

ISIS: THE SAVIOR GODDESS

Caitlin Matthews

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Reclaiming the Divine Feminine from exile in the West, Caitlin Matthews explores her many ancient forms worldwide as a post-feminist archetype for the future, showing us the way to a practical spirituality grounded in daily life, sacred marriage, and the natural world. In this excerpt, the author demonstrates the central role of Isis in the Sophia Tradition—the Divine Wisdom Tradition—elements of which are shared by the Rosicrucian and Martinist paths. Caitlin Matthews, a well known teacher of Western spirituality and Celtic folklore, is author of over thirty books.

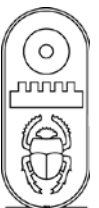


Isis holding a sistrum and an oinochoe, marble, Roman artwork from the Adrian period, 117-138 CE, Villa Adriana near Tivoli, Italy. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, 2006, Wikimedia Commons.

The connections between Isis and Sophia are very significant and show us Sophia's strongest links to the ancient goddess tradition. Isis is a Savior Goddess par excellence, one who combines the elements of the Black Goddess and the Hellenic philosophies that went to create the definitive Sophia.

Isis had been a potent goddess as early as the third millennium BC. She was the sister-wife of Osiris, with whom she mated in the womb of their mother, Nuit, the sky goddess. Theirs was an eternal balanced partnership and may stand as a model for the ideal Sophianic relationship to the Divine Masculine. Isis was primarily the Lady of the House of Life, the possessor of the ankh, which was the symbol both of divine authority and also the key to the house of life itself. Her name in Egyptian was really Auset (Isis is a Hellenized version), which means "throne." The hieroglyph that represents Isis is the throne, and this image shows her as literally the power of the earth, of which the royal seat is but a representation. Pharaohs were established on the throne of Isis. The dead went into the Otherworld, their sarcophagi guarded by Isis with her wings outstretched. Was it a memory of this image that caused the author of the Pentateuch to write, "The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms?"¹

The cult of Isis was wide ranging and deeply rooted in the classical world. She epitomized the Great Mother, as well as



taking on the attributes of lesser goddess forms and subsuming them into her cult. In her aretalogy or self-praise, Isis utters as comprehensive a list of her abilities as any that appear in the mouth of wisdom in the Bible:

*I gave and ordained laws for men,
which no one is able to change...
I am she that is called goddess by
women...
I divided the earth from the heaven.
I showed the paths of the stars.
I ordered the course of the sun and the
moon.
I devised business in the sea.
I made strong the right.
I brought together women and men.
I appointed to women to bring their
infants to birth in the tenth month.
I ordained that parents should be loved
by children.
I laid punishment upon those disposed
without natural affection toward
their parents.
I made with my brother Osiris an end to
the eating of men.
I revealed mysteries unto men.
I taught men to honor images of the
gods...
I made the right to be stronger than gold
and silver.
I ordained that the true should be
thought good...
I am the Queen of rivers and winds and
sea.
No one is held in honor without my
knowing it.
I am the Queen of war.
I am the Queen of the thunderbolt.
I stir up the sea and I calm it.
I am in the rays of the sun...
I set free those in bonds...
I overcome Fate.²*

This comprehensive list enumerates the pagan virtues as understood in the ancient world. Isis shows herself in the likeness of Maat, or Demeter



Ptolemaic Coin, Ptolemaic period. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

Thesmophorus as an upholder of justice, a lawgiver, and creator as well as one who reforms the nature of spirituality and even fate—*heimarmene*, most feared by the ancients for its capricious convolutions. Significantly another aretalogy says of her, “Thou didst make the power of women equal to that of men.”³

The turning point in Isis’ career happened when Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. The Ptolemaic dynasty, founded by Ptolemy I, a Macedonian, brought a Greek influence to bear upon Egypt. The Ptolemaic dynasty immediately assimilated itself to Egyptian modes of kingship, but the assimilation of Egyptian and Greek religious traditions was more difficult. The Greeks were keen to understand the universal language of symbolic correspondence between their own deities and those of the Egyptians. Ptolemy I appointed two priests to modify the disparate polytheisms into a coherent order: Manetho, an Egyptian, and Timotheus, a Greek.

The long history of Egyptian tradition had, over the centuries, accommodated itself to some strange inconsistencies, which these two ironed out, incorporating Greek concepts and deistic analogies that made Egyptian worship more ecumenical.⁴

Plutarch takes up the Egyptian Isis and Hellenizes her in his study *Isis and Osiris*. The Greek-Egyptian experience is truly a catalyst

in this study of wisdom, for the strong character of Isis the Goddess became the Sophianic touchstone of both Hermeticism and Gnosticism, as well as a major influence within Neopythagorean philosophy.

Search for Osiris

The myth of Isis is typified chiefly by her long search for the body of her husband/brother, Osiris, who is riven in pieces by Set, his opponent. Isis' long task is the reassembling of Osiris' body and the magical conception of her child, Horus, through whom the teachings of the gods will be vindicated. Plutarch speaks of this esoteric wisdom: "The Egyptians place sphinxes before their shrines to indicate that their religious teaching has in it an enigmatical sort of wisdom."

In Saïs, the statue of Athene, whom they believed to be Isis, bore the description: "I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and my veil no mortal has yet uncovered." The statue of Neith at Sais betokens the nature of Isis, whose mantle she is: the mysteries of the Goddess are eternal and ever renewing. It is not given to any mortal to view these mysteries in their totality, save only in part and by the light of their own understanding.

The Goddess Neith, once venerated as the Creating Mother, who wove the loom of the sky with her shuttle, was associated with another creating god, Khnum, who made the gods on his potter's wheel.⁵ This



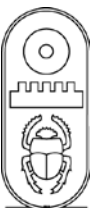
Isis-Aphrodite, first century, Alexandria. Isis assimilated the characteristics of many Mediterranean Goddesses. Photo by Bibi Saint-Pol/ Wikimedia Commons.

association of a veiled goddess with an artificer god prefigures the gnostic Sophia and her son, the Demiurge.

In the *Hermetica*, Horus asks his mother, "How did earth attain to the happy lot of receiving the efflux of God?" And Isis answers, "Mighty Horus, do not ask me to describe to you the origin of the stock whence you are sprung; for it is not permitted to inquire into the birth of gods. This only I may tell you, that God who rules alone, the fabricator of the universe, bestowed on the earth for a little time your great father, Osiris, and the great goddess Isis, that they might give the world the help it so much needed."⁶ Here, we see the Hermetic concept of godhead of artificer; exactly the same term is used to describe Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8: "As for the robes, those of Isis are variegated in their colors; for her power is concerned with matter which becomes



Illustration of Plutarch from the *Nuremberg Chronicles*, 1493.



everything and receives everything, light and darkness, day and night, fire and water, life and death, beginning and end.”⁷

Isis was the great saving Goddess under whose many-colored cloak were subsumed the attributes and abilities of myriads of lesser deities. Plutarch comments, “There are those who declare that Isis is none other than the Moon; for this reason it is said that the statues of Isis that bear horns are imitations of the crescent moon, and in her dark garments are shown the concealments and the obscurity in which she in her yearning pursues the Sun (Osiris).”⁸

The black Isis is none other than the Black Goddess, Isis in her role as esoteric instructor as well as in her sorrowful mantle of mourning. Generally, the Black-Goddess aspect of Isis is polarized upon Nephthys, her sister, who was originally Mistress of Heaven and the Underworld, but these roles became later split, with Isis as Queen of Heaven.⁹

Isis is the skillful avoider of the net in which Set attempts to trap her. The net was seen as the symbol of the Adversary of Wisdom, for it was believed to exist in the Underworld where the dead had to learn its every part: the poles, ropes, weights, and hooks, whose names they had to learn in order to become “true fishers.” In other words, the initiate was supposed to learn about the net of life in order not to be caught in its toils, but to learn how to fish for real nourishment.

Isis and Christianity

With the onset of Christianity as the Roman state religion in the fourth century, the cult of Isis declined only in name, for the potency of her ritual worship flowed into the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom the same qualities, divine works of mercy, and love are attributed. Like the fertile waters of the Nile that brought life to Egyptian people then as now, the Goddess herself returns to enliven her people. Now that we are

experiencing a reappraisal and reverence for the Goddess, it is only right that we should approach her once again, in whatever form she appears to us.

The statues of Isis suckling Horus formed the early iconic model for all subsequent Madonna-and-child images of Christian tradition. The Roman emperors, prior to Christianizing Constantine, venerated Isis, as is shown in a mural at Philae where Augustus is depicted offering



The Black Madonna de la Daurade, Basilica of the Daurade, Toulouse, France. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives. The present statue of the Black Madonna is a second exact copy of the original, which has been attested in this location since at least the tenth century. The current building was completed in the nineteenth century, however, there has been a church dedicated to the Virgin on the spot since 410 CE, when the Emperor Honorius allowed the then existing Temple to Apollo to be converted into a Christian church.

Isis myrrh, while Tiberius offers milk and incense, as well as animals sacred to Isis.

Without any reservation one can transpose this nativity to that stable frequented by three kings!¹⁰

As Isis is the sister-spouse of Osiris, so the Gospel of Philip observes, “Mary is the name of his (Jesus’) sister and his mother and it is the name of his partner.”¹¹ Mary inherits



Icon of the Akathist of the Theotokos, fresco detail, 1644, Church of the Deposition of the Robe of the Mother of God, Moscow Kremlin, Russia. Photo by Shakko, Wikimedia Commons.

the role of *Nympha Dei* (bride of God) from Isis, along with numerous other titles, the most important correlation being “Throne of the King,” as Mary is called in the Eastern Orthodox Akathist Hymn.¹²

Isis is opposed to Set and all his works in much the same way that Mary is opposed to the serpent of Satan. “The adversary who spies on us lies in wait for us like a fisherman.”¹³ Statues of Isis show her crowned with the moon and with a crocodile under her feet—the infamous Set thrown down. This image is translated in its entirety in the Book of Revelation where Mary is similarly depicted, only as the moon crowned with the sun and with the moon under her feet, trampling on the serpent representing Lucifer. Mary’s veil of sunlight is the true *doxa* or glory of Sophia.

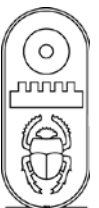
The *Beatus Apocalypse* of Ferdinand I of Spain illustrates the Woman Clothed with the Sun, the Christianized Isis. In her form as the Lower Sophia, totally black and with her eagle’s wings ready to lift her to safety; one of the heads of the seven-headed dragon about to devour her bears in its jaws a net to entrap her.

The identification between Set and Typhon was readily made in Hellenic Egypt.¹⁴ It is surprising that Nephthys, the sister of Isis and her mirror image, should not have partaken of Set’s nature. She remains on Isis’ side as Black Goddess to her Sophia throughout her battle with Set, just as Ge Melanthe does with Hera in her battle against Zeus.

The House of the Net was the title of the God Thoth’s temple. The term *net* was used in a symbolic sense to denote that which shuts humankind “into the limitations of the conventional life of the world” and which keeps us from memory of our true selves.¹⁵



The Woman Clothed with the Sun, Beatus of Liébana, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, Codex of Ferdinand I, eleventh century, Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid. The Woman Clothed with the Sun appears in Revelation 12. Upper left, we see her in her glory with the moon under her feet, assailed by a seven-headed dragon. Lower left, she appears again as the Black Goddess with wings (in some copies she is completely black), while one of the heads spews forth a flood with which to drown her. However, “the earth helped the woman” and swallowed the waters so that she was able to fly to safety. The retreat of Sophia to a safe place is a continual theme in her mythos. This episode is paralleled in the stories of both Isis and Leto. These two images of Sophia show her in her glorious and veiled guises.



Here the veil of Sophia keeps the unprepared from experiencing initiations that will overturn their world. This veil is usually seen as an entrapping net, as when Tiamat was trapped in a net by Marduk.¹⁶ So Zeus sought his mother Rhea in marriage until she assumed serpent form; but he bound her in “the Noose of Hercules” and united with her. In contradistinction to the entrapping net is the protective veil of Isis, the veil of Neith.

In the Panathenaea the famous Peplum, Veil, Web, or Robe of Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom, was borne aloft like the sail of a galley; but this was the symbol only of the Mysteries. Mystically it signified the Veil of the Universe, studded with stars, the many-colored Veil of Nature, the famous Veil or Robe of Isis, that no “mortal” or “dead man” has raised, for that veil was the spiritual nature of man himself, and to raise it he had to transcend the limits of individuality, break the bonds of death, and so become consciously immortal.¹⁷

That same veil was inherited by Isis from her mother, Nuit the Sky Goddess, whose body arches over the heavens with a veil of stars. The veil of sunlight that Mary wears in Revelation is truly the doxa of Sophia, the glory that was once that of Isis.

The Peplos was one of the names of heaven, according to the hymns of Orpheus.¹⁸ It was said to have been woven by Persephone, when her mother left her in a cave to learn the arts of embroidery and weaving. Persephone was seen as presiding over creation, and her web is the weave of Heaven itself. This continual reference to the garment or veil of wisdom reminds us that Sophia is found everywhere, under the forms of nature or else hidden in the symbols and images that speak to the heart. This is the veil that cannot be rent asunder by rape, only by personal understanding.

Isis was a way shower through the mysteries of spirituality. The famous



Title page from John Price's Latin edition of Apuleius's novel *Metamorphoses, or the Golden Ass* (Gouda, Netherlands, 1650).

Pharos of Alexandria, the lighthouse that was one of the seven wonders of the world, was dedicated to Isis Pelagia, Queen of the Sea. It is indeed like a pharos that she appears across the sea to Lucius Apuleius.

Lucius Apuleius (AD 120-180) was an initiate of the mysteries of Isis about which he wrote in his allegorical story, *The Golden Ass*, in which Lucius tells how he was accidentally transformed into an ass by his girlfriend, the servant of a Thessalian witch. The antidote to this unfortunate condition is the eating of roses.

However, the asinine Lucius is taken away before he is able to be transformed and spends a year in the shape of an ass. After thrilling and frightening adventures, he is condemned to become the object of an obscene spectacle: to mate publicly in the arena with a condemned female criminal. He makes his escape and finds himself by the sea. A full moon rises



Michael Bull, F.R.C., *Isis*.

over the waves and he purifies himself seven times in the sea and addresses Isis, imploring her to help him.

She appears crowned with the headdress of the moon and two vipers, with cornstalks woven in her hair. Her multicolored robe is woven with flowers and fruit, and her black mantle is embroidered with stars and the moon. She carries a sistrum in her hand and addresses Lucius: “I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are.”¹⁹

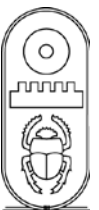
The next day turns out to be the *Navigium Isidis*, the annual dedication and launching of a ship to Isis. During the ceremonial procession, Lucius is instructed to go forward and eat of the rose garland borne by the high priest. Isis says, “Only remember, and keep these words of mine locked tight in your heart, that from now onwards until the very last day of your life you are dedicated to my service. It is only right that you should

devote your whole life to the Goddess who makes you a man again.”²⁰

Lucius is duly transformed and receives the three rites of initiation, which bring him fully into the worship of Isis and Osiris. He upholds the reticence of the initiate in his reported initiations and speaks in veiled language of his revelation of Isis: “I approached the very gates of earth and set one foot on Persephone’s threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon: I entered the presence of the gods of the underworld and the gods of the upperworld, stood near and worshipped them.”²¹

This allegory of Lucius’ transformation is a mystery story. Its inclusion of the labors of Psyche reinforces the nature of initiation. Lucius intends to be transformed briefly into an owl, the bird of wisdom, but instead, due to his irregular life, becomes transformed into an ass, the beast of foolishness. Like Bottom of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he undergoes mockery and degradation; he is brought into close relations with the fairest women who, in his human condition, he would have longed to embrace. He is cast in the part of Typhon the Ass to experience to the full his disordered lusts. Isis teaches him wisdom and continence and finally shows herself his Savior Goddess.

What then is the task of Isis? Plutarch tells us, “(Typhon or Set) tears to pieces and scatters to the winds the sacred writings, which the Goddess collects and puts together and gives into the keeping of those that are initiated into the holy rites.”²² Isis is then the reassembler of lost knowledge. To us also is entrusted the sacred task of reassembling the scattered wisdom of the Goddess into a body of knowledge. This image is a compelling one





Cover page of Volume II of Athanasius Kircher's *Mundus Subterraneus*, 1664. Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus (Mercury) are pointing the student toward Isis-Artemis as the source of wisdom. Photo by Badseed/Wikimedia Commons.

for contemporary women who have no goddess heritage to draw upon. Let them look to Isis and know her as queen of their search, who will take off her crown, wrap her hair in a scarf, and go out looking with them.

If we leave Isis here, it is not farewell. We will meet her again in other guises and other centuries, coming over the seas of time in visionary splendor as brilliant as ever Lucius saw. Sophia now stands at the point of embarkation, leaving behind her self-evident salvific status to go into strange countries. She goes as a traveler, as a pilgrim goddess, wearing a cloak that will not draw attention to herself, in the mode of all women traveling alone. During this exile, Sophia

will emerge from each culture and country until a cumulative image of Divine Wisdom arrives back on the shores of consciousness as Isis returning, with much baggage besides.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ [Deuteronomy 37:27](#).
- ² C. Frederick Grant, *Hellenistic Religions* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 132-133.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁴ R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 46-53.
- ⁵ Manfred Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 74.
- ⁶ Walter Scott, ed., *Hermetica*, 4 vols. (Boulder, CO.: Hermes House, 1982), 493-494.
- ⁷ Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 5, trans. by F. C. Babbitt (London: Heinemann, 1957), 181.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.
- ⁹ James A. Robinson, *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 236.
- ¹⁰ Witt, *Isis*, 63.
- ¹¹ Bentley Layton, trans., *The Gnostic Scriptures* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987), 335.
- ¹² *The Akathist Hymn and Little Compline* (London: Faith Press, n.d.), 18.
- ¹³ David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1979), 109.
- ¹⁴ Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 177-193.
- ¹⁵ G.R.S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*. vol. 1 (London: John Watkins, 1964), 41.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹⁸ Thomas Taylor, *Selected Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 305.
- ¹⁹ Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, translated by Robert Graves (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1950), 228.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 241.
- ²² Plutarch, *Moralia*, 9.