"The Virgin Whom the Forces Did Not Defile": Norea and the Virginal Spirit in *The Reality of the Rulers*

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“THE VIRGIN WHOM THE FORCES DID NOT DEFILE”:
NOREA AND THE VIRGINAL SPIRIT IN THE REALITY OF THE RULERS

Anne M. McGuire

In his critical editions, translations, commentaries, and scholarly studies, Bentley Layton has contributed enormously to our understanding of the Coptic language and the texts of Nag Hammadi. He has also helped to forge new understandings of the historical and literary relationship between the classic “Gnostic” and “Valentinian” traditions. In honor of these contributions, I offer in this essay a literary analysis of an honorific epithet, “the Virgin whom the Forces did not Defile,” that appears in identical wording in two Nag Hammadi texts: The Reality of the Rulers (Hyp. Arch.) from “classic Gnostic scripture” or the “Sethian corpus,” and The Gospel of Philip (Gos. Phil.) from the Valentinian tradition. Both of these texts bestow the epithet upon a single female character, establishing the special role of Norea and Mary, respectively, in their accounts of creation and redemption. Yet in each, the image of “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile” functions within its own distinctive literary context and mythological system. In Hyp. Arch., “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile” is identified with Norea, the spiritual daughter of Eve. In Gos.


6 Hyp. Arch. 91, 35-92, 4.
Phil., by contrast, it is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is declared to be “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile.”

In Hyp. Arch., Norea’s virginal status is connected to the divine Virginal Spirit who dwells in the realm of Incorruptibility and extends herself into the world, granting her spiritual powers to humankind. In Gos. Phil., the virginity of Mary is associated with both the conception of Jesus and the processes of divine emanation, and works primarily to establish his special role as Savior in the drama of redemption. Comparative study of the differing uses of the epithet with reference to Norea and Mary, respectively, may shed further light on the historical and literary relationship of the “Gnostic” and “Valentinian” traditions. For the purposes of this volume, I have chosen instead to honor Bentley Layton’s work on Hyp. Arch. with an analysis and interpretation of “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile” within its literary and mythic contexts in Hyp. Arch.

My approach is indebted to the view that “interpretation is grounded not in isolated textual elements, but in the ‘configurative meanings’ that readers construct.” It thus seeks to be attentive to the interrelationship among the signifying elements of the text, its mythic system, and the larger socio-cultural world of its readers. These signifying elements include: the figurative language of the text, especially its key metaphors and symbols; the central categories of the text’s mythic system, especially the distinction between the divine realm and the cosmos, and the characters (divine, archontic, and human) who inhabit and sometimes traverse these realms; the interactions among these mythic personae and their defining characteristics; and, perhaps most important, the interrelationship among the “speakers” and “hearers” of the text. These include not only the speaking characters of the text and their addressees, but also the narrator and his original audience, and the text as a whole and its readers.

7 Gos. Phil. 55.23-36; 71.16-21 also refers to Mary as “Virgin.”


9 M.F. Foskett, A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity, Bloomington – Indianapolis, 2002, p. 6, citing W. Iser, The Act of Reading, Baltimore, 1978, p. 118. On p. 1-8, Foskett provides a brief, but very useful summary of literary approaches indebted to the reader-oriented theories of Wolfgang Iser and others. She writes, p. 6: “Alone, a text is only a framework for meaning, replete with formal patterns marked nevertheless by ‘blanks’ and ‘gaps of indeterminacy.’ It is the reader who performs the ‘variety of cognitive acts within a temporal (sequential) framework’ necessary to render perceived patterns of signification meaningful. Accordingly, interpretation is grounded not in isolated textual elements, but in the ‘configurative meanings’ that readers construct.”

10 For an excellent collection of studies illustrating cultural analysis, see D.B. Martin and P.C. Miller (eds.), The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography, Durham, 2005.
This essay approaches “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile” as a metaphorical and honorific title or epithet within the mythic system of Hyp. Arch. Within this mythic system, Norea is neither the “Perfect Human Being” who brings salvation, nor his mother, but she is a metaphorical or spiritual “mother” and a crucial symbolic link between the divine Virginal Spirit and those human beings who are to be saved. As a metaphor, the image of “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile” transfers multiple associations between its “source domain” — in this case, that of gender, sexuality, and the body — and a variety of other conceptual categories or “target domains.” The significance of the epithet, like that of virginity itself, is not exhausted by reference to issues of gender, sexuality, and the body, but rather is informed and shaped by a wider set of relations between the source domain of gender and sexuality and a broader set of categories drawn from both the text’s symbolic/mythic system and the larger cultural world of late antiquity. Within the mythic system of Hyp. Arch., these target domains include: the nature or character of the divine, the Rulers of this world, and humankind; the significance of difference, unity, multiplicity; the forms of spiritual, social, and political power; and notions of salvation. By analyzing the ways in which these categories, as well as the other signifying elements of the text, map onto and construct one another, it is possible to see more clearly how the epithet functions within the mythic world of Hyp. Arch. and, more broadly, within the socio-cultural worlds of its readers.


12 C. Bynum, Introduction: The Complexity of Symbols, in C. Bynum, S. Harrell, and P. Richman (eds.) Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols, Boston, 1986, p. 3-4, notes: “Gender-related symbols, in their full complexity, may refer to gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it; or they may, in their basic meaning, have little at all to do with male and female roles.” This insight is central to the important contribution of M.A. Williams, Variety in Gnostic Perspectives on Gender, in King, Images of the Feminine (1988), p. 2-22.

13 Williams, Variety, p. 4: “Gendered imagery may be used primarily for the sake of its gendered character, or for some other reason.” While Williams argues that gender-related symbols sometimes have little or nothing to do with gender and sexuality, I am more inclined to see the target associations as always carrying some connection or resonance back to the source domain of gender and sexuality.
GENRE, LITERARY STRUCTURE, INQUIRERS AND REVEALERS IN HYP. ARCH.

_Hyp. Arch._ exists only in the Coptic manuscript found at Nag Hammadi (NHC II,4). In its surviving form, _Hyp. Arch._ is a composite of three literary genres, drawn perhaps from distinct layers of composition and authorship.\(^\text{14}\) Opening the work is a brief epistolary introduction in the form of a letter to an unnamed recipient who has inquired about “the reality (hypostasis) of the Authorities.”\(^\text{15}\) The second section of the work is a fragmentary mythic narrative, very loosely based on the creation narratives of Genesis 1-11,\(^\text{16}\) beginning abruptly with the false claim of the Creator to be the only God. The third and final portion of the text takes the form of a revelation dialogue between the Illuminator Eleleth and Norea, the spiritual daughter of Eve.\(^\text{17}\)

As suggested by its title and epistolary introduction, the central focus of _Hyp. Arch._ is the “reality” or “nature” of the Authorities that govern the cosmos. Citing Eph 6:12, the narrator tells his audience: “The great apostle… told us that ‘Our contest is not against flesh and [blood]; rather the Authorities of the world and the spiritual hosts of wickedness.’ [I have] sent (you) this because you inquire about the reality [of the] Authorities.”\(^\text{18}\) The narrative’s account of the origin of these Authorities and their interactions with their divine and human characters discloses the true hypostasis, that is, the nature, reality, and origin of these Rulers. As the mythic fragment of section two and the revelation of Eleleth to Norea (section three) unfold, they provide answers to questions that have been posed directly by two characters: the unnamed recipient of the epistolary introduction and the mythic character Norea. Both ask about the Authorities that govern the cosmos: what is their “nature” or “reality” and how can they be understood in relation to the divine and human realms? At the same time, however, these questions have perhaps also been asked indirectly by the implied readers of the text. In this way, the text sets up three pairs of inquirers and their corresponding agents of revelation. Inquiring into the “reality” of the Rulers are the letter recipient, Norea, and the readers of the text. Providing revelatory material to each, in turn, are: the implied narrator; Eleleth the great Angel and Illuminator; and the text as a whole. Just as the questions of Norea are answered directly by the revelation of Eleleth, so the inquiries of the letter recipient and the readers of the text are answered, respectively, by the implied

\(^{14}\) B. Barc, _L’Hypostase des Archontes (BCNH 5)_ , Quebec – Louvain, 1980, p. 45-48, suggests that the present text is the result of two redactions. While this is certainly quite possible, this essay is less concerned with the world behind the text (the author and his sources), and more concerned with the encounter between the text and its readers, especially the ways the text presents its readers with interpretive possibilities.

\(^{15}\) _Hyp. Arch._ 86,20-27.

\(^{16}\) _Hyp. Arch._ 86,27-93,3.

\(^{17}\) _Hyp. Arch._ 93,3-97,22. B.A. Pearson, _Revisiting Norea_, in _King, Images of the Feminine_ (1988), p. 272-73, suggests that an _Apocalypse of Norea_ may have been a source for this section of the text.

\(^{18}\) _Hyp. Arch._ 86,21-27.
narrator and the text as a whole. For inquiring readers, as for Norea and the unnamed recipient of the letter, the narratives and revelations of Hyp. Arch. address the readers’ questions about the “reality” of the Rulers and provide them with a salvific revelation, not only about the “reality of the Rulers,” but indeed about their own identities and the promise of their redemption. This gives Eleleth, the implied narrator, and the text as a whole parallel roles as potential agents of revelation, as it similarly bestows on Norea, the unnamed recipient of the letter, and the implied readers of the text parallel roles as potential recipients of revelation.

The creation narrative fragment of section two (86,27-93,3) begins to provide the context for understanding the “reality” or “nature” of the Rulers, first through its depiction of the Chief Ruler’s arrogant claim to be the only God. This, in turn, brings a rebuke from the divine realm that sets in motion the creation of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. Within this first narrative section, however, it is not yet clear how this Ruler or his offspring came into being, or what relation they have to the divine realm. Significantly, it is only much later, within Eleleth’s revelation (94,4-96,17), that the fuller context for understanding the hypostasis, or nature and origin, of the Rulers is disclosed. This revelation comes precisely as Norea, much like the letter’s unnamed addressee, inquires about the hypostasis of the Authorities, as Norea asks Eleleth: “Lord, teach me about the power of these Authorities — how did they come into being and from what hypostasis (reality, genesis, origin, nature) and of what matter, and who created them and their power (dynamis)?”\(^{19}\)

Eleleth discloses more fully the hypostasis of the Rulers through a detailed account of the deeply flawed attempt of Sophia, divine Wisdom, to “create something alone without her consort” (94,2-8) and its disastrous aftermath. Sophia’s action brings into being the aeons below the limitless aeons of the divine realm. This leads to the emergence of a veil between the two realms, a shadow beneath the veil, matter, and an androgynous product that comes forth like from matter like a miscarriage, or untimely birth, namely: the Chief Ruler Ialdabaoth. Eleleth’s narrative thus provides the missing key sought by those who inquire about the origin of the Authorities. While Eleleth’s revelation is directly addressed to Norea in primordial times, it can be received simultaneously by two other potential sets of recipients: the unnamed addressee of the epistolary introduction; and astute readers of the text.

Having provided his account of the hypostasis of the Rulers and their cosmos, Eleleth goes on to answer an equally crucial question from Norea about her own origin. She asks: “Am I also from their matter?\(^{20}\)” Eleleth’s reply distinguishes the origin and power of Norea and her offspring from those of the Rulers, and concludes with a promise of their redemption from the bondage

\(^{19}\) Hyp. Arch. 93,32-94,2.

\(^{20}\) Hyp. Arch. 96,18-19.
of the Authorities’ error. To Norea’s question, “How much longer?” Eleleth explains: “When the True Human Being is manifest in a modeled form,” and “He teaches them about everything and anoints them with the chrism of Eternal Life.” Thus, as with the account of the origin of the Rulers, Eleleth’s responses to Norea’s inquiries about her own origin and destiny may be received simultaneously by the addressee and the readers of the text. Like Norea, they are empowered to learn from Eleleth’s revelation, as from the narrator and the text as a whole, that they, like Norea and her offspring, will be redeemed when the True Human Being appears, and teaches and anoints all of Norea’s offspring “with the chrism of Eternal Life.”

THE MYTHIC SYSTEM OF HYP. ARCH.

At the center of the mythic narrative of Hyp. Arch. is the conflict between two modes of power: the Rulers of this world and various manifestations of the divine Spirit. The Rulers, comprised of Ialdabaoth, the Chief Archon, and his offspring, reside in the cosmic realm. The divine, comprised of various personae, exists within the realm of Incorruptibility, but also enters into the cosmic realm. Its personae and manifestations include: the Father of the Entirety; the Virginal Spirit; the Spirit from the Adamantine Land; the Voice from Incorruptibility; Pistis Sophia; her daughter Zoe; and Eleleth, “one of the four Light-givers who stand in the presence of the great invisible Spirit.” Within the cosmic realm, the divine manifests itself in the Image of the divine Voice that appears in the waters; the Spiritual Woman (Pneumatike), taken out of Adam’s side and initially joined to the embodied Eve; the instructing serpent; and the Perfect or True Human Being, who will come “in a modeled form.” Caught between the opposing axes of the Archons and the divine Spirit are the human characters of the drama: Adam and Eve; their offspring Cain, Abel, Seth, and Norea; Noah; and the rest of humankind.

In its representation of the struggle between the Rulers of this world and the divine, Hyp. Arch. creates a mythic system in which issues of power are directly linked to images of gender, sexuality, and the body. The two modes of power encounter each other in a series of confrontations in which the Rulers attempt to grasp, control, dominate, or contain the divine, especially in its female manifestations. Twice the efforts of the Rulers take the form of attempted rape. In the first case, they attempt to rape the Spiritual woman Eve, but manage only

21 Hyp. Arch. 96,31-97,22.
22 Hyp. Arch. 96,32-97,5.
23 Hyp. Arch. 97,2-3.
to rape the fleshly or carnal woman that remains after the Spirit leaves her body and goes into a tree. In the second case, the Rulers’ attempt to rape Norea, spiritual daughter of Eve, is foiled, as Norea resists their advances, subverts their claims, and cries out for assistance from above. When the Chief Ruler demands that Norea “render service to us, as did your mother Eve,” Norea’s cry for divine assistance brings a revelation from Eleleth. The revelation dialogue between Eleleth and Norea is organized around four questions from Norea, followed by Eleleth’s responses. Norea’s questions concern the identity of the Revealer; how the Authorities came into being; the relation of Norea and her children to the Rulers and to the divine; and the Rulers’ end. Eleleth’s responses provide the authoritative account and revelation of the hypostasis of the Rulers, and concludes with a promise of a future redemption when the “True Human Being” comes “in a modeled form” and brings the Authorities’ rule to an end.

Throughout the narrative, the Rulers display their character and power in efforts to dominate and defile humankind and the various manifestations of Spirit. The spiritual forces, by contrast, display their character and power in their efforts to assist and redeem humankind from the Rulers’ attempts to dominate and defile. They manifest these abilities in undetected movement and transformation and, most importantly, in various forms of speech, including verbal rebuke, the power of naming, and the ability to cry out for assistance.

In the opening mythic fragment, *Hyp. Arch.* offers its account of the creation of the visible cosmos and the first human beings. The narrative begins with the arrogant claim of the chief Archon to be the only God and extends through the confrontation between Norea, the virginal daughter of Eve, and the Rulers at the site of the ark. The chief of the Rulers, known alternately as Samael, Sakla, and Ialdabaoth, appears from the beginning of the narrative as a blind god and “god of the blind,” who claims to be the only god.

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26 Hyp. Arch. 92,29-32.
27 I.S. Gilhus, *The Nature of the Archons*, Wiesbaden, 1985, p. 17-19, analyzes the structure of the revelation dialogue as consisting of four questions and responses concerning: the identity of the Revealer (93,6-32); how the Authorities came into being (93,32-96,17); the relation of Norea and her children to the Rulers and to the divine (96,17-31); when and how the Rulers will come to an end (96,31-97,21).
29 Layton, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, pt. 2, p. 46-47, n. 23, and p. 72-74, n. 167. Samael appears at *Hyp. Arch.* 87,3; 94,25-26; Sakla appears at 95,7; Ialdabaoth at 95,8; 95,11-12; 96,3-4. Barc, *L’Hypostase*, p. 75-76, puts forward the hypothesis that in the first redaction, Ialdabaoth and Sabaoth were identified as the two sons of the chief Ruler. In his view, the second redactor identified Samael with Ialdabaoth, and made Sabaoth his son.
30 Hyp. Arch. 86,27: “Their chief is blind”; 87,3-4: “You are mistaken, Samael (which is, ‘god of the blind’)”; also, 94,25-26.
Their great one is blind; [because of his] power and his ignorance [and his] arrogance he said with his [power], “It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me].” When he said this, he sinned against [the Entirety]. And this speech reached up to Incorruptibility. And behold, a voice (f.) came forth from Incorruptibility, saying, “You are mistaken, Samael” — which is, “god of the blind.”

This passage introduces a pattern that recurs throughout the narrative: the vain and arrogant claims of the Archons evoke a voice of rebuke from the realm of Incorruptibility. The rebuking Voice from above unmasks the ignorance and error of the Rulers, shatters their assumptions, and subverts their claims to authority. This narrative pattern, like the Voice itself, discloses the nature of the Rulers as blind and powerless in the face of a higher power from above and sets the stage for further action.

The first human being, Adam, is formed after the body of the Rulers, and “after the image of the God that had appeared to them in the waters.” This is the image of the divine voice from Incorruptibility that rebuked the Chief Ruler’s claim to be the only God and then appeared in the waters below:

As Incorruptibility gazed down into the regions of the waters, her image appeared in the waters; and the Authorities of darkness became enamored of her. But they could not lay hold of that image which had appeared to them in the waters, because of their weakness — since soul-endowed beings (ψυχικος; ψυχικος) cannot lay hold of the Spiritual (πνευματικος; πνευματικος); for they were from below, while it was from above.

This revelation sets in motion the events that will lead to the creation of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. Enamored of the Image that appears in the waters, the Rulers vainly attempt to capture it by modeling a male human being after their body and after the image that appeared in the waters. The Rulers assume this male counterpart will attract the female image that appeared in the waters. Yet because they are powerless and do not understand the force of God or the Image, they are unable to make their modeled male form arise. The Spirit from above sees this and enters into Adam, followed by a Voice that comes for his assistance.

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33 Hyp. Arch. 87,29-33.
34 Hyp. Arch. 87,1-4; 87,12-15.
35 The distinction here between the soul-endowed beings and the things of the Spirit clearly seems to draw from Paul’s discussion in 1 Cor 2:14: “The soul-endowed human being (psychikos anthropos) does not receive the things of the Spirit of God (ta tou pneumatos tou theou), for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually (pneumatikos) discerned.”
36 Hyp. Arch. 87,11-20.
37 Hyp. Arch. 87,33-88,10.
38 Hyp. Arch. 88,1-10.
Afterward, the Spirit saw the soul-endowed human being upon the ground. And the Spirit came forth from the Adamantine Realm; it descended and came to dwell within him, and that human being came to be a living soul. It called his name Adam since he was found moving upon the ground. A Voice came forth from Incorruptibility for the assistance (βοηθεία; boēthia) of Adam; and the Rulers gathered together all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the sky and brought them in to Adam to see what Adam would call them, that he might give a name to each of the birds and all the beasts.  

As in Genesis 2:7, the human being receives the name “Adam, since he was found moving upon the ground,” and he becomes a “living soul.” But here, it is not the breath of the Creator, but rather the Spirit from the Adamantine land that comes to dwell in the soul-endowed (psychikos) Adam that gives him life and the power to arise. Equally important, it is the Voice from Incorruptibility, in turn, that gives him the power to name all the birds and beasts of the earth. This divine Voice that comes to Adam recalls and can, perhaps, be identified with the Voice that rebuked the Chief Ruler in the opening scene of the narrative. But in this, its second appearance, the Voice from Incorruptibility displays its power not in rebuke against the Rulers, but in the form of assistance (boēthia) to Adam, in the power of language and naming. As the Voice comes to the Spirit-filled Adam, he becomes empowered to name the birds and the beasts the Rulers had made, but could not name themselves. With this episode, the recipient of the opening letter and astute readers begin to see that the spiritual powers of movement, life, and speech are transferred directly from the divine Spirit to the human beings whom the Spirit comes to inhabit. 

As the narrative continues, the Rulers command Adam not to eat from the tree of knowing good and evil, not realizing that it is not their will, but the will of the Father that leads them to issue the command, so that “he might (in fact) eat” and not regard the Rulers “as would one of entirely carnal (hylíkos) nature.”

The Rulers then bring a deep sleep of Ignorance upon Adam, and “they opened his side like a Living Woman.” With this act, the Spirit leaves Adam and enters the Spiritual woman, Eve, separated from his side. Yet Adam retains something of the power of the Spirit and the Voice, as he identifies the Spiritual woman as the one who gave him life and he names her “mother of the living” — For it is she who is my mother. It is she who is the physician, and the woman, and she who has given birth.

This Spiritual woman now embodies the Spirit from the Adamantine land that first gave movement and life to Adam, and perhaps also the Voice from

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40 Hyp. Arch. 89,1-3.
41 Hyp. Arch. 89,8-9.
42 Hyp. Arch. 89,16-17. Compare Gen 2:23: “This one shall be called Woman”; Gen. 3:20: “The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.”
Incorruptibility that gave Adam the power of speech. Her beautiful presence, like that of the divine image that appeared in in the waters, arouses the Archons once again. They respond with their second attempt to grasp and defile a manifestation of the female Spirit from above.

Then the Authorities came up to their Adam. And when they saw his counterpart (f.) speaking with him, they became disturbed in a great disturbance; and they became enamored of her. They said to one another, “Come, let us sow our seed in her,” and they pursued her. And she laughed at them for their senselessness and their blindness. And in their clutches, she became a tree, and she left her shadow resembling herself before them; and they defiled (ἀγορασμὸς) [it] foully. And they defiled (ἀγορασμὸς) the impression of her voice, so that they made themselves liable to condemnation by their modeled form and [their] image.43

In this second attempt to defile a female manifestation of the Spirit, the Rulers try to “sow their seed” (sperma) in her. But the Spiritual Woman they desire leaves the carnal or fleshly shadow resembling herself behind and enters a tree.44 The Rulers, mistaking the carnal shadow for the Spiritual Woman herself, succeed in defiling only the carnal woman and the impression of her voice. In this act of rape, the Rulers and the carnal woman would appear to conceive Cain.45

Upon leaving the woman, Pneumatike, the Spiritual Woman,46 enters the serpent and instructs the man and woman to eat from the tree of recognizing evil and good, against the Rulers’ command.47 This act of spiritual instruction is simultaneously an act of insubordination against the Rulers. The Spiritual Instructor, in the form of the serpent, thus informs the man and woman that the Rulers commanded them not to eat of the tree of knowing evil and good out of jealousy.48 With this spiritual instruction, the human beings of flesh and soul learn that by eating, “your eyes shall open and you shall become like gods, knowing evil and good.”49 After the woman “took from the tree and ate,” and “gave to her husband and herself,” they learn that they are “naked of the Spiritual” element, and in shame, they bind fig leaves to cover their loins.50 Upon questioning Adam, the Rulers learn that the woman gave to him from the tree and the arrogant Ruler curses her.51 She in turn informs them that the snake led

45 Hyp. Arch. 91,11-12: “Now afterwards, she bore Cain their son.”
46 Layton’s translation here, “the Female Spiritual Principle,” does not obscure the gender identification of this term, but it does depersonalize her ongoing representation. My translation deliberately seeks to repersonalize the reference for the purposes of literary analysis.
47 Hyp. Arch. 89,31-90,2.
48 Hyp. Arch. 90,6-12.
49 Hyp. Arch. 90,8-10.
50 Hyp. Arch. 90,15-19.
her astray. The Rulers then curse the snake, cast Adam and the woman out of the Garden, and put them under the curse. Thus here, as in Genesis 3, the human beings’ act of defiance leads to their being cursed, expelled from the Garden, and thrown into a life of distraction and pain. This distraction takes the form of becoming occupied with earthly things and thus unable to be “devoted to the Holy Spirit.”

It is within this setting outside the Garden that Eve gives birth first to her first child, Cain: “Now after these things, she (the woman) bore Cain, their son; and Cain cultivated the land”. While the text is somewhat ambiguous about Cain’s paternity, the reference to “their son,” together with the murderous behavior of Cain, suggests that Cain is the product of the Rulers’ rape of the carnal woman. The narrative, however, goes on to clarify that Eve’s second child, Abel, is begotten through intercourse with Adam: “Thereupon he (Adam) knew his wife; again becoming pregnant, she bore Abel; and Abel was a herdsman of sheep.” The account of the births of Cain and Abel, their respective votive offerings of crops and lambs, and the fleshly Cain’s pursuit of Abel completes this portion of the narrative and forms the transition to the Norea narratives.

Norea’s spiritual identity is signaled immediately in the account of her birth as one of two spiritual children of Eve: Seth and Norea.

And Adam [knew] his counterpart (f.) Eve, and she became pregnant and bore [Seth] to Adam. And she said, “I have borne [another] human being through God in place [of Abel].” Again Eve became pregnant, and she bore [Norea]. And she said, “He has begotten on [me a] virgin (ἥτις μην παρεσακοσκος) as an assistance (ὕπνος εἰσια) [for] many generations of humankind.” She is the virgin (τηρενος) whom the Forces did not defile (μην παρεσακοσκος). Then humankind began to multiply and improve.

The close juxtaposition of the births of Norea and Seth have suggested to some that Norea may be considered “a female counterpart to Seth.” In one
sense, she is. Both Norea and Seth are set apart from their siblings and share a special identity as the spiritual children of Eve. Yet in another sense, Norea is not merely Seth’s “counterpart.” Viewed from the perspective of the subsequent narrative, the juxtaposition of their births points even more to a difference and asymmetry in their significance. While Seth may have been borne “through God in place of Abel,” Norea is declared to be a Virgin, an assistance to many generations of human beings, and the one whom the Forces did not defile. In contrast to other texts of the “Gnostic” or “Sethian” corpus, Hyp. Arch. gives far more attention to Norea and her children than it does to Seth and his seed. It is not his birth, but hers that captures the attention of the reader; not his character, but hers that plays the central role in the narrative; and not his “seed,” but her “offspring” that represent the generation of those who are saved.

As the narrative continues, it becomes increasingly clear that Norea is not merely “female counterpart” to her brother Seth in this variant of the “Sethian system,” but a female figure of greater significance and power than her male counterpart Seth. Rather than upholding the traditional subordination of female to male powers, Hyp. Arch. discloses the superiority of the female manifestations of Spirit to the androgynous Archons. In this way, among others, Hyp. Arch. revises the “Sethian” pattern of mythmaking and re-centers the mythic narrative around new and somewhat different oppositions involving sexuality and gender: androgynous sexual aggression vs. female virginity; and the traditional gender roles of male dominance and female subordination vs. the inversion of social roles and values through the power of the divine Spirit.

This more significant role for the female daughter of Eve, in my view, may well represent a twist or deliberate turn away from the dominant Sethian pattern of mythmaking, destined to recharge or re-signify the mythic drama in a more decisively gendered way. For the mythic system of Hyp. Arch., the Archons’ efforts to dominate and defile female images of the divine (the Image of the Voice in the waters; the Spiritual Eve; the Virgin Norea) may well have been chosen deliberately from the source domain of gender and sexuality — as vehicles or metaphors to transfer associations between the source domain of gender and sexuality onto the target domains outlined earlier: the nature or reality of the divine, the Rulers, and humankind; the significance of difference, unity,

Pearson, Stroumsa offers a very useful discussion of gnostic inversion, and describes Norea as female counterpart of Seth, yet such a description places Hyp. Arch. under the interpretive framework of the Sethian system and ignores the ways in which Hyp. Arch. radically alters “the Sethian system.”

multiplicity; the uses of power; and salvation. Thus, in my reading, the lesser role of Seth and the more central role of Norea both reflect this text’s effort to symbolize the hypostasis of the Rulers’ power as akin to the dominating and defiling acts of rape, and to reveal the spiritual power of language, Gnosis, and the subversion of the Rulers’ efforts to dominate and defile as manifested most powerfully in a character who in the traditional, gendered scheme of things would be subordinate to male powers. In the mythic world of Hyp. Arch., it is precisely the supposedly subordinated female character who demonstrates the spiritual power to overcome, unmask, and subvert the false claims of the Rulers, and of all those who would falsely claim to rule, dominate, and defile the spiritual. Thus, the text’s replacement of Seth with Norea as the spiritual heroine of the mythic narrative fits in with — and reflects precisely — its efforts to unmask, subvert, and undo the false claims to power, domination, and defilement of those who claim to govern the cosmos.

In her first appearance within the text, Norea receives two epithets that immediately focus the reader’s attention on her virginal and spiritual identity. In the words of her mother Eve, Norea is a “Virgin (παρθενος; παρθενος) begotten on me as an assistance (βοηθεια; βοηθεια) for many generations of human beings.” In the words of the narrator, “She is the Virgin (παρθενος; παρθενος) whom the Forces (δυναμις; δυναμις) did not defile.” The four highlighted terms, Virgin, assistance, Forces, and defile, resonate with the language of other key passages in the text, while at the same time referring to distinct aspects of Norea’s virginal identity. Even more important, both epithets point forward to Norea’s manifestations of spiritual power in her struggle against the Rulers and in Eleleth’s eschatological promise to Norea and her spiritual children.

In identifying Norea as Virgin, or parthenos, both statements point to her female gender and her sexual purity. Even more importantly, both reveal her spiritual identity and kinship with the divine Virginal Spirit, as they anticipate Eleleth’s assurance to Norea: “Your abode is in Incorruptibility, where the Virginal Spirit dwells.”59 Thus, even more than the manner of her birth, these namings of Norea point to her special relation as “Virgin” to the Virginal Spirit above. When Eve announces at her daughter’s birth that “He (the Father of the Entirety)60 has begotten on me a virgin as an assistance (βοηθεια; βοηθεια) for many generations of humankind,” her language connects Norea’s birth or begetting to the divine and, at the same time, identifies her spiritual

59 Hyp. Arch. 93.2-32. The plural form of the possessive prefix would appear to include Norea’s offspring in this kinship.
60 Layton (Hypostasis of the Archons, pt. 2, n. 96,62) resolves the ambiguity of the male pronoun by identifying the subject of the verb with the “God” through whom Seth was also begotten: the Father of all. This sets the paternity of Seth and Norea apart from that of Cain, “fathered” by the Rulers, and Abel, fathered by Adam.
role as an “assistance” (βοηθεια) to humankind. Even more important, Norea’s role as an assistance recalls the language of Gen. 2:18, where the Lord God creates for Adam a “helper” (LXX: βοηθον) as his partner, as well as the dual roles of the Spirit and the divine Voice that bring assistance to Adam in the powers of movement, life, and language.

The reappearance of “assistance” (βοηθεια) in this declaration of Norea’s virginity suggests strongly that Norea’s assistance to humankind will also be revealed in the power of language and naming. Here again, the intended recipient and the astute reader see that the spiritual powers of movement, life, and speech are transferred directly from the divine Spirit to the human beings whom the Spirit comes to inhabit. Thus, the first reference to Norea as “Virgin” and “assistance” identifies her spiritual kinship to the divine Father, the Spirit from the Adamantine Realm, and the Voice from Incorruptibility. Just as the divine Voice assisted Adam by empowering him to name the birds and beasts gathered by the Rulers, so Norea will provide spiritual assistance to humankind in undefiled divine-like virginity and in the act of re-naming the Forces as beastly, thereby unmasking their false claims and undoing their attempts to defile.

Along with these similarities are important differences between the two scenes. In Adam’s case, the Voice from above comes for Adam’s assistance in the service of the Rulers. Adam uses the divine assistance in the Rulers’ presence, and presumably with their approval, to name the birds and beasts. In this case, Norea is both the “voice” and the “assistance.” Even more important, unlike the voice manifested in Adam, Norea’s voice will not serve the Rulers. Rather, Norea’s voice will assist many generations of humankind in another, more subversive act of naming, directed not for, but against the interests of the Rulers.

The object and effect of Norea’s speech is suggested both in the earliest depiction of the divine Voice from Incorruptibility and in the narrator’s statement: “She is the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile.” In its earliest appearance, the divine Voice rebukes the Chief Ruler’s claim to be the only God and

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61 Indeed, as the narrative continues immediately after this scene, the reader is told: “Then humankind began to multiply and improve” (Hyp. Arch. 92,3-4).

62 Hyp. Arch. 88,17-24. Layton, Hypostasis of the Archons, pt. 2, p. 53, n. 48: “Verbal communication is divine, for it is the means by which gnosis will ultimately be transmitted to mankind and save them from the Rulers.”

63 Layton, Hypostasis of the Archons, pt. 2, p. 62, n. 96: “The word boetheia, which here refers to Norea, calls to mind the heavenly faculty of speech implanted in Adam ‘for his boetheia’ (cf. n. 48), Norea will be the ‘voice’ of the divine addressed to future generations... likewise just as the ‘voice’ of Adam comes from above, from the ‘Virgin’ Spirit, so Norea is a parthenos and thus a human replica and reminder of the Spirit above.”

projects the female image of the Voice into the waters below. This image arouses the Rulers’ desire and leads them not only to create the first human being as a potential snare, but to attempt to defile the Spiritual woman Eve. Thus, when the narrator declares: “She is the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile,” his words directly and powerfully contrast the undefiled, virginal Norea with the defiled woman, the carnal Eve whom they presume to be Norea’s mother. Unlike the carnal woman, who was defiled by the Rulers, Norea resists their sexual advances, retains her purity, and remains “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile.”

Norea’s Struggle against the Rulers

The prelude to Norea’s central confrontation with the Rulers takes place at the ark. After noting that “humankind began to multiply and improve” after the births of Seth and Norea, the narrative focuses briefly on the Rulers’ plan to bring a flood upon humankind and to “obliterate all flesh, from human being to beast.” The Ruler of the Powers instructs Noah to build an ark and “set it upon Mount Sir.” When “Orea” comes to him wanting to board the ark, Noah resists her advances, but Norea responds with a demonstration of the fiery power of her breath: “And when he would not let her, she blew upon the ark and caused it to be consumed by fire. Again he made the ark, for a second time.

Although this episode does not narrate a direct confrontation between Norea and the Rulers, it points to a crucial opposition between Noah, the faithful servant of the Ruler of the Forces, and Norea, whom he tries to prevent from entering the ark. Norea’s fiery breath parallels, and anticipates Eleleth’s account of, the fiery breath of Zoe. After the Ruler’s second claim to be the “god of the Entirety,” Eleleth recounts, Zoe rebukes him and breathes into his face. “And her breath became a fiery angel for her, and that angel bound Ialdabaoth and cast him down into Tartarus, at the bottom of the abyss.” With her

65 K. King, Ridicule and Rape, Rule and Rebellion: Images of Gender in the Hypostasis of the Archons, in J.A. Sanders and C. Hedrick (eds.), Gnosticism and the Early Christian World: Festschrift for J.M. Robinson, Sonoma, 1990, p. 1-35, rightly points out that the text’s view that Norea’s real mother is not the embodied Eve, but the Spiritual Woman, Pneumatike, obscures the physical role of the carnal Eve as the woman who gave birth to Norea.

67 Hyp. Arch. 92,3-4.
68 Hyp. Arch. 92,4-8.
69 Hyp. Arch. 92,8-14. This figure is most likely to be identified not with Ialdabaoth, but with Sabaoth, whom Eleleth describes in 95,13-96,3 as having been established in charge of the seventh heaven.
70 Hyp. Arch. 92,14-15.
71 Hyp. Arch. 92,16-18.
72 Hyp. Arch. 95,5-13.
destruction of the ark, Norea demonstrates the destructive power of her breath against Noah and the Forces, as she reveals her spiritual kinship to Zoe, daughter of Sophia.

Immediately after this demonstration of her fiery breath, Norea encounters even more formidable foes: the Forces who would defile her. Her response to these Forces reveals even more clearly both the subversive and linguistic nature of her role as an “assistance” for many generations of humankind. The Rulers attempt to lure Norea into submission and service by telling her: “Your mother Eve came to us.” But their formulation reminds the astute reader of their misguided and failed attempt to “sow their seed” in the Spiritual Woman, and exposes their ignorance of that failure as well as their inability to recognize the difference between the Spiritual Eve and the carnal Eve, in whom they sowed their seed. Finally, this episode exposes the inability of the Rulers to perceive the crucial difference between Eve, the carnal woman they defiled, and Norea, “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile.” They neither see those differences, nor recognize the nature and power of Norea, displayed so recently in her destruction of the ark.

Against the Rulers’ efforts to convince Norea that her mother came to them, Norea confronts them boldly and displays her spiritual power of speech, renaming both the Rulers and her mother:

But Norea turned to them and said to them, “It is you who are the Rulers of the darkness; you are accursed. And you did not know my mother; rather it was your counterpart (f.) that you knew. For I am not your descendant; rather it is from above that I am come.” The arrogant ruler turned in his power, [and] his countenance came to be like (a) black […]; he acted boldly toward her and said to her, “It is necessary that you render service to us, like your mother Eve; for I have been given […].”

This exchange between Norea and the arrogant Ruler Ialdabaoth represents a crucial turning point in the mythic narrative. Norea’s words represent the first human expression of the rebuking Voice from Incorruptibility against the Rulers of this world, and they do so in a bold pattern of renaming and inversion. With her rebuke to the Rulers’ false claims, Norea renames them as “Rulers of Darkness” and curses those who had cursed Adam and Eve. She corrects their foolish claim to have known her mother and renames the woman they knew as their female “counterpart.” Thus, Norea distinguishes the woman the Rulers defiled from her true mother, the Spiritual Woman. Even more important, this exchange links the Rulers’ failure to grasp the Spiritual Woman in that act of rape to their previous failure to grasp the female Image that appeared in the waters. While in both cases they become enamored and desire the female Spirit, all they are
able to grasp is their own “counterpart.” In the first case, they create a male “counterpart” for the Spiritual Image, but it is only their archontic or carnal counterpart, unable to move, speak, or arise until vivified by the Spirit from the Adamantine Land. In the second case, they attempt to rape the Spiritual Woman, but sow their seed only in their own female counterpart, the carnal Eve.

In the Symposium of Methodius, the speech of Agatha puts forward a strikingly similar image of “spirits of wickedness” enamored by, and seeking to defile, the beautiful “image” of the divine, which is the soul. After praising the soul’s “imperishable and immortal form,” Agatha urges the young maidens of the Symposium to protect themselves from “the spirits of wickedness” which are enamored of the soul’s beauty and seek to defile it: “All of us, my dear maidens, come into this world with an extraordinary beauty which has a relationship and kinship with wisdom…. For fashioned in the image of the only-begotten, it [the soul] has an unsurpassed loveliness. It is for just this reason that the spirits of wickedness become enamored of it and lie in wait for it; they would force it to defile that god-like and lovely image which it possessed.”

For Methodius, as for Hyp. Arch., the “spirits of wickedness” of Ephesians 6:12 are indeed at work in the world, but they are not the world’s Creators or Rulers, and the object of their desire is not the divine Spirit or her mythic female manifestations in primordial times. Rather for Methodius the defiling powers are “the devil and his angels, who scheme to dirty and defile, by their sinful contact, the spiritual and translucent beauty of our minds, and lust to commit adultery with every soul that is espoused to the Lord.”

Thus, Agatha urges her fellow young maidens to “keep this beauty spotless and intact” by literally pursuing a life of virginity and being metaphorically espoused as a bride only to the Lord.

In the Norea episode of Hyp. Arch., the Rulers for a third time attempt to grasp a female Spiritual being. Once again, they fail to discern properly the true identity of the female object of their desire. They mistakenly identify Norea as the daughter of the carnal woman whom they defiled, and falsely claim to have power over Norea. They try to make her subordinate and to have her “render service” to them. In her response, Norea exhibits the power of the divine Voice, even before Eleleth reveals her kinship with the divine. By renaming those Powers who would claim sexual and social power over her, Norea frees herself from their clutches, declares her independence, and asserts her superiority to the Rulers. As Norea thus resists the Rulers and disempowers them in language, the text discloses how Norea will be an “assistance” for many generations of

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76 Methodius, Symposium 6.1.
77 On the metaphorical character of the “virginal brides” of the bridegroom in Methodius, see Clark, Celibate Bridegroom, p. 14-15.
humankind. It is precisely through the spiritual and subversive power of speech that Norea will serve as such a model and assistance. Norea’s response to the Rulers might thus be read as a rejection of those powers (social, political, archontic) that make false claims to dominate and to subordinate spiritual powers from above. Their encounter exposes their authoritarian power as illegitimate tyranny. At the same time, it reveals Norea’s virginal power as superior. Yet Norea’s spiritual power is not all-encompassing or complete, for she herself must cry out to the God of the Entirety for divine assistance:

But Norea turned, in the power of [...]; and [she] cried out in a great voice [up to] the Holy One, the God of the Entirety, “Rescue (Ἀποβοήσοι) me from the Rulers of unrighteousness and save me from their clutches — at once!”

This summons for divine assistance brings the revelation of Eleleth, which brings several crucial disclosures, in response to four questions from Norea. In response to Norea’s first question: “Who are You?” Eleleth replies: “It is I who am Eleleth, sagacity, the great Angel, who stands in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I have been sent to speak with you and save you from the hands of the lawless. And I shall teach you about your Root.” After revealing his identity and purpose, Eleleth asks Norea a rhetorical question and then offers the crucial promise of redemption to Norea and her offspring:

Do you think these Rulers have any power over you (sg.)? None of them have power against the Root of Truth. For because of it (the Root), He appeared in the final ages; and they will reign over their Authorities. And these Authorities cannot defile (Ἁμαρθέ) you and that generation (Ἡρεμα). For your (pl.) abode is in Incorruptibility, where the Virginal Spirit (Ἡροθηνικός) dwells, who is superior to the Authorities of chaos and their cosmos.

With this utterance, Eleleth discloses to Norea the true “hypostasis,” “nature,” or “reality” not only of the Archons, but of Norea herself and “that generation” that cannot be defiled. As those whose abode is in “Incorruptibility, where the Virginal Spirit dwells,” Norea and “that generation” cannot be corrupted or defiled because they have spiritual kinship with the Virginal Spirit.

Eleleth’s utterance also reveals to Norea the source of the power she has already demonstrated in her confrontation of the Rulers: it is the Root of Truth that protects Norea and her offspring against the Authorities and their defilement.

You and your offspring belong to the Father who exists from the beginning; it is from above, from the imperishable Light that their souls have come. Because of this the Authorities cannot approach them because of the Spirit of Truth present

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78 Hyp. Arch. 92,32-93,2.
80 Hyp. Arch. 93,18-32.
within them. And all who have come to know this way exist deathless in the midst of dying humankind. But that Seed (ⲥⲡⲉⲣⲙⲁ) will not become manifest now. Rather, after three generations it will become manifest. It has freed them from the bond of the error of the Authorities. 81

Eleleth informs Norea that it is only when “the True Human Being” appears in a modeled form that the previously hidden spiritual seed within Norea and her offspring will become known. With the revelation of that knowledge, or Gnosis, the tyranny of the Authorities will be overturned. Eleleth goes on to tell Norea about the nature of that redemption and all the things the true Human Being will accomplish: He will teach them about everything and anoint them in the chrism of Eternal Life; blind thought will be cast off from them; they will trample under foot the death of the Authorities; they will ascend to the Light which has no limit, where this Seed exists; then the Authorities will relinquish their ages, their angels will weep over their destruction, and their demons will lament their death; and “all the Children of the Light will know the Truth and their Root in Truth and the Father of the Entirety and the Holy Spirit. They will all say in a single voice, ‘The Truth of the Father is just, and the Son is over the Entirety.’ And from everyone unto the ages of ages, ‘Holy — holy — holy! Amen!’” 82

With this conclusion, the revelation of Eleleth points forward to the last days when the True Human Being will redeem the children of Norea and end the oppressive reign of the Rulers. This promise of a future redemption for Norea’s children carries important implications for the readers of the text, who may feel challenged and/or empowered to pose their own interpretive question: what does this mythic account of creation, of confrontation between two modes of power, of rape and attempted rape, of carnal and spiritual birth, and of eschatological redemption, signify? By putting together the various signifying elements of the text, inquiring readers may begin to perceive the metaphorical patterns of the mythic narrative and connect them to their own lives.

In reading the mythic narrative of Hyp. Arch., one might argue that all readers encounter a special concern with the exercise of power in the world, especially the confrontation between the abusive, domineering power of the Archons and the vivifying, redeeming power of the Virginal Spirit. The narrative’s “hypostasis (reality, nature, character) of the Rulers” thus provides the reader with images of illegitimate power, while those of the divine Spirit provide models for redeeming power: the power of movement, life, and naming given to Adam; the instruction offered by the Serpent; Eleleth’s revelation; and Norea’s identity.

82 Hyp. Arch. 97,1-21.
As “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile,” Norea stands apart from other human characters as a model of spiritual purity and a figure of spiritual insight and power. Like the divine female image in the waters and the Spiritual Woman, Norea’s significance cannot be grasped as if she were a “counterpart” or subordinate to the Rulers, or even to her brother Seth. She stands apart, rather, as a figure who subverts such schemes of dominance and displaces the Rulers, Seth, and perhaps even our own readings of gender relations, of this and other texts. The character of Norea, like her representation in the text, has the power to subvert and displace such narratives of dominance and control, as she disarms the oppressive powers that illegitimately claim to rule the cosmos, the social order, and the body. That Norea is female and the Rulers androgynous in representation has deep metaphorical significance, but does not refer directly to social relations in the world of its readers. Rather, they are mythic symbols and metaphors, drawn from the source domain of gender, sexuality, and the body, and they provide a basis for reflection on a variety of “target domains”: the relation of the divine, the archontic, and the human; the significance of difference, unity, and multiplicity; the exercise of power in the world; and the nature of salvation.

Eleleth’s revelation and the narrative as a whole also invite astute readers of the text to see Norea’s work as anticipating that of the True Human Being and to understand themselves as Norea’s offspring and recipients of salvation. Readers of the text thus become the “future” descendants of Norea when they receive Eleleth’s revelatory narrative of creation and redemption as a “true” account or “mythos” of the ways things are. As such, readers, like the other recipients of revelation before them, Norea and the epistle’s addressee, are invited by Eleleth’s revelation and the text as a whole to understand the “reality” (hypostasis) of the Rulers, of Norea as “the Virgin whom the Forces did not defile,” and of themselves as her spiritual offspring.

The Reality of the Rulers thus serves to disclose and impart to Norea’s “descendants” the ability to engage in and to win the struggle against the Authorities of the cosmos and the spiritual hosts of wickedness. As mythic symbols and metaphors, the representation of Norea and the Rulers gain their signifying power from their perceived correspondence to the social world of the text’s readers, but the precise interpretation of their symbolic significance remains open-ended, and depends on the varying contexts, experiences, and identities of those readers. In inviting the readers of the text to claim their identity as Norea’s children, Hyp. Arch. challenges its readers to discover the Virginal Spiritual power that subverts the Archons’ power within the mythic narrative, and, moving from that narrative to their own worlds, to exercise that same power of critique, subversion, and redemption in their own worlds. The

account of Norea’s struggle against the Rulers may thus be used to extend the subversive power of Norea’s speech, as it specifies the character of her “assistance” to generations of humankind. Her children are those who have been anointed by the True Human Being, who are called now to understand themselves as inheriting the promise to Norea and her children, and to exercise the spiritual power of virginity to resist and undo the Forces who would defile them.

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