

IMAGES OF THE MOTHER:
A DYNAMIC AND LIVING FIGURE

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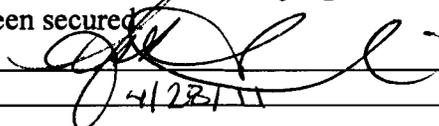
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Abstract

This thesis seeks a comprehensive study of the mother figure in religious imagery from prehistory to modern day. The focus will be an analysis of the dominant figures and symbols that constitute the beginnings of what is considered Western theology, from the region of ancient Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean, progressing through the evolution and expansion of these images as they move westward. The context for this survey will be the development of prehistoric symbols and images as they manifest in the theology of later civilizations, and how the evolving characterizations of the mother figure change as they come into contact with varying ideologies. A substantial portion of this analysis will be centered on the image of the Virgin Mary and her relationship to the ancient iconography of the mother goddess, as well as how this association manifests in a patriarchal religion. This study seeks to demonstrate the pertinence of mother imagery throughout history, and how it maintains a dynamic and functional role in present day.

Introduction

An examination of the mother figure in religious tradition generates a diverse and complex collection of symbols, associations, and practices, varying and evolving through the multitude of cultures and civilizations that have subsisted through our history as humankind. While an extensive investigation of every significant form and representation of the mother in the province of religion would be beyond the scope of this work, particular attention will be granted here to so-called “Western” culture and its origins. Here I endeavor a cross-cultural analysis from the prehistoric to the current era of religious sensitivity. Understanding the symbols and figures associated with motherhood and birth from prehistory – such as the chevron, water, snake – provides a substantial foundation from which to engage with later representations of mother figures in more developed civilizations. I will focus on these representations specifically in the area of Mesopotamia, expanding outwards towards the Mediterranean, Egypt, and finally moving westward through Europe and into North America. The most substantial and extensive of these considerations will be that of the foundations of the Judeo-Christian God, and the controversial relationship of this figure to the mother image. Indeed, I will discuss that the shift in religious sensibility, from the complex androgyny and multifaceted functions of the earthy figures of ancient civilization to the tenaciously transcendent and fear-inspiring Judeo-Christian God, has radically and enduringly transformed both the representation and reception of the mother figure.

Mother in the Prehistoric: Symbols, Motifs, and Animal Representations

A comprehensive study of prehistoric female figures and symbols is at once generous and overwhelming in its plentitude and its breadth. There is an immeasurable amount of material from which to derive a profound and relevant idea of who the mother was and how she was represented in prehistoric times. For the purpose of this work, a study of the figures in what is now the Middle East and Western Europe will be discussed specifically. To make clear, the period which will be defined as prehistoric will be the range from the oldest known artifacts, including figurines, cave drawings, and pottery, to the era of the first known civilization with a recorded history.

One of the earliest symbols associated with the generative female is the vulva. Engravings from the Aurignacian period, dated around the 30th millennium B.C.E., depict vulva shapes on rocks. What is interesting about these depictions is their apparent relationship with the supernatural; “From Upper Paleolithic times the vulva is portrayed either as a supernatural triangle associated with aquatic symbolism, as a seed and sprout, or as an oval vulva swollen as in preparation for birth. Each category has its own meaning: the first is the cosmic womb of the Goddess, the source of the waters of life; the second is the sprouting of life; the third is the giving of birth.”¹ Each of these representations illustrates a generative power; and the clear union of these attributes specifically to the female indicates a widespread understanding of the female as uniquely possessing this power. This is the earliest imagery that depicts the female as both significant and distinctive in her ability to give life and to stimulate transformation. The vulva symbol is often seen in conjunction with other important images, including the zig-zag shape

¹ Marija Gimbutas. *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989) 99.

most often associated with water or moisture. This is evidenced in, “Magdalenian times and later in Old Europe, zig-zags and M’s are found engraved or painted within uterine and lens (vulva) shapes, suggesting the symbolic affinity between the zig-zag, M, female moisture, and amniotic fluid.”² The clear association of the vulva shape to the symbol for moisture elucidates two important features of early female imagery. First, the fluid associated with the vulva itself indicates an understanding of the process through which the living female body produces life; the moisture associated with both conception and the act of giving birth lends itself to this awareness. Second, the more broad association of the distinctive female shape with that of water suggests the early association of the birthing female with the life-giving power of nature. This is developed further in evolved anthropomorphic figures, such as those found on artifacts of the Cycladic culture of the Bronze Age. Platters were found that represent plant and animal-like figures; “They stand on two legs and have a large vulva...the association of anthropomorphic features with plant motifs and the water sphere conveys the idea of regeneration. The fish and the feet of a bird of prey stand here as symbols of the Goddess of Death and Regeneration, whose main epiphany is as bird of prey (vulture, owl, or other) and as fish.”³ These standing platter figures feature the body parts of birds and fish, depicted with vulvas and plant-life; the connection of these attributes draws a correlation between nature, water, and the female as mother. This is the first instance where the reproductive female is portrayed in juxtaposition with symbols connected to death as well as life. This is incredibly significant, in that the relationship between birth, death, and rebirth is understood in terms of the female and her multifaceted role.

Connected to the symbol of the female vulva, there also exists widespread evidence of

² Gimbutas, 19.

³ Gimbutas, 101.

egg symbolism as a representation of female reproductive power. Seen again in Magdalenian art, “circles and ovals are engraved over female buttocks and the bodies of bulls. The latter association will continue throughout prehistory. There are several categories of egg symbolism...The first comprises birds carrying a cosmogonic egg, the second links the egg with water and the bull as life-generators, and the third associated eggs with symbols of becoming...”⁴ The positioning of the egg shapes over the female buttocks indicates an understanding of female anatomy, and therefore a comprehension of its significance and role in reproduction.

Taking a moment to examine the significance of the bull in this conception, it is important to note the “extraordinary likeness of the female uterus and fallopian tubes to the head and horns of a bull...If we note that some representations of the bull's head in Neolithic art show the horns capped with rosettes or stars, then the similarity is even greater.”⁵ It is fascinating to note the extensive knowledge that exists in these prehistoric cultures, and their ability to manifest this comprehension symbolically into a profound portrayal of life and beyond. The bull-uterine relationship is widespread, and can be seen in such instances as on anthropomorphic vases, where the head of the bull is placed purposefully below the abdomen.⁶ The bull becomes an animal of sacrifice and regeneration; “an immediate transformation from death to life - is most impressively revealed by large bulls or aurochs in Catal Huyuk frescoes covering whole walls of the shrines, three-dimensional bull heads attached to the walls, and horn cores set in benches...Bulls are incarnated with the generative force of the Goddess.”⁷ The entirety of their significance seems to stem from this early realization of their similarity to the very core of generative power found in the female body. From this innate relationship, they are given the

⁴ Gimbutas, 213.

⁵ Gimbutas, 265-266.

⁶ Gimbutas, 266.

⁷ Gimbutas, 267.

correlational powers of regeneration, derived from the feminine. This is also evidenced in the association of the bull with symbols of water.

Returning to the symbol of the egg, it is frequently seen in relation to the symbols of water and that of the bull. They are seen together in various representations, including, “on vases where all three appear in association...On one side are bulls with enormous horns; on the other side, eggs connected by striated lines seem to float in primeval waters.”⁸ The egg is understood as possessing a direct relationship with elemental life, and the female is inherently in control of this life. This egg, the vessel of life, is naturally associated with both earth and water, “[This] water is the primordial womb of life, from which in innumerable myths life is born. It is the water ‘below,’ the water of the depths, ground water and ocean, lake and pond.”⁹ This connection with the underground, the womb of the earth which carries the substance of life, will have profound implications in the development of the earth mother, as well as death and regeneration notions surrounding the divine mother figure. Furthermore, there is a very particular and important image that arises out of this primordial scene – the snake begins its association with the becoming of life. The egg and the snake appear together in various representations, and, “such portrayals very likely reflect a connection with those creation myths featuring a cosmogonic egg and a snake at the beginning of the world.”¹⁰ The snake is an especially potent figure of life and regeneration; it comes, “from the depths of the waters where life begins,” and its regular shedding of its skin and hibernation associate it with aspects of death and renewal of life as a continuous process.¹¹ This has further evidence in the widespread ritual acts throughout history which consist of snakes being placed in the company of children and the

⁸ Gimbutas, 215.

⁹ Erich Neumann. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1955) 47.

¹⁰ Gimbutas, 217.

¹¹ Gimbutas, 121.

ill in order to impart powers of rejuvenation and protection upon them. The snake's symbolic association with chevrons, spirals, zig-zags, etc. indicates its representation as "guardian of the springs of life;"¹² an especially important image that will become employed by numerous traditions as a way of illustrating the great mother and her guardianship of the earth.

Another of the developed shapes that starts to take on meaning and sophistication is that of the chevron. This mark is an inverted V-shape, and seems to take on significance in multiple cultures as early as the 17th millennium B.C.E. This symbol is directly associated with bird and bird-like depictions, as well as with the symbol of the triangle, and especially of the inverted triangle as a completion of the chevron shape itself. Figurines of bird-like creatures with extensive and varying designs of the chevron have been found all over Europe, including Malta and France, dating from the 17th-14th millenniums B.C.E.¹³ There is a clear connection between the chevron and the female body, which starts to take on shape and significance over the centuries. The "V" appears etched or painted onto female figures either in adornment or, of particular interest, on the belly or genitals of the figure. The association of the female with bird imagery is a result of the similarity of specific characteristics – namely, the "V" shape outlined in the bird's beak and its reflection in the shape of the female body. It is likely that this emphasis is drawn due to the distinguishing nature of the reproductive area of the female. Just as in the bull symbol, this feature becomes her icon and adornment, and finds its likeness in the figure of the bird.

Examining the chevron symbol more closely, it can be seen that there is a difference between the motif as an isolated figure and as a pattern as it appears on pottery, drawings, and figurines; "The convention of borders serves to distinguish the chevron as symbol from the

¹² Gimbutas, 121.

¹³ Gimbutas, 3.

chevron as decorative motif. The isolated symbol has a denotative function, while the decorative elaboration developed from the single motif has a rather generative significance and serves as a connotative context.”¹⁴ The purposefulness with which the chevron symbol is arranged in a pattern, and delineated through the use of borders, accentuates the icon as both significant in relationship to other symbolic representations on the same object, as well as indicative of a generative force inherent in the symbol. As such, the implication is that the female’s embodiment in the symbol of the chevron represents the general conception of the female as mother, as one who generates life.

Looking at an especially significant image: “Observe this intimate association on an Early Vinča vase from Anza in Macedonia: on the neck of the vessel are the beak and eyes of the Goddess; her cheeks are painted with the diagonal bands which seem to be her particular marking; the red-painted arms of a multiple chevron converge in the center of her ‘body’ as symbolic adornment...”¹⁵ The female is portrayed in an anthropomorphized bird figure, with multiple and varying chevron shapes arranged in a pattern on her body. The use of pattern and repetition here are reminiscent of the generative force of the image; there is a clear awareness here of the powerful association of the female with the bird and chevron symbols, that by rendering them together, they achieve importance as an emblem of reproduction. Furthermore, in another interesting example of the relationship of the female with both life and death, there are figurines from the mid-3rd millennium B.C.E. from a cremation cemetery. This cemetery, “on the island of Malta yielded schematic figurines of birds with human legs, their flat, disc-shaped bodies incised on either side with a chevron or checkerboard motif...”¹⁶ There is again an anthropomorphic figure with features of a bird, seen in conjunction with the chevron. The

¹⁴ Gimbutas, 6.

¹⁵ Gimbutas, 9.

¹⁶ Gimbutas, 9.

chevron is placed purposefully in the abdomen section of the figurines, indicating the association with the female body. Here, however, the figures are related to death and the afterlife; the fact that they were found in an ancient cremation site is redolent of the notion that the female functions in both life and the passing of life, with the notion of renewal always close at hand. Indeed, many graves and burial tombs in prehistory and beyond, “were oval in shape, symbolic of an egg or womb...[which] express the idea of burial in the mother’s womb. Burial in the womb is analogous to a seed being planted in the earth, and it was therefore natural to expect life to emerge from the old.”¹⁷ This is the concept which provides the foundation for the mother’s association with both life and the regeneration, as it manifests in new life on earth, or in the afterlife. In later cultures, it is common for the mother to be associated at once with the earth as well as the underworld, or the womb of the earth; the mythological tradition of the journey through the underworld culminates in the rebirth of the individual.¹⁸

In one of the fullest representations of the life-generating image, “...around 6200 B.C.E., the first goddess appears, in plaster outline on the wall, her legs spread wide, giving birth; below her, rows of plaster breasts, nipples painted red, are molded over animal skulls or jaws that protrude through the nipples.”¹⁹ This is one of the earliest illustrations of the female in the act of giving birth. It resonates significance due to the artifacts of molded breasts found with her, indicating that this act was honored in some way. The female figure and the event of life issuing forth from her is given special reverence; it is clearly considered to be forceful and important, worthy to be recorded. Thus, the implication is that the female from prehistory is characterized in a very particular fashion – that is, the emphasis is on her role as one who gives life.

¹⁷ Gimbutas, 151.

¹⁸ Neumann, 159.

¹⁹ Carl Olson, ed. *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) 11.

Early Mesopotamian and Egyptian Figures

The culture of ancient Sumer, dating around the 4th millennium B.C.E., is considered the first civilization in recorded history. The Sumerians were located in southern Mesopotamia and were a largely agrarian society, utilizing the newly advanced knowledge of agriculture to settle the population and subsequently sustain densely populated cities and develop a writing system. There were several prominent god and goddess figures in this culture, each connected with an aspect of the earth or heavens. Among these, Inanna and her counterpart Ishtar are especially relevant to this study. Inanna, Ishtar, and the goddess Astarte are considered counterpart goddesses, because they are very similar in nature; however, they originate from different geographic locations. At many times, Inanna and Ishtar become indistinguishable in their roles and representations.

Inanna is the quintessence of the early female goddess, in that she is complex and multifaceted in her roles as a female figure. She is represented as the queen of various aspects of heaven and earth, of love, war, and fertility, among others. There is no lack of depth in her character; she possesses both positive and negative traits, divine and human associations. It is important to note that, “in ‘The Exaltation of Inanna’ that goddess is described as of equal rank with the god An, head of the Sumerian pantheon, and in possession of all the divine ordinances.”¹ A basic understanding of Inanna requires the acknowledgement that she was not considered inferior to any other god or goddess. The “Exaltation of Inanna” is a very significant work of Sumerian literature, as it shows a full account of how Inanna was represented and received by the Sumerian people. The prose begins with the statement of her complete and

¹ Carl Olson, ed. *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) 20.

incontestable possession of all the divine powers, and that she is most beloved; there is an ensuing illustration of her being as a dragon in her power over the people and over all the land.²

This is one of many various descriptions of such a powerful female figure in the form of a serpent, and the import of such will become clearer in the progression of this analysis. The description of Inanna as having power over the people and the land is very important in the examination of how the people received her as their guardian. She is described as the commander of the things of the earth; the lands “bow low [and] humanity comes before... in awed silence at the terrifying radiance and tempest...”³ Inanna is, in this sense, the guardian of all that is earthly, and all beings are in obeisance to her. She is understood as emotional, subject to both great compassion and extreme wrath. This expressive tending to her people is an attribute of her mothering character – above all she is representative of both the loving and punishing aspects of the mother.

Inanna is characterized by her need to be assuaged. With her great power comes the duty of the people to submit and make offering to her for her favor. Because she is in control of the land and its people, she manipulates their destiny. It is in this respect that they both fear and revere her, and are thus under the encumbrance to appease her. It is this relationship that will become the hallmark of the mother’s relationship with her earthly children. She is a figure to whom humanity supplicates itself for sustenance and relief. Indeed, “Even other deities cringe in the face of Inanna’s fury when people fail to pay her proper homage as a fertility goddess, and the vengeance she takes on the land and its inhabitants is terrible when she judges the latter and gives them ‘their just desserts’ or decrees their fate...”⁴ Inanna requires deference from her

²The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, “*The Exaltation of Inana (Inana B): translation*”, <http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/section4/tr4072.htm> (09 March 2011).

³ <http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/section4/tr4072.htm>.

⁴ Olson, 20.

followers, primarily in her role as a mother. She is identified as a fertile mother of the earth and its bounty, as well as the mother and ruler of humanity. Her intensity in this sphere is suggestive that it is in her role as mother that she is of most import. It is also in this function that the people most readily and enthusiastically regard her, because she directly influences the most crucial aspects of the people's livelihood – that is, she controls the fertility of the land, as well as the fate of the population.

Ishtar shares the same attributes as Inanna, and in such cases as the sacred marriage rite, it becomes unclear if there remains any differentiation whatsoever between the two goddesses. Ishtar is identified especially by her extreme range of emotions towards her people. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Ishtar is shown as both violently destructive as well as compassionate, taking care of her “children,” she accepts moral responsibility for their state and promises to provide sustenance for them.⁵ Ishtar, like Inanna, is characterized by her loving and rebuking maternal nature – she is not above the mortal feelings of attachment to her people. Indeed, this is the root of the strong and intimate relationship the people have with her; and it is because she provides their subsistence that they enthusiastically and deferentially worship her.

One of the most significant and pertinent illustrations of this concept is the sacred marriage rite. This rite, “...performed throughout Mesopotamia for two thousand years, [it] was based on a sacred fertility drama described in poetic and priestly accounts that originated in Sumer early in the third millennium and focused on how to assure fertility to the land and its people.”⁶ The marriage rite was a sanctified ceremonial act of sexual communion between the goddess Ishtar incarnated in a young priestess and a man – typically the ruler of the time – enacted in a lavish temple-like setting. Accounts of this act depict a procession of the two

⁵ Olson, 21.

⁶ Olson, 22.

participants, accompanied by people singing fervent love hymns, and adorning the goddess and her lover with perfumes and ornamentation. It was a sumptuous and enthusiastic affair, aimed primarily at the loving embrace of the man by the goddess Ishtar; this was symbolic of her approval and compassion for him and his people. Here the mother goddess is depicted as possessing sexuality and love, as well as tremendous power; she is in a position of authority over the ruler and his people, and requires of them both supplication and offering in a physical and mystical sense.

It is significant that, “The issue of this union is not her offspring but luxuriant vegetation and the fertility of the land (or a bountiful harvest), and the goddess’s endorsement of the king’s fitness to rule (or the stability of the throne), and the goddess’s promise that she will lead the king to victory in battle (or the survival of the social order).”⁷ There is unmistakable power illustrated here; Ishtar possesses influence over the land and its people, the ruler, and the success of the kingdom. All of this authority is derived from her function as a mother goddess. The Sumerian people understand her as the primary manipulator of their destiny; not through explicit reproduction, but through the symbolic act of sexual union, she is sated with generative energy that manifests itself in every aspect of life. Success and survival in the Sumerian culture is inextricably joined with their understanding of the mother’s capacity for fertile productivity.

Moving westward into the civilization of ancient Egypt, there are parallels with the Sumerian goddesses in the Egyptian figures of Isis and Hathor. Isis develops as a primary character in the Egyptian pantheon around the 3rd millennium B.C.E. Her name means, “‘the seat,’ [or] ‘the throne,’ the symbol of which she bears on her head; and the king who ‘takes possession’ of the earth...does so by sitting on her in the literal sense of the word.”⁸ This

⁷ Olson, 22.

⁸ Erich Neumann. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1955) 99.

representation has its roots in the early figures of the earth mother; the female was predominantly characterized by a squat figure, with an exaggerated belly and breasts that sit atop full thighs and expansive genital areas. The arms, legs, and heads of these figures are often diminished or altogether absent, which is highly suggestive of the importance placed on the naval region. This “bulk compel[s] the Great Mother to take a sedentary attitude, in which she belongs like a hill or mountain to the earth of which she is a part and which she embodies. Even where she stands, her center of gravity draws her downward toward the earth...The seated Great Mother is the original form of the ‘enthroned Goddess,’ and also of the throne itself.”⁹ These early representations, which evoke a sense of the centered and earth-settled, demonstrate the mother as belonging to the earth, and possessing the base which all life rests upon. Isis fully embodies this characterization; as her name and accompanying symbolism suggests, she is the foundation from which life arises. The throne is analogous to the “lap” of the mother, where the full extent of power and rulership springs from.

Arising from this symbolism, the Egyptian tradition asserts that, “The king received his authority by taking his place on the throne. The throne, so to speak, makes the king...since the beginning of Egyptian history, pharaohs called themselves sons of Isis. In the Pyramid Texts it is stated that Isis gave birth to the king, that she suckled him, and that she attended him as a mother. This conception has its mythical prototype in the care that Isis took for her son Horus. What Isis did for Horus, she is willing to do for the king, who bears the Horus name.”¹⁰ This association of the ancient symbol of the throne with Isis’ maternal nature is deeply significant in the understanding of the mother’s role, especially in such a powerful and influential civilization. As with Ishtar’s marriage rite, Isis determines the legitimacy of the king’s right to power. By

⁹ Neumann, 98.

¹⁰ Olson, 32.

physically taking the throne, the king symbolically enters into the mother-child relationship with Isis; all of his authority is generated from this bond. Ancient Egyptian birth scenes depict the queen, “as the vehicle that conveys the divine substance to the royal child. The god, acting as the father, was an invisible figure in the background and the human father officially played no part at all. Thus the queen was the sole person who could actually guarantee the divine nature of the crown prince.”¹¹

This conception is also manifested in the general population; “The texts and the sepulchral monuments show that the ancient Egyptians treated their wives and mothers with great respect... The books of Wisdom, for example, teach that one should never forget the care that a mother has bestowed on her children. Sometimes, during the Middle Kingdom, for instance, descent is reckoned through the maternal line.”¹² It is clear that the mother figure in this culture is both esteemed and powerful. The king’s relationship with Isis the mother is mirrored in the everyday lives of the Egyptians; Isis becomes a model and an ideal for the Egyptian mother figure, and the influence and esteem she sustains is preserved in the mothers of the common people.

Isis is also commonly known as a vessel of great wisdom and magical power; this characterization is intimately associated with her motherly role, in that she possesses the greatest knowledge and influence over life. The wisest of the Egyptian gods, “...the Egyptians indicated this quality of the goddess by calling her ‘great in magical power’... [her] wisdom consisted of insight into the mystery of life and death.”¹³ As the progenitor and manipulator of life, Isis maintains a supernatural influence over both life and death – she is capable of producing, and thus also of destroying. This versatile and powerful aspect of the goddess is exemplified in the

¹¹ Olson, 30.

¹² Olson, 29.

¹³ Olson, 32.

account of how she and Osiris give birth to their son Horus. The legend depicts Isis, lamenting the death of Osiris, preparing a magical rite through which Osiris may be resurrected and then properly buried and imparted into the afterlife. Upon resurrecting Osiris, Isis wishes to create a son through which their lineage may endure. To accomplish this, Isis fashions a phallus and joins their bodies, miraculously producing a son, Horus. Isis pronounces, “there is no god who has done what I have done, nor a goddess: I made myself to a man, though I am a woman, in order to make thy name live upon earth.”¹⁴ In recognition of her unique abilities, she proclaims her supremacy over the generative powers of any other figure; the androgynous aspect of such is essential. Also seen embodied by Inanna and Ishtar, Isis encompasses both male and female attributes; however the birth of Horus represents this essential and honored function of the mother goddess most explicitly. There is no lack of understanding in the ancient world of the need for both male and female elements to engender life, but it is the belief that the mother figure alone can uniquely embrace both traits that is of considerable import. Furthermore, the birth of Horus, “...is also depicted by showing Isis in the form of a bird descending upon the phallus of Osiris in order to impregnate herself.”¹⁵ Here the imagery of the bird is once again a symbol of the generative mother; and as previously examined, the image of the bird retains its significance as representative of Death and Regeneration.

Isis becomes more widespread and multifaceted as she comes into contact with other cultures, specifically the Greeks and Romans. With this expansion, her status evolves into that of a cult figure, with comparable figures arising in the mainstream religious beliefs of the civilizations that encountered her. In Greece and in Rome, “she was accorded to be the goddess of nature, the harvest, sailors, the star Sirius, the eye of the sun god,” and she had a particular

¹⁴ Olson, 34.

¹⁵ Olson, 34.

association with the mother goddess figures of Demeter and Cybele.¹⁶ It becomes clear that as Isis moves outward from Egypt, she is supplemented with the qualities of regional religious figures, and both her range and functions as a goddess become even more impressive and inclusive. Her essential characteristics remain unchanged however, when looking at how she is represented in these new contexts. Her associations with the harvest, the sea, and the stars all have their root in the traditional conception of the mother figure, dating from prehistory. The connection with the harvest is typified in the mother goddess' role in the fertility of the land; this representation is almost universal at this point in time, from its beginnings in the symbolism of the egg/seed, to the ritual celebrations of Inanna as the guarantor of bountiful crops. In addition, the honoring of Isis as a patron of sailors, especially in Rome, has its foundations in the deeply rooted association of the mother with water and its generative force.

It is important to note that, "About 300 B.C.E. the cult of Isis took the form of a mystery religion...there arose a closed society of adherents of Isis who celebrated secret and sacred rites into which one could be initiated in order to acquire the deep wisdom and the full salvation that the goddess could offer. ..She is a savior goddess, serving as a comforting example to the faithful in distress."¹⁷ This phenomenon is significant in that it indicates a shift in the reception of the mother goddess and highlights a new facet of her responsibility as the guardian of the people. Up until this point, the mother figure was openly worshipped; her role was that which impacted every life, and the full immensity of her power was not restricted to a certain group of people. This shift in characterization shows a development of thought, where a hierarchy of believers begins to surface, and only those who consider themselves the most devoted adherents reap the full potential of the goddess' power. This conception becomes intimately engaged with the

¹⁶ Olson, 35-36.

¹⁷ Olson, 38.

novel idea that this mother goddess is able to offer salvation and protection. In their faith as the most true and intimate devotees of Isis, it follows that this belief expanded into an understanding that Isis would reward them with the fullest of her guardianship. The representation of her as a “savior goddess” is very significant; it demonstrates the progression of the perception of the mother from one who influences the fate of the people through her own command, to one who may be appealed to in order to obtain liberation. This interesting evolution indicates a more wide-ranging conception of her abilities – that she may provide deliverance from a vast range of ills, from emotional distress, poverty, ignorance, etc. To the faithful, Isis becomes a benevolent mother who may be entreated to protect and provide relief. This characterization will have profound implications when examining the mother figure in developing Christianity; indeed Isis’ widespread influence was at its peak around the third century C.E., when her cult was a serious competitor of the Christian church.¹⁸ This circumstance will be explored in detail later in this analysis, in the segment delegated to early Christian imagery.

Another figure in the Egyptian pantheon of considerable significance to this study is the goddess Hathor. Hathor is characterized as both an earth and sky goddess, and is primarily associated with life and death. She is, “portrayed in three main ways...[First] bearing headgear with two horns embracing a sun disc and ornamented with the uraeus...[or] a cap in the shape of a vulture...Second, she is depicted as a cow wearing the headgear of the first figure...[Third] as a female visage with cow’s ears and a wig,” - it is important to observe that in these illustrations, Hathor is depicted full-faced, which is unusual for Egyptian images of important figures.¹⁹ These representations are reminiscent of the bull and snake imagery from prehistory. As previously discussed, the bull is evocative of the female’s role in regeneration. When

¹⁸ Olson, 37.

¹⁹ Olson, 41.

specifically ornamented with the horns of a cow or bull, Hathor becomes expressive of this concept. The presence of the vulture emphasizes this connection, as the bird of prey is traditionally symbolic of death and regeneration. Again, the snake emerges in association with this creative force, and is recognizable as a symbol of authority and the power of both male and female attributes that has come to characterize the mother figure. The manner in which Hathor is depicted is a mark of distinction and reverence; she is accorded a full-faced representation, one that permits the full force of the imagery associated with her to be venerated.

Her relationship with the earth is as a fertility goddess; one of her epithets is the, "...mistress of the vulva. She is the goddess who helps conception and birth. That is why women in childbirth pray to her for help. Hathor is expected to promote fertility in general. She is 'she who, by her fertility, brings abundance in all Egypt.' More particularly she is called 'mistress of love.' The term love, when applied to an ancient goddess, generally means that she stimulates sexuality."²⁰ Hathor's intimate association with sexual vitality, fertility, and birth indicates a great reverence for these aspects of life among the Egyptian people. Through this relationship with a powerful and potent goddess, they are celebrated as among the most esteemed and vital elements of life, and the goddess herself is made more eminent through them.

Hathor's connection with the sky is such that she, "functions as the goddess of the dead, for the nocturnal sky is often viewed as the netherworld...Hathor [is] sometimes pictured as a cow with stars on the points of her horns and on her body."²¹ This illustration is both redolent of the rosette-studded bull horns of prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines which represented the generative female, as well as her connection to regeneration after death. The connection between death and the afterlife as represented here in the night sky imagery, and the relationship of

²⁰ Olson, 42.

²¹ Olson, 44.

Hathor to these images suggests an understanding that the mother figure functions as a part of this rebirth after death. To the Egyptians, Hathor evokes, “an optimistic joy and enthusiasm that lifts mortal beings into a higher sphere.”²² Belonging to the spheres of both the living and the dead, Hathor maintains a transcendental essence, and is honored as the compassionate mother who may gracefully transport her children from one realm to the other.

²² Olson, 46.

The Greeks and the Division of Unity

The Greeks flourished in the 1st millennium B.C.E., and were an intellectually and politically commanding civilization. In the religious sphere, the Greeks are identified as polytheistic, with a vast array of gods and goddesses that are delegated to particular areas of life, and are personified as figures that inhabit both the mortal and immortal realms. Many of the Greek goddesses associated with fertility and love have assimilated features of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian mother goddesses. What is interesting is that the Greeks also pay homage to a complex and transcendental mother goddess unlike the anthropomorphic figures that comprise the Greek pantheon.

This goddess is to whom the Greeks refer as Gaia or *Ge*, meaning earth. Gaia is the definitive earth mother; “she differs from the later goddesses in that she *is* and remains earth, earth recognized as animate and divine...Gaia reminds us that the divine is transhuman and prehuman – there from the beginning – not simply a human projection. Because of this she is the primordial source...”¹ There is a distinction between the Greeks’ understanding of Gaia and their other gods and goddesses. Gaia is beyond the projections of human emotions and physicality that the other gods personify, she is transcendent and always transforming. These attributes are primary in her characterization as a mother – given the ability to transform, create, and destroy life, she is the ultimate progenitor. The Greeks understand this absolute divinity as the “realm of soul. She is never just vegetal fertility nor even the physical globe at its most volatile and destructive. She is for life but for ever-renewing, ever-changing life, for life as it encompasses

¹ Carl Olson, ed. *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) 49-50.

death.”² Here again is the expression of the mother as one who contains both life and death as part of her transformative and generative powers. Gaia surpasses all other divine manifestations, for she is the creator of the earth and all its inhabitants, as well as the divine substance of the soul. This characterization demonstrates the perception of the mother as one who is intimately associated with the most spiritual and transcendent elements of existence. It is very important to examine Gaia’s unique role in the creation of other divinities. She not only formulates the divine substance of humans, she is also fundamental in the creation of the Greek pantheon. Gaia is the one who rears the great Zeus, she absorbs the blood of the earth to produce nymphs and giants, and she fashions the seafoam to create the magnificent Aphrodite. She allocates them life and gives them roles in the natural world; this she does for every living thing, and thus is present as the supreme mother to all beings, both earthly and divine. Gaia’s creative force is her fundamental nature, “To be Gaia is to give birth to something other than herself, to heterogeneity...The other [gods] ... are supplanted...She is not; indeed, she participates in the supplantation.”³

This ability to generate so impressively is indicative of her supreme fertility. She is understood as being, “ever fertile...but she is as likely to give birth to the monstrous as to the beautiful...Gaia’s emanations are projections of her own being, each catching one aspect of her own protoplasmic fullness. To know her fully is to see her in that which emerges from her.”⁴ Gaia’s generative power and eternal fertility is always aimed at bringing forth life, and against the stifling of life; thus her power manifests itself in all aspects, both the good and the bad. There is no division of her fertile energy, from her springs variety of life, all of which is a part of her and has a place in the world. This is the Greek understanding of the mother of all things; the

² Olson, 50-51.

³ Olson, 52.

⁴ Olson, 53.

belief that everything has its origin in one being, and that this being can be perceived in each and every one of these emanations.

The way in which Gaia is symbolized is highly evocative; “For the Greeks, the particular place where Gaia’s presence was most evident was Delphi...The Greeks experienced Delphi as the navel of the earth...This is where the world came into being. This is preeminently the place where earth and sky, human and divine come together.”⁵ Delphi represents the abdomen, or the womb, of the earth. The word Delphi comes from the root word meaning womb, and thus is intimately associated with the mother figure. It is the place of deep connection and indivisibility; all aspects of life are united here. The mother and her womb are characterized as the place where everything exists without separation, in its purest form. The most common artistic interpretation of Gaia is, “as a human woman emerging breast-high from the earth itself...Because earth is always near at hand and cannot be escaped, she is guarantor of the most serious oaths. Even the gods swear by her.”⁶ Gaia is always seen in union with the earth; her figure is never separated from the earth, as it is her truest form. Her genuine and inseparable relationship with all things earthly makes her the most faithful source of its truths. This understanding provides the foundation for her affiliation as, “the giver of dreams and of mantic oracles...from her deep knowledge of what is really (and inevitably) going on...she is nature moving toward emergence in personal form.”⁷ Her intimate and unfailing knowledge of life, including the divine and earthly aspects, gives her supreme authority over all things emerging into life. This includes dreams and prophecies, as the Greeks believed these to be truths which can take real form. Delphi is the foremost location for such dreams and oracles, and is unparalleled in its importance for the Greeks as a place of divination. It is this strong connection

⁵ Olson, 50.

⁶ Olson, 51.

⁷ Olson, 51.

between Gaia and Delphi that gives both their potent spiritual power. Furthermore, Delphi is the site of the legend of Apollo's victory over the great guardian Python. This serpent is purported to be the guardian of this womb of the earth, and is intimately associated with Gaia the mother. This is further evidence of the mother's relationship with the primordial serpent.

The Greeks also consider Gaia to have incarnate forms, including those daughter goddesses which possess her attributes. Themis is one such daughter, "[who] shares many of her mother's functions and attributes, including her knowledge of the future...she is mother, among others of Dike (Justice) and of the Fates. She comes to be associated particularly with righteousness and communal order in society...right order in the human realm to the Greeks meant harmony with the natural order."⁸ Gaia's power is concentrated here in the form of order and fate, as part of nature's command. The Greek Furies are also associated with this notion of destiny, as well as retribution and right-ordering of the world; and they too are considered one of Gaia's many embodiments. Gaia is also manifested in her daughters Demeter and Persephone, who, "in their essential bond with one another represent the two aspects of Gaia, the vegetative and chthonic."⁹ Here Gaia's form is separated into two prominent aspects, the fertile and earthly mother of vegetation and bounty, and the otherworldly guardian of the dead. As previously discussed, in Gaia's undivided form, she encompasses these attributes in union. It is also interesting to note that Pandora, the first woman in Greek mythology, "is Gaia in human form. Her very name, 'rich in gifts,' 'all-giving' (a name also of Earth itself), suggests this...her iconography is indistinguishable from Gaia's – she is Gaia emerging in human form from the earth...[she is] the giver of all gifts, both welcome and unwelcome."¹⁰ Although all humans have their source in Gaia, Pandora is depicted as the closest in form and function to the great

⁸ Olson, 53.

⁹ Olson, 53-54.

¹⁰ Olson, 54.

mother. She is the first woman, divinely created, and is considered the source of all “gifts” to mankind; these include both the good and the evil, as reminiscent of Gaia’s all-embracing creative force. Pandora also maintains an interesting relation to later Christian mythology of the first woman, Eve, given further analysis in the chapter related to her.

There is an important revolution in Greek mythology with the ordering of the Olympian pantheon, where Gaia becomes eclipsed by a new order of patriarchy. Despite being sprung from the essence of Gaia, Zeus and the other gods and goddesses become disaffiliated with her, and the classical representations of the deities, “is symbolized by their being represented as cut off from their mother...”¹¹ Indeed, almost all of the subsequent divinities are products of, “Zeus’s parthenogenetic creation,”¹² where the mother is either completely absent, or invisible in the act of creation. In fact, only Artemis is portrayed as having a real mother; however, she too becomes shadowed by her offspring, and it is Artemis who embraces the maternal role. Artemis possesses a, “tender solicitude for all that is young and vulnerable, animal or human. Indeed, at Ephesus, she was worshipped as the many-breasted great mother. Yet the classical Artemis is a virgin who never bears a child of her own; she shuns the world of men and lives in the forest on the fringes of the inhabited world. She represents the persistence of the natural, the untamed, even within the Olympian hegemony – but a naturalness that had become infertile.”¹³ Artemis remains one of the only traditional mother figures in Greek mythology, though she preserves only the compassion and relationship to the natural world – she suffers the loss of fertility that characterizes the mother at her most forceful. Artemis is powerless to create, and thus is wanting in closeness to the true essence of nature. She embodies this unusual break in the theology of the mother. No longer is the mother portrayed as a figure of unity and totality, multi-faceted and

¹¹ Olson, 56.

¹² Olson, 55.

¹³ Olson, 56.

fundamentally generative in nature; Artemis reflects a division in this complexity and a general reduction in the functionality of the mother.

The Foundations of Judeo-Christian Monotheism

There exists a strong foundation of ancient Hebrew culture, tradition, and religious mythology that becomes integrated into traditional Christian religious imagery. It is in the tradition of the Jewish people that the transformation from a mother-worshipping to a father-centered faith becomes complete. Although there are illustrations and instances of powerful male deities from almost every preceding civilization, there always existed accompanying female figures that equaled in importance. Even for the ancient Greeks, there was no lack of female figures that were significant and powerful in their own right, including those of a maternal nature. However, the Jewish faith marks the beginning of a purely patriarchal and mother-refuting institution that diverges strongly from widespread nature-based and cohesive theology.

In the first millennium B.C.E., there is evidence that the Jewish people began adopting a dualistic view of life and the supernatural. The Jewish Essenes embraced the novel concepts of, “good-versus-evil as the cosmic battle between light and dark...And so an extremely dualistic good/light versus evil/dark ontology was incorporated as the rational framework of Christianity...Under these religious systems, half of life is seen as the enemy of life, and is no longer experienced as an inherent and organic part of the life process.”¹ The Jewish understanding of Yahweh was that of an all-powerful transcendental god, representing the ultimate possibility of good; with this necessitated the perception of evil – symbolized by those things dark and chaotic – and believed to be inherently opposed to the ordered goodness of life. This conception, and its development in the Christian tradition, separates existence into two disparate spheres, and negates the value of that which is associated with the dark and unordered.

¹ Barbara Mor and Monica Sjoo. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987) 232-3.

This darkness was directly associated with the earthly - indeed, with what has been universally understood as the spirit and domain of the mother. Through her relationship with the earth, the mother figure becomes polluted with symbolism of chaos and evil.

The ancient Hebrew people were not untouched by the influence of the great mother figure from other religious traditions; they “perceived this primordial paradigm of earth as Birth Mother, Sex Mother, and Death mother, all three in one.”² They rejected this notion of paradox and unity, and formulate an image of god that does not include the cyclic and multi-faceted aspects of life. Instead, Yahweh demonstrates the unique ability to exist beyond the natural order, and is, in fact, “alone among all male gods of the earth... [who] never made love to a female or to the earth. In Christianity this extraordinary phenomenon is continued in a son born without sex, from a sexless virgin mother.”³ This is exceedingly significant in examining how the mother figure is received in such a tradition; those aspects which are inherent to her power are rendered useless, and she becomes inert. Yahweh alone is the animator of life, and thus proves that the female mother has no place in creation. Thus, without the acknowledgement of her role in the creative process, she is diminished to merely the passive and the earthly – that is, she becomes the symbol of what is not divine.

In the book of Genesis, “the ancient Goddess was described in negative abstractions: ‘chaos,’ ‘darkness,’ ‘the deep’...some mindless beast of matter who must be kept under...control and always subject to the Father’s logos, or word. Tehom (the Abyss, the Dark Night, the Lower Waters) has always since crouched submissively in Her deep abode... sending up springs to those who deserve them...though She thus influences human fate, none may visit

² Sjoo, 270.

³ Sjoo, 270.

her recesses.”⁴ The Torah references these aspects – the dark, the chaotic, the abyss – as a primordial essence which is subject to the order generated by the father. This is further evidence suggesting the mother inhabits the sphere of chaos and corporeality. These “Lower Waters” are the terrible realm under the divine heavens; the connection of the mother with water is again apparent, especially as it relates to primordial life. This mother goddess is still present in this dark place, though she is not to be experienced.

This depiction has intimate associations with serpent symbolism, which has its roots in the earliest mother imagery, and is evidenced among all of the cultures previously discussed. The primordial serpent is always closely associated with the womanly and motherly body. From the prehistoric relationship of the snake and the egg, the mother is characterized as the beginning of life from chaos, the commander “of matter still unformed and undifferentiated, she holds the earth like an egg in the pure energy of her coils.”⁵ This depiction evolves, and its development can be traced in the images of Isis, Hathor, Gaia, among others. An interesting transition occurs, again in Greek mythology, where at Delphi Apollo slays Gaia’s Python. This is celebrated as a conquering of the guardian of the womb, opening the earth to control by a force other than the original mother. And it is in, “Hebrew Genesis, [that] the serpent is doomed by... Yahweh to be forever the enemy of the human race: to be crushed under our heels, and to give back to us only poison. In Christian prophesy, in Revelation 12-21:1, the final extinction of the dragon is promised when a king-messiah kills the watery cosmic snake, and then takes over the world throne unchallenged: ‘and there was no more sea.’”⁶ Here in the Hebrew tradition, the snake which once represented primordial origins of life and the generative mother becomes characterized as a bringer of evil and enmity. No longer is the snake evocative of supernatural

⁴ Sjoo, 248.

⁵ Sjoo, 251.

⁶ Sjoo, 251.

power and productive force; it is symbolic of that which must be conquered in order for peace to be restored and for salvation to be realized. The snake as guardian of life is to be eradicated, as are the primordial waters from which this life generates.

Another significant example of this perception is in Lilith. In Hebrew legend, “[she] was the rebellious woman created before Eve. She was portrayed as part snake and wearing wings – ‘the winding serpent who is Lilith’ ... Her relation to the very old Snake-and-Bird Goddess is obvious...”⁷ This is also suggestive of the snake-bird mother goddess imagery as it is transformed into a portrayal of disorder and earthly offense. Eve becomes critical in this representation as well. As the first woman, and progenitor of mankind, Eve symbolizes the primary mother in Christianity. Traces of the ancient mother goddess can be found in Eve, and in the story of the Garden of Eden; “Here is the Garden of the Goddess and her wise cosmic serpent, the tree of knowledge with its dark soma fruit, the fig of the Cretan Goddess – which became, for Westerners, the magic apple...*Eve* means ‘life,’ and Eve is called the Mother-of-All-Living. *Adam* means ‘son of the red Mother Earth.’”⁸ The creation myth and its principal participants are redolent of the mythological foundations of a vast number of civilizations predating the Hebrews. However, here the creation of man stems peculiarly from the male body, and from a father god. The names given to Adam and Eve evoke this original representation of man being born from the earth, taking their essence from the earth-mother and propagating life in human form. In the course of events leading to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, Eve is seduced by the primordial serpent; it is her acquisition of the knowledge of life that necessitates her exclusion from that which is divine. Eve, as mother, is disconnected from the divine quality, and is reduced to inhabit a strictly corporeal world. This is also another

⁷ Sjöo, 276-7.

⁸ Sjöo, 276.

illustration of, “the separation of the female from the male, at Yahweh’s command.”⁹ Again, the mother experiences a great divide of her unity; the androgynous intermingling of male and female has no place in this ordering of the world. Eve is in essence broken off from the whole of the body. She then induces the chaos of earthly affliction, and still operating as mother, inflicts this burden upon her children. She is the source of “Original Sin,” and thus the mother figure, and the earth itself, becomes equated with transgression and evil. Furthermore, the punishment that Adam and Eve are fated to endure is suggestive of this negative mother imagery. Adam is forced to roam the earth, to labor the earth and take his subsistence from it. This relationship between Adam and the great mother earth is understood as a curse upon humanity. This is also true of Eve – her punishment is purely related to her role as mother. Eve must experience motherhood through suffering; birth becomes painful and is identified as punitive. This is highly contrary to the organic and honored power of reproduction that has been the dominant perception until this time.

⁹ Sjo, 276.

The Culmination of Judeo-Christian Mother Imagery in Mary

With the birth of Jesus, the role of the mother in the Judeo-Christian tradition changed significantly. Christian faith maintains that Jesus was born to a virgin Mary and her husband Joseph, and was the Father god in human incarnation, identified as the Holy Son. This act marks the first shift in thought concerning Christian perceptions of the mother. In giving birth to the divine, Mary embraces some of the attributes of the ancient mother goddess that had long been rejected by Judeo-Christian theology. In this act of creation alone, Mary elevates the mother from her earthly domain, and restores the transcendence and import that was her original nature.

Although the Bible does contain differing accounts of Mary and her fundamental nature, there is no dispute over her being a special woman, who God chose to carry his essence into the earthly realm. The Protevangelium of James contains a more comprehensive view of Mary's early life, the testimony of which is indicative of her remarkable nature from her own birth, leading up to the moment of conception and the birth of Jesus. James documents, "...an account of two miraculous births: that of Mary and that of Jesus. It opens with Mary's aged parents, Joachim and Anna, mourning their childlessness. Angels appear to both, assuring them that they will have a child 'who will be spoken of in the whole world' (4.3)"¹ Mary is here represented as part of a divine plan, even before her own parallel experience with her husband Joseph. This lays the foundation for her figure to be received as something beyond the earth, and places her own conception in Anna as something that is sanctified. This image is further developed in the story of Anna taking Mary, "to the temple at the age of two. The little girl jumped for joy to be placed in the service of God; she was 'nurtured like a dove and received food from the hand of

¹ Carl Olson, ed. *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) 83.

an angel' (8.1)² Again Mary is depicted in such a way as to be blessed and pure in action and heart – this enables her to exist untainted, in preparation for her later role. Joseph, and his relationship to Mary, is also purified; it is reported that, “A dove flew out of Joseph’s rod up to his head; this was a sign that he was to take Mary under his chaste and fatherly care.”³ The dove imagery and the virtuousness of each associates both Mary and Joseph with the divine. They are represented as the most righteous among mortals, and as such, maintain the closest connection to the sacred. This is the only way in which Mary’s role as mother can transcend the physical realm of the earth.

When the time comes for Mary’s role as mother to be realized, Mary is doubtful of the undertaking; “The angel’s response to Mary’s doubts about this mission makes it clear that the birth of Jesus is to be understood as a union between humanity and divinity (Luke 1:35).”⁴ In yet another example of divine involvement on behalf of Mary, the angel reminds Mary that the birth of her son has been divinely ordered, and that she will successfully carry out God’s will. This relationship between God, the angels, and Mary is evocative of a new evolution in mother imagery in Christianity. Mary’s ability to connect with the divine realm demonstrates the advancement from Eve’s original displacement from this sphere.

The Gospels relate the birth of Jesus, immaculately conceived by virgin Mary; the very fact that she is given such attention in the Bible is indicative of her importance. It is in the granting of Mary’s inclusion in the act that the divine birth marks the acceptance of the earthly mother in such a momentous act of creation. Above all, it is Mary who becomes the vital component of the divine birth – she is the one who transmits the divine essence to the earthly realm, and who is partner in the revealing of the true nature of her son; and it is, “Mary’s role in

² Olson, 84.

³ Olson, 84.

⁴ Olson, 81.

the event [that] shows her maternal influence on her son, which is the basis of Marian intercession.”⁵ However, this concept of arbitration develops more fully in later centuries, and will be looked at in detail in the next chapter.

One of the most evocative images of Mary is in Chapter 12 of Revelations, which describes, “a ‘great portent’ 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). Like everything else in Revelation, the story line is fantastic and ambiguous: the woman is pregnant, she cries out in pain at the birth of the child; a seven-headed, ten-horned, seven-crowned dragon threatens to devour the child as soon as it is born. But the drama has a happy ending, the birth takes place safely...”⁶ Based on the context, and the language describing the child in this passage, the woman is considered a portrayal of Mary, and the event is the birth of Jesus. This image is of great significance, in that it is a biblical description of the mother figure from a transcendental perspective. The mother here occupies both the earthly, signified by the dragon, and the mortal act of giving birth, as well as the divine realm, indicated by the heavenly bodies that surround her. The dragon here is of great import; it is the serpent once more symbolizing the earthly sphere. This is another instance of the separation of the earthly serpent figure from that of the generative mother; instead, the serpent is assaulting the very act of creation. Here, the serpent is understood to represent Satan. Satan is inherently connected to the earthly, in essence all that is anti-divine. Here again, this dualistic perspective is manifest, and the imagery is indicative that the corporeal realm of Satan and the serpent is always posed to threaten that which is divine and good. This is the realm that the mother has always occupied; however here, Mary becomes the ideal mother, and she is depicted in relation to the heavens and is protected by the divine. Her figure is surrounded by

⁵ Olson, 82.

⁶ Olson, 83.

the sun, moon, and stars, the connotation of which suggests that her rightful place is in the heavenly realm. It is her creative force, however, that functions still on earth; the birth of Jesus is the link between her function in the divine and earthly spheres. This is the ultimate reconciliation of the mother figure with the earth and the transcendental generative force which makes her a divine figure.

Beyond the biblical descriptions themselves, there exists extensive Marian imagery in the centuries following the death of Jesus. It is interesting that in much of the earlier representations, there is a notable influence of Isis imagery interwoven in the figure of Mary. Some of the essential attributes of Mary as mother are found in Isis herself, and indeed it is from Isis that Mary takes the name Theotokos, meaning Mother of God. Isis had been recognized by this name for centuries, as well as by the epithet, the Great Virgin.⁷ The Egyptians were purposeful and particular in their depictions of Isis, and the way in which they portrayed the great mother goddess was both novel and impactful. This manner of representation is seen in early Marian imagery, and is such that, “Her features are generalized to make her appear ‘divine’, and her look is remote and serene above human problems. The friendly twinkle of reflected light is missing in her eyes...Moreover, Mary refrains from looking directly at us...this detached ‘Isis look’ is characteristic of most of the early images of Mary.”⁸ Isis, too, occupied both the divine and earthly realms, although she was recognized definitively as a goddess. Mary is not understood in this sense; however she is given a very distinctive place in the heavenly domain. This representation of her exemplifies this; her features lack a sense of mortal affection, and it is not a lack of sympathy or sensitivity to the mortal realm, but a certain distance from earthly concerns as she has already ascended to the divine. This transcendence is not yet a firm religious notion,

⁷ Maria Vassilaki, ed. *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005) 4.

⁸ Vassilaki, 8.

but this image, as well as that described in Revelations, hints at the conviction that Mary has risen to the heavens in a special place of reverence. In another depiction of Mary, the influence of Isis is extant in the allusion to her as a patron of the earth and subsistence, as well as the heavens. Mary stands in likeness to Isis, “Though she lacks the knotted mantle, she is identified by the crescent moon above a crown of greenery, by the stalks of grain in her raised left hand, and by the yellow scepter, which disappears into the folds of her garments. Her head is ringed by a grey halo with a white border, her hair falls in loose ringlets in front of her left...”⁹ Here, the grain and greenery is reminiscent of the mother earth imagery of Isis and her predecessors. There is a relationship of the mother figure, even in Mary, to the fertility of the land. Mary even manifests her influence as a patroness of sailors, and is deemed, “...Mary, ‘Star of the Sea,’”¹⁰ This interesting portrayal of Mary is found in a European prayer and invocation of Mary, and has clear associations with Isis, who was also called upon as a guardian of the sea and seafarers. It is apparent in the appropriation of both the descriptive epithets and the imagery itself of the goddess Isis to the mother Mary that there is at least in some degree an intersection of religious belief and imagery.

A very important shift occurred around the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., as there emerged a strong discourse on the Assumption of Mary. This is evidence of a notable evolution of thinking of Mary, as it is not dependent on the birth of Jesus; Mary becomes identified as significant beyond her direct relationship with Jesus. At this time, special attention is paid to Mary’s life after his birth, as well as her death. In the philosophical writing of the Pseudo-Melito, it is described that, “...after the death of Jesus, Mary was visited by an angel who promised as consolation for her overwhelming grief that she would soon be reunited with her son. Shortly

⁹ Vassilaki, 6.

¹⁰ Olson, 86.

afterward, Mary died, surrounded by the apostles...An archangel brought Mary's soul to be reunited with her body, and she was taken up, physical body and soul, to heaven. Here she remains, incorrupt and eternal...The message...is simply that Mary neither was born nor died in the way of other human beings."¹¹ This conception of Mary lays the foundation for what becomes a widespread conception of her as a divinely received figure, and subsequently one who may act as intermediary between the human and divine. She is understood as remarkable among all of mankind, and while she was a mortal, she did not merely function as such but became engaged in both realms.

A cult of the Virgin Mary arose among such representations, and images of her depict, "Mary holding the infant Jesus, both often crowned and jeweled, [and] are the most ancient and consistent representations associated with [the] Virgin."¹² Such images become the basis of what is known as the Hodegetria, the term in Greek meaning "she who shows the way". The general presentation of the Hodegetria is the mother Mary, "shown frontally, presenting the Christ-child for the world's salvation. She holds Christ either on her left arm with her right directing the viewers' eye towards him, or enthroned on her lap in front of her...[What is] important is the bringing together of the Virgin and the child in her arms in one visual form. The union of these two figures in one image gives visual expression to the mystery of the Incarnation, and in addition, through their close relationship, it testifies to God's planned role for Mary in the salvation of the world."¹³ This illustration of Mary is primarily aimed at the offering of Jesus as the way to salvation; however, the essential significance of the image is in the bold presentation of Mary as the benefactor and guardian of the Savior. The position of Mary as the one who

¹¹ Olson, 84.

¹² Olson, 82.

¹³ Vassilaki, 104.

directs humanity towards the acceptance of Jesus is suggestive of her indispensable nature as mother. The ancient symbolism of the throne is implicit in this illustration as well.

This significant and novel acceptance of the mother figure is further advanced in the perception of Mary as the most impactful intermediary between man and God. This idea first found basis in times of extreme struggle or danger; “during the great plague of 590 the icon of Mary was carried to the basilica of St Peter’s and by means of the intercession of the Virgin the plague – a sign of the wrath of God – ceased.”¹⁴ With Mary’s ascension to the divine realm, the mother’s role becomes completely associated with her relationship with the father God. She is now understood as powerful and possessing influence over God. Man’s relationship with the mother is still in its essence a supplication to her power, now in the form of intercessor on behalf of man before God. This relationship is strongly redolent of the ancient bond between man and the earth mother goddess – in submitting to her, man invokes her guardianship, and she permits his survival and success. Indeed, this somewhat subtle transition back to the imagery of the early mother figure is also found in, “eighth century epithets of the Mother of God which exploit the imagery of light – starting with the ‘bright dawn’...”¹⁵ In the dualism of the Judeo-Christian theology, the mother figure originated in the realm of darkness and chaos. Mary exalts the mother, bringing the perception of her into one of lightness and good.

¹⁴ Vassilaki, 35.

¹⁵ Vassilaki, 84.

Dynamism and Miracles in the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages saw an evolution in the belief in Marian intercession. Her image took on a cult status, even through periods of iconoclasm and changing orthodoxy. Her closeness to her son endowed Mary with special power over salvation in the eyes of the public. This conception of the Virgin Mary took special hold in the Catholic and Orthodox churches that expanded over most of Europe. Mary became associated with sensational apparitions and miracles; her name, her image, and relics attributed to her became the source of inspiration and liberation.

Despite not being sanctioned by the Church, for centuries, “Christians enthusiastically marked the anniversaries of Mary’s birth and death...it became generally believed that the angelic appearance to Anna signaled Mary’s special conception. It was not claimed that Mary was born, like Jesus, through an overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, but rather that her normal human conception was marked by a special grace that sanctified her in Anna’s womb, freeing her from the original sin borne by all other human beings.”¹ This general perception of Mary marks the beginning of the controversy regarding her blessed conception in Anna. The belief at this time was such that Mary’s impregnation with Jesus necessitates that her origins must be consecrated, so that her own essence will not taint that of her son’s. The way her own corporeal nature becomes reconciled with the divine is through the blessing of Mary in Anna’s womb. The mother’s womb, the source of generative power, then becomes a place of purification. Mary’s sacred nature develops strongly, and in the iconoclastic period of the 8th and 9th centuries, her image acquires a special status of reverence. The orthodox iconoclast position on Marian

¹ Carl Olson, ed. *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) 84-5.

devotion states: “...How can the all-hymned Mother of God, on whom the fullness of the divinity cast its shadow, through whom the unapproachable light shone, higher than the heavens and holier than the Cherubim, be depicted in the vulgar art of the Greek?’...that because matter cannot reproduce her grandeur, any representation must be an offence to the Mother of God.”² Here, the mother is given unparalleled veneration – the description evokes the sentiment that Mary is unique in having experienced the wholeness of divinity upon her. She is, above all others, exalted to holiness; and it is because of her role as mother that she is so. During this time, orthodoxy took center stage, and the roles of Mary and of all the saints became defined. While the holy power of intercession was attributed to some degree to all Christian saints, “Mary’s heavenly credibility was especially efficacious, since she was at once the mother of Jesus and the queen of heaven, the most accessible and the most powerful of all who stand in the presence of God.”³ The images of Mary depict her crowned and enthroned with the infant Jesus, often with stars or other heavenly bodies surrounding her; the implication is that she is regarded as the queen of heaven, her rightful place with her son Jesus and the father God. Her relationship with these figures, combined with her fundamentally human nature, allows her a unique accessibility to those who worship her and desire divine intervention.

The end of iconoclasm produced a new fervor in Marian worship. Her image became openly accessible and was enthusiastically received and revered. The *Canon of Orthodoxy* defined that, “the Theotokos is ‘truly the Mother of God’ (third ode) and that ‘through her the *Logos* was incarnated... The Patriarch addresses ‘the much hymned, much praised, Virgin mother, Mother of God’ and requests her ‘to redeem from grave misdeeds those who honour your Virgin Birth. For we have no other help but you, bride of God’ (seventh ode). And he

² Maria Vassilaki, ed. *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005) 82.

³ Olson, 85.

beseeches ‘Help, shelter and succor of all, show that you can intercede... with the power of your son’, because ‘as mother you are all-powerful’ (ninth ode).”⁴ This new orthodox position, which allowed the images of Mary to be openly venerated, identifies Mary as the absolute Mother of God; that it was through her that God’s essence was brought to the earth. This definitive position of the Church endorses Mary as the Mother – capitalized, implying Mary’s established and authoritative role. She is all-powerful, as it stated, *because* she is mother. The initiative of the Church’s statement was to propagate the reception of Mary as one to be praised, celebrated, and entreated to. The statement, “we have no other help but you,” suggests the burgeoning belief that Mary is exclusive in her ability to successfully intercede on behalf of humanity. As mother, she possesses the ultimate compassion for her people; she is their most powerful shelter and relief. The virgin mother Mary is considered the exalted guardian of man.

With this new orthodox attitude towards Marian imagery came a new depiction of the mother Mary. Previously, the dominant image was that of the Hodegetria, the enthroned mother offering the infant Jesus for salvation. Now, the Theotokos is dominated by, “notions of maternity and sorrow at the death of a child...[which] represents the affirmation of the human element in God’s plan for the salvation of mankind.”⁵ This new image portrays Mary as emotionally connected to her son; the role is exceedingly more maternal and passionate than that of the regal Hodegetria. What is interesting about both the Hodegetria and the new Theotokos representation is that Jesus is the center of the image in infant form. This is evocative of the unmistakable significance which the mother-child relationship maintains in the tradition. Especially in the latter figure, the motherly aspect is clearly the heart of the vision. This is understandable in the context of the new orthodoxy, which clearly defines Mary’s role as the

⁴ Vassilaki, 81.

⁵ Vassilaki, 91.

people's savior. Mary shares this role with Jesus, in the sense that she is understood as having the most direct relationship with her son Jesus – none can surpass the intimacy of the mother-child relationship – and the most powerful compassion for the people, whose world she was originally a part of. This perception of the mother-child bond is further evidenced in the way that Jesus is portrayed in the images. In these post-iconoclastic images, “His physical response to her motherly love is tender embrace, in which his small arm reaches up and around her neck to touch her cheek. Through her knowledge of his love she can be assured of his response to her appeal for the salvation of mankind. In his privileged relationship she provides the access to the economy of intercession.”⁶ The relationship depicted in these images is central to the understanding of how Mary's role as mother evolves into one that enables her to function as the supreme liberator of the people. The physical and emotional connection that is deliberately portrayed in these images serves to affirm her unparalleled and unconditional loving relationship with Jesus; this in turn enables her to appeal to him on behalf of those that implore her help. For those that revere her and her relationship with Jesus, the belief is that Mary will, without fail, act as mediator to the Holy Son. This conception has its foundations in the ancient mother figure, who possesses command over all that she creates.

There is an interesting evolution of this imagery, with the emergence of relics and apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The conviction that Mary works as intercessor on behalf of humanity progresses into the general belief in her powers as a worker of miracles. Mary, “The loving mother and powerful queen was also invested by popular tradition with the power to work miracles. Latin, Greek, and Coptic tales of wonders worked by Mary flourished from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. One startling but interesting motif that appears again and again in these collections is the power of milk from Mary's breasts to cure blindness, cancer, and other

⁶ Vassilaki, 106.

illnesses. There also remain from the Middle Ages a great many relics of the Virgin, pieces of clothing or bits of hair left behind at the Assumption. These were thought to have the power to work miracles.”⁷ The novel inspiration of milk symbolism is indicative of the deep impact of mother imagery developing in the Middle Ages. Mary is imbued with the characteristically corporeal attributes of the mother; however, through her relationship with the divine, these features are given a transcendental power and importance. Her milk is not merely motherly nourishment, but surpasses this bodily purpose and functions as a sacred source of liberation from human suffering. This is exceedingly significant in the evolution from Mary’s original union with the image of Jesus – she is now seen alone, and understood as possessing power in and of herself. The physical features of her motherhood are now the focus of Marian devotion. Relics such as cloth or hair attributed to her are believed to preserve her energy and power, namely, her generative force that translates into the power to cure, heal, and liberate. Milk is the ultimate symbol of this power; this idea is the basis of milk imagery associated with salvation.

It became orthodox tradition that milk was given, “as a reward to Christian martyrs and to the just at the Last Judgment. Accounts of martyrdom of St Paul and St Catherine of Alexandria tell us that milk gushed forth in place of blood from their decapitated remains. It attested to their instantaneous salvation and attainment of immortality in Christ.”⁸ The hegemonic belief of the power of milk is revealing of the expanding influence of mother imagery in the Christian tradition. Milk is uniquely transmitted through the mother, and thus it is implicit in the reverence with which it is treated that the mother herself is exalted in the practice. The mother’s milk became a symbol of salvation and righteousness. This imagery becomes assimilated into the Marian imagery of the late Middle Ages. Mary is now depicted as a mother offering her breast

⁷ Olson, 86.

⁸ Vassilaki, 18.

to the infant Jesus; some representations show her nursing. This image is known as the Galaktotrophousa. The tradition of the church at this time was to use the image of the Galaktotrophousa to significantly express, “the importance of milk and its close ties to blood and flesh, specifically the blood and flesh of Christ. The newly baptized were offered a special Eucharist, designed for this moment of rebirth in Christ. In between the wine and bread of the standard ceremony they were given a cup of milk mixed with honey.”⁹ The taking in of milk signified the act of rebirth in the purity of Christ. The mother in this way serves to provide the essence for regeneration.

These ideas became developed fully with the emergence of imagery concerning God in association with feminine attributes. The renowned Christian mystic Julian of Norwich embodied this conception of the Father God and the Holy Son, drawing her inspiration from other great religious figures, as well as the Bible itself. Though relatively little is known of her life, Julian of Norwich was born in the second half of the fourteenth century; she was extremely devout, and asserted her belief that God functions as a mother to his children. She found direct feminine reference to the creator in the Bible, explicitly in passages which refer to the wisdom of God; “The Bible continually refers to wisdom, which is God’s external revelation of self, by use of the feminine pronoun...Wisdom is further the “mother” of “all good things” (Wisd. 7.11-12), “motherlike,” and “like a young bride” who comes to meet “he who flees the Lord” (Sir. 15.1-2).”¹⁰ What has since been understood as the predominantly male Christian God is now welcomed as having evolved into an entity which possesses the characteristics of a feminine mother; Wisdom is the manifestation of the earthly mother aspect of the father God. However, as Julian of Norwich discusses, there are more subtle and profound suggestions of God’s role as

⁹ Vassilaki, 18.

¹⁰ Jennifer P. Heimmel, *“God is Our Mother”: Julian of Norwich and the Medieval Image of Christian Feminine Divinity* (Salzburg: Institute for English and American Studies, 1982) 5.

mother found within the Bible. Regarding his children, God professes, “‘My burden since your birth, whom I have carried from your infancy...I will bear you’ (Isa. 46.3-4).”¹¹ This imagery is evocative of a mother supporting her child, caring for it through all stages of life. This is a direct reference to God having participated in the birth of his children, and nurturing them as a mother. In further evidence of this notion, in Galatians 4.19, God declares, “‘You are my children, and you put me back in labor pains until Christ is formed in you.’”¹² This indicates the association of God with the physical and earthly feelings of motherhood – the experience of labor pains is explicitly maternal. This imagery is especially significant, as it marks a departure from the rigidly defined transcendence and masculinity of the Christian perception of God. Furthermore, it illuminates an entirely new acceptance of the mother; no longer is the earthly mother characterized by the dark and chaotic, and she does not solely belong to the sphere deserving of loathing and constraint. This imagery is also independent of association with Mary, and thus represents a liberated expression of the mother.

Julian of Norwich derives some of her illustrations from the theology of St. Anselm and the influential 13th century text *Ancrene Riwe*. St. Anselm claims, “‘Truly, Lord, you are a mother; for both they who are in labour and they who are brought forth are accepted by you...It is by your death that they have been born...So you, Lord God, are the great mother.’”¹³ This illustration plainly correlates the father God with the image of the mother. Not only is this a reverential representation of mother, but the great mother. The connotation of this is that of the great primordial mother, the elemental mother associated with earth, heaven, creation. By referring to God in this way, this fundamental mother figure is illuminated once again in the mainstream religious sentiments of the people. It is significant to note that this representation

¹¹ Heimmel, 7.

¹² Heimmel, 25.

¹³ Heimmel, 25-6.

also includes the elements of life and death that have been evidenced in earlier earth mother illustrations. The mother's ability to regenerate and produce life from destruction is embodied in the act of Jesus' death and resurrection. There is also evidence of the primordial androgyny associated with the great mother. The inherent masculinity with which the Christian God is understood now exhibits characteristically feminine attributes, and is indeed called by a feminine name.

In the *Ancrene Riwe*, God is described as a mother caring for his children and there is an extensive discussion of why God withdraws from the people. It is claimed that, "One reason...is so that we might more eagerly call after God as a baby does with its mother...in discussing why God allows us to be tempted, answers that God is playing with us as a mother with her child, waiting to embrace us and tell us all is well..."¹⁴ In attempting to comprehend and explain the nature of God's relationship with humanity, the mother figure is utilized as the most fitting metaphor. This is indicative of an inherent understanding and embracing of the mother figure, through which her nature may provide insight and revelation to those seeking higher awareness; her figure is used to facilitate the comprehension of the transcendental. The *Ancrene Riwe* further describes that God, like the mother, "indulged in playful games of hide and seek with the young child, so that the child seemed left alone and the grace and comfort of the mother was apparently withdrawn. Yet this was actually done out of love for the child rather than through a lack of it..."¹⁵ This conception of the mother is suggestive of the most physical and emotional bonds between mother and child – she is at once a nurturer and a disciplinarian. The mother is represented as one who instructs the child, and who knows what is best despite the apparent suffering that the child must endure. This is the manner in which God is understood at this time.

¹⁴ Heimmel, 39-40.

¹⁵ Heimmel, 61.

Julian of Norwich supports this characterization; she claims that God must act as mother to his children in order to love and care for their development. Her vision also includes the nurturing nature of Jesus; “This recurrent image of the essential nourishment is further offered directly from the divine body just as with a mother suckling her young. It is Christ who states: ‘He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal...For my flesh is real food and my blood real drink...the man who feeds on me will have life because of me.’ (John 6.48-58).”¹⁶ This passage elucidates the direct relationship between mother and child, and how that becomes translated in the relationship of Jesus and his believers. Jesus affirms that his people must drink and feed from him; this symbolic taking in of his essence is analogous to the mother nursing her child. Because of this, the child is given life and abiding nourishment. This is another example of how the mother figure provides superior symbolism for the deepest truths of a religion.

Returning to the image of Mary, she was observed throughout the Middle Ages as part of this redeeming and regenerative force associated with the Father God and the Holy Son. Popular images were made of her, some of which depict her as she is described in Revelations – as the glorious and transcendent queen of heaven. Such images are found in numerous churches in Europe, and include elaborate representations of Mary; “often a dragon or a snake curls around the feet of the Virgin. The fact that Mary is stepping on the beast suggests the curse upon the serpent-devil who led Adam and Eve into sin (Gen. 3:15); this is one of the many ways in which Mary is seen as the female force who overcomes the curse brought upon the human race by the first woman, Eve.”¹⁷ Here again the serpent is depicted as a symbol of the earthly and debased; however, it is significant to note that it appears still in connection with the great mother figure. The snake serves to represent the corporeal and vile, and the great mother Mary, pictured

¹⁶ Heimmell, 11.

¹⁷ Olson, 83.

stepping on the snake, is a signifier of the need for power over this realm. Although the mother is now in opposition to the corporeal realm, there is an important connection to her possession of command over what is earthly. This act is also indicative of Mary's role in the exalting of the feminine; Mary has transcended this loathsome world that Eve and her children were originally banished to. Despite this shift in imagery of the great mother, there still exists the prevailing belief of the distinct separation of the divine and the corporeal; the corporeal realm is still the original realm of the mother. This dualistic interpretation renders the conviction of the physical realm as inferior and contemptible, and the mother maintains an intrinsic association with such. This is evidenced in recurrent images of, "the world...pictured literally as the Devil's excrement. Christian paintings and drawings of the time show cities, fields, animals, humans, trees, dogs, babies, flowers – all falling...[from] Satan, who squats above us all grinning."¹⁸ There is a clear understanding of the world as possessing that which is evil and desecrated. With Mary's exaltation from this sphere, the great mother figure experiences a disconnect from what was originally elemental to her creative and nourishing nature. No longer do the natural phenomena of the world represent part of the mother's wonder and power, but they become defiled through their exclusive association with Satan.

¹⁸ Barbara Mor and Monica Sjoo. *The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1987) 289.

Conclusion: Mary's Contact with the New World

Coming out of the medieval period, the figure of the mother continues to have a strong presence in the image of Mary. Her influence expands with the discovery of the New World and the introduction of industry. She adapts to the indigenous traditions already present in the Americas, and her evolved image shapes the way the mother image is received, both in these cultures and beyond. With the rise of industrialism, Mary comes to represent a theological approach to confronting a modern existence.

The Aztecs were an established civilization in Mesoamerica before their contact with the Spanish in the 16th century. The Aztec culture possessed a developed religious institution, with established mother goddess figures; these are all notably represented under the mother figure Tonantsi. Tonantsi is the symbol of the mother earth, of the protecting and nurturing mother; her attributes take form in the figures of other derivative goddesses, including that of sustenance, grandmother, fertility, etc. Tonantsi's contact with Catholicism initiated a development in traditional religious folklore. Tonantsi's mothering nature took on a new form with the onslaught of Christian conquerors; "According to legend, Tonantsi would not allow this foreign god to punish her children. Part of the folklore of Mexico expresses this protective function of the goddess: she challenged God, her son, to produce mother's milk (as she had done), to prove that her benevolence equaled his disciplinary harshness."¹ Tonantsi becomes characterized as a defender of her children against the perceived threat of the Christian male god. Indeed, God is believed to be one of Tonantsi's offspring, manifesting the punishing and wrathful aspects of the divine. God is unable to balance his nature with the loving and nurturing that only Tonantsi

¹ James J. Preston, ed. *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 12.

herself can provide; this nourishment is symbolized in the form of mother's milk. Tonantsi represents the ultimate, all-encompassing mother, and her image eventually becomes analogous with the Virgin Guadalupe.

The legend of the Virgin Guadalupe describes an apparition of the Virgin Mary who appeared to a young peasant, Juan Diego, in 1531 near Mexico City. The Virgin appeared in the form of Juan Diego's indigenous heritage, and the, "...phonetic equivalent in Nahuatl, Juan Diego's native language, is *Coatlocochia*, which may refer to the serpent goddess worshiped in the region before the introduction of Christianity."² The Lady Guadalupe demonstrates the Virgin Mary appearing in the form of the indigenous people of Mexico, and she possesses characteristics of the native spirituality. The reference to the serpent is reminiscent of the ancient serpent-mother symbolism, as well as the Virgin Mary's association with the conquering of the serpent. The Virgin Guadalupe quickly developed into a figure representing the poor and oppressed in Mexico, as initiated through Juan Diego's unique encounter with her. Since her first appearance, there sprang an exceptional amount of apparitions and miracles attributed to the Virgin. As early as 1544, in the midst of a terrible epidemic in Mexico City, the Virgin's image, "was brought to the city and her presence was believed to have abated the pestilence. Again, in 1629 there was a flood, and her presence was believed to have caused the waters to subside. The miracles she performed for families and individuals were many."³ These occurrences mirror those reported in Europe, and increase in number in Latin America. In Mexico, the mother traditionally possesses an exalted role; "there is also evidence that the role of 'mother' is one of the most prized and sacred in the community...a matter of...duty to respect the sacredness of motherhood which the individual woman shares with the Virgin Mary and with the great mother

² Carl Olson, ed. *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989) 87.

³ Preston, 8-9.

goddesses of pre-Christian times.”⁴ The mother’s inherent significance in the Mexican culture evolves into an orthodox religious sacredness with the introduction of the Virgin Mary in the form of Lady Guadalupe. As a result of the Virgin Mary’s growing importance in Mexico, the mother becomes sanctified and revered for her innate association with the mother of God. Indeed, in 1754, “a Papal Bull recognized popular devotion to Guadalupe and declared her to be Patroness and Protectress of New Spain...The basilica constructed at the foot of Tepeyac Hill in her honor is located about three miles from Mexico City’s cathedral. It has come to be regarded as the most sacred shrine in Mexico and one of the holiest in Christendom.”⁵ This is indicative of the passionate veneration of the mother figure through the image of Mary, practiced pervasively by the public throughout the region of Latin America. The Lady Guadalupe represents the theological orthodoxy of such a custom; and she eventually becomes known as the Queen of the Americas. Later, her association with the common people instigates her reception as a figure of reform.

Similar apparitions continue to appear in Europe in the early modern period. One of the most powerful and renowned of these Marian visions is the apparition at Lourdes to a young girl, Bernadette, in 1858. The location of the apparition is the source of miracles and healing, and is considered to retain this power in present day; “The spring soon flowed clear, and was credited with powers of healing. The water revealed by the Virgin is the center of the miracles of Lourdes...pilgrimages should be conducted there, in the spirit of penance, for the sake of spiritual cleansing. This concern for the expiation of sin is directly related to the theological revelation of Lourdes; in one of her final messages, the Virgin told Bernadette ‘I am the

⁴ Preston, 14

⁵ Preston, 8-9.

Immaculate Conception.”⁶ There is resurgence in the symbolism of water, as it relates to the mother and the idea of cleansing and rebirth. There is also a strong developing fervor for the act of repentance that is illustrated by such visions. One especially evocative Marian apparition occurred in Portugal in 1917. A small group of children encountered Mary at Fatima, and, “As in the case of Lourdes, the messages of Fatima stressed repentance and penance...the lady encouraged prayer of the rosary as an especially efficacious tool for overcoming sin. But the Fatima visions included a dramatic glimpse of the future torments of the damned: the children were shown the depths of hell.”⁷ There is a clear command to pray and repent; the mother Mary instills in her children a sense of fear of the punishment they may incur if they do not follow her order. This message in the modern world, “delivered to the humble, the poor, the unprepared, is that the world has gone sadly astray but can be saved through the intervention of a loving mother, the only intermediary power with sufficient sympathy and power to restrain the arm of her son.”⁸ Mary remains representative as the intermediary between her children and Jesus, and retains her power as the bringer of salvation to those that cling to her. The mother now possesses the power of warning and of arresting the punishing anger of God.

This new role is especially efficacious in the modern world, wherein the humble may be shown a way to survive in the midst of modern disorder. Mary is the autonomous mother, “who takes initiatives on behalf of mankind, often intervening in the midst of the economic and political crises characteristic of industrialized mass society.”⁹ Mary is symbolized as a unique source of redemption and liberation in modern times. There is an implicit suggestion in these modern apparitions and miracles that Mary is demanded as a figure of power and sanctity in and

⁶ Olson, 88.

⁷ Olson, 90.

⁸ Olson, 91.

⁹ Preston, 145.

of herself. The widespread movement of Marian acceptance and worship in this period demonstrates the power of the masses in cultivating established religious tradition. Indeed, the Immaculate Conception of Mary was, “declared dogma (a true and uncontestable teaching of the Church) in 1854; the Assumption gained this status in 1950.”¹⁰ Thus, the worship of Mary as a divine mother figure as an officially recognized and respected practice is a modern phenomenon. The significance of this is such that Mary represents the full redemption of the divine female and great mother as it manifested in the Judeo-Christian tradition; “on account of Mary all women are blessed. No longer does the female stand accursed, for it has produced an offspring which surpasses even the angels in glory. Eve is fully healed.”¹¹ Mary’s elevation from the debased realm of Eve and original sin subsequently exalts the mother figure. She is now able to exist in this tradition beyond the earthly and what is perceived as passive and corrupt; “Marian doctrines, by patristic and subsequent tradition, hinge on the notion of Mary as the new Eve.”¹² Mary is not only a redeemer of mankind, but acts as a liberator for the mother image itself.

While images and representations of the great spiritual mother exist in other cultures and traditions, Mary is the culmination of this symbol in the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition. Her figure serves to at least partially heal the break in mother imagery that occurred with the introduction of a powerful masculine and earth-denying theology. It is suggested that, “Mary is the Catholic Christian religion’s symbol which reveals to us that the Ultimate is androgynous, that in God there is both male and female, both pursuit and seduction, both ingenious plan and passionate tenderness.”¹³ Mary’s unique and essential role in the unveiling of the truth of the Christian religion indicates the unquestionable significance of the mother; Mary makes it

¹⁰ Olson, 85.

¹¹ Maria Vassilaki, ed. *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005) 153.

¹² Preston, 153.

¹³ Olson, 93.

possible for God to manifest himself in human form for the salvation of mankind. And the fact that God made himself, “born of a human woman reveals the completeness and complexity of the Christian truth. Mary...reveals the true God, an inclusive, androgynous deity...she is somehow a component of the proper understanding of God.”¹⁴ Even in a conservatively paternalistic tradition, there is a place and function for the mother; not just a static and inferior position, but a growing and evolving role in which the significance of the mother is constantly advancing and continuing to remain relevant with the changing world.

¹⁴ Olson, 93.

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