

“The Egyptian Foundations of Gnostic Thought”, Chapter Twelve: The Gnostic Isis, Tefnut, and Hathor.

Of all the Egyptian mythological precursors who appear against an emanationist backdrop, none finds such full expression in Gnostic thought as the motif of the youngest and wisest goddess who experienced a passion to know the Parent, the goddess who fled convention, or the goddess who fell to earth archetype. This special intimacy between goddess and father-god, at times suggestively sexual, as well as pertaining to “knowing” hidden aspects of the Primal Source, forms the core motif of Valentinian thought, this and the standard theme of a goddess transgressing - with or without the approval of the Parent - and subsequently generating a lower realm. To briefly review this we shall examine the system of Ptolemy, a disciple of Valentinus *ca.* 185 C.E. (see Appendix B). In this emanationist theogony a primal ogdoad appears from the Source with Bythos appearing as the first aeon, obviously functioning as Nun. This original group of eight both suggest the Heh-gods and the Heliopolitan Ennead when considered along with the Primal Parent. In the latter case a correspondence would be as follows:

Bythius (The Deep)	Shu
Sige (Silence)	Tefnut
Nous (Mind)	Geb
Aletheia (Truth)	Nut
Logos (Word)	Osiris
Zoe (Life)	Isis
Anthropos (Primal Man)	Seth
Ekklesia (Church)	Nephthys

A Decad follows the first Ogdoad and a Duodecad follows on this. The last goddess to appear is Sophia, thirtieth and youngest aeon. Sophia embodies the Seth principle (as discussed in the next chapter) in refusing to procreate with her partner Theletos, instead wishing to “know” the Parent. Irenaeus described the passion of Sophia as follows: “[it] consisted in a desire to search into the nature of the Father; for she wished, according to them, to comprehend his greatness”.¹ The result is a formless abortion (another Seth motif) and the generation of great agitation in the Pleroma. Eventually Horus establishes a boundary between the abortive realm and the upper realms: Sophia is redeemed and returns to the congregation while her lower self, remains with the Demiurge as Sophia Achamoth.

There are two Egyptian myths from which the above sequence of events is derived. The first is the myth of Re and Isis which exists in many versions. The manuscripts we shall be examining date to the 19th Dynasty (1314-1200 B.C.E.).² Isis is herein described as a clever woman, whose “heart was craftier than a million men... more discerning than a million gods” and, “she thought in her heart to learn the name of the august god”.³ Isis took some of the god’s “spittle” and shaped it into a snake which bit him, upon which “the fire of life

came out of himself".⁴ The god's ennead became greatly disturbed as the god informed them

A painful thing has bit me.

My heart does not know it, my eyes do not see it,

I do not recognise in it anything that I have created.

I have not felt a pain like it;

There is nothing more painful than this.⁵

This is an exemplary Gnostic precursor of what it means for the Primal Parent to confront his "depths". The depths involve an unintended perversity, evil. In the Egyptian and Gnostic view this centres upon the figure of a goddess with exceptional qualities. Isis appears before the god and promises to relieve his pain if he will tell her his name, to which he eventually agrees, saying:

Give me thy ears, my daughter Isis,

So that my name may come from my body into thy body.⁶

It is surely not overstating things to note the sexual tension in this description: Isis wishes to know the Father and he ends up "bitten", suffering a burning fever not relieved until his "name" passes from his body into hers. Apart from this we have the same theogonic infrastructure as with later Gnostic systems, in that an amorphous and inchoate aspect of the godhead is transformed by the youngest daughter of the Parent; this transformation causes severe agitation amongst the higher powers, a disruption that requires extreme measures in dealing with it. The upshot of this is an emphasising of the special theogonic relationship between Father god and youngest goddess. The daughter generates the *dysteliological* within the all-perfect Pleroma; the role of Isis in this myth, as with Seth in many others, points up the Egyptian appreciation of this. Isis, as with the later Gnostic Sophia, was a power that was actively involved with the reality of pain and suffering within the visible world, and the mysteries of sexuality. Isis went on from her depiction in the above spell as "Isis the Great, Mistress of the Gods, who knows Re by his own name" to proclaim in Graeco-Roman times:

I am the wife and sister of King Osiris...

I compelled women to be loved by men.

I caused the just to be stronger than gold or silver.

I ordained that the true be considered beautiful.

I invented marriage contracts.

Languages I assigned to Greeks and barbarians.

I caused the honorable and the shameful to be distinguished by Nature...

The island from the depths I brought up into the light.

I conquer Fate. Fate heeds me.

Hail Egypt who reared me.⁷

The key feature here is her involvement with the "shameful", her role in "surfacing" creation from the depths, and her dominion over Fate. The Gnostic *Thunder Perfect mind* comes directly out of the Isis tradition as a few excerpts demonstrates:

I am the bride and the bridegroom...

I am the mother of my father,

and the sister of my man and he is my offspring...

I am the sound of the manifold voice,
and the word of many aspects. (13.27-32 & 14.12-14)

I am the judgment of the Greeks and of the barbarians.

I am the one whose image is great in Egypt (16.5-7)

Out of shame accept me unto yourselves shamelessly;
and out of shamelessness and shame,

indict the parts of my being in yourselves (17.15-22)

I am the one who is called "the Truth" and "Iniquity" (20.7-8)⁸

The link in both systems, besides the obvious recourse to aretologies,⁹ is the feminine power over beneficence and iniquity, as well as her archetypal presence as sexuality incarnate. The reference to "Nature" is an identification of Isis with Ma'at who subsumes both "honourable" and the "shameful"¹⁰; the corresponding identification with "Truth" in the Gnostic text is also linked to "Iniquity", and so the dual-aspected goddess present in the lower world is a motif shared by Egyptian and Gnostic thought.

The depiction in the *Thunder* of the goddess as wife and mother of her husband firmly links this text to the Egyptian Isis tradition, where Isis is wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, his reincarnation. As well, Isis assimilated within herself all of the ancient gods, and so it is with the Gnostic goddess "whose image is great in Egypt" and who claims that "I am the one whose God is many" (*The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, NHC VI,2 6.24).¹¹

The second main Egyptian myth to inform the Gnostic view of the divergent goddess, and on par with the Isis and Re story, is the myth of Tefnut in Nubia. The Leyden demotic papyrus I 384, already cited, dated to the 2nd century C.E., describes the departure of Tefnut, daughter of Re, who rejects her partner and has fled to Ethiopia in the form of a lioness. Re sends Thoth and Shu in order to bring Tefnut back, for her exile has caused disturbances in Egypt.¹² Thoth (and Shu in the Egyptian original) finds her in the desert and eventually persuades her to return to Egypt. This myth, which exists in fragmentary form in the Leiden papyrus, is a derivation of the earlier story of the eye of Re, found in the tombs of Seti I and Ramses III,¹³ in which the eye of Re is despatched in order to end humankind's revolt against himself. As noted in Chapter 8, Hathor/Sekmet wreaks a terrible vengeance upon humankind, acting as an independent force of evil on par with the lion-faced Authades. Following this main mythological story, the *Pistis Sophia*, along with all of Valentinian myth, depict emissaries being sent from on high to deal with the disruption centred about a key goddess figure. Sekmet was worshipped on the desert's edge as a mistress of war and strife, and was apparently associated with Nubia in later times as lions were more numerous there. Her main sanctuary was at Memphis; however, the temple of Mut south of Karnak in its prime under the auspices of Amenhotep III had some six hundred 2-metre high statues of Sekmet set up within its precincts. As with Nun, the Heh-gods, Horus, Seth and Isis, Sekhmet took on a darker role in Graeco-Roman times as she was incorporated into the Gnostic myth. In conflating the Isis and Tefnut stories, we are presented with the key function of the Valentinian theogonic

myth reduced to its essentials: the daughter of the Creator god rejects her consort and wishes to know the Parent; as a result of this she ends up in a terrifying void - literally an antithetical "emptiness" to pleromic "fullness". While initially manifesting an acute spirit of *non serviam*, she is redeemed, and order is restored to the divine congregation. This is accomplished through the dispatch of certain divine functionaries who succeed in bringing the goddess back. Sophia, in Gnostic thought, is a conflation of Isis, Hathor, and Sekhmet.

The appeal by Thoth to Tefnut is highly reminiscent of the Gnostic "call": the soul, far afield from its spiritual source, is reminded by Thoth of her heritage and urged to return.

I also remain here until the retribution upon myself is fulfilled. You love your land, as do I myself following my yearnings. May you call: come with me to Egypt!¹⁴

The Gnostic *Pistis Sophia* embodies the banished goddess archetype par excellence. Sophia in Chaos performs an elaborate series of "repentances", the end result of which is the call of Sophia for help and the dispatch of two divine emissaries to save her:

'O Light, you who has assisted me, may your light descend upon me. For you are my shelter and I come to you Light, believing in you, the Light...'
And I commanded Gabriel and Michael that they should bear the Pistis Sophia upon their hands that her feet do not touch the lower Darkness. And I again commanded them that they guide her in the places of Chaos from whence they would bring her out. (II, 139.1-4 & 12-16)¹⁵

The Thought of Norea is a short Nag Hammadi Gnostic text which also expresses the motif of the goddess who finds herself in the "lower regions" and calls out for help. Four helpers intercede in this scenario, "that she be reconciled to all the imperishable ones" (NHC IX ,2 28.10). Besides suggesting the motif of Tefnut in Nubia, this text also manifests the focus of the Re and Isis myth in its description of the goddess attaining the inner thought and knowledge of the Father. The above-cited passage is embedded in the larger context of this motif:

[She] has inherited the Living Word (Logos) that she be reconciled to all of the Imperishable Ones, and [speak] with the Mind of the Father. And [she began] to speak with words of [life] and (she) remained in the presence of the exalted One [possessing] that which she had learned before the world came to be. (28.8-17)¹⁶

Marsanes (NHC X,1) also suggests the Tefnut motif of the goddess attaining *gnosis* in withdrawing from the Godhead, and is also approached by two powers:

Gnosis stood beyond him because it belongs to him, and she who exists, she who sought, possesses it in the same manner as the Triple-Powered One possesses. She withdrew from them, these two Powers, since she exists outside of the Great One. (9.3-12)¹⁷

The Tefnut motif bespeaks the dual aspects of the goddess, as does the Isis and Re story in which Isis debilitates the god and disrupts the unfolding unity and harmony of the theogony. In the Valentinian model it is Horus who

establishes the boundary following Sophia's transgressions; Sophia is redeemed and ascends to the Pleroma, not without leaving her darker double behind as a sort of shadow goddess ambiguously functioning in the Heimarmene through the demiurge. This moment appears to be taken from another Isis myth in which Horus chops off the head of Isis in a rage at her unexpected kindness towards Seth: "he cut off the head of his mother Isis and he took it under his arm and climbed up the mountain".¹⁸

There is no sense in the Egyptian Re and Isis myth, the Tefnut in Nubia myth, or in the plethora of Gnostic affiliated Sophia myths, that these female divine figures knowingly commit evil. This is the essential feature for both mythologies. Theirs is not a "Fall" as such, although it is clear that they transgress the accepted order in seeking out their own self-fulfilment.¹⁹ It is curious indeed that both myth-systems hint at a sexual link and this points us to the consideration that the goddess was seen to be fulfilling the larger theogonic necessity. If the Gnostic Parent "wished to know his depths", the earlier Egyptian Re also "came out" to see what he had made, meeting up with an experience of evil that was quite unexpected.²⁰ In both theogonies, a young female goddess empowers herself at the expense of the entire divine court: her punishments for this action range from the very mild to fairly severe, as in the case of the *Pistis Sophia* who ends up tormented and abused at great length by lower powers until her repentances are heard. The overall Egyptian-Gnostic theme is that this goddess acts as a critical catalyst in the assimilation of the lower realms. The Valentinian establishment of the aeon Horus occurs in response to the call of the goddess, and we find this exact turn of events in the earlier Egyptian myth:

Isis called out, and (sent) her voice to heaven, that the souls of the gods in the firmament might hear it, and give judicial commands for Horus, the son of Isis.²¹

In seeking out a catalysing agent closer to the genesis of actual evil, the function of the demiurge must be considered. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this figure is often simply ignorant, or even well-meaning albeit with limited resources and flawed results. However, there are other "archons" that fulfil the role of malevolent agents and the essential dramatic element, present in a host of Gnostic myths, is their attempt to ensnare and torment Sophia. This dichotomy can also be traced back to Egyptian myth in the antagonism that existed between Isis and Seth. Seth kills her husband and brother Osiris, and also attacks the offspring of the goddess who is born in hiding in an inhospitable place. The Sethian principle of wilful perversity shall be dealt with in the following chapter.

In Gnostic texts the role of Sophia, often following her repentance and redemption, is one of a dispenser of justice akin to the role of Isis/Ma'at. The figure of Christ is slotted into a pre-existing Memphite theology of the Word; the result is a close association between this goddess and a Logos-figure. Both are theogonically engaged in a descent to the lower realms in order to confront and transform evil. All of this is present in the Isis-myth as relayed to us by Plutarch:

For this reason the longing for truth, particularly for truth about the gods, is a yearning after divinity, since it involves in its training and intellectual pursuit an acquirement of sacred lore which constitutes a holier task than all ceremonial purification and temple service, a task which is supremely welcome to this goddess whom you worship as one who is exceptionally wise and devoted to wisdom. Her name certainly seems to imply that to her more than anyone else belong knowledge and understanding. For Isis is a Greek name; so is Typhon, who is hostile to the goddess and demented by ignorance and deceit; he scatters and destroys the sacred Word which the goddess collects and puts together and delivers to those undergoing initiation.²²

Do we not detect an indictment of traditional religious practice here, in favour of an elitist quest for Wisdom? The text goes on to recommend ascetic practices as a preparation for "knowledge of the First and the Lord" (352.10). These basic motifs could be demonstrated at length, from any number of Gnostic tractates; however, a sampling from *The Tripartite Tractate* will suffice:

Those of whom he first thought that they should attain Gnosis and the good things which are in it, *Sophia* of the Father caused them to ponder, so that they would experience the evil things and might train themselves in them, as a [...] for a time, [so that they might] receive the enjoyment [of good things] for eternity. (126.28-37)

She had the *Logos* of the Son and his essence and his power and his form, who is the one whom he loved and in whom he was pleased, who was entreated in a loving manner. She was light and a desire to be established she was instructed and she was an eye of vision, these aspects of the exalted she possessed and she is *Sophia* that his thought oppose those things beneath the organization; it was a Word for the utterance and the completion of things in this manner. (93.34-94.10)

The powers were good and greater than those of the similitude. For those belonging to the similitude also belong to a nature of [deceit]. From a phantasm of similarity and a thought of arrogance has [come about] that which they became; however, they originate from the thought which first knew them. (82.15-24)

The beings of the similitude, however, were exceedingly afraid, since they were not able to hear about him [the Word] in the beginning, that there is (can be) a vision of this kind. Therefore they fell into the pit of ignorance which is called "the Outer Darkness", and "Chaos" and "Hades" and "the Abyss" (89.20-28).²³

There does not yet exist in English a translation and commentary of all four versions of the *Apocryphon* ("Secret Book") of *John*,²⁴ nor has there been any viable theory put forward as to the existence of an *Urtext* from which these four versions have come down to us.²⁵ This, in large part, results from the usual paucity of sociological evidence we have about specific Gnostic sects in general. The lack of a firm date and place of composition, and anonymity of the author, only adds to the difficulty in assessing the rhetorical intent of the

work and in what sort of contexts it was actually used. At the very least it is clear that the work attained widespread appeal in various recensions. Certainly if *The Apocryphon of John* made it to the wilds of Lyon where Irenaeus reacted to it,²⁶ as well as to Alexandria and southern Egypt,²⁷ it was as likely to have been used in Syria and the cities of Asia Minor.

The depiction of aeonial generation follows the description of primal unity of the Source. In the *Apocryphon of John*, this Source creates "its own image", a first entity separate from itself which is a female "forethought", called Barbelo, referred to as "the womb of everything" (NHC II, 5:5).²⁸ Through Barbelo, various aeons are created forming a Pentad made up of male-female pairs. It is at this point that the Gnostic version of the virgin birth is detailed as Barbelo is impregnated by the Father, giving birth to Autogenes, the Gnostic cosmic Christ-figure. All four versions follow:

NHC II,1 6.2-22²⁹

This is the pentad of the aeons of the Father which is the first man, the image of the invisible spirit: it is Pronoia (forethought) who is Barbelo, together with the Mind, and Foreknowledge, and the Indestructibility, and the Eternal Life, and the Truth - this is the androgynous pentad of the aeons which is the decad of the aeons, which is the Father. And he gazed at Barbelo in the clear light which surrounds the invisible spirit (and) with his spark she conceived. And he begot a spark of light resembling blessedness, but it does not equal his greatness. This was an only child of the Mother-Father which was manifested out (from the Father); namely, the sole offspring, the only child of the Father of pure Light. And the invisible virginal spirit rejoiced over the Light which came to be, that which was first manifested in the first power of his Pronoia who is Barbelo.

NHC IV,1 9.8-28³⁰

This is the Pentad of androgynous aeons which is the Decad of aeons: this is the Father. And he saw in Barbelo a pure Light enveloped by the invisible spirit, (and) with his spark she conceived a child for him. He begot a spark of light in a blessed Light, but it does not equal his greatness. This was an only child of the Mother-Father which was manifested out (from the Father); namely, his sole offspring, the only child of the Father of pure Light. However, the invisible virgin Spirit rejoiced over the Light which came to be, that which was first manifested out of the first power of his Pronoia who [is Barbelo].

NHC III,1 9.3-23³¹

These are the five aeons of the Father which is primordial Man, the image of the invisible: these are Barbelon, together with Ennoia (Thought), the First Gnosis, and Incorruptibility, and Eternal life. These are the five androgynes, the ten aeons of the Father. And Barbelon gazed intensely into the pure light and was enveloped by it. She begot a spark of light resembling the blessed light, but not equal in greatness: this is the only-begotten, made manifest out of the Father - the divine Autogenes, first-born of all the offspring of the Father, the pure Light. The great invisible spirit rejoiced over the Light, that which he revealed in the primordial power which is his Pronoia the Barbelon.

BG, 29:8-30.14³²

This is the fifth of the aeons of the Father, (he) who is Primal Man, the image of the invisible who is the Barbelo, together with Ennoia, and the First Gnosis, and Incorruptibility, and Eternal Life. This is the fifth androgyne³³, namely, the tenth aeon. He is the Father of the Uncreated Father. The Barbelo gazed intensely at him, into his pure Light. She was enveloped by it and she begot a blessed spark of light: it was not however, equal in greatness. This is the only-begotten revealed by the Father, the divine Autogenes, the first-born child of all the spirits of pure Light. The invisible Spirit rejoiced over the Light which came to be, that which was first manifested out of the primordial power which is his Pronoia, the Barbelo.

The core myth is not substantially altered here in any text, however the differences that do exist are not simply syntactical; rather, certain aspects of this process are stressed in different ways. For example, only NHC II lists *Truth* as one of the aeons, this being a key female Valentinian aeon (*Aletheia*) located in the primal ogdoad. In NHC II and IV it is the Father who looks at Barbelo, whereas in NHC III and BG it is Barbelo who gazes at the Father. In this amorous situation, the question of who seduces whom is rather acute, suggesting the incestuousness that exists between Sophia and the Father in the Valentinian system. There is, however, a more fundamental issue as the key feature of all Gnostic "goddess" texts, springing from their Egyptian derivation, is the willful self-empowerment of the female goddess or aeon. As Isis or Tefnut disrupt the godhead through their independent actions, so Gnostic emanationist systems follow this lead in emphasising the independent nature of Sophia, Barbelo, and other female aeons. It is clear then that NHC III and BG 8502,2 are part of this picture, whereas NHC II and IV above are more monistic in their desire to portray the omnipotent will of the Father.³⁴ Further down in the theogonic process Sophia is created as follows:

NHC II,1 9:25-10:1³⁵

The Sophia of the Epinoia, being an aeon, contemplated within a thought of herself with the conception of the invisible spirit and foreknowledge (*prognosis*). She desired to bring forth a likeness from herself, without the consent of the spirit - he had not approved - and without her consort, and without his intention. And though the person of her maleness had not approved and she had not found her chance, and she had deliberated without the consent of the Spirit, (yet with) the Gnosis of her initiative she brought forth because of the invincible power which is in her.

NHC III,1 14:9-15:3³⁷

Our friend and sister Sophia, who is an aeon, contemplated a thought of herself through the conception of the Spirit and the first knowledge. She desired to bring forth her likeness from herself [...] ³⁸ although the Spirit did not approve, nor give his assent, nor did her consort approve, the male virginal Spirit. She did not then find her consort (nor) assent without the approval of the Spirit and the Gnosis of her own harmony which she brought forth because of the amorous inclination which is in her.

The reference to Sophia as *sister* occurs in III and BG, while in II it is to *Sophia of the Epinoia*. Sophia seeks a union with the *invisible spirit* and *foreknowledge* in II and IV, *spirit* and *first knowledge* in III and BG. Her erstwhile consort is referred to in II as "the person of her maleness", "male virginal spirit" in III and BG.⁴⁰ Most importantly, Sophia begets because of an *invincible power* in her in II, and *amorous inclination* and *passion* in III and BG; although IV is missing here (large sections of this tractate have been lost) it seems likely that its version was *invincible power* as well. The sexuality of III and BG are in accord with the parallel in the previous section in III and BG in which Barbelo is seen as the seducer. The following section appears to derive from the Egyptian myth of the eye of Re and Hathor:

NHC IV,1 15:1-5³⁶

'...of herself with the contemplation of the invisible Spirit and the foreknowledge (*prognosis*). She desired to bring forth a likeness from herself without the consent of the Spirit - he had not approved....

BG 36:16-37:11³⁹

Now our friend and sister Sophia, who is an aeon, thought a thought of herself, and through the thought of the Spirit together with the first knowledge, she desired to reveal the likeness out of herself, although the spirit had not consented or granted it, nor yet had her consort approved, the male virgin spirit. She did not find one in harmony with her as she was about to concede it without the consent of the Spirit and with the Gnosis of her harmony, emitting forth because of the passion which is in her.

NHC II,1 20.14-28⁴¹

And he sent, by means of his beneficent Spirit and his immense compassion, a helper to Adam, luminous Epinoia from within him, she who is called "Life." And she assists the whole creation, suffering with him and restoring him to his pleroma (fullness), and by instructing him about the descent of his seed and by teaching him of the upward path, the way which he came down. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam so that the archons would not know (her), but that the Epinoia might be a correction of the defect of the Mother.

NHC III,1 25.6-23⁴³

He sent his beneficent Spirit out and his immense compassion as a helper for the first who had come down, who was called "Adam of the luminous Epinoia", she whom he called "Zoe" (Life). But it is she who works at the whole creation, suffering with him, establishing him in his pleroma (fullness), and explaining to him the descent of the deficiency, and she instructed him about the reascent. Now the luminous Epinoia was hidden in him so that the archons would not know (her), but that our syzygaic sister [...] Sophia is about to rectify her deficiency by means of the luminous Epinoia.

NHC IV,1 31.23-26⁴²

...of the upward path, the way which he came down. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in Adam so that...

BG 53:4-54:4⁴⁴

He sent out the beneficent Spirit and his immense compassion as a helper for the first who had come down, who was called "Adam of the luminous Epinoia", she whom he called "Zoe" (Life). But it is she who works at the whole creation, suffering with him, establishing it as his completed temple for he himself, and explaining to him the descent of his deficiency and instructing him about the reascent. And the luminous Epinoia was hidden in him so that the archons would not know (her). But our sister Sophia who resembles ourselves, is about to rectify her deficiency by means of the luminous Epinoia.

We are presented in this section of the cosmogonic tale with the second part of the Egyptian core myth, the descent of Tefnut to Nubia and the despatch of divine emissaries to redeem her to Egypt; as well, there is the motif of the eye of Re and Hathor sent to quell the revolt of humankind against the heavens. Also suggestive is the depiction in *The Litany of Re* of a long invocation which asks that the king be made like Re himself in order to deliver him from the tormenting demons of the netherworld.⁴⁵ Elsewhere, it is proclaimed of the king that "thou art the bodies of Isis".⁴⁶

Of all the Egyptian goddesses Ma'at ranks with Nun as a complex ubiquitous archetype, a figure whose presence resonates throughout the entire theogony. In the created world of order, a manifestation of her own puissance, Ma'at is depicted on innumerable reliefs as the recipient of kingly offerings and prayer. When the king dies and sets out upon his underworld journey, it is to Nun that he prays. Nun is an ordering principle - one which contains disorder

within itself - therefore otherworldly, whereas Re, solar architect supreme, is at the very centre of life in this world, his role indubitably bound up with the created world born anew each morning. However, Ma'at represents not just a demiurgic dynamic bound up in the maintenance of the world, of society, and royalty,⁴⁷ but a benign demiurgic principle manifest at the very onset of the theogonic process, as in Coffin text 80, already cited, in which Atum identifies his daughter Tefnut as Ma'at. Likewise, when Isis is identified with Ma'at, it is due to her fusion with Hathor.⁴⁸ This dynamic of blending functions, personalities, and theogonic roles in Egyptian thought finds its later distinct manifestation in Gnostic myth.

The so-called Valentinian myth in my view, is not original in the sense of its forming a discrete and novel trajectory amongst the welter of Gnostic ideas surfacing in the first centuries of this era. Certainly patristic evidence has highlighted a number of features that can create this impression. However, the key theogonic figure in the Valentinian myth is Sophia, not Christ, nor any earthly player. It is in the self-contained volition of this female figure that we can see the myth as a reflection and refraction of a host of Egyptian goddess motifs, and we note that the *Pistis Sophia*, or *The Trimorphic Protennoia*, to cite two important examples that are not "Valentinian" are equally theogonically centred upon the goddess who falls to earth. The key feature in the Gnostic extension of the Egyptian myth, and one that is faithfully maintained and elaborated upon into a veritable fugue of variations, is the self-willed aspect of the goddess: Sophia wished to "know" the Father, as did Isis, and she alone of all the aeons procreated from herself alone. And so a critical aspect of the Valentinian myth centres upon the antinomian sexuality of the female aeon in her refusal to accept her ordained partner, instead choosing to procreate by herself alone. This decisive self-empowerment is also a key characteristic of Isis as Plutarch records:

For they often give Isis the name Athena, which has some such meaning as this: *I came from myself*, which indicates self-impelled movement.⁴⁹

This characteristic is also to be found in connection with Isis in a Late Egyptian text first noted by W. Spiegelberg wherein Isis proclaims her having given birth to a son without male involvement: "I have played the part of a man though I am a woman".⁵⁰ In this Isis is again demonstrating her special affinity with the creator-god, in this case the androgynous Atum.⁵¹ Yet even her more commonly portrayed union with Osiris suggests the Gnostic theogonic apotheosis, for this follows his death, and the birth of their son Harpocrates is premature resulting in a deformity in his lower limbs, a turn of events in every sense symbolically "Sethian".⁵²

Plutarch's view of matter, from the Egyptian mythology at his disposal, is in complete accord with the Valentinian view:

The images which the perceptible and corporeal nature fashions from it, and the ideas, forms and likenesses which this nature assumes, are like figures stamped on wax in that they do not endure for ever. They are seized by the element of disorder and confusion which is driven here from the region above and fights against Horus, whom Isis brings forth as an

image of what is spiritually intelligible, since he is the perceptible world... made spurious by matter.

...matter, being shown by its nature to be incapable of itself brought forth the first creation. For this reason they declare that god to have been born maimed in the darkness....⁵³

The Valentinian myth, as we have seen in Chapter 11, embodies one of the clearest and strongest Sophia myths in its variants. The intriguing issue of imperfection in both Isis and Sophia is at the heart of their theogonic functions, and is a key to their broad appeal. This issue, initially investigated by Albert Torhoudt in *Een Onbekend Gnostisch Systeem in Plutarchus' De Iside et Osiride*⁵⁴, is shown by Torhoudt to exhibit a close connection between the Valentinian system recorded by Hippolytus, and chapters 54ff in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*.⁵⁵ It is interesting to consider the likelihood that it was Plutarch's own dualistic propensities which lead him to note this connection.

The *Gospel of Truth* takes the negative attributes of Isis further, depicting the goddess as the demonised *Plane*, the hypostasised Error in the theogonic process. Following Torhoudt, Jan Helderma notes the enabling myth of Osiris as creative Logos, Isis as the receptive material element, and their offspring Horus as the created world.⁵⁶ This myth is seen to be derived in the Late Period from "an Alexandrian milieu lying behind this gnosticising source", from which Plutarch also drew.⁵⁷ Gnostic reversal which redeems Seth as we shall see in the next chapter, here turns Isis into the personification of ignorance and evil:

Ignorance of the Parent brought about Terror and Fear. The Terror became dense in the manner of mist so that no one could see. Because of this Error found strength (and) she made her own matter vainly, without knowing Truth. (NHC I.3 17.9-17)⁵⁸

"Oblivion" comes into being from Error (17.36), and we recall the establishment of Horus in the Valentinian scheme, a boundary to separate the disruptive abortion of Sophia from the pleroma. Horus is born of Isis in this sense, and although Plane is an unredeemable evil in this tractate there is, as always, a theogonic necessity in this turn of events:

Oblivion, which did not come into existence close to the Parent, came into existence because of him. (18.1-3)⁵⁹

Apart from this nadir in the fortunes of Isis, this goddess overall embodies human attributes in the sense that she shares in the travails of the lower realm that we inhabit. She is a purveyor of *gnosis* in the Isaic tradition,⁶⁰ seen to be a more efficacious alternative to many forms of traditional religious observance as the above citation from Plutarch demonstrates, and is able to overcome pernicious Fate. This famous declaration "I overcome Fate!" finds its theogonic extension in various Gnostic myths where Sophia is seen to descend to the level of the Heimarmene and eventually overcome it through various dynamics. It is the melancholic search for the scattered Osiris,⁶¹ the ignorance, wandering, and lamentation in a lower world that form the archetypal appeal of this Egyptian/Gnostic female salvific figure. The rejection of astrological determinism underlies the perceived numinosity of both goddesses. In the

conflated mythological person of Sophia, the Egyptian goddesses Hathor, Tefnut, and Isis continue to lead the downward theogonic extension into darkness, one that paradoxically leads to eventual pleromic completion.

¹Book I.2.2. *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, 317.

²All citations are from Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*.

³Piankoff, *Litany of Re*, 56. See also another version found in A.H. Gardiner, ed. *Hieratic papyri in the British Museum*, vol. 1, Text. Third Series (London: British Museum, 1935). "Isis was a woman wise in speech, her heart more cunning than that of millions of men; her utterance was more excellent than that of millions of gods; she was more perceptive than millions of glorified spirits. She was not ignorant of anything in heaven or earth, like Re who holds the earth in his possession," 116.

⁴Piankoff, *Litany of Re*, 57.

⁵Ibid., 57.

⁶Ibid., 59.

⁷Stanley M. Burstein, ed. and trans., *The Hellenistic Age from the battle of Ipsos to the death of Kleopatra VII* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸Coptic transcriptions from *NHS*, vol. XI, 236, 240, 244, 250.

⁹See Pheme Perkins, "Sophia as Goddess in the Nag Hammadi Codices," 158-176. See also Arthur, *The Wisdom Goddess*, 161-62.

¹⁰Burstein, *The Hellenistic Age*, 147, n. 8.

¹¹Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XI, 240.

¹²The Greek text varies from the Egyptian demotic original in minor details. See Stephanie West, "The Greek Version of the Legend of Tefnut," *JEA* 55 (1969): 161; Wilhem Spiegelberg *Der ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenauge* (Strassburg: Strassburger Druckerei und verlagsanstalt, 1917); also Hans Junker, "Der Auszug der Hathor-Tefnut aus Nubien" (*Abh. d. Kgl. Preuss. Ak.*, 1911).

¹³Kurt Sethe, "Zur altägyptischen Sage vom Sonnenauge das in fer Ferne war," in *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Aegyptens*, vol. 3 (1912; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964).

¹⁴Spiegelberg, *Der ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenauge*, XII, 1-20.

¹⁵Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. IX, 278.

¹⁶Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV, 96.

¹⁷Coptic transcription from *NHS*, vol. XV, 274.

¹⁸*The Contendings* 9,8 ff., trans. Griffiths from *De Iside et Osiride*, 350.

¹⁹Pace a whole host of scholars, too numerous to list here, who define this as a "fall".

²⁰Piankoff, *Litany of Re*, 57.

²¹Junker. *Der Grosse Pylon*, 17, 11-13; also, as Griffiths notes in *De Iside et Osiride*, "Isis uttered a great shriek and the world was disturbed," 330.

²²351.17-352.5, trans. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 119-21

²³Coptic transcriptions (in sequence given) from *NHS*, vol. XXII, 320, 262, 242, 254.

²⁴There are in fact five versions if Irenaeus's rather abbreviated account (*Adv. Haer.* I 29,1-4) is included. The Coptic tractates contained in Nag Hammadi codices II and IV are rather similar and have been taken together (by B. Layton among others) to provide a long version with a minimal number of lacunae; the tractate contained in Nag Hammadi codice III and the Berolinensis manuscript 8502, now in Berlin (hereafter 'BG'), differ in more specific details and are the "short" versions referred to in this study.

²⁵See Martin Krause and Pahor Labib, *Die Drei Versionen des Apokryphon des Johannes* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1962), in which the three Nag Hammadi texts now in the Cairo museum are translated; Walter C. Till and Hans-Martin Schenke, eds. and trans. *Die Gnostischen Schriften des Koptischen Papyrus Berolinensis 8502* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1972); also Michel Tardieu, *Écrits Gnostiques: Codex de Berlin* (Paris: Les Éditions du cerf, 1984).

²⁶Referring to “their lies”- and depicting them as a sect descended from the Simonians, Irenaeus describes them as “a multitude of Barbelognostics, appearing like mushrooms out of the ground (*Adv. Haer.* I 29, 1).

²⁷The NHC II “long” version is written in Sahidic Coptic but with a Sahidic with dialectical elements which place it at the northern edge of the Sahidic area. Søren Giversen, in the introduction to his *Apocryphon Johannis* (Copenhagen: Prostant Apud Munksgaard, 1963), concludes that, “we must admit that the linguistic peculiarities only testify in favour of the text having actually been written in the area around that place at Nag Hammadi which is stated to be the finding place, though the area slightly north thereof would fit,” (44).

²⁸This raises the very important issue (for more orthodox Christian scholars in any case), of whether the Gnostic concept of the Primal Source (“the Unity”, “God”, “Father of the All”, “the Invisible” in our text) was dyadic or strictly monist. The inclusion of the feminine principle at the very beginning of the theogony accords well with many other gnostic texts in creating a certain ambiguity. “The tradition that Valentinus taught an ultimate dyad must be viewed in the light of the extreme ambiguity of the term ‘dyad’. In philosophical usage it could mean (a) plurality as such, the ‘indefinite dyad’, (b) duality, (c) the number two (two may be added to two, but not twoness to twoness), (d) the second cosmic principle, and (e) the first pair of principles. In theology it could indicate a pair of antagonistic first principles; or again, a God with two complimentary aspects.” G.C. Stead, “The Valentinian Myth of Sophia,” *JTS*, N.S. XX, Pt.1 (April 1969): 88.

²⁹Coptic transcription from DDV 123-25.

³⁰Coptic transcription from DDV 207-8.

³¹Coptic transcription from DDV 60-61.

³²Coptic transcription from PB 98, 100.

³³Clearly what is being referred to here is the final syzygy - each pair made up of a male and female aeon - the female aeon here being the tenth.

³⁴The lacunae of the shorter recensions aside, we note that it is only the longer versions that made it into English translation in the so-called “third, and completely revised” *Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988).

³⁵Coptic transcription from DDV 134-35.

³⁶Coptic transcription from DDV 212.

³⁷Coptic transcription from DDV 68-69.

³⁸There is at this point an error made by the scribe who inserts 15: 4-9 mistakenly. This segment is omitted in the translation here.

³⁹Coptic transcription from PB 112, 114.

⁴⁰As in the *Tripartite Tractate* for example, this male aeon (*Theletos* in the Valentinian system) is not named. There is also a similar expression used by Mary in the *Pistis Sophia* (Book 1, 33:14): “And Mary also came forward and said, ‘My Lord, my (inner) man of light has ears, and (therefore) I hear with my power of light.’” This very strikingly portrays the inner syzygy necessary for true spiritual vision from a female perspective.

⁴¹Coptic transcription from DDV 163-64.

⁴²Coptic transcription from DDV 230-31.

⁴³Coptic transcription from DDV 81-82.

⁴⁴Coptic transcription from PB 146, 148.

⁴⁵Piankoff, *The Litany of Re*, 32-33.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁷Aristide Théodoridès, “De l’assimilation à la divinité dans la Sagesse de l’ancienne Égypte,” in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique*, 26-37.

⁴⁸Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 264.

⁴⁹*Peri Isidos*, 376.11, trans. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 217.

⁵⁰Wilhelm Spiegelberg, “Varia: Eine neuelegende über die Geburt des Horus,” *ZÄS* 53 (1917): 94-97.

⁵¹CT Spell II, 136, “I am Atum who created the great ones, I am he who fashioned Shu, I am these Two, male and female.” Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 116.

⁵²Torhoudt sees the maimed Harpocrates as emblematic of the material element of the world; indeed, the word used by the Valentinians for the material "abortion", *ektrwma*, in Torhoudt's view recalls the premature nature of Harpocrates' birth. *Een Onbekend Gnostisch Systeem*, 36f, and 119.

⁵³373.13, trans. Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 205

⁵⁴Lovanii: *Studia Hellenistica*, 1942.

⁵⁵Seen to be "convincing" by Griffiths for one; *De Iside et Osiride*, 49.

⁵⁶Jan Helderma, "Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth?", 33.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁸Coptic transcription from *EV*, 4.

⁵⁹Coptic transcription from *EV*, 6.

⁶⁰"At the same time, Isis is to him [Plutarch] a goddess of wisdom, and her mysteries lead to *gnosis* of the highest being, that is, Osiris," Griffiths, *De Iside et Osiride*, 51.

⁶¹Plutarch, *Peri Isidos*, 59.1.