *Early Christian Writings*, §§ 7-8.
- 154 *Gospel of Bartholomew* II:4-22 (trans; M. R. James), Gnostic Society Library. This text, sometimes called *Questions of Bartholomew*, is dated variously from the 2nd to the 6th century. For more on Mary's life and ministry see John F. Nash, *Mary: Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess* (2020). Online: <http://uriel.com/Mary/index.html>.
- 155 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, (trans; A. L. Williams, London Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), §100:5, 210. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book III, ch. 22, §4 (trans; W. Rambaut, Christian Classics Library).
- 156 "Under thy compassion," *Rylands Papyrus* P 470, c.250 CE. John Rylands University Library, Manchester, UK.
- 157 An important difference, however, is that Chesed is the masculine element, and Geburah the feminine one!
- 158 Epiphanius, "Against Collyridians," *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (trans; F. Williams), 2/e, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies.

- 159 According to the Greek historian Herodotus the Scythians worshipped a *heptad*, a pantheon of seven gods, all paired with goddesses.
- 160 “John the Son of Zebedee,” E. A. Wallis Budge, *Legends of Our Lady Mary the Perpetual Virgin and her Mother Hanna* (London: Medici Society, 1922), 245ff.
- 161 “Bartholomew the Apostle,” *Legends of Our Lady Mary ...*, xxxvii-xxxix.
- 162 *Life of the Virgin* (trans; S. J. Shoemaker), (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), §§93-96, 120-123. *Transitus Mariae*, reproduced in Agnes Smith Lewis (ed.), *Apocrypha Syriaca*, Clay and Sons, 1909, reprint: (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), book II, 20; book III, 34.
- 163 Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019), 70-102.
- 164 Examples include a sixth-century mosaic in the Basilica of Parenzo, Croatia; an eleventh-century mosaic in Ravenna, Italy; and most evocatively, the early fifteenth century *Le sacerdote de la Vierge* (“The Priesthood of the Virgin”), from the school of Amiens, France.
- 165 *Life of the Virgin*, §111,136.
- 166 *Ibid.*, §117, 141.
- 167 *Transitus Mariae*, book V, 65-66. See also the translation in Appendix C of Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 374.
- 168 *Ibid.*
- 169 *Matthew* 13:55-56; *Mark* 3:31-32; 6:3.
- 170 See the discussion in Ashe, *The Virgin: Mary’s Cult ...*, especially ch. 8.
- 171 Peter of Damascus, “A Treasury of Divine Knowledge,” *Philokalia* (trans; G. Palmer *et al.*), Eling Trust, 1977, vol. 3, 130.
- 172 Hildegard of Bingen, Antiphon “O Splendidissima Gemma,” *Symphonia*, (trans; M. Atherton), *Hildegard Selected Readings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 117.
- 173 For example, Walsingham, England, became a popular pilgrimage destination after a Marian apparition to a Saxon noblewoman in 1061.
- 174 Thomas à Kempis, *Founders of the New Devotion: Being the Lives of Gerard Groot, Florentius Radewin and Their Followers*, English translation (London: Kegan Paul, 1905), 64.
- 175 Second Council of Constantinople, Canon 15.
- 176 María de Ágreda, *Mystical City of God*, vol. 1, §42 (trans; F. Marison), (Hammond, IN: Conkey, 1722/1902), 56.
- 177 *Ibid.* The English translation of the *Mystical City of God* received an *Imprimatur* from the Roman Catholic bishop of Fort Wayne, IN.
- 178 Nicene Creed, as approved by the First Council of Constantinople.
- 179 Cyril of Alexandria, “In Defense of the Theotokos,” homily, Council of Ephesus, June 22, 431.
- 180 Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon for the Sunday within the Octave of the Assumption,” 207.
- 181 *Matthew* 25:31.
- 182 Jill Raitt *et al.*, *Christian Spirituality*, vol. 2 (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 1987), 412.
- 183 Second Council of Constantinople, Canon 15.
- 184 Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1900), 195-197. See also Mara Freeman, *Kindling the Celtic Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2000), 254-256. Parts of the Scottish highlands and western islands were largely untouched by the Reformation, allowing traditional customs to be retained longer than was possible in other parts of England and Scotland. The annual offering of cakes to Mary seems to have survived until the nineteenth century.
- 185 J. A. MacCulloch, *The Religion of the Ancient Celts* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 265-266.
- 186 Quoted in Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (London: Penguin, 2003), 186-187.
- 187 *Song of Solomon* 4:7. An inscription over the Lady Chapel in Westminster Cathedral, London, reads: *Tota pulchra es, Maria, et macula originalis non est in te* (Latin: “Thou art all fair, O Mary, and the original stain of sin is not in thee”).
- 188 Anselm of Canterbury, *Concerning Virginal Conception and Original Sin* (trans; J. Hopkins & H. Richardson), 1099, ch. 12. Online: <https://jasper-hopkins.info/DeConceptu.pdf> (Last accessed Aug. 2, 2020).
- 189 Pius IX, Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus*, Rome, December 8, 1854.
- 190 Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, Vatican City, 1950, §44.
- 191 Leo XIII, Encyclical on the Rosary *Lucunda Semper Expectatione* §2, Vatican City, 1894.
- 192 Paul VI, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Vatican City, November 21, 1964, ch. VIII, especially §§53, 66, 67.
- 193 *Ibid.*, §67.
- 194 See for example Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 14-16.
- 195 John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*: “On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of

- the Pilgrim Church,” Vatican City, March 25, 1987.
- 196 John Paul II, prayer before the Roman Icon of Our Lady, “Salus Populi Romani,” Vatican City, December 8, 1990.
- 197 Schaup, *Sophia*, xiii.
- 198 Notable for its contribution to this effort has been the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, an international network of academics.
- 199 Even in our own time, former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote: “Since very early on, Christians had imagined the Church in the form of a woman, and ... the woman praying with hands extended and head covered, stood for the whole believing community considered as Christ’s bride.” *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (London: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 43-44.
- 200 Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 2.
- 201 A contemporary of Helena Blavatsky, Kingsford served for one year as head of the London lodge of the Theosophical Society until a dispute with A. P. Sinnett and other issues led to her resignation from the society. She converted to Roman Catholicism but pursued her esoteric work, which included mediumship.
- 202 Anna Kingsford, *Clothed with the Sun*, 2/e (London: Watkins, 1889), 31.
- 203 Annie W. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity or The Lesser Mysteries*, 2/e (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1905/1966), 140.
- 204 Annie W. Besant, “The New Annunciation,” *The Theosophist*, (vol. 49, June 1928), 278ff. Capitalization in original.
- 205 Sandra Hodson (ed.), *Illuminations of the Mystery Tradition: Compiled from the Writings of Geoffrey Hodson* (Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishing House, 1992), 70. Published posthumously by his widow.
- 206 Ibid.
- 207 Sandra Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary: The Occult Diary of Geoffrey Hodson* (Manila, Philippines: Theosophical Publishers, 1988), 267. Published posthumously by his widow. For a more extensive exploration of Hodson’s writings on Mary see John F. Nash, “Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess: Mary in the Writings of Geoffrey Hodson,” *The Esoteric Quarterly* (Winter 2019), 37-65.
- 208 Alice A. Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy* (New York: Lucis, 1957), 291. Capitalization in original.
- 209 Ibid.
- 210 Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Masters and the Path* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1925), 288. Leadbeater made a similar point in *The World Mother as Symbol and Fact* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1928), 17-18.
- 211 Corinne Heline, *The Blessed Virgin Mary: Her Life and Mission* (Black Mountain, NC: New Age Press, 1971), 106-107.
- 212 S. Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary*, 268.
- 213 Ibid., 82.
- 214 For a discussion of the Jungian archetypes see Joan Relke, “The Archetypal Female in Mythology and Religion: The Anima and the Mother,” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* (vol. 3, no. 1, Feb. 2007).
- 215 S. Hodson (ed.), *Light of the Sanctuary*, 81-82. Perhaps it was no accident that those were the feminine ideals of Victorian/Edwardian society in which Hodson grew up.
- 216 Geoffrey Hodson, *The Kingdom of the Gods* (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1952), 244.
- 217 Andrew Harvey, *Return of the Mother* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001), 343.
- 218 Griffiths, *Marriage of East and West*, 192.
- 219 Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, 88, 215. Emphasis removed.
- 220 Helena P. Blavatsky, *Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society: Stanzas I & II*, Theosophical Publishing Society, 1889, 4.
- 221 Alice A. Bailey, *Esoteric Healing* (New York: Lucis, 1953), 362-363.
- 222 Valentin Tomberg (attrib. to), *Meditations on the Tarot: a Journey into Christian Hermeticism* (trans; R. Powell), (Rockport, MA: Element, 1985/1993), 281.
- 223 Ibid., 282-283. Parenthesis and capitalization in original.
- 224 Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith*, 122.
- 225 *Revelation* 18:2. The next verse leaves no doubt about the gender and moral status assigned to Babylon: “all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies.”
- 226 Bailey, *The Externalization of the Hierarchy*, 155.
- 227 *Ecclesiasticus* 25:24.
- 228 The blood of Archbishops Thomas Becket and Óscar Romero was never considered to defile the altars where they were slain. Moreover, the blood of Christ lies at the very heart of Christian ritual.
- 229 It is hard to avoid comparisons with Cybele’s male disciples who castrated themselves.

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- ²³⁰ Exceptions were the Quakers, who affirmed gender equality in the 17th century, and other small denominations in the 19th century.
- ²³¹ Charles Leadbeater even suggested that Mary attained the sixth initiation. See *The World Mother as Symbol and Fact*, 4-5.
- ²³² Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 93.
- ²³³ *Psalms* 110:3. Among major translations, only the Douay–Rheims Bible mentions a star.

- ²³⁴ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 58-50.
- ²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.
- ²³⁶ Sophia may have overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation in somewhat the same way as the Christ overshadowed Jesus at the Baptism.
- ²³⁷ See for example Bailey, *Initiation, Human & Solar*, 38.
- ²³⁸ See ch. 6 of Nash, *Mary: Adept, Queen, Mother, Priestess*.