

## Seminar 13

### THE WISDOM TEXTS

#### DIVINE WISDOM, SOPHIA, HOLY SPIRIT

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*I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light for the light that cometh from her never goeth out...*

— Wisdom of Solomon

Why did I find the tradition of the Shekinah so interesting and significant? (see chapter 3 *The Dream of the Cosmos*) Because it gave me a different image of spirit, one that was immediate, intimate, one that I could relate to, love and intelligently serve. Here was an image that I did not need to worship as something remote from myself and the world, a vision that gave infinite value to life in this dimension and offered a theology of connection between the invisible and visible dimensions of reality. But I knew there was more to be discovered and that this tradition was but one strand of many. My desire to understand more about the origins of the image of the Shekinah led me back to the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament as well as to the Gnostic texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945.

When writing *The Myth of the Goddess*, I had followed the image of the Divine Feminine or Great Mother from the Palaeolithic era onwards. I knew that behind the imagery of the Shekinah stood the great goddesses of the Bronze Age and the image of Hokhmah or Divine Wisdom in the Old Testament. Beyond them was the distant, shadowy form of the Neolithic Great Mother. It seemed to me that there were elements in Kabbalah that paralleled the Hindu concept of Shakti and her cosmic union with Shiva. This suggested to me that an original tradition of the unity of the two aspects of the source of life - personified by a god and goddess - was at one time disseminated through India, Mesopotamia and Egypt but was gradually lost with the rise and differentiation of the three patriarchal religions. What we have left today are a few precious fragments of a lost tradition.

As I read the texts from different traditions, it became clear to me that the esoteric stream of Gnostic Christianity, Alchemy and Kabbalah had carried forward from Egypt the ancient cosmology of the Divine Feminine which was slowly to disappear over the centuries of the Christian era. The repression of the image of the goddess was the principle reason for the loss of the idea of cosmic soul. But the eradication of all traces of animism and the repudiation of the idea that all of nature was ensouled with spirit and therefore sacred, ultimately removed from the people who lived during the millennia of the three patriarchal

religions their age-old sense of participation in the invisible cosmic being of a Great Mother. In the West, it was only in Celtic Christianity that the belief that nature was sacred and animated by spirit survived and then only until the Synod of Whitby in 611. Thereafter, it began to fade although it is enjoying a revival today in the work of Irish poets and writers who have rescued and restored to us the beautiful litanies of the Celtic Church.

To reconnect with the tradition of the Divine Feminine that had been fragmented, obscured and almost lost over some two and a half thousand years I turned to the magnificent passages in the Books of Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. If I had not by chance been given a Bible when I was nine years old that contained the *Apocrypha*, I would not have known of the existence of these Books since the *Apocrypha* is not included in the Protestant Bible and I was brought up as a Protestant..

What I discovered as I read these texts is that - even at a distance of two thousand and more years - their words offered the most vivid and powerful imagery of the immanence of spirit in the life of this planet. They seemed to transmute all creation and the apparent insignificance of our lives into something precious and sacred, to be loved, embraced, cherished and celebrated because the life we see and experience here is the epiphany or emanation of the divine ground that has brought us into being and contains our world within itself. This deeper understanding of life radiates from the magnificent passages in the Books of Proverbs and Ben Sirach where Wisdom speaks as the Holy Spirit, calling to humanity to listen to her. Unknown and unrecognised, she says she is working within the depths of life, within the depths of nature and our nature, yearning to open our hearts and minds to her presence, her justice, her compassion and her truth. It seemed to me, as I read these passages, that I was listening to the voice of the Shekinah speaking to the souls of humanity who were the scattered sparks of her divinity.

But, as with the loss of the tradition of the Divine Feminine in Christianity, there is also a story of loss in the Jewish tradition. It begins at the time of the First Temple in Jerusalem when, during the reign of various kings but particularly those of Hezekiah and Josiah, the Temple was purged of any trace of the cult of a female deity, including her image (known as the Asherah) and that of the Brazen Serpent that was intrinsic to her cult. The groves of trees sacred to her were also razed to the ground. In 721 BC the Assyrians attacked Samaria, the northern province of Israel, and carried off ten of the twelve tribes to an unknown fate - the first recorded example of ethnic cleansing. The thousands of people belonging to these tribes simply disappeared. This catastrophe was blamed on the people's worship of a female deity and King Hezekiah felt impelled to wipe out all traces of her cult. This work of destruction was completed in 723 BC and again, under King Josiah, in 623 BC.

In between their two reigns, other kings had restored the image of the female deity and the brazen serpent to the Temple.

However, the ancient tradition of a female deity who was the Protectress of Jerusalem did not die out after Josiah's purge but was carried to Egypt by the Jewish groups who fled to Alexandria at this early time and, in a second wave, a hundred and twenty years later, at the time of the Babylonian Captivity. In 597 BC, the great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, the city sacked and many of its people carried off into captivity in Babylon. Some, however, chose to flee to Egypt where they joined the community already established there. The first group of refugees had taken with them the traditions of the First Temple that included the worship of deity whom they worshipped as the Queen of Heaven and who was the Protectress of Jerusalem.

We have the interesting account in the Book of Jeremiah, where the prophet, addressing the people in exile in Egypt, places the blame for their troubles on their worship of the Queen of Heaven. However, he evidently met with strong resistance:

Then all the men which knew that their wives had burned incense unto other gods, and all the women that stood by, a great multitude, even all the people that dwelt in the land of Egypt, in Pathros, answered Jeremiah, saying, "As for the word that thou has spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee. We will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth, to burn incense unto the Queen of Heaven and to pour out drink offerings unto her, as we have done, we, and our fathers, our kings, and our princes, in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem; for then had we plenty of victuals, and were well, and saw no evil. But since we left off to burn incense to the queen of heaven, and to pour out drink offerings unto her, we have wanted all things, and have been consumed by the sword and by the famine." (Jer. 44:15-18)

The Jewish community in Alexandria continued to preserve the tradition of a female deity whom they addressed as Divine Wisdom, Queen of Heaven and Holy Spirit. Among the later texts which still kept alive this tradition was the Book of the Wisdom of Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus c. 185 BC), which enshrines the magnificent passages where Wisdom speaks to the world (see below). Around 100 BC, the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon was also written which describes Wisdom as sitting by the throne of the Lord in heaven (9:10) and was spoken of as the Holy Spirit (9:17) Did these two books enshrine a much older tradition?

The second major phase of the loss of the Divine Feminine followed the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans and the devastating sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Soon after this date a group of rabbis met together in the university of Jamnia to define what would, from that time on, constitute their canon of holy books. As Margaret Barker writes in her book, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, "With the exception of some enigmatic passages in the Book of Proverbs, all traces of the Lady Wisdom disappeared from this collection and

scholars who base their picture of ancient Israel on the Hebrew canon of evidence can find no place for the Lady Wisdom. The Targumists, who made the Aramaic translations for use in the synagogue remembered Wisdom and rendered the first verse of Genesis ‘In the beginning with Wisdom [the Spirit hovering over the waters] the Lord created and completed the heaven and the earth.’” (*Targum Neofiti* Genesis 1.1) <sup>1</sup>

What is so interesting about this story is that the Jewish communities in Egypt evidently preserved the tradition of the Divine Feminine, Divine Wisdom, the Queen of Heaven and the Holy Spirit, from the pre-exilic Temple in Jerusalem and transmitted this early tradition to the Jewish-Christian communities in Egypt who inherited their canon of texts.

The Jewish community in Egypt also preserved the First and Second Book of Enoch which Margaret Barker considers to be “the key to a vast spectrum of ancient tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Passages in the First Book of Enoch suggest that the refugees in Egypt remained true to the ways of the First Temple and deplored the rejection of the Queen of Heaven, saying that the role of Wisdom had been to give ‘sight’ to the temple priests. While these texts disappeared from the Hebrew canon and the mainstream Jewish tradition they were evidently known in Byzantium, where the magnificent Basilica dedicated to *Haghia Sophia*, still standing today, was completed by the Emperor Justinian in AD537. In the vast apse is the image of Sophia, Divine Wisdom.

Enoch himself had a vision of a huge fragrant tree whose grape-like fruits yielded Wisdom (1 Enoch 32.4). It is possible that the imagery of the Enoch texts found its way into the later books of Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. In these later texts Wisdom was, in Margaret Barker's words, “symbolised by a tree of life and by water. She had a throne, she was the Queen of Heaven, she was both mother and consort of the kings, but also the consort of the Lord. She gave eternal life/resurrection, she fed her devotees, she was radiant, superior to earthly light, the mother of all creation. She was the anointing oil, the archetypal angel high priest, the genius of Jerusalem and its protectress.” <sup>1</sup>

The following passages give an intimation of the imagery in which Wisdom is described in the Books of Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon:

Who can number the sand of the sea,  
And the drops of rain,  
And the days of eternity?  
Who can find out the height of heaven,  
And the breadth of the earth,  
And the deep, and Wisdom?  
Wisdom hath been created before all things,  
And the understanding of prudence from everlasting.

The word of God most high is the fountain of Wisdom;  
And her ways are everlasting commandments.  
To whom hath the root of Wisdom been revealed?  
Or who hath known her wise counsels?  
Ben Sirach 1. 2-6

As a mother shall she meet him  
With the Bread of Understanding  
shall she feed him,  
And give him the Water of Wisdom to drink.  
Ben Sirach 15. 2-3

Wisdom is glorious, and never fadeth away:  
yea, she is easily seen of them that love her,  
and found of such as seek her.  
She preventeth them that desire her,  
in making herself first known unto them.  
Whoso seeketh her early shall have no great travail,  
for he shall find her sitting at his doors.  
To think therefore upon her is perfection of wisdom,  
and whoso watcheth for her shall quickly be without care.  
Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-15

It is a strange and interesting fact that the Christian Old Testament (Catholic Church) retained the tradition and texts relating to Divine Wisdom and the Holy Spirit, while the mainstream Jewish tradition apparently discarded them. The reason the Church was able to inherit them was because, as Margaret Barker observes, when the Christian missionaries from Alexandria took the new teaching into the Greek speaking world of the Mediterranean, “they took with them the Greek Scriptures from the community in Egypt, descended from those refugees who continued to venerate the Queen of Heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of this new research is the light it may throw on the life and teaching of Jesus. “We do not know what Jesus regarded as Scripture,” Margaret Barker says. “But we can wonder whether He was influenced by the Wisdom tradition in Egypt during the “missing” years where it is possible that he spent several years before his baptism and the beginning of His ministry. During this time, He may have come in touch with the Wisdom tradition and the Wisdom texts. Jesus was said to be the incarnation of the power and the Wisdom of God (Cor. 1.24); and Matthew 11.19, with a similar verse in Luke 7.35 that describes him as the child of Wisdom. The Woman clothed with the sun who gives birth to the Messiah in Revelation 12 was Wisdom, and Jesus is depicted as Wisdom in the letter to the church of Laodicea (Rev. 3. 14-22). Here Jesus speaks to St. John in his vision and describes himself as the witness of the creation, the one who gives true riches, eternal life and anointing to open the eyes...In the prophecy of Isaiah we read that the sevenfold Spirit was to

rest on the descendent of Jesse and transform his mind, so that he saw things differently (Isa. 11.2).”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the Wisdom texts, the tradition transmitted to the early Christian Church from the Jewish communities in Egypt and elsewhere had many gospels which were later, under the influence of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in the second century AD, removed from the canon of teaching that was to become the foundation of Church doctrine and teaching. Some two hundred years after the choice made by Irenaeus, two edicts of the Emperor Constantine (AD326 and 333), ordered the burning of any gospels outside the established canon of the four we know today. This suggests that many of the previously banned or excluded gospels were still in circulation. Constantine was influenced by Athanasius, the powerful Bishop of Alexandria.

Some fifty years later, in AD381, the final coup de grâce was delivered by the Emperor Theodosius which declared that anyone who did not comply with his edict that all must believe in the doctrine that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were of one and the same substance would be declared a heretic. The end result of Theodosius’ policy was the persecution not only of heretics but of the pagan religions and the destruction of their shrines and magnificent temples. It was at this time that the idea entered Christian teaching that hell and eternal punishment awaited heretics and unbelievers.<sup>2</sup>

In one of the gospels destroyed during this time, the Gospel of the Hebrews - a lost text that was known only from quotations in the work of the early Christian Fathers, Origen and Jerome - the Holy Spirit is described as the mother of Jesus, who spoke to him at his baptism and saying “My Son, in all the prophets I was waiting for Thee.” “Here,” Professor Gilles Quispel (one of the great authorities on the Gnostic Gospels) writes, “we come to a very simple realization: just as the birth requires a mother, so rebirth requires a spiritual mother. Originally, the Christian term “rebirth” must therefore have been associated with the concept of the spirit as a feminine hypostasis.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally a catastrophic loss of the Divine Feminine was hidden in the process by which the Hebrew rendering of the concept of “Holy Spirit” (*Ruach*) was translated into the Latin *Spiritus Sanctus* whose masculine gender ending would lead, in Christian theology, to the Holy Spirit being defined as male.<sup>4</sup>

The image of the Divine Feminine, the Holy Spirit, Divine Wisdom (Sophia), was nevertheless cherished by the Gnostic communities who, after the edicts of Constantine and Theodosius, could only survive persecution by going underground. Margaret Barker writes that the imagery of Divine Wisdom “survived... above all, in the iconography of the Eastern Churches, where the Holy Wisdom appears in all her ancient splendour. The most famous of

the Wisdom icons is the Sophia of Novgorod, which shows her as a fiery winged angel... enthroned where one would expect to see the figure of Christ, crowned as the Queen of Heaven, and holding the scroll of true knowledge and the serpent staff, her ancient symbol.”<sup>1</sup>

The final phase of the loss of the tradition and imagery of the Divine Feminine in the Western tradition came with the Reformation when the Protestant Church in the sixteenth century decided to adopt the Biblical texts from the Hebrew canon of Jerusalem (defined at the University of Jamnia shortly after AD70). It rejected those that belonged to the earlier traditions which had taken root in Egypt and been transmitted to the early Christian Church. To these Protestants, any mention of a female divinity was anathema, and so the magnificent verses in the Wisdom of Solomon and the Wisdom of Ben Sirach were excluded from the Protestant canon of texts and are therefore unknown to Protestant Christians, although they could still read the great passage in the Book of Proverbs. The Catholic Church, however, retained the Wisdom texts in the part of their Bible known as the *Apocrypha*.

Divine Wisdom (called Hokhmah in Hebrew and Sophia in Greek) comes to life in these passages from the Book of Proverbs and the Books of Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon in the *Apocrypha*. Wisdom tells us that she is immanent in our world, with us in the streets of our cities, calling to us to awaken to her presence, to obey her laws, to listen to her wisdom, promising her blessing if we can only hear her voice and respond to her teaching. With their vivid imagery, these passages transform the idea of the Holy Spirit, speaking as Divine Wisdom, from abstract idea into living presence. She speaks as if she were here, in this dimension, dwelling with us in the midst of her kingdom, accessible to those who seek her out. She is unknown and unrecognised, yet working within the depths of life, striving to open our understanding to the divine reality of her being, the sacredness of her creation, and her justice, wisdom, love and truth.

In the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom tells us that she is the Beloved of God, with Him from the beginning, before the foundation of the world. She speaks from the deep ground of life as the hidden law which orders it and as the craftswoman of creation:

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:  
While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields,  
Nor the beginning of the dust of the world.

When he established the heavens, I was there:  
When he set a circle upon the face of the deep:  
When he made firm the skies above:  
When the fountains of the deep became strong:  
When he gave to the sea its bound,  
That the waters should not transgress his commandment:  
When he marked out the foundations of the earth:  
Then I was by him, as a master craftsman:  
And I was daily his delight, Rejoicing always before him,  
Rejoicing in his habitable earth;  
And my delight was with the sons of men.

Proverbs 8:23-31

In the Wisdom of Ben Sirach (thought to date to the first quarter of the second century BC), it seems as if Divine Wisdom, the Holy Spirit, is telling us her story:

I came out of the mouth of the most high,  
and covered the earth as a cloud.  
I dwelt in high places,  
and my throne is in a cloudy pillar.  
I alone compassed the circuit of heaven,  
and walked in the bottom of the deep.  
I had power over the waves of the sea, and over all the earth,  
and over every people and nation...

He created me from the beginning before the world,  
and I shall never fail.  
In the holy tabernacle I served before him;  
and so was I established in Sion.  
Likewise in the beloved city he gave me rest,  
and in Jerusalem was my power...

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 En-gaddi,  
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...

I gave a sweet smell like cinnamon and aspalathus,  
and I yielded a pleasant odour like the best myrrh...  
As the turpentine tree I stretched out my branches,  
and my branches are the branches of honour and grace.  
as the vine brought I forth pleasant savour,  
and my flowers are the fruit of honour and riches.

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.  
Come unto me, all ye that be desirous of me,



and fill yourselves with my fruits.  
For my memorial is sweeter than honey,  
and mine inheritance than the honey-comb...

The first man knew her not perfectly,  
no more shall the last find her out.  
For her thoughts are more than the sea,  
and her counsels profounder than the great deep.

I also came out as a brook from a river,  
and as a conduit into a garden.  
I said, I will water my best garden,  
and will water abundantly my garden bed:  
and lo, my brook became a river,  
and my river became a sea.  
I will yet make doctrine to shine as the morning,  
and will send forth her light afar off.  
I will yet pour out doctrine as prophecy,  
and leave it to all ages for ever.  
Behold that I have not laboured for myself only,  
but for all them that seek wisdom.

Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach 24:3-6, 9-11, 13-21, 28-34

Here is the language of the immanence of the Divine Feminine in the world. Who wrote these magnificent verses and the ones to follow? Was it a high-priest of the First Temple whose words were preserved by the early communities in Egypt or a later priest of that Egyptian community? Did he hear a voice speaking to him or did he have a vision of a great feminine being, as did Apuleius of the goddess Isis? The verses reveal this feminine Presence - whom we can name as Divine Wisdom and the Holy Spirit – to be the intelligence of the cosmos, rooted in tree, vine, earth and water and active in the habitations of humanity. She is the principal of justice that inspires human laws. She is invisible spirit guiding human consciousness; a hidden presence longing to be known, calling out to the world for recognition and relationship. To those who, like Solomon, prized her more highly than rubies, Divine Wisdom was their wise and luminous guide:

I prayed and understanding was given me: I called upon God, and the Spirit of Wisdom came to me...

I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light,  
for the light that cometh from her never goeth out...

And all such things as are either secret or manifest, them I know.

For Wisdom, which is the worker of all things, taught me; for in her is understanding spirit,  
holy, one only, manifold, subtil, lively, clear, undefiled, plain, not subject to hurt, loving the  
thing that is good, quick, which

cannot be letted, ready to do good, kind to man,

stedfast, sure, free from care, having all power, overseeing all things, and going through all  
understanding, pure, and most subtil, spirits.

For Wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passeth and goeth

through all things by reason of her pureness.

For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall into her.

For she is the brightness of the everlasting Light,  
the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness...

She is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the Light, she is found before it...

Wisdom reacheth from one end to another mightily:  
and sweetly doth she order all things.

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.                      Wisdom of Solomon 7:7, 10, 21-7, 29; 8:1-2

### **The Aurora Consurgens**

There is a medieval alchemical text - the *Aurora Consurgens* - which takes up this story. I feel it should be included here because not only are its words exquisitely beautiful and numinous but the commentary by one of Jung's closest colleagues, Dr. Marie Louise von Franz, is profound and illuminating. She writes, "The *Aurora* is one of the earliest medieval treatises in which we find the nascent idea that the alchemical opus involves an inner experience and that a numinous content -Wisdom - is the secret which the adept was looking for in the chemical substances [in his retort]." (p. 186) <sup>5</sup> "We can understand how shattered the author of *Aurora* must have been when Wisdom suddenly appeared to him in personal form...For an intellectual it is a shattering experience when he discovers that what he was seeking is not just an idea but is psychically real in a far deeper sense and can come upon him like a thunderclap. He is saying that she [his vision] is devastatingly real, actual and palpably present in matter." (p. 192)

This book belongs with the Wisdom Texts and carries forward elements from the passage attributed to Solomon quoted above and from other verses included in this seminar. The author of the book, who was believed by Dr. von Franz, to be St. Thomas Aquinas himself, is speaking of a vision and a revelation he had just prior to his death, a revelation that was written down as he spoke by the monks sitting with him. In the first chapter he mentions a feminine figure whom he identifies with Divine Wisdom and who is the same figure who appears in Proverbs, Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. He writes, "All good things came to me together with her, that Wisdom of the South, who preacheth abroad, who uttereth her voice in the streets, crieth out at the head of the multitudes, and in the entrance of the gates of the city uttereth her words, saying, "Come ye to me and be enlightened, and your operations shall not be confounded; all ye that desire me shall be filled with my riches...I will teach you the science of God." And he continues:

“She it is that Solomon chose to have instead of light, and above all beauty and health...For all gold in her sight shall be esteemed as a little sand, and silver shall be counted as clay...And her fruit is more precious than all the riches of this world, and all the things that are desired are not to be compared with her...She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her, and an unfailing light...He who hath found this science, it shall be his rightful food for ever...Such a one is as rich as he that hath a stone from which fire is struck, who can give fire to whom he will as much as he will and when he will without loss to himself.”

And Wisdom speaks to him:

“Be turned to me with all your heart and do not cast me aside because I am black and swarthy, because the sun hath changed my colour and the waters have covered my face...because I stick fast in the mire of the deep and my substance is not disclosed. Wherefore out of the depths have I cried, and from the abyss of the earth with my voice to all you that pass by the way. Attend and see me, if any shall find one like unto me, I will give into his hand the morning star.”

And in words that resonate with those attributed to Jesus

“I am that land of holy promise, which floweth with milk and honey and bringeth forth sweetest fruit in due season; wherefore have all the philosophers commended me and sowed in me their gold and silver and incombustible grain. And unless that grain falling into me die, itself shall remain alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth threefold fruit: for the first it shall bring forth shall be good because it was sown in good earth, namely of pearls; the second likewise good because it was sown in better earth, namely of leaves (silver); the third shall bring forth a thousandfold because it was sown in the best earth, namely of gold. For from the fruits of this grain is made the food of life, which cometh down from heaven. If any man shall eat of it, he shall live without hunger.” (pages 142-3)

## **The Gnostic Imagery of the Divine Feminine**

Yet another strand in this extraordinary story is the Gnostic imagery of the Divine Mother who was known to the early Christians in the first two centuries of the Christian era (most probably the descendants of the Jewish Christians who had taken refuge in Alexandria and who had preserved the tradition of the Queen of Heaven). Were it not for the discoveries of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1945, this part of the story would have been lost to us, perhaps forever. Here was yet another source of material relating to the imagery of the Divine Feminine. It is astonishing that so much survived, passed from individual to individual, century to century.

During the last fifty years or so, it has become increasingly clear that there was a great underground stream of human experience which flowed from the thriving city of Alexandria in Egypt into several different channels - into the writings of the early Christian Gnostics, the

Hermetic Tradition, the later Alchemists, and the transmitters, both Jewish and Christian, of the ancient tradition of Kabbalah. Hellenistic Egypt in the second and third centuries AD was the immediate source of all these traditions, yet we now know that the roots lie deeper, in the temple teachings of a far older time, whether in Palestine or Egypt. Alexandria was the city of Gnostic teaching - the meeting place of East and West, a vibrant crucible for the exchange of ideas and teachings between Egyptians, Greeks, Syrians and Jews, and also sages from the East bringing teachings from far-away Persia and India. This vital stream of esoteric teaching which was later to suffer such repression and persecution at the hands of the late Roman Empire and the Christian Church, is the “complementary” or missing counterpart of the orthodox tradition that is familiar to us. It is a vital yet largely unknown aspect of our spiritual inheritance.

So who were the Gnostics? They were a group of early Christians, among them the descendents of Jews who had fled Jerusalem after the murder of James, the older brother of Jesus, who claimed to have inherited the secret teaching that Jesus imparted to his closest disciples, including his older brother and Mary Magdalene. Many Gospels now lost were in circulation among them, including the four that have come down to us.

There are two Greek words for knowledge. One of them - *epistēmi* - means knowledge in the sense of information gathered. The other, *gnosis*, means knowledge in the sense of insight and wisdom. The meaning and purpose of life is to be discovered neither through faith nor through accumulating knowledge about the known world, but through inward transformation and the development of the eye of the heart. The Gnostic Gospels show us that, like the kabbalists, the focus of their concern was with how to awaken us to awareness of the divine ground of our being, to awaken us from a state, not of sin, but of sleep and ignorance.

By the year 200, as Elaine Pagels tells us in Chapter III of her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, “Every one of the secret texts which gnostic groups revered was omitted from the canonical collection, and branded as heretical by those who called themselves orthodox Christians. By the time the process of sorting the various writings ended...virtually all the feminine imagery for God had disappeared from the orthodox Christian tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Until the latter part of the last century when the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi were published, no one knew that some groups of early Christians had had an image of the Divine Mother whom they had named “The Invisible within the All.”<sup>7</sup> Some texts speak of how, as the Eternal Silence, the Divine Mother received the seed of Light from the ineffable source and how, from this womb, she brought forth all the emanations of Light, ranged in related pairs of feminine and masculine energies. They saw her as the womb of life, not only of human life,

but the life of the whole cosmos. They knew this Divine Mother as the Holy Spirit and saw the dove as her emissary. The Jewish Christians believed that, at the baptism of Jesus, it was the Divine Mother, the Holy Spirit, who spoke to her son saying “This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” (see Quispel above)

I find it fascinating that the imagery and mythology of the Divine Mother in Gnosticism is so similar to the imagery of the Shekinah in Kabbalah that they seem to belong to one and the same tradition. Now with the research of Margaret Barker confirming the presence of exiled or refugee groups from Jerusalem in Alexandria, the dispersed fragments come together and the relationship would seem to be confirmed. In a gnostic text called the *Trimorphic Prottennoia*, the speaker describes herself as the intangible Womb that gives shape to the All, the life that moves in every creature. Other texts name her as the Mother of the Universe but also speak of the androgyny of the divine source in imagery similar to the later kabbalistic texts. I remember reading Elaine Pagel’s book with intense interest but I did not then experience the image of the Divine Mother as alive and relevant to myself here and now – not until I explored the historical roots of my powerful vision (see Chapter Two, *The Dream of the Cosmos*).

The Catholic Church inherited the biblical Wisdom texts that were preserved by the Jewish community in Egypt, translated into Greek and then into European languages and were included in the *Apocrypha*. But the voice of the Divine Feminine in the lost gnostic texts was, until very recently, unknown to Catholics and Protestants alike.

The beautiful verses given below from texts found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 and dated to c. 200 AD, may be descended from the far older texts cherished by the Jewish community in Alexandria. They are clearly related in feeling and imagery to the verses given above where Wisdom is speaking of herself, but also to the imagery of the Shekinah in the *Zohar* or *Book of Splendour* that appeared in northern Spain a thousand years later. Who treasured this tradition and kept it alive for later generations? Who took the tradition of Divine Wisdom from Palestine to Spain and thence to medieval France and the rest of Europe, preserving it as a precious legacy to us today, when the world is crying out for Wisdom, Justice and Compassion?

Here are a few lines from a long poem called “*The Thunder, Perfect (Whole) Mind*” :

I am the first and the last.  
I am the honored one and the scorned one.  
I am the whore and the holy one.  
I am the wife and the virgin  
I am the mother and the daughter.  
I am she whose wedding is great,

and I have not taken a husband...  
I am the silence that is incomprehensible  
and the idea whose remembrance is frequent.  
I am the voice whose sound is manifold  
and the word whose appearance is multiple.  
I am the utterance of my name...  
I am knowledge and ignorance...  
I am strength and I am fear.  
I am war and peace.  
Give heed to me...  
I am the one whose image is great in Egypt  
and the one who has no image among the barbarians.  
I am the one who has been hated everywhere  
and who has been loved everywhere...  
I am the one whom they call Life  
and you have called Death.  
I am the one whom they call Law,  
and you have called Lawlessness.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most beautiful poem is this one from a text called *The Trimorphic Protennoia*:

I am the Protennoia,  
The Thought that dwells in the Light.  
I am the movement that dwells in the All,  
She who exists before the All.  
She in whom the All takes its stand. [becomes manifest]  
I am Invisible within the Thought of the Invisible One.  
I am revealed in the immeasurable, ineffable things.  
I am intangible, dwelling in the intangible.  
I move in every creature.  
I am the sight of those who dwell in sleep.

I am the Invisible One within the All.  
I am the immeasurable, ineffable,  
yet whenever I wish,  
I shall reveal myself.  
I am the movement of the All.  
I exist before the All, and I am the All,  
Since I exist before everyone.  
I am a Voice speaking softly.  
I exist from the first.  
I dwell within the Silence...  
And it is the hidden Voice that dwells within me,  
Within the intangible, immeasurable Thought,  
Within the immeasurable Silence.

I descended to the midst of the underworld [our world]  
And I shone down upon the darkness.  
It is I who poured forth the Water.  
I am the one hidden within Radiant Waters.

It is through me that knowledge comes forth.  
I am perception and knowledge,  
Uttering a Voice by means of Thought.  
I am the real Voice.  
I cry out in everyone and they know me.  
I am the Thought of the Father  
And through me proceeded the Voice, that is,  
The knowledge of everlasting things.  
I revealed myself within all those who know me  
For I am the one joined with everyone  
Within the hidden thought.

I am the Image of the Invisible Spirit  
And it is through me that the All took shape,  
I am the Mother as well as the Light,  
The intangible [Virgin] Womb,  
The unrestrained [boundless] and immeasurable Voice.

I am the Mother of the Voice  
Speaking in many ways, completing the All.  
It is in me that knowledge dwells,  
The knowledge of things everlasting.  
It is I who speak within every creature  
It is I who lift up the sound of the Voice  
To the ears of those who have known me,  
That is, the Sons of the Light.

So now, O Sons of the Thought, listen to me,  
To the sound of the Mother of your mercy  
I am the Womb that gives shape to the All  
By giving birth to the Light that shines in splendour.<sup>9</sup>

A final verse from this text leaves us with the imagery of light and the declaration of divine presence in the midst of this world.

I am the voice speaking softly.  
I exist from the first.  
I dwell within the Silence,  
Within the immeasurable Silence.  
I descended to the midst of the underworld  
And I shone down upon the darkness.  
It is I who poured forth the Water.  
I am the one hidden within Radiant Waters...  
I am the Image of the Invisible Spirit.  
I am the Womb that gives shape to the All.  
By giving birth to the Light that shines in splendour.<sup>9</sup>

The Holy Spirit could be imagined variously as the light that manifests as both wave and particle, or as the 'sea' of photons or light particles which are the ground of our being and all physical reality including the complex structure and mysterious organisation of energy that we name as matter - a word which comes from the Latin word for mother - *mater*. After so

many billions of years the energy of life has evolved a form - the planet earth - and a consciousness - our own - which is slowly growing towards the recognition of its ground and source. Yet, because of the loss of the tradition of the Divine Feminine, we do not know that what physicists are exploring in the finer and finer gradations of matter they are discovering is what the awe-struck explorers of the Tree of Life in Kabbalah named the Face and the Glory of God, nor that the universe we explore with our technology is the outer covering or veil of a unimaginably fine web of luminous and invisible relationships.

While I was researching the many images from alchemical manuscripts, I found that in the St. Geneviève library in Paris, there is a sixteenth century alchemical text with a painting of an alchemist talking to a woman. She wears a crown holding the symbols of the planetary powers and she sits on the branches of a stylised great tree beneath which a fire is burning. Is she an image of Divine Wisdom, the presiding image of alchemy, or the *anima-mundi* - the soul of the world? She is inviting the alchemist to turn away from his alchemical vessels and enter into a dialogue with her.

If we were able to speak to her, what comment would she pass on the pathological effects of our ignorance – the pollution of her earth, her seas, her air, the abysmal and wanton sacrifice of animals (as in the shocking handling of the BSE and Foot and Mouth crises in the United Kingdom) and the contamination with toxins and pesticides of the food and water that is her gift of life to us? And what of the ever-increasing manufacture and sale of arms, the torture and murder of men, women and children in war, the use of explosives to destroy flesh and bone, the continued laying of land-mines and the use of weapons such as cluster bombs and depleted uranium, the agony of orphaned, abandoned, murdered and maimed children? To hear her answer, we would have to attune ourselves to her being. We would have to listen with her ear to the voice of the suffering we bring into being by our ignorance of the oneness and divinity of life. We would have radically to change our habits of behaviour and become more consciously aware that the suffering we inflict on others is actually suffering that we are inflicting on the “body” of spirit - that spirit suffers through that suffering.

If we could hear her voice, surely we would awaken to the sacredness and divinity of life. We would begin to see matter and our own bodies in a different light. We would treat them with greater respect. If we could awaken to that voice, we could bring matter and spirit, body and soul together, healing the deep wounds inflicted by the beliefs and concepts which have sundered them. Even as we accomplish this, we will begin to transmit the light and love flowing to all creation from the Holy Spirit.

In Neil Douglas-Klotz's *Prayers of the Cosmos*, and his beautiful translation of the Lord's Prayer from the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, a startling image of divine union



emerges. As he writes in his introduction: “Unlike Greek, Aramaic presents a fluid and holistic view of the cosmos. The arbitrary borders found in Greek between “mind,” “body,” and “spirit” fall away. Furthermore, like its sister languages Hebrew and Arabic, Aramaic can express many layers of meaning. Words are organized and defined based on a poetic root-and-pattern system, so that each word may have several meanings, at first seemingly unrelated, but upon contemplation revealing an inner connection... The Aramaic language is close to the earth, rich in images of planting and harvesting, full of views of the natural wonder of the cosmos. “Heaven” in Aramaic ceases to be a metaphysical concept and presents the image of “light and sound shining through all creation.””<sup>10</sup>

Here is his translation of the first line of the Lord’s Prayer, which in the Christian Bible (KJV) is rendered “Our Father which art in heaven.”

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos  
You create all that moves  
In light.

O Thou! The Breathing Life of all,  
Creator of the Shimmering Sound that touches us.

Respiration of all worlds,  
We hear you breathing – in and out –  
In silence.

Source of Sound: in the roar and the whisper,  
In the breeze and the whirlwind, we  
Hear your Name.  
Radiant One: You shine within us,  
Outside us – even darkness shines – when  
We remember.

Name of names, our small identity  
Unravels in you, you give it back as a lesson.

Wordless Action, Silent Potency –  
Where ears and eyes awaken, there  
Heaven comes.

O Birther! Father-Mother of the Cosmos!

#### Notes:

1. Margaret Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh 2000, pp. 109-112, 200-212, 279-301 . All quotations marked note 1 are from this text and I am greatly indebted to her research which she kindly made available to me.

2. Charles Freeman, *AD 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Christian State*, p. 171-172, Pimlico, Random House, London, 2008
3. Gilles Quispel, *The Birth of the Child*, page 23. Professor Quispel was one of the original translators of the Gospel of Thomas. I was interested to discover that the late Father Bede Griffiths, one of the great philosopher-mystics of our time, asks in his book, *Return to the Centre*, p. 62 “May we not say that the Holy Spirit is feminine?” and that Dr. Keith Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford in a recent book names the Holy Spirit as feminine.
4. see *The Myth of the Goddess*, pages 612-617
5. *Aurora Consurgens*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966, Bollingen Foundation, New York 1966
6. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., London, 1979, p. 57
7. *ibid*, Chapter III
8. *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*, Nag Hammadi Library in English, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1977, p. 271-7, (extracts)
9. *The Trimorphic Protennoia*, Nag Hammadi Library, p.461-70 (extracts)
10. Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1990, page 3