

## THE SAGA OF PISTIS SOPHIA

In 1945, a red earthenware jar was found buried near Nag Hammadi, a town in Upper Egypt. Within it, thirteen papyrus books dating from A.D. 350 were discovered. These writings belonged to believers in the philosophy/religion of Gnosticism.

**Gnosticism** is heavily influenced by the Hellenistic idea that the material world is evil, and the spirit is good. Gnostics believed that the ultimate supreme God did not create the world; instead, a lesser god, a "demiurge," created the world poorly and imperfectly. The result was a material world filled with decay, weakness, and death.

However, Gnostics also believed that human beings, though locked in this material body, contain a spark of a higher spiritual reality within them. This spark, if fanned into a flame, can liberate us and help us return to spiritual perfection.

This transformation happens through **self-discovery**: by discovering your divine identity, you separate from the world by "stripping off" the consciousness of the physical body, ultimately experiencing the kingdom of Light, Peace, and Life.

The female divinity in Gnosticism is **Sophia**, a being with many aspects and names. She is sometimes identified with the Holy Spirit itself or also called the Universal Mother. She was seen as the Psyche of the world and the female aspect of Logos.

### The Myth of Pistis Sophia

Upon his return from his ascent, Jesus describes to the disciples the hierarchies of the various planes that he has passed through on his way up.

After several incidents with the entities of the lower planes, Jesus finds Pistis Sophia below the thirteenth plane of consciousness. She was alone, without her consort or her brothers, sorrowful and grieving on account of the torments that an entity known as the Authades, the "Self-Centered One", had inflicted on her with the help of his emanations.

It happened that Pistis Sophia saw "The Light of the Height" on "The veil of the Treasury of the Light" and started singing praises to that Light. From then on, the "Self-Centered One" started to hate her, as did those below him. The "Self-Centered One" conceived a ruse to trick her. Pistis Sophia was led to look below and there she saw the light of another entity called "The Lion-Faced Power".



Not knowing that it was an emanation of the “Self-Centered One”, she decided to go after it, without her consort, to take its light, thinking that it would enable her to go to “The Light of the Height”.

Once she descended from her place of origin, she was dragged further and further down into chaos, with the emanations of the “Self-Centered One” and the Twelve Aeons constantly chasing after her, trying to take her light away. When she finally saw Jesus surrounded by light, she cried to “The Light of Lights” and uttered a series of *metanoias* (often translated as “repentances”).

## The Symbolism

In Theosophical terms, Pistis Sophia represents the soul, or more specifically, the part of the soul that incarnates; namely, the monad of Consciousness in the concrete mind.

Thus, her compound name indicates the fundamental principle of “The Faith in the Light”, an aspect of God, that enables her to undertake her mission, namely, the development of wisdom in both worlds.

Her consort is Jesus, the aspect of the soul that unfolds the triple-natured higher Self in line with Pistis Sophia's progress in the material world. Jesus remained behind in the higher planes when she descended into chaos. This separation expresses the split in consciousness between the higher and lower nature of human man.

Although this is really one with his divine Self, the usual level of his consciousness cannot reach the spiritual planes; thus, in this myth, Pistis Sophia and Jesus are presented as separate entities.

The villain of the story is the “Self-Centered One”, standing for the ego, an appropriate name for the vain and egotistic “I,” which always demands to be the center of attention and strives for the gratification of the senses, thus causing great affliction for the soul. The regents or archons of the Aeons are the main allies of the “Self-Centered One”, and they stand for the emotions and passions of man. Leading them is “The Lion-Faced Power”, an emanation of the “Self-Centered One”, standing for egotism, the strongest force driving man away from God and into chaos.

These evil and dark powers are not so much outer demons as they are inner aspects of man. Their role is to seize and fix the consciousness onto the strong, heavy vibrations of emotions, passions, and fantasies associated with sense gratification and mental delusions such as attachment, pride, and ambition. Thus, they are described as actively engaged in trying to pull man down, or in the language of the text, in taking away Pistis Sophia's Light. This goes on unrelentingly until Pistis Sophia's final liberation from chaos.



While “chaos”, in the system of this myth, is a region of the underworld, the term is mostly used to convey the image of a psychological state of disorder. Since Pistis Sophia is the monad of Consciousness, when it is said that she falls into chaos, it means that she becomes prey to mental disorders resulting from emotions, desires, and passions. She becomes conditioned by names and forms, by cultural values and mores, by a whole gamut of conditions that represent a virtual prison to the incarnated soul—in short, the delusion of separateness.

Thus, Pistis Sophia's descent into chaos is a symbolic description of man's entrance into the cycle of incarnation, where he will remain until his mission is accomplished.

Jesus and Pistis Sophia are presented as a pair, the two aspects of the soul, just like the two sides of a coin. Each has its role in the mystery of life. The progressive expansion of Consciousness that eventually turns Jesus into a Master of Wisdom was in fact a reflection, on a higher level, of Pistis Sophia's slow and relentless battle in this world against all agents of matter that have constantly strived to take away her Light.

No mention is made of the great number of incarnations that Jesus must have gone through until that historical one in Palestine. During all those lives, regardless of the names by which he may have been known, Pistis Sophia, his soul, was the loyal heroine doing battle in this world.

## The First Mystery: to comply with the Divine Plan

Pistis Sophia “falls” from her original region, pursuing a mirage, a reflection of the “Light of the Height” seen down below in the region of the Aeons, which represents the power of matter.

This fall, due to ignorance, was her “original sin,” but later the text says that Pistis Sophia fell at the command of the **First Mystery**, that is, following an inner urge **to comply with the divine plan**. This would require her to incarnate in order **to fulfill the final objective of having Spirit manifest fully through matter**.

As Pistis Sophia descends into chaos, she takes upon herself the necessary vehicles for manifestation in the material world. Thus, both on the astral and the physical planes the soul is “wrapped” with appropriate bodies to function in those planes. Thus, on the astral plane, Providence (in Greek, *heimarmene*, also translated as “fate”) bestows all the tendencies from past lives that provide the opportunities for the individual to learn the lessons that remain to be learned. On the physical plane, the middle region provides a physical body for the individual that is adequate for the type of life that karma has in store for him.

The story expresses the reality as seen from the Height, that is, from a spiritual vantage point.



Thus, when Pistis Sophia complains that the archons of the Aeons are oppressing her, trying to take her Light away, this might mean that the personality has experienced a heavy, aggressive, or unpleasant vibration, such as a feeling of hatred, or has told a lie.

But the "oppression of the archons" can also mean experiences of immoderate sense gratification that to a worldly individual mean "to enjoy life" and "to have fun," but to the soul, seeing reality from the vantage point of the inner light, are seen as an affliction for which she will pay dearly.

Here is enacted the classical struggle of the forces of darkness against those of the Light. Pistis Sophia, the soul, strives to go to the Height but has to fight every inch of the way against evil and darkness. These forces are entrenched within her own castle—her emotions, desires, and passions under the command of the self-serving personality.

## Sophia's Initiation Path

In her process of ascent, Pistis Sophia experiences thirteen *metanoias*, followed by eleven songs of praise to the Light. The word *metanoia* ("repentance") is central to the Christian tradition, but its original Greek meaning was much broader than "repentance," indicating a change in one's mental state. Thus, each *metanoia* indicates that the individual is undertaking an inner change—of attitude, values, and behavior.

Since Pistis Sophia's region is the Thirteenth Aeon, she must symbolically effect thirteen changes of consciousness or *metanoias*, one for each region or aspect of herself. The much-heralded Way or Path in all esoteric traditions in fact entails this very process of inner change. This is made clear in the statement "Thou canst not travel on the Path before thou hast become that Path itself" (*The Voice of the Silence*, 12).

Nowhere in the *Pistis Sophia* do we see Jesus preaching any moral code of behavior. What is made clear is that man must renounce the world and transform his mind if he hopes to receive the mysteries that will open for him the inheritance of the Light.

While Jesus's parables and other public teachings often castigate conventional wisdom as expressed by compliance with the Mosaic Law (Borg, 97–116), the *Pistis Sophia* clearly links Jesus's teachings with the prophetic tradition. This is done ingeniously by means of interpretations advanced by the disciples after each *metanoia* uttered by Pistis Sophia, which in fact are quotations from the biblical Psalms and the apocryphal *Odes of Solomon*.

The *metanoias* and invocations uttered by Pistis Sophia suggest the protracted process of transformation needed to turn a worldly individual into "a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). On closer examination of these *metanoias* and songs of praise, we notice some turning points and fundamental changes in her situation as she is slowly freed from chaos.



These turning points have a parallel with the five major initiations of the esoteric tradition.

The first turning point occurs (after the fifth plea) when her insistent pleas for assistance from the Light of the Height are finally heard.

These pleas have a parallel with the surrender of the mystic, implicit in Jesus's utterance "Thy will be done, Lord, not mine." In time a channel is opened up in the seeker's consciousness where the Light starts to be seen, or the Christ is born.

After Pistis Sophia's sixth *metanoia*, her sin of going down into chaos alone without her consort is forgiven, and Jesus leads Pistis Sophia "into a somewhat spacious region in the chaos." This more spacious "region" is actually an expansion of consciousness. Here the aspirant's interests in the coarser things of the outer world, with their heavy vibrations, begins to diminish.

This relative respite from the oppressions of the archons, that is, of emotions and passions, expressed as an elevation into a more "spacious region in the chaos," seems to indicate what Theosophy calls **the First Initiation**.

Once the archons notice that Pistis Sophia has not been taken entirely away from chaos, they return with redoubled efforts to afflict her and she continues to utter her *metanoias*, thus continuing her inner transformation. After the ninth *metanoia*, her plea for help from the Light is partially accepted, and Jesus is sent by the First Mystery to help her to secretly escape from chaos.

From then on, Pistis Sophia, man's Consciousness, perceives Jesus as a Light shining brightly, probably an indication of the opening of her spiritual vision, or of an expansion of consciousness arising from the Second Initiation. From then on, the (hu)man in the outer world has his mind progressively illumined by "The Light of the Height", enabling him to carry out his work in the world as a Light bearer, as Jesus did after his baptism in the Jordan. **It is the Second Initiation.**

But the desires and emotions elicited by material things are still felt as the emanations of the "Self-Centered One" (the egotistic personality), and the powers of the archons (desires and passions) change form as the seeker conquers the grosser vibrations. After the thirteenth *metanoia*, Jesus sends a Light-Power to assist Pistis Sophia and to take her to higher regions of chaos.

The initiation process continues with the fourteenth invocation, when another Light-power is sent by the First Mystery (the power of Divine Spirit). These two powers meet together and become a great stream of Light, forming a protecting crown over the head of Pistis Sophia.



This seems to reflect the stage of illumination reached with **the Third Initiation**, in which periods of consciousness of unity with God and with all beings alternate with the usual dualistic consciousness of the world.

Now the joy of Pistis Sophia becomes the central theme of her songs of praise, in which she reiterates her determination to remain firm and never stray from the Light again. But the powers of darkness do not relent, and new and stronger emanations of the “Self-Centered One” are sent to join the others so as to oppress Pistis Sophia and take her back to chaos.

After her sixteenth invocation, pleading for the help that had been promised, she is saved once again by the stream of Light, with the help of the **Archangels Michael and Gabriel**. Jesus also goes down into chaos to help Pistis Sophia. He enables her to step over the principal evil emanation of the “Self-Centered One”, a serpent with seven heads. This symbolizes the killing of the seeds of evil within man, namely the illusion of separateness.

Once the illusion of separateness is overcome, the initiate is entitled to enter nirvana. Thus, at this point, Jesus takes Pistis Sophia to a region just below the Thirteenth Aeon, her original station (probably a reference to **the Fourth Initiation**, which turns the seeker into an Arhat or Enlightened one). The Initiate is very close to the other shore, his final destination.

Nevertheless, in spite of her high accomplishments, the soul is still subject to the affliction of the subtle material powers, and Pistis Sophia continues her invocations. Jesus warns her that the “Self-Centered One” is furious with her and will try a last attack by means of two dark and violent emanations in order to take her back into chaos. She is left alone, but Jesus promises to come back to help her if she feels oppressed and invokes his help.

As indicated, the two dark and chaotic emanations (probably depression and despair) attack in earnest. This seems to refer to the period sometimes called as the Dark Night of the Soul when the individual feels alone and abandoned by all and sundry, sinking into a period of depression that might lead to despair, until he is able to renounce his last remaining attachments to the world—namely, his feeling of being a separate “I”—prior to final and permanent union with God or the Light.

With the twenty-fourth invocation finally arrives the moment to take Pistis Sophia permanently out of chaos and into Thirteenth Aeon. This might look like an anticlimax, a mere return to her original region. But at this point a touching surprise awaits her. It is said that Pistis Sophia reaches her final liberation at the exact moment that Jesus is at the Mount of Olives with his disciples in the process of being elevated to the Height during the Light. Thus, we have an indication of **the Fifth Initiation**, both from the point of view of the glorified individuality, Jesus or the Higher Self, and of the soul, which is finally freed from the prison of the world.



At that moment Pistis Sophia is finally reunited with her consort, Jesus, a parallel with the sacrament of the wedding chamber mentioned in the *Gnostic Gospel of Philip* and with the experience of the great mystics at the last stage of Theosis, "deification" or union with God.

This mysterious initiation, which is said to be conferred by the initiate upon himself, is the end of the soul's pilgrimage. The man has learned all there is to be learned as a man and embarks on another journey beyond the realm of humanity in the endless spiral of eternal evolution. The symbolic image of being elevated to the Height conveys the idea of a monumental expansion of consciousness to the adept, encompassing all planes from "earth" to "heaven."

Notice that at each of the five major turning points in the story of Pistis Sophia, her consort, Jesus, goes down into chaos to help her. This seems an indication that an integration of the two aspects of the soul, Jesus and the Pistis Sophia, occurs as part of the initiation process. The first four such integrations are partial or perhaps temporary.

It is only with the final initiation that total and permanent integration of the higher and lower natures of man is finally accomplished.

We could conclude that the *Pistis Sophia* myth, like all sacred scriptures, is an encoded map to a precious treasure hoard. If we can interpret its symbols, we will be able to tread the Path and find the precious pearl of gnosis, the key that admits us to the kingdom of heaven.

## **"Sophia.21" The Woman of the New Millennium**

This woman is always unique. She does not imitate; she does not sell herself or the symbols of her gender. She does not need; she loves. She does not seek approval because when she feels fulfilled and what she needs manifests itself. She does not create dependencies because she attracts people and conditions that are also full.

Her power comes from both attracting fullness and bestowing it, depending on the extent of her communion with life.

Being with her is both an invitation to life and a challenge to know oneself and is never easy for those who seek comfort. She cannot be fooled. She is fluid, vital, and unpredictable as life itself. She rests in fullness and not in emptiness.

She knows how to be alone and enjoy it. In company she is fun because she is connected to the direct sources of pleasure of living in her body, of feeling her emotions, of playing with ideas and reformulations.

She understands because she feels. She feels because she loves.



She knows because she sees.

She sees because she is in contact with all her faculties from her sensibility.

Her sexuality is her business, private and precious.

She does not take the form of any image and everything around it reflects the richness of its inner self. She is controlled but not repressed. She has a sense of priorities and ideals. She follows a melody and a rhythm of its own emanating from within, obeying them, but also respecting the difference with others.

She has a strong experience of what it is to be loved by Life and therefore does not seek it but nevertheless knows how to offer it freely and appropriately.

She is free without having to announce it, convince or prove it to anyone. She is spontaneous within her own style, which can be reserved, intellectual, devotional or extrovert and social. Her ideas respond to the direct perception of the life she lives as a continuous experience.

She can be verbal or non-verbal. She craves life and authenticity. She serves no one because she lives in the Service. It cannot be possessed or exclusive, nor the property of anyone or anything, nor a ground for exploitation or easy prey... because it is free from the forces that normally bind human beings.

She embodies the wisdom of the 21st century woman, our Sophia!

## References:

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