

THE VEIL OF ISIS **by Jeni Bethell**

In the Major Arcana of the Tarot, The High Priestess is said to represent the receptacle of which the Magician, the seed, has need. It is through this union between the feminine, passive, unconscious High Priestess and the Magician's masculine, activating self-consciousness, that the animating principle of the Magician can be activated by the Empress.

One of the roles of mythology is to present to us concepts, sometimes quite complex, which, when personalised in story, can be more readily digested and comprehended. The great Egyptian goddess, Isis, was worshipped far and wide for over 3000 years as Magician, as devoted wife and mother (Empress) and also as High Priestess, guardian of the veil. In presenting a little of the mythology surrounding Isis, I hope to demonstrate, by analogy, the profound role the High Priestess energy plays in linking the energies of Magician and Empress, and also to shed a little light on the great spiritual wisdom She, the High Priestess, offers.

The Journeys of Isis

Perhaps the most famous myths surrounding Isis concern her journeys in search of her beloved brother and husband, Osiris. Their evil brother, Seth, had tricked Osiris into lying in a sarcophagus that was then nailed down and set afloat on the Nile. It ultimately landed in Byblos, was enwrapped by a tamarisk tree which was cut down by the king to form a pillar for the roof of his palace. Having eventually located Osiris and brought him back to Egypt, Isis, adopting the wings of a kite, breathed life back into Osiris's body. Again Seth attempted to destroy his brother and rival, this time tearing his body into fourteen pieces and scattering them far and wide. Yet Isis was not daunted. The great goddess systematically retrieved each part, remoulded the man and again used her wings to breathe life into him long enough, say some versions of her story, to enable her to conceive her boy child, Horus.

Isis, the High Priestess

Even from this brief re-telling one can instantly recognise Isis' magical and creative powers. The elusive, often 'hidden' High Priestess influence is less obvious yet equally significant. It was surely the High Priestess, speaking to Isis through her senses and emotions, who first guided the goddess to the dead body of her beloved in Byblos, and later as she systematically retrieved his bodily parts from far and wide. How could Isis have persisted with what, to the rational mind, was a hopeless venture without Arcana II's intuitive wisdom, wisdom that requires faith in the mysterious and the non-rational? We are also told that, on her second rescue mission, as Isis retrieved each body part, she created a shrine and performed a ritual to 'mark the spot', so to speak. Theorists might say this was done purely to trick Seth into believing she had buried each body item; but I like to think of it principally as an act of gratitude and reverence for the hidden knowledge she had obtained, indeed could only obtain through the High Priestess. As we know, while our contact with The High Priestess is always somewhat uncertain, She comes or She doesn't, we also know that ritualistic

practices demonstrating our respect for this 'other' consciousness, encourage contact with Her. On the other hand, when She comes in full force, Her messages have a power that is hard to ignore. And we certainly get the sense of Isis being driven in her plight! Lastly there is the solitary nature of Isis' journeys. It is written she gained some help on occasions along the way from her sister Nephthys and her ally, Thoth, the God of Wisdom. But mostly she did it alone just as our work with our own High Priestess energy is principally solitary in nature even though we may share it at times with others, for instance in performing a divinatory reading of their Tarot cards.

Symbols from a Psychological Perspective

When we consider the qualities of the High Priestess from a psychological perspective, as the feminine, unconscious half of human duality, we may be particularly drawn to symbols displayed in decks like the Ryder-Waite which seem to emphasise this. These include a prevalence for the colour blue, the colour so often associated with our intuition, and a preponderance of water, the waters of emotion on the ground, the waters of the unconscious we glimpse beyond the pillars. There are also lunar references: the crescent at Her feet and, some suggest, Her headdress depicting the three aspects of the moon.

Symbols from a Spiritual Perspective

We can also view the card of the High Priestess from a spiritual perspective, based on the belief that our existence is linked to the creative force of the universe; that our world, even our individual lives, represent in microcosm what the entire universe represents in macrocosm. From this perspective the High Priestess looms as a powerful force indeed. And there are a host of symbols common to many Tarot decks that suggest the High Priestess *does* have an understanding of that which surpasses earthly oppositions; that She in fact *represents* the essential link between the Above and the Below. For She is seated between the pillars of Sun and Moon, Karma and Justice; she wears the cross of Unity, of revelation; the curtain behind her frequently depicts both masculine (palm leaf) *and* feminine (pomegranate) symbols; and the great book, the book of Knowledge, rests in Her lap.

The Solar Disc of Ra

There is another myth associated with Isis that reinforces this notion. In this story Isis uses her magical power to first wound and then heal the creator Sun God Ra. In so doing she is able to manipulate Ra into revealing to her the secret of his name; in other words the secret of the Word, the secret of All, thereby attaining equal rank and power to him 'in heaven and upon earth'. With this in mind the headdress frequently worn by the High Priestess represents, not the triple moon of the feminine, but the masculine solar disc of Ra with the cow's horns, ancient symbol of the feminine Creator Goddess, on either side. From this spiritual perspective, the High Priestess is positioned at the gateway not merely to the realms of the personal unconscious, but to all that transcends the personal, to the Divine.

The Veil of Isis

Perhaps the most significant and also the most complex symbol associated with the card of the High Priestess is that of the veil. A veil is both literally and metaphorically a vehicle of separation of one thing from another. It also represents all that is elusive, is hidden from our normal gaze, from our conscious understandings. Certainly we read that Isis did wear a veil as she started on her epic trek. In the literal sense, this represented the veil of mourning for her beloved husband and brother. She was blocking out the 'reality' of the conscious world, which we can sometimes find helpful during times of grief. But the veil was also, assuredly, the veil the High Priestess wears as part of Her headdress to remind us of the desirability of solitary meditation as a means to contact Her energy. This veil encourages us to cease using our outer eyes, the two eyes that view the outer world, and instead focus on 'looking' within. We see it also with the Christian nun who, in 'taking the veil', separates herself from the world and, at the same time, separates the world from the intimate relationship arising from her life with God.

The veil of the High Priestess can also refer to the screen or curtain in front of which She is seated, suggesting her role as guardian and guide. Again, this represents the wall between the worlds of the conscious and the unconscious self, and perhaps also between the earthly and the spiritual planes of existence. In decks like the Marseilles, the head of the High Priestess is tilted to the right, emphasising her left eye, said to be the eye of the moon that relates to the feminine unconscious from a psychological perspective, the feminine aspect of God in spiritual terms.

Yet as humans, even with the guidance of our High Priestess, we can only gain glimpses of the Unknowable; hence the engraving at the base of a statue of Isis in Sais that reads, *"I am everything that was, that is, that ever will be. Nor has any mortal man ever been able to discover what lies under my veil."*