

\$14.00

Women's Studies/Spirituality

In the beginning, God was a woman...

Here is an invitation to discover a past that has been buried by millennia of Judeo-Christian myth and corresponding social order. Merlin Stone tells us, in fascinating detail, the story of the Goddess who, known by names such as Astarte, Isis, and Ishtar, reigned supreme in the Near and Middle East. There she was revered as the wise creator and the one source of universal order, not simply as a fertility symbol as some histories would have us believe. And under the Goddess, societal roles differed markedly from those in patriarchal Judeo-Christian cultures: women bought and sold property, traded in the marketplace, and inherited title and land from their mothers.

How did the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy come about? By documenting the wholesale rewriting of myth and religious dogmas, Merlin Stone describes an ancient conspiracy in which the Goddess was reimagined as a wanton, depraved figure, a characterization confirmed and perpetuated by one of modern culture's best-known legends—that of Adam and the fallen Eve.

Insightful and thought-provoking, this is essential reading for anyone interested in the origin of current gender roles and in rediscovering women's power.

"A powerful book... and a thoroughly fascinating study." —*Books West*

Merlin Stone, a teacher of art and art history as well as a widely exhibited sculptor, became interested in archaeology and ancient religion through her art. She has produced pieces on the Goddess for both radio and the stage, and conceived and organized Goddess festivals in both New York and Toronto.

Cover images: *The Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli; Kali courtesy of Giraudon/Art Resource; Isis courtesy of Corbis-Bettmann
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Merlin
Stone



WHEN GOD WAS A WOMAN



WHEN



GOD



WAS A



WOMAN

The landmark exploration of the ancient worship of the Great Goddess and the eventual suppression of women's rites

Merlin Stone



2 One of several small clay Goddess figures with reptile heads discovered in the city of Ur in Sumer (Iraq). Archaeologists date these figures to between 4000 and 3500 B.C. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

3 Small bronze statue of the Goddess astride two lions. This double lion symbolism was, in Greek and Roman periods, associated with the Goddess as Artemis, Cybele and Rhea. This figure was discovered in southern Italy and is dated to about the fifth century B.C. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



4 Goddess seated upon double feline throne. Discovered in Level II (5750 B.C.) of Catal Hüyük, Anatolia (Turkey), by James Mellaart, who unearthed many other Goddess figures and ancient shrines at the same site. Courtesy of the Museum of Archaeology, Ankara.



5 Still known to the Cretans as The Little Goddess of the Serpents, this portrait of the Goddess or one of her priestesses was discovered in the Palace of Knossos on Crete. The figure is dated to the Middle Minoan Period (2000-1800 B.C.). Courtesy of Stylianos Alexiou, director of the Archaeological Museum of Crete in Iraklion.



6 A & B Two gold serpents coil about the arms and extend from the hands of this delicately carved ivory and gold Goddess or priestess from seventeenth-century B.C. Crete. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Mrs. W. Scott Fitz.





7 One of the many portrayals of the Sumerian Goddess seated upon her throne. This piece was found in a level of the Early Dynastic Period (early third millennium) of the city of Ur in Sumer (Iraq). Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



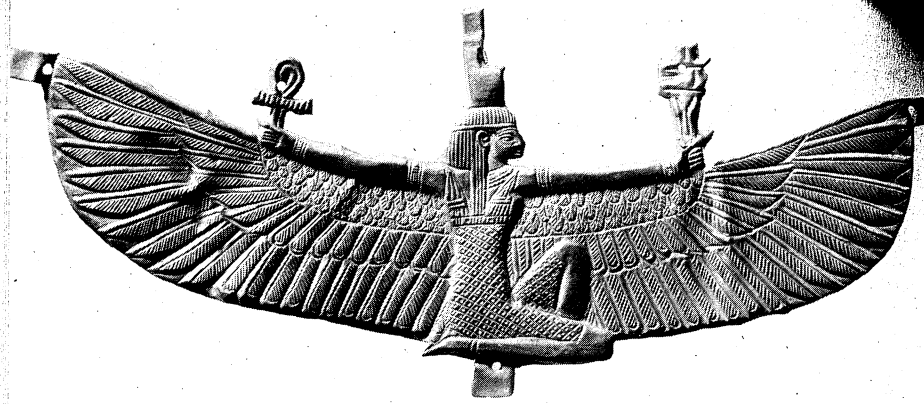
8 Serpents and flowers held in Her extended arms, the Goddess on this plaque combines the symbolism of the Egyptian Goddess Hathor and the Canaanite Goddess Ashtoreth. Similar "Astarte plaques" have been discovered in Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Iraq. This one from Egypt is dated at about 1250 B.C. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



9 Small clay sculpture of a couple lying on a woven bed, perhaps depicting the ancient sacred sexual rituals of the Goddess religion. One of many similar pieces from the Old Babylonian Period (1900–1700 B.C.) found in the city of Ur in Sumer (Iraq). Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Limestone statue of the Cobra Goddess
Zit (named Buto by the Greeks). Patron
deity of all of Lower Egypt in predynastic
periods, protecting deity of the crown of the
north in early dynastic times, her central
shrine was in Per Uto (Buto) on the Delta.
This seventh-century B.C. statue is from
Dessuk, Egypt, which is believed to be the
site of ancient Buto. Courtesy of the Uni-
versity Museum of the University of Pennsyl-
vania.





11 A gold pectoral of the winged Isis wearing the Egyptian symbol of the throne upon her head. Discovered in a pyramid in Ethiopia, this piece is dated at about 600 B.C. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



12 Greek period statue of the Lady of Byblos (Baalat) from Byblos, Canaan (Lebanon). The worship of the Goddess at the temple of Byblos dates back to at least 2800 B.C. and was closely associated with the worship of Isis and Hathor of Egypt as well as that of The Serpent Lady of the Sinai Peninsula. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

The protective wings of the Goddess Isis shield the smaller figure of Osiris, her brother and husband. This stone carving from Egypt is dated at about 600 B.C. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.





↑ 14 A snake tube discovered in Beth Shan, Israel (Canaan). Dated to about the thirteenth century B.C., it is similar to the snake tubes unearthed at Kition, Cyprus, and at Knossos, Crete, from that same period. Courtesy of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.

→ 15 Ritual cymbal in hand, Aphrodite, as she was known in Thapsus, Carthage, during the Roman period. Though generally designated as the Goddess of Love, Aphrodite was also revered as a battle goddess and Mother of All Deities. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

← 16 Statue of a priestess from the Aphrodite temple at Paphos, Cyprus. According to Greek legend, Cyprus, where the worship of the Goddess as Ashtoreth (Astarte) had been widespread since the second millennium B.C., was the site of the birth of the Goddess known as Aphrodite in classical Greece. This statue is dated at about 700 B.C. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.





17 A larger-than-life-size statue of the Greek Goddess Demeter, worshiped as the provider of law and agriculture, whose most important center was at Eleusis. This portrayal of the Goddess of the Eleusinian Mysteries comes from Cnidus, Turkey (ancient Caria). Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



18 Seal stone of the Goddess Athena, whose major site of worship was the Acropolis of Athens, Greece. As in many other portrayals of Athena, she is depicted here with her sacred serpent. This small carving in carnelian was found in Curium, Cyprus, and is dated to the fifth century B.C. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



19 Large bronze head of Athena in her battle helmet. Serpents adorn her shoulders and breastplate. Found in Piraeus, Greece, this portrayal of the patron deity of Athens is dated to the fourth century B.C. Courtesy of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes, and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.

Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex 1949

In his statement opposed to the ordination of women, Bishop C. L. Meyers said the Episcopalian priesthood is a "masculine conception."

"A priest is a 'God symbol' whether he likes it or not. In the imagery of both the Old and New Testament God is represented in masculine imagery," he said in a statement that was circulated among some 760 delegates at Grace Cathedral for the 2½ day convention.

"Christ is the source of Priesthood. The Sexuality of Christ is no accident nor is his masculinity incidental. This is the divine choice," the statement said.

San Francisco Chronicle
25 October 1971

In the beginning there was Isis: Oldest of the Old, She was the Goddess from whom all Becoming Arose. She was the Great Lady, Mistress of the two Lands of Egypt, Mistress of Shelter, Mistress of Heaven, Mistress of the House of Life, Mistress of the word of God. She was the Unique. In all Her great and wonderful works She was a wiser magician and more excellent than any other God.

Thebes, Egypt, Fourteenth Century BC

Thou Sun Goddess of Arinna art an honored deity; Thy name is held high among names; Thy divinity is held high among the deities; Nay, among the deities, Thou alone O Sun Goddess art honored; Great art Thou alone O Sun Goddess of Arinna; Nay compared to Thee no other deity is as honored or great . . .

Boghazköy, Turkey, Fifteenth Century BC

Unto Her who renders decision, Goddess of all things, Unto the Lady of Heaven and Earth who receives supplication; Unto Her who hears petition, who entertains prayer; Unto the compassionate Goddess who loves righteousness; Ishtar the Queen, who suppresses all that is confused. To the Queen of Heaven, the Goddess of the Universe, the One who walked in terrible Chaos and brought life by the Law of Love; And out of Chaos brought us harmony, and from Chaos Thou has led us by the hand.

Babylon, Eighteenth to Seventh Centuries BC

Hear O ye regions, the praise of Queen Nana; Magnify the Creatress; exalt the dignified; exalt the Glorious One; draw nigh to the Mighty Lady.

Sumer, Nineteenth Century BC

Preface

How did it actually happen? How did men initially gain the control that now allows them to regulate the world in matters as vastly diverse as deciding which wars will be fought when to what time dinner should be served?

This book is the result of my reactions to these and similar questions which many of us concerned about the status of women in our society have been asking ourselves and each other. As if in answer to our queries, yet another question presented itself. What else might we expect in a society that for centuries has taught young children, both female and male, that a MALE deity created the universe and all that is in it, produced MAN in his own divine image—and then, as an afterthought, created woman, to obediently help man in his endeavors? The image of Eve, created for her husband, from her husband, the woman who was supposed to have brought about the downfall of humankind, has in many ways become the image of all women. How did this idea ever come into being?

Few people who live in societies where Christianity, Judaism or

Islam are followed remain unaware of the tale of Eve heeding the word of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, eating the forbidden fruit and then tempting Adam to do the same. Generally, during the most impressionable years of childhood, we are taught that it was this act of eating the tasty fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that caused the loss of Paradise, the expulsion of Adam and Eve, thus all humankind, from this first home of bliss and contentment. We are also made to understand that, as a result of this act, it was decreed by God that woman must submit to the dominance of man—who was at that time divinely presented with the right to rule over her—from that moment until now.

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is not exactly the latest news, but few contemporary happenings have affected women of today any more directly. In the struggle to achieve equal status for women, in a society still permeated by the values and moralities of Judeo-Christian beliefs (which have penetrated deeply into even the most secular aspects of our contemporary civilization) we soon realize that a thorough examination of this creation legend, alongside its historical origins, provides us with vital information. It allows us to comprehend the role that contemporary religions have played in the initial and continual oppression and subjugation of women—and the reasons for this.

In prehistoric and early historic periods of human development, religions existed in which people revered their supreme creator as female. The Great Goddess—the Divine Ancestress—had been worshiped from the beginnings of the Neolithic periods of 7000 BC until the closing of the last Goddess temples, about AD 500. Some authorities would extend Goddess worship as far into the past as the Upper Paleolithic Age of about 25,000 BC. Yet events of the Bible, which we are generally taught to think of as taking place “in the beginning of time,” actually occurred in historic periods. Abraham, first prophet of the Hebrew-Christian god Yahweh, more familiarly known as Jehovah, is believed by most Bible scholars to have

lived no earlier than 1800 BC and possibly as late as 1550 BC.

Most significant is the realization that for thousands of years both religions existed simultaneously—among closely neighboring peoples. Archaeological, mythological and historical evidence all reveal that the female religion, far from naturally fading away, was the victim of centuries of continual persecution and suppression by the advocates of the newer religions which held male deities as supreme. And from these new religions came the creation myth of Adam and Eve and the tale of the loss of Paradise.

What had life been like for women who lived in a society that venerated a wise and valiant female Creator? Why had the members of the later male religions fought so aggressively to suppress that earlier worship—even the very memory of it? What did the legend of Adam and Eve really signify, and when and why was it written? The answers I discovered have formed the contents of this book. *When God Was a Woman*, the story of the suppression of women's rites, has been written to explain the historical events and political attitudes that led to the writing of the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall, the loss of Paradise and, most important, why the blame for that loss was attributed to the woman Eve, and has ever since been placed heavily upon all women.

Introduction

Though to many of us today religion appears to be an archaic relic of the past (especially the writings of the Old Testament, which tell of times many centuries before the birth of Christ), to many of our parents, grandparents or great-grandparents these writings were still regarded as the sacred gospel, the divine word. In turn, their religious beliefs, and subsequent behavior and social patterns, have left their imprint on us in various ways. Indeed, the ancient past is not so far removed as we might imagine or prefer to believe.

In fact, if we are ever to fully understand how and why man gained the image of the one who accomplishes the greatest and most important deeds while woman was relegated to the role of ever-patient helper, and subsequently assured that this was the *natural* state of female-male relationships, it is to these remote periods of human history that we must travel. It is the ancient origins of human civilizations and the initial development of religious patterns we must explore. And this, as you will see, is no easy task.

It is shocking to realize how little has been written about the

female deities who were worshiped in the most ancient periods of human existence and exasperating to then confront the fact that even the material there is has been almost totally ignored in popular literature and general education. Most of the information and artifacts concerning the vast female religion, which flourished for thousands of years before the advent of Judaism, Christianity and the Classical Age of Greece, have been dug out of the ground only to be reburied in obscure archaeological texts, carefully shelved away in the exclusively protected stacks of university and museum libraries. Quite a few of these were accessible only with the proof of university affiliation or university degree.

Many years ago I set out upon a quest. It eventually led me halfway round the world—from San Francisco to Beirut. I wanted to know more about the ancient Goddess religion. Along the way were the libraries, museums, universities and excavation sites of the United States, Europe and the Near East. Making my way from place to place, I compiled information from a vast variety of sources, patiently gleaning each little phrase, prayer or fragment of a legend from a myriad of diverse information.

As I gathered this material about the early female deities, I found that many ancient legends had been used as ritual dramas. These were enacted at religious ceremonies of sacred festivals, coinciding with other ritual activities. Statues, murals, inscriptions, clay tablets and papyri that recorded events, legends and prayers revealed the form and attitudes of the religion and the nature of the deity. Comments were often found in the literature of one country about the religion or divinities of another. Most interesting was the realization that the myths of each culture that explained their origins were not always the oldest. Newer versions often superseded and displaced previous ones, while solemnly declaring that "this is as it was in the beginning of time."

Professor Edward Chiera of the University of Chicago wrote of the Babylonian myth of the creation of heaven and earth by the god Marduk that "Marduk, the new god of this rather new city, certainly had no right to appropriate to himself the glory of so great

a deed . . . But in Hammurabi's time Babylon was the center of the kingdom . . . Marduk, backed by Hammurabi's armies, could now claim to be the most important god in the land." Professor Chiera also explained that in Assyria, where the god Ashur eventually became the supreme deity, "The Assyrian priests gave the honor to Ashur simply by taking the old Babylonian tablets and recopying them, substituting the name of their own god for that of Marduk. The work was not very carefully done, and in some places the name of Marduk still creeps in."

In the difficulties I encountered gathering material, I could not help thinking of the ancient writing and statuary that must have been intentionally destroyed. Accounts of the antagonistic attitudes of Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedanism (Islam) toward the sacred artifacts of the religions that preceded them revealed that this was so, especially in the case of the Goddess worshiped in Canaan (Palestine). The bloody massacres, the demolition of statues (i.e., pagan idols) and sanctuaries are recorded in the pages of the Bible following this command by Yahweh: "You must completely destroy all the places where the nations you dispossess have served their gods, on high mountains, on hills, under any spreading tree; you must tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred poles, set fire to the carved images of their gods and wipe out their name from that place" (Deut. 12:2, 3). There can be little doubt that the continuous attacks, as recorded in the Old Testament, destroyed much precious and irretrievable information.

In later periods Christians were known throughout the world for their destruction of sacred icons and literature belonging to the so-called "pagan" or "heathen" religions. Professor George Mylonas wrote that, during the reign of the early Christian Emperor Theodosius, "The Christians, especially in the large cities of Antioch and Alexandria became the persecutors and the pagans the persecuted; temples and idols were destroyed by fire and their devotees mistreated." As the worship of the earlier deities was suppressed and the temples destroyed, closed or converted into

Christian churches, as so often happened, statues and historic records were obliterated by the missionary fathers of Christianity as well.

Though the destruction was major, it was not total. Fortunately many objects had been overlooked, remnants that today tell their own version of the nature of those dread "pagan" rituals and beliefs. The enormous number of Goddess figurines that have been unearthed in excavations of the Neolithic and early historic periods of the Near and Middle East suggest that it may well have been the evident female attributes of nearly all of these statues that irked the advocates of the male deity. Most "pagan idols" had breasts.

The writers of the Judeo-Christian Bible, as we know it, seem to have purposely glossed over the sexual identity of the female deity who was held sacred by the neighbors of the Hebrews in Canaan, Babylon and Egypt. The Old Testament does not even have a word for "Goddess." In the Bible the Goddess is referred to as Elohim, in the masculine gender, to be translated as god. But the Koran of the Mohammedans was quite clear. In it we read, "Allah will not tolerate idolatry . . . the pagans pray to females."

Since a great deal of information was gleaned from university and museum libraries, another problem I encountered was the sexual and religious bias of many of the erudite scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of the available information in both archaeology and ancient religious history was compiled and discussed by male authors. The overwhelming prevalence of male scholars, and the fact that nearly all archaeologists, historians and theologians of both sexes were raised in societies that embrace the male-oriented religions of Judaism or Christianity, appeared to influence heavily what was included and expanded upon and what was considered to be minor and hardly worth mentioning. Professor R. K. Harrison wrote of the Goddess religion, "One of its most prominent features was the lewd, depraved, orgiastic character of its cultic procedures." Despite the discovery of temples of the Goddess in nearly every Neolithic and historic excavation, Werner Keller writes that the female deity was

worshiped primarily on "hills and knolls," simply echoing the words of the Old Testament. Professor W. F. Albright, one of the leading authorities on the archaeology of Palestine, wrote of the female religion as "orgiastic nature worship, sensuous nudity and gross mythology." He continued by saying that "It was replaced by Israel with its pastoral simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism and its severe code of ethics." It is difficult to understand how these words can be academically justified after reading of the massacres perpetrated by the Hebrews on the original inhabitants of Canaan as portrayed in the Book of Joshua, especially chapters nine to eleven. Professor S. H. Hooke, in his collection of essays *Myth, Ritual and Kingship*, openly admits, "I firmly believe that God chose Israel to be the vehicle of revelation."

Albright himself wrote, "It is frequently said that the scientific quality of Palestinian archaeology has been seriously impaired by the religious preconceptions of scholars who have excavated in the Holy Land. It is true that some archaeologists have been drawn to Palestine by their interest in the Bible, and that some of them had received their previous training mainly as biblical scholars." But he then proceeded to reject this possibility of impairment, basing his conclusion primarily upon the fact that the dates assigned to the sites and artifacts of ancient Palestine, by the scholars who took part in the earlier excavations, were subsequently proven to be too recent, rather than too old, as might perhaps be expected. The question of whether or not the attitudes and beliefs inherent in those suggested "religious preconceptions" had perhaps subtly influenced analysis and descriptions of the symbolism, rituals and general nature of the ancient religion was not even raised for discussion.

In most archaeological texts the female religion is referred to as a "fertility cult," perhaps revealing the attitudes toward sexuality held by the various contemporary religions that may have influenced the writers. But archaeological and mythological evidence of the veneration of the female deity as creator and law-maker of the universe, prophetess, provider of human destinies,