

WHERE SHALL WISDOM BE FOUND? (JOB 28.12)

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After Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BCE, refugees fled south. The prophet Jeremiah went with them, and told them that the disaster had been due to their sins, and that even in Egypt, the punishment would continue. The refugees in Pathros confronted Jeremiah and would not accept what he said. *The disaster had been caused, they said, by neglecting the Queen of Heaven.* Jeremiah 44 then offers us a glimpse of the religion of seventh century Judah - burning incense to the Queen of Heaven, pouring out libations to her and making loaves to represent her: 'For then we had plenty of food and we prospered and saw no evil' (Jer. 44.17).

Set alongside this the brief and stylised history incorporated into the Book of Enoch, known as the *Apocalypse of Weeks* because each period of the history is designated as a week. It is the history of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, the giving of the Law but without any mention of Moses and the Exodus, the building of the temple in the fifth week, and then, in the sixth week, 'All who lived in the temple lost their vision, and *the hearts of all of them godlessly forsook Wisdom*, and the house of the kingdom was burned and the whole chosen people was scattered (1 Enoch 93). This history knows nothing of the Deuteronomists' story of the Exodus and their hero Moses, but it does emphasise Enoch, and says that Jerusalem was destroyed after the people in the temple had forsaken Wisdom. There is even a poem about the rejected Wisdom:

Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the children of men,
and found no dwelling place

Wisdom returned to her place, and took her seat among the angels (1 Enoch 42)

Just before the temple was destroyed, there had been a massive purge of the religion of Judah and Jerusalem, usually described as King Josiah's reform. The Deuteronomists' own account of this purge makes it clear that an old copy of a law book had been found in the temple, and this prompted the young king to remove from his kingdom everything which did not comply with the regulations of that law book. 2 Kings 23 describes what happened: anything associated with the worship of Baal and Asherah and the host of heaven was removed from the temple and destroyed. The priests whom earlier kings had appointed to burn incense in other cities were deposed, but they would not come to serve in Jerusalem; they stayed in their own areas. The account emphasised the destruction of the Asherah, which was taken from the temple and burned by the Kidron, and the destruction of the houses of the *qdšm*, a word usually translated male prostitutes, but which should perhaps be read as 'holy ones, angels', in view of the fact that Josiah was removing everything connected with the host of heaven. In these houses, women had woven linen garments for Asherah¹. He also removed horses dedicated to the sun which had stood at the gate of the temple. *What the refugees described as abandoning the Queen of Heaven, and Enoch described as forsaking Wisdom must have been this purge by Josiah.* What he had tried to destroy was the older religion of Jerusalem and Judah.

As late as the fourth century CE, people remembered what had happened at that time: the Jerusalem Talmud described how a large number of priests had fought with Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem, and had then been settled in Arabia, 'among the sons of Ishmael.' (j.Ta`anit 4.5). These must have been the disaffected priests who would not accept Josiah's purge. Jeremiah records the fear of King Zedekiah, one of Josiah's sons: 'I am afraid of the Jews who have deserted to the Chaldeans, lest I be handed over to them and they harm me.' (Jer.38.19). The first temple was always remembered as the true temple. In the time of the Messiah, five things would be restored which had been in the first temple but not in the second: the fire, the ark, the menorah, the Spirit and the cherubim². Elsewhere we read that in the time of Josiah the ark, the anointing oil, the jar of manna and Aaron's rod had been hidden³. The account of Josiah's purge must include within it somewhere the removal of the ark, the menorah, the oil, manna and

high priestly staff, and the cherubim, presumably of the throne. Some of them may have been taken away for safe keeping, by those devoted to the temple tradition. Others would have been destroyed.

The first chapter of the Book of Proverbs also describes the rejected Wisdom, and could well have been set in the period between the rejection of Wisdom by Josiah and the destruction of the city by the Babylonians. 'How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing, and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof and I will pour out my spirit on you... because I called and you refused to listen... and you have ignored all my counsel... I will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when panic strikes you... when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me but I will not answer, they will seek me diligently but they will not find me.' (Prov.1 22-28) This is a Goddess speaking to the people who have rejected her.

Even a brief survey shows that there had been a Lady in Jerusalem who had been rejected and returned to her place among the angels. She had been worshipped with wine and incense, and bread to represent her. She had protected the city and given prosperity, and she had given vision to the priests. She had been evicted from the temple by Josiah, and her cult probably involved the items removed in the purge or remembered as missing from the second temple: the item named the Asherah, the host of heaven, the horses for the sun, the menorah, the oil, the manna, the high priest's staff that bore almond blossoms, the ark, the fire and the Spirit. A long list, but these things were not forgotten.

In the Book of Revelation John saw the ark restored to the holy of holies, (Rev.11.19), he saw four horses ride out from the temple (Rev.6.1-8), he saw the Man in the midst of the seven lamps, the menorah (Rev. 1.12), he heard the Spirit promising the faithful that they would receive the hidden manna (Rev.2.17). John was describing the restoration of the first temple. He also saw the Queen of Heaven in the temple, even though she is not named as the Queen. 'A great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars' (Rev.12.1). At her feet was a great red dragon. She gave birth to a son who was destined to fulfil Psalm 2 - to rule the nations with a rod of iron - and presumably the rest of the Psalm as well: 'You are my son. Today I have begotten you'. The woman's son was taken up to the throne of God. *These few verses in the Book of Revelation show the importance of the Lost Lady and the cult of the first temple for understanding Christian origins.*

Something of the Lost Lady and her world can still be recovered, a world in which profound issues were explored and theology was expressed, not in the abstract philosophies which we have come to associate with theology, but in pictures, symbols and the sound of words. This does not mean that it was an unsophisticated system. Wisdom theology has been overshadowed by a simplistic theology of history, which modern scholars have presented as Old Testament theology. Wisdom, by means of the images used to depict her, addresses such question as the relationship between the human and the divine, the means of apotheosis, the stewardship of knowledge, and the power which knowledge gives to transform or to destroy.

First, we need to consider the evidence of archaeology.

- Hundreds of small female figurines (854 to date)⁴ have been found in Judah and Jerusalem, known as Judaeen pillar figurines. They are between 8 and 14 cm tall, with prominent breasts and prominent eyes. Figurines found in Jerusalem and north Judaea sometimes wear a turban, and some hold a disc which has been identified as a shield, a drum or a loaf. The face is often painted red, the 'dress' seems to have been white, and there are traces of red and yellow decoration on the neck and shoulders, perhaps representing jewellery. These figurines were often found with horse and rider figurines. Many had been smashed. Archaeologists have concluded that these figurines went out of use at the end of the second temple period, the time of Josiah.
- Graffiti have been found on two large storage jars at Kuntillet Ajrud in the southern desert, which seems to have been a resting place for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. 'I bless you by Yhwh of Samaria and by Asheratah' says one, and the other 'I bless you by Yhwh of Teman and by Asheratah.' There has been endless debate about these inscriptions, and how the name Asheratah relates to the Old

Testament name Asherah⁵. Given that Asheratah is a constant form, and Yhwh is defined by his cult centre - Teman, Samaria - it looks as though Asheratah was 'senior' figure, perhaps the mother of the LORD?

- There are the tablets found at the site of ancient Ugarit, (on the coast of Syria) which describe their great goddess Athirat, the same name as Asheratah. She was their Great Lady, the Virgin Mother of the seventy sons of the high god El, a god who was often depicted as a bull, ⁶, she was a sun deity, she was the Lamp of the gods, the Bright One, and her symbol was a spindle. She had several names: Athirat, Rahmay and Shapsh, she was the nursing mother of the earthly king, who was known as the Morning Star and the Evening Star (c.f Rev. 22.16), and it seems that she was represented by the winged sun disc over the head of the king, showing that she was his heavenly mother⁷.

It is bad practice to reconstruct the male God of Israel from the biblical texts and the female from archaeological evidence, as this gives the impression that the Lady cannot be found in the written sources. The correspondence between the Great Lady of Ugarit and the lost Lady of Jerusalem is, however, striking, as we shall see that the Lady of Jerusalem was described as a winged sun deity, the mother of the king named the Morning Star, and the Mother of the sons of El i.e. of the angels. The advantage of having archaeological evidence to support a hypothesis constructed from texts is that archaeological evidence is less likely to have been edited, although the archaeological reports from the first half of the last century show that numbers of these figurines were discarded as rubbish, because they had no possible relevance to biblical archaeology.

Many fragments of Isaiah have been found at Qumran, but the Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7 only survives in the great Isaiah scroll, in other words, this is the only pre-Christian evidence for the Hebrew text of that prophecy. The present form of the text, even in English, implies that something is missing. Ahaz says he will not ask for a sign from the LORD, *yhwh*, and Isaiah says he will have a sign from the Lord *adonai*, (instead), and there follows the prophecy of the birth of the child. The Isaiah scroll here differs from the Masoretic Hebrew by one letter, and reads: 'Ask a sign from the *Mother of the LORD your God*, and, when Ahaz refuses, Isaiah says 'Then the Lord himself will give you a sign... 'Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isa.7.14). This would make very good sense if Jerusalem had had a Great Lady who had been the heavenly Virgin Mother of the earthly king, a king who was himself the sign of God with his people, Immanuel. The promised child then appears: 'Unto us a child is born' (Isa.9.6), the song of the angels in the holy of holies as the new king is born as the divine son. The other account of this birth in Psalm 110 includes, in an otherwise unreadable patch of Hebrew, the name 'The Morning Star'. Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet Micah, also spoke of an unnamed woman who was about to give birth to the great Shepherd of Israel. The familiar words of this prophecy are: 'You, Bethlehem Ephrathah... from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days', and the word is '*olam*, eternity, the holy of holies. The lines about his mother are rarely noticed, but this is another text describing the mother and her royal son who is born in the holy of holies and will come forth (Micah 5.1-4). There is also the prophecy in Malachi 4.2, which foretells the return of Elijah before the Day of the LORD, and the gospels identified John the Baptist as Elijah heralding the coming of the LORD (Mark 9.11-13). The other part of Malachi's prophecy is often overlooked, or mistranslated. When Elijah returns: 'The Sun of Righteousness shall rise with *healing in her wings*'. The sign in heaven in Revelation 12 is the Queen of Heaven in the holy of holies with the ark. She is clothed with the sun and crowned with the stars, and she gives birth to the Messiah. Later she flies with the wings of a great eagle to escape from the serpent. *This vision is set exactly in the centre of the Book of Revelation.*

Wisdom describes herself in the holy of holies in Proverbs 8. In the temple, this had been constructed as a perfect cube and lined with gold to represent the light and fire of the divine presence (2 Chron.3.8); here in Proverbs 8 it is the state beyond the visible and temporal creation. Wisdom was herself begotten and brought forth in this state (Proverbs 8.24-25), and she was beside the Creator as he established the heavens and marked out the foundations of the earth. She witnessed the creation. She was also the *Amon*, a rare Hebrew word which probably means craftsman; in the Greek it became *harmozousa*, the woman who joins together, or the woman who maintains the harmony (Prov.8.30). This Wisdom poem does not describe the visible creation - trees, birds, animals - but only the structures which were established in the invisible

state., the 'engraved things'. She was there when the Creator engraved the circle on the face of the deep, set the engraved mark for the sea which it could not pass, engraved the foundations of the earth (Prov.8.27-29). She was the Creator's delight, and she danced and played before him. The male and female Creator is familiar from Genesis 1.26-27: 'Then God (a plural word in Hebrew) said 'Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness... So God created the human in his image, male and female he created them.' The female figure also appears in Genesis 1.2: '...the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters' 'Moving' here is a feminine form: *she* was hovering, fluttering over the face of the waters. When Genesis was translated into Aramaic, a version used in Palestine⁸, and so one the first Christians would have known, gave the first verse of Genesis as 'In the beginning with Wisdom the LORD created... People remembered that Wisdom had been present at the creation, and that she was also known as the Spirit.

The woman in the holy of holies, clothed with the sun and giving birth to the Messiah, must have prompted the early Church to tell the story of Mary as the story of Wisdom. The *Infancy Gospel of James* is not easy to date, but Justin in the mid-second century knew that the birth had taken place in a cave, Clement of Alexandria, at the end of the second century, knew that Mary was a virgin after giving birth, and Origen knew that Joseph had been a widower with other children⁹ - all details unique to account. A papyrus of the *Infancy Gospel of James*, dated to the end of the third century, is the oldest known complete gospel text¹⁰. The *Infancy Gospel of James* tells how Mary was given to the temple when she was three years old, like the infant Samuel (1 Sam.1.24). The priest received her and sat her on the third step of the altar, and she danced at his feet in the temple. She was fed by an angel, and grew up in the temple until, at the age of twelve and the onset of puberty, she had to leave. A husband was found for her, Joseph, who was a widower with sons. When a new veil was needed for the temple, seven young women were chosen to spin the wool and to weave. Mary was one of them, and while she was spinning, the angel told her that she would give birth to the Son of God Most High. Mary spinning the red wool as the angel speaks to her became the ikon of the Annunciation. The little girl in the temple, dancing before the high priest, is exactly how Wisdom was described in Proverbs 8: playing and dancing before the Creator. Like Wisdom, Mary is depicted in ikons as seated in the holy of holies, being fed by an angel. She left the holy place to give birth to her child, like the woman clothed with the sun appearing through the opened veil of the holy of holies. Whilst she was weaving the new veil, the symbol of incarnation, she was pregnant with her child, and in ikons, she is shown holding her spindle, the ancient symbol of the Great Lady. The Queen of Heaven and her Son were Mary and her Son, and just as Jesus was proclaimed the LORD, the God of Israel, so Mary was depicted as the Great Lady, his Mother.

The memory of the Holy Spirit as the Mother of Jesus is preserved in the writings of the Hebrew Christians. Origen often quoted from the Gospel of the Hebrews, which is now lost apart from quotations such as his. In this Gospel, Jesus says: 'Even now did my mother the Holy Spirit take me by one of my hairs and carry me away to the great Mount Tabor', possibly a reference to Jesus being driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit after his baptism.¹¹ Jerome, who is the main source of quotations from this Gospel, shows that the voice at Jesus' baptism was the voice of the Spirit. 'According to the Gospel written in the Hebrew speech... "It came to pass, when the LORD was come up out of the water, the whole fount of the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon him and said unto him: My son, in all the prophets I was waiting for thee, that though shouldst come and I might rest in thee. For thou art my rest, thou art my first begotten son that reignest for ever."¹² The *Gospel of Philip* preserves another interesting tradition from the Hebrew Christians, for whom Spirit was a feminine noun. They said that the Spirit coming on Mary (Luke 1.35) could not be described as conception; presumably it was creation, as in Genesis 1. 'Some say Mary conceived by the holy Spirit. They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman?'¹³ Jesus spoke of the children of Wisdom (Luke 7.35.)

According to the refugees who argued with Jeremiah, the Queen of Heaven had been worshipped with incense, libations of wine and bread which represented her. Exactly the same was prescribed for the table in the temple for the shewbread. It was a table of gold on which were put 'Plates and dishes for incense, flagons and bowls for libations, and the bread of the Presence (Exod.25.29). One of the few things known about the bread of the Presence is that it had to be baked in a special mould; the shape of this mould was

never revealed, although it is depicted having upward curling ends. The process of baking the bread of the Presence was the family secret of the house of Garmu and they kept their secret¹⁴. The bread of the Presence was the only cereal offering taken into the temple itself., and the Mishnah records how this was done at the end of the second temple period. There were two tables in the porch of the temple and ‘On the table of marble they laid the bread of the Presence when it was brought in and on the table of gold when it was brought out, since what is holy must be raised and not brought down’.¹⁵ Since gold was used for the most holy things, we conclude that the bread had acquired holiness whilst it was in the temple. The Targum described the bread of the Presence as the most sacred of all the offerings¹⁶. It was described as the most holy portion for the high priests, meaning that it imparted holiness to them (Lev.24.9)¹⁷, and it was eaten by them each Sabbath, when the new loaves were taken into the temple. When the desert tabernacle was prepared for travelling, the furnishings had to be wrapped in two covers, to prevent any but the high priests from seeing them. The ark and the table, however, had have three coverings (Num. 4. 5-8).

How did the bread acquire this holiness and special status? The bread of the Presence, like other cereal offerings, was described as an *`azkarah*, usually translated ‘a memorial offering’. The text in Leviticus could imply that the incense was the *`azkarah* but the Targums show that it was the bread itself. We have already met another form of this ambiguous word *`azkarah*: did it mean remember or invoke? Did the Levites remember or invoke the LORD, was Moses told to remember the LORD by the newly revealed Name, or to invoke him? Here, the bread of the Presence is likely to have been not a memorial offering but an invocation offering, as this would explain its extreme holiness. Psalm 38 was to be sung with this type of offering, and includes the lines: ‘My God be not far from me, Make haste to help me’ (Ps.38.21-22). Psalm 70 was also for the *`azkarah*: ‘O LORD make haste to help me... O LORD do not tarry.’ (Ps.70.1,5). These are invocations. The bread of the Presence must have been a means of the LORD’s presence in the temple. If the words of institution at the Last Supper had been spoken in Hebrew or Aramaic, *anamnesis* would have represented *`azkarah*, invocation offering, and so the bread could have been the bread of the Presence. (Luke 22.19; 1 Cor.11.24)

Presence (*panim* which literally means faces, hence the *prosopa* of later Trinitarian language), must have been a reverent circumlocution. There are many places in the Greek Old Testament where *panim* is understood as adding emphasis, and not as ‘presence’ in any special sense. Thus ‘My Presence will go with you’ - the LORD’s promise to Moses (Exod.33.14), became in Greek ‘I myself (*autos*) will go with you.’ ‘The Angel of his Presence saved them’ (Isa. 63.9) became in Greek ‘Not an ambassador nor an angel but he himself saved them.’ The Angel of the Presence was the LORD, and so the bread of the Presence must have been the bread of the divine Presence. It would be interesting to know what was said to the priests as they received their piece of bread each Sabbath.

Wisdom invited her devotees to her table. ‘Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave simpleness and live, and walk in the way of discernment. (Prov.9.5-6). Wisdom presided at a table where bread and wine were taken, and by taking her bread and wine her devotees acquired Life and Wisdom. Later writers knew that Wisdom gave herself in her bread: ‘Those who eat me will hunger for more’ (Ben Sira 24.21). The Genesis Rabbah, the traditional Jewish commentary on Genesis, says that the bread which Melchizedek brought to Abraham was the bread of the Presence, and there follows a reference to this passage in Proverbs 9 about Wisdom’s table.¹⁸ Those who participated in the Eucharist described in the Didache gave thanks for knowledge and eternal life, and Bishop Serapion in fourth century Egypt prayed at the Eucharist that his people might become living and wise. And what might have been the background to the Western text of Luke 22, where Jesus takes the bread and says ‘This is my Body.’

On of the problems at the beginning of the second temple period, according to the prophet Malachi, was that the bread set on the table was polluted¹⁹. ‘With such a gift he will not lift up his Presence upon you’ (Mal 1.9). The LORD could not be present with polluted bread, and what follows came to be regarded by the Church as a prophecy of the Eucharist. ‘From the rising of the sun to its setting, my Name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my Name and a pure cereal offering’

(Mal.1.11)²⁰ By implication, the Eucharist restored the bread of the Presence. Enoch too complained about the polluted bread in the second temple (1 Enoch 89.73).

Epiphanius, a bishop writing in the middle of the fourth century, described how women in Arabia (where the disaffected priests in the time of Josiah had settled) offered a small loaf of bread to Mary, and he linked this custom to the worship of the Queen of Heaven described in Jeremiah. Epiphanius dismissed the whole idea as ridiculous, but did describe how they used to decorate a chair or square stool, and covered it with cloth. They put out bread there and offered it in Mary's name. Then the women ate the bread²¹. This is clearly a garbled account, but very interesting. It seems as though a loaf of bread was enthroned before it was eaten. Bread to represent her, perhaps.

Ezekiel, who was a priest in the first temple and was deported to Babylon, described how the Lady left the temple. In his two visions of the chariot throne, the one as it left the temple and the other as it appeared to him on the banks of the River Chebar in Babylon, he described a male and female figure. Most English versions of these chapters (Ezek.1 and 10) attempt to cope with the confusing Hebrew by smoothing over the evidence for what Ezekiel was actually describing²². There are four (feminine) Living Ones in human form (Ezek.1.5), and they had four faces/presences, wings and hands. In the midst of the Living Ones was fire, and she/they were in the midst of a wheel within a wheel, and the rings were full of points of light/eyes. Wherever the Spirit went, the wheels went, because the Spirit of the Living One, (feminine singular) was in the wheels (Ezek.1.20). Over the heads (plural) of the Living One (fem. singular) there was the likeness of the firmament, like the gleam of terrible ice/crystal, and above this there was a throne on which was a human form, the likeness of the glory of the LORD (Ezek.1.28). Immediately after this vision, Ezekiel was given a scroll and told to eat it (Ezek.3.1-2). Since Ezekiel was describing the heavenly throne, this must have been how he imagined the Holy of holies; the throne, and beneath it the gleaming firmament, and beneath that, a fourfold fiery, female figure with wings and hands. Ezekiel heard a sound 'like the voice of Shaddai', which must have been the name of the Living One (Ezek.1.24; 10.5). There is a similar description in chapter 10, where he described the Glory leaving the temple: 'As for their appearances, they four had one likeness, as if a wheel had been in the midst of a wheel' (Ezek.10.10 AV); 'All their body (singular body, plural suffix) was full of points of light' (Ezek.10.12); 'She is the Living One that I saw by the River Chebar (Ezek.10.15); 'She is the Living One I saw beneath the God of Israel by the River Chebar' (Ezek.10.20). One very obscure verse (Ezek.10.12) seems to say that all flesh, that is, all created things, were the points of light within the wheels. This was the Lady as Ezekiel knew her, leaving the temple. We are accustomed to translating the plural form *elohim* as God, singular; it is likely that the Living One was also described in singular and plural forms.

What Ezekiel saw was a wheel within a wheel, (or a ring within a ring), and those rings were full of points of light. In the midst of the rings was a fourfold fiery female figure, the Living One, with hands and wings. Overhead was the firmament, gleaming like ice, and above this, the heavenly throne. Ezekiel was then given a scroll. The Living One whom Ezekiel saw leaving the temple must have been the Queen of Heaven, Wisdom. *It is remarkable how many details of Ezekiel's vision appear in the ikon of the Holy Wisdom.*

Elsewhere (Ezek.28. 12-19), Ezekiel described an anointed guardian cherub, full of Wisdom and perfect in beauty, who was driven out of the Garden of Eden. The cherub was the seal, and must have been the high priest, because the Greek version of the list of twelve gemstones worn by the cherub is an exact description of the high priest's breastplate (Ezek.28. 13; Exod.28. 17-20). Fire came forth from the midst of the cherub - who must have been a fiery being - and consumed the holy place. *What is remarkable is that the anointed guardian cherub high priest was female.* In its present form the oracle concerns the king of Tyre, but Tyre and Zion are very similar words in Hebrew, and the Hebrew text has already been distorted to conceal the gems of the high priest's breastplate. Only the Greek has the full list. Ben Sira, writing some four centuries after Ezekiel's vision, described Wisdom as the one who served in the temple of Zion. She was the high priest (Ben Sira 24.10).

The other great symbol of wisdom was the Tree of Life. 'She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her, those who hold fast to her are called happy.' (Prov.3.18). 'Happy' here is the Hebrew word *asher*, which may be word play on her name Asheratah. Ben Sira, writing in Jerusalem about 200BCE has Wisdom compare herself to all manner of trees: 'I grew tall like a cedar in Lebanon, like a cypress in the heights of Hermon, I grew tall like a palm tree in Engedi, like rose plants in Jericho, like a beautiful plane tree I grew tall' (Ben Sira 24.13-14). Enoch reveals more about the Great Tree. On his visionary journey in heaven, he saw a great tree by the throne, 'whose fragrance was beyond all fragrance, and whose leaves and blossoms and wood never wither or rot (1 Enoch 24.4). No mortal could touch the tree until after the great judgement, when its fruit would be given to the chosen ones, and the tree itself transplanted again into the temple. The fruit of the tree was sometimes compared to the clusters on a palm (thus here) or to grapes. The tree is fully described in a text which was part of a small Christian library, hidden in a cave in Egypt in the fourth century and rediscovered in 1945. The text is usually identified as Gnostic, but texts such as these are full of temple imagery and traditions, and labels such as Gnostic (and therefore heretical) should not be applied with too much confidence. 'The colour of the tree of life is like the sun, and its branches are beautiful. Its leaves are like those of the cypress, its fruit is like a bunch of white grapes.' Enoch reveals something more about this tree; it is the place where the LORD rests when he is in Paradise. 'I saw Paradise, and in the midst, the tree of life, at that place where the LORD takes his rest when he goes (up) to Paradise... That tree is indescribable for pleasantness and fragrance, and more beautiful than any created thing. its appearance is gold and crimson and with the form of fire' (2 Enoch 8.4).

In an account of the life of Adam and Eve written at the end of the second temple period, when God returns to Paradise, the chariot throne rests at the tree of life and all the flowers come into bloom.²³ The synagogue at Dura Europas depicts a king enthroned in a tree. The tree was inseparable from the throne itself. Reigning from the tree became a Christian theme, and the subject of controversy with Jews. Justin claimed that they had removed words from Psalm 96.10, which were important for Christians. The verse had originally been: 'Say among the nations "The LORD reigns from the tree"', but, he claimed, 'from the tree' had been removed²⁴. The *Letter of Barnabas* hints at this longer reading by saying that the royal kingdom of Jesus was founded on a tree²⁵, and the longer version of Psalm 96 was known to several early Christian writers. 'From the tree' does not appear in any version presently known, but the tree of life and what it represented was a point of contention between Jews and Christians. In the Book of Revelation, faithful Christians were promised that they would eat the fruit of the tree of life (Rev.2.7; 22.14), which stood by the throne of God-and-the-Lamb, watered by the river of life.

In the time of Jesus, the veneration of the Lady and her tree was not just a distant memory. Juvenal, the Roman satirist writing early in the second century CE, described a poor Jewish woman, possibly a refugee, as a fortune teller 'an interpreter of the laws of Jerusalem, a high priestess of the tree, a reliable mediator with highest heaven.'²⁶ In a section of the Mishnah dealing with idolatry, there are prohibitions which must have been directed against the cult of the Lady. 'If a man finds an object on which there is a figure of the sun, a figure of the moon or a figure of the dragon (c.f. Rev.12), he must throw them into the Dead Sea'²⁷. 'If a tree was planted from the first for idolatry, it was forbidden. If it was chopped and trimmed for idolatry, and it sprouted afresh, one need only take away what had sprouted afresh; but if a Gentile set up an idol under the tree and then desecrated it, the tree was permitted'²⁸. Even to walk under such a tree made one unclean. Bread baked with wood taken from the Asherah was unclean, any garment woven with a shuttle made from Asherah wood was unclean. Branches from an Asherah or from an apostate city could not be used in Tabernacles processions²⁹. This is an interesting list: the sun, the moon, and a dragon is reminiscent of the Lady in Revelation 12: bread and weaving are associated with the Lady, apostate cities show that this was not a matter of pagan practice but a dispute within the Hebrew community; and a shaped tree immediately suggests the menorah, which was a stylised almond tree (Exod. 25.31-37).

In the time of the Messiah five things were to be restored to the temple; the fire, the ark, the Spirit, the cherubim and the menorah. Since the asherah was remembered as a stylised tree, the older English translations of the Bible, made before the discoveries at Ugarit revealed the existence of the goddess Athirat, translated *asherah* as 'grove', following the Greek. It was forbidden to plant a grove of trees near any altar of the LORD (Deut 16.21 King James Version); Jezebel had 400 prophets of the groves (1 Kgs

18.19, KJV). The *asherah* removed by Josiah would have been a stylised tree, and the only stylised tree associated with the temple was the menorah, the tree of fire which was the tree of life, and therefore a symbol of the Lady who was being removed. This menorah was remembered as the true menorah. There as a seven branched lamp in the second temple - it is depicted on the arch of Titus among the loot from the temple which was taken to Rome - yet people still looked for the restoration of the true menorah in the time of the Messiah.

The Lady's tree of fire appears in another story, where her demise is the preface to the story of Moses and the Exodus. The burning bush was her tree of fire. The story of Moses learning the new name for God at the burning bush is recognised by scholars as the point at which the compilers of the Pentateuch joined together the two traditions. Abraham, Melchizedek and the patriarchs were joined to Moses and the Exodus, and the God of the Patriarchs was renamed. At the burning bush a voice said that the name to be used in future was *yhwh* (Exod.3.15). Later, we read: 'God said to Moses: I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them (Exod.6.3). Ezekiel had described the voice of the Living One as the voice of Shaddai. Now Shaddai has been translated in various ways, most often by Almighty, but the usual meaning of this Hebrew word is breasts, suggesting that El Shaddai had a female aspect. In the stories of the patriarchs, El Shaddai was associated with the gift of fertility: 'May El Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you (Gen.28.3); 'I am El Shaddai; be fruitful and multiply... kings shall spring from you (Gen. 35.11); 'El Shaddai... who will bless you with the blessings of the breast and of the womb... (Gen.49.25). If the story of the burning bush does represent the transition from the older religion to that of the Deuteronomists, then we should have an explanation for the later Christian custom of representing Mary by the burning bush. This fiery tree had been the ancient symbol of the Mother of the LORD; sometimes Mary is depicted literally within the burning bush, sometimes there is simply a fiery tree named 'the Mother of God', and sometimes the burning bush ikon depicts Mother and Son surrounded by the angels of the weathers, that is, the angels of Day One in the Holy of Holies.

The oil which anointed royal high priest and made him the LORD, the child of Wisdom, the Son of God, was perfumed oil from the tree of life. Wisdom was described by Ben Sira as the oil itself: a sweet perfume of myrrh, cinnamon and olive oil (Ben Sira 24.15) as prescribed in the instructions for the tabernacle (Exod. 30.23-25). Enoch described the experience of being anointed with this oil as he stood before the throne: 'The LORD said to Michael: "Go and take Enoch from his earthly clothing (from his mortal body) and put on his the clothes of my glory (his resurrection body). And so Michael did just as the LORD commanded him. He anointed me and he clothed me, and the appearance of that oil is greater than the greatest light, and its ointment is like sweet dew (the symbol of resurrection) and its fragrance is myrrh, and it is like the rays of the glittering sun. And I looked at myself and I had become like one of the glorious ones"' Enoch then saw the vision of the six days of creation³⁰. The myrrh oil as the sacrament of apotheosis was mentioned by Pope Leo the Great in one of his Epiphany sermons: 'He offers myrrh who believes that God's only begotten son united to himself man's true nature.'³¹

The perfumed anointing oil was kept in the holy of holies, and when the royal high priest was anointed, he received the gift of Wisdom herself: resurrection life, vision, knowledge and true wealth. The high priest was anointed on his head and between his eyelids - a curious detail which must have symbolised the opening of his eyes. When the oil was hidden away in the time of Josiah, Enoch said that the priests lost their vision. This is the context of the Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11: The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of Wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the LORD.' The text continues, translating literally: 'His fragrance shall be the fear of the LORD.'

Memories of the gift of Wisdom in the fragrant myrrh oil appear in a variety of texts from the early Christian period. John wrote in his first letter: 'You have the chrism from the Holy One and you know all things... you have no need for anyone to teach you anything (1 John 2.20,27). In the *Clementine Recognitions*, Clement attributed to Peter this explanation of the word Christ: 'The Son of God, the Beginning of all things, became Man. He was the first whom God anointed with oil taken from the wood of the tree of life' Peter said Christ would in turn anoint those who entered the Kingdom. Peter continued, 'Aaron the first high priest was anointed with a composition of chrism which was made after

the pattern of the spiritual ointment' and if this earthly copy was so powerful, how much greater, he argued, was that chrism extracted from a branch of the tree of life.³² A collection of early Christian hymns known as *The Odes of Solomon* includes lines such as: 'My eyes were enlightened and my face received the dew, and my soul was refreshed with the pleasant fragrance of the LORD' and 'He anointed me with his perfection and I became as one of those who are near him.'³³ Paul wrote to the Corinthians about 'the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ... a fragrance from life to life' (2 Cor.2.14,16), meaning a fragrance from the tree of life which leads to life. Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land used to bring back little flasks of oil inscribed: 'Oil from the tree of life.'³⁴

The Lady was never really lost. Throughout the Bible and related texts, there is a whole network of symbolism through which the characteristic Wisdom theology was transmitted. Much of this is now more familiar as imagery associated with Mary. It appears, for example, in Akathist Hymn, where Mary is described as the Queen and Mother, the fiery throne, the dwelling place of the light, the lampstand, the fiery chariot of the Word, the food that replaced the manna, the tree of glorious fruit from which believers are nourished, the scent of Christ's fragrance, and the unburned Bush. The roots of all this imagery lie in the first temple, which had been the house of Wisdom, the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of the LORD. In view of her importance, it is not surprising that the great churches were dedicated to the Holy Wisdom.

¹ The most likely meaning of the uncertain Hebrew of 2 Kgs 23.7

² Numbers Rabbah XV 10

³ Babylonian Talmud Horayoth 12a

⁴ R. Kletter 'Between Archaeology and Theology. The Pillar Figurines from Judah and the Asherah' in *Studies in the Archaeology of the Iron Age in Israel and Jordan* ed. a M. Mazar Sheffield 2001 pp.179-216.

⁵ A good way into the debate is J Day *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* Sheffield 2000

⁶ These texts can all be found in N Wyatt *Religious Texts from Ugarit. The Words of Ilmilku and his Colleagues*. Sheffield 1998

⁷ N Wyatt 'The Stela of the seated God from Ugarit' in *Ugarit-Forschungen* 15.(1983) pp. 271-77.

⁸ Targum Neofiti; translation by M. McNamara Edinburgh 1992

⁹ Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 78 translation in Ante Nicene Fathers vol.1. Clement *Miscellanies* 7.93; translation in Ante Nicene Fathers vol.2. Origen *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17 translation in Ante Nicene Christian Library (additional volume) Edinburgh 1897 reprinted Grand Rapids 1974.

¹⁰ Papyrus Bodmer V

¹¹ Origen *Commentary on John* 2.12; translation in Fathers of the Church vol 80 Washington 1989. Homily 15.4 *On Jeremiah*; translation in Fathers of the Church 97 Washington 1998

¹² Jerome On Isaiah 11.2; translation in M.R.James *The Apocryphal New Testament* Oxford 1926 reprinted 1980 p.5

¹³ *Gospel of Philip* C.G II.3.55 translation in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* ed, J.M.Robinson Leiden 1996

¹⁴ Mishnah *Yoma* 3.11 translation in H Danby *The Mishnah* Oxford 1933 reprinted 1989. Babylonian Talmud Menahoth 94ab translation by I Epstein, 35 vols, London 1935 reprinted 1961

¹⁵ Mishnah *Menahoth* 11.7

¹⁶ Targum *Onkelos* Lev.24.9

¹⁷ It was later given to all the priests Mishnah *Menahoth* 11.7

¹⁸ Genesis Rabbah XLIII.6

¹⁹ Mal.1.7-9 has 'bread' not food in both the Hebrew and the Greek, despite some English translations.

²⁰ Quoted by e.g Justin *Dialogue with Trypho* 41 translation in Ante Nicene Fathers vol.1

²¹ Epiphanius *Panarion* 1.79 translation by F Williams Leiden 1987

²² The only English version to give a fair representation of the Hebrew is the King James Version

²³ *Apocalypse of Moses* 22; translation in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* ed. J.H.Charlesworth, vol 2 London 1985

²⁴ *Dialogue with Trypho* 71

²⁵ *Letter of Barnabas* 8

²⁶ Juvenal *Satires* 6. 543-5

²⁷ Mishnah *Aboda Zarah* 3.2

²⁸ Mishnah *Aboda Zarah* 3.7

²⁹ Mishnah *Sukkah* 3.1-3

³⁰ 2 Enoch 22 translation in Charlesworth *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol.1.

³¹ Sermon 6; translation in Fathers of the Church 93 1996

³² *Clementine Recognitions* 1.45-6 translation in Ante Nicene Fathers vol.8.

³³ *Odes of Solomon* 11 and 36; translation in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol.2. ed. J.H.Charlesworth London 1985

³⁴ A Grabar *Ampoules de Terre Sante* Paris 1958