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THE RIDDLE OF THE THUNDER (NHC VI, 2): THE FUNCTION OF PARADOX IN A Gnostic TEXT FROM NAG HAMMADI

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Preface

One of the important components in the literary and theological background of earliest Christianity was the collection of wisdom sayings. Such collections must have been the direct ancestors of works like the Synoptic Sayings Source ("Q") and the *Gospel According to Thomas*. As the original Hellenistic Jewish genre (Sayings of the Wise) developed into various gnostic counterparts, one of its salient evolutionary features was the appearance of dark sayings, whose interpretation was not plain, was riddlesome, or was even said to be "secret" (*logoi apokryphoi*). At this point the line of development merged temporarily with the Greek riddle, until the genre was ultimately transmuted into outright obscure paradox. A few paradoxical sayings are already present in the *Gospel According to Thomas*; but not until the appearance of a little-known *Gospel of Eve* did one find relatively pure forms of the new genre, which we may call the Riddle Gospel. The present essay explores several works in the thrall of the *Gospel of Eve*,

chief among them being *Thunder, Perfect Intellect* (NHC VI,2). At this ultimate stage in the line of development, the voice of Dame Wisdom has become the voice of a riddle, and traditional sapiential content has been totally neutralized by paradox, making way for the construction of a mythic *hyponoia* ("buried meaning") more typical of the symbolic world of gnosticism.

I. The Literary Character of *Thunder, Perfect Intellect*

Thunder, Perfect Intellect (or simply, *Thunder*) is a powerful poem of some two hundred verses, originally composed in Greek. This poem has been called unique¹ in the surviving Mediterranean literature, primarily because of its combination of the rhetorical mode of omnipredication (best known from Isis aretalogy) with a logic of antithetical paradox that negates the possibility of taking predication seriously. A few lines from the opening of the poem can serve to remind us of the extraordinary impression made by this most bizarre of all works from the Nag Hammadi corpus:

It is from the power that I, even I, have been sent
And unto those who think on me that I have come;
And I was found in those who seek me.
Look upon me, o you (plu.) who think on me.
And you listeners, listen to me!
You who wait for me, take me unto yourselves,
And do not chase me from before your eyes.

For, it is I who am the first: and the last.
It is I who am the revered: and the despised.
It is I who am the harlot: and the holy.
It is I who am the wife: and the virgin.

It is I who am the mother of my father: and the
sister of my husband.
And it is he who is my offspring.
It is I who am the servant of him who begot me:
It is I who am the governess of my (own) offspring.

¹ According to MacRae (*Thunder*, 1) "[The *Thunder*] presents an especially interesting challenge to the student of Gnostic literature. In its form and content it is unique in the Nag Hammadi collection and virtually unique as a distinct literary work in the context of literature from the Roman and Hellenistic periods. Though it shares features of both form and content with passages in several types of ancient religious literature, it has no counterpart as a separate work." MacRae's essay together with responses by B. Pearson and T. Conley printed in the same volume constitute the major pieces of scholarly discussion on this tractate.

It is I who am incomprehensible silence:
And afterthought, whose memory is so great.

For, it is I who am acquaintance: and lack of acquaintance.
It is I who am reticence: and frankness.
I am shameless: I am ashamed.²

This short sample makes clear all the poem's salient features. (1) *The text is a monologue, concerned not with plot, but with the building up of persona. In ancient rhetorical practice, this is ēthopoia* ("delineation of character"). Time, place, and occasion are still relevant, but they must be deduced from the *ēthopoia*.

(2) An important element of this *ēthopoia* is the speaker's use of the formula *egō eimi*, "It is I who am. . ." This somewhat cumbersome English translation of the formula is meant to take account of a contrast, expressed in Greek and in Coptic, between pairs like *phōs eimi tou kosmou* versus *egō eimi to phōs tou kosmou*, "I am the light of the world" versus "it is I who am the light of the world."³ The first option answers the question, "To what class of thing do you belong?"; while the second answers, "Who is the light of the world?" This second option, the *egō eimi* option, was the hallmark of Isis propaganda, used in advertising campaigns of the deity as she competed for adherents in a syncretistic milieu, where each divine being claimed to be all good things to all people. Thus Isis grandly claims, "Isis am I, mistress of every land. . . It is I who overcome fate."⁴

(3) Another aspect of the speaker's *ēthos* ("character") is *what she predicates of herself*. On the one hand, there is the outrageous pairing of the predicates so as to express a paradox, often phrased in balanced antithesis. Since paradox is utterly foreign to the content of Isis monologues the strong disjunction between self-predicating (Isiac) rhetoric and paradoxical logic is the true exegetical crux of our text. On the other hand, the poem gives us specific details about the speaker's family relations, social status, moral and mythic attributes, and abilities.⁵ These

² *Thund.* VI,2:13,2-14,30, trans. by Layton.

³ John 9:5 versus 8:12.

⁴ Isis aretalogy of Cyme, verses 3a and 56. I translate from the text in Bergman, *Isis*, 301-303.

⁵ *Family relations*: wife, virgin, mother, daughter, barren, has many children, married, unmarried, midwife, lying-in-woman, bride, bridegroom, begotten by her own husband, mother of her own father, sister of her own husband, mother of her own husband, begotten by her own offspring. *Social status*: first, last, revered, despised, governess of her own offspring, servant of her own father, declared publicly, denied, spoken of with truth and with lies, recognized, unrecognized, wealthy, poor, has many images, has no images, male, female, restrained, pursued, collected, scattered, celebrated, uncelebrated, spared, smitten, citizen, alien, rich, poor, distant, nearby, unified, dissolved, persistent, weak, has

details may be clues that our gnostic author has left behind in setting up this riddle.

(4) Modern interpretation stresses the combination of *egō eimi* and paradox as the characteristic feature of this text;⁶ yet, in fact, the same number of lines is given to a quite different rhetorical mode, the *philosophical sermon or gnostic diatribe*. Examples of gnostic diatribe are well known,⁷ and one should not forget its resemblance to exhortations of Jewish Wisdom in texts like the eighth chapter of Proverbs.⁸ In this mode, the monologist addresses the audience, issuing commands and invitations, disparaging their actions and attitudes, and posing rhetorical questions of a damaging sort. Rhetorical antithesis is very typical, though paradox is not. Now, in our text about one-half of the verses belong more or less to this mode.⁹ But many of them have also the paradoxical character of the *egō eimi* predications, suggesting that the audience as a whole shares in the paradoxical nature of the monologist.¹⁰

descended, has ascended. *Moral and mythic attributes*: holy, harlot, afterthought, memory of afterthought, voice of manifold sound, discourse of manifold imagery, *gnōsis*, *agnōsia*, frankness, reticence, shameless, ashamed, peace, war, mighty, disgraced, merciful, cruel, continent, weak, bold, fearful, thriving, feeble, wise, foolish, speaks, silent, *sophia* of Greeks, *gnōsis* of non-Greeks, judgment, life, death, law, lawless, divine pantheon, godless. *Abilities*: source of power for her own offspring, dependent upon her own offspring in her old age, strong, afraid (i.e., weak), teacher, uneducated.

⁶ MacRae, *Thunder*, 2.

⁷ A classic example is *Corpus Hermeticum* VII, *Poi Pheresthe Ō Anthrōpoi*: "O men, whither are you being swept away? You are drunk! You have drained to the last drop the unmixed drink of the teaching of ignorance. You cannot carry it, but are even now vomiting it. Quit your drinking; turn sober; look upwards with the eyes of the heart, and if you cannot all do so, at least let those who can. For this evil of ignorance floods the whole earth; it corrupts the soul imprisoned in the body, not permitting it to anchor in the harbors of safety" (*Corpus Hermeticum* 7.1, trans. F. C. Grant in Grant, *Gnosticism: A Source Book*, 224-25, at 224). The Greek text is edited by A. D. Nock in Nock-Festugière, *Hermès*, 1. 78-84. A typical Sethian gnostic example of this literary mode occurs in the Nag Hammadi Library in *Zost. VIII,1:130,14-132,5*.

⁸ E.g., Prov 8:4-7 LXX, "O people, I exhort you, and I send forth my voice unto the children of humankind. O you who are simple, consider subtlety. And you who are untaught, take in (wisdom of the) heart. Listen to me, for I am speaking of solemn things and uttering straight (thoughts) from my lips. For my throat is going to meditate on truth; and deceitful lips are abominable before me." MacRae (*Thunder*, 2) calls attention to such passages, although he is making a somewhat different point.

⁹ I am not proposing here a hypothesis of isolatable sources behind the poem; I only mean to observe a constant shift among several literary modes or genres that characterizes the way our author writes. Indeed, some verses resist simple classification under one head alone: the uniquely first-person utterances are usually paradoxical; the uniquely second-person utterances (commands, rhetorical questions, accusations) are usually diatribic; but, for example, first-person utterances addressed to the second person are harder to classify (16:18 seq. "It is I who am what you have scattered: and you have collected me"). Note also the wise cautionary remarks by MacRae, *Thunder*, 4.

¹⁰ Thus, e.g., "Why, o you who hate me, do you love me, And hate those that love me?"

(5) Finally, there is a fragmentary *mythic framework*, comprising a mere twelve verses: at the beginning,¹¹ "It is from the power that I, even I, have been sent/ And unto those who think on me that I have come;/ And I was found in those who seek me"; in the middle,¹² "It is I who cry out:/ And it is upon the face of the earth that I am being cast out"; and at the end,¹³ "For—many and sweet are the . . . passions . . . which people restrain,/ Until they become sober and flee up to their place of rest./ And they will find me there,/ And live, and not die again" (i.e., not become reincarnate in a prisonlike body).

Brief as it is, this summarizes a myth of the soul's descent into the body, its entrapment in a disastrous cycle of reincarnations, and the descent of a savior from another realm of power and rest, who suffers, recalls the soul to soberness and her proper home, and reascends, showing the way for those who will be saved.

To recapitulate: nearly half of the verses are *egō eimi* self-predications, mostly paradoxical; nearly another half are diatribic, and also of these very many are paradoxical; and only a few verses are elements of a mythic setting.

II. Paradox and Riddle

What can be said about the female persona built up by this curious intersection of rhetorical modes? First, she likes to talk! We may call her "she," but gender is ultimately irrelevant since she is only a traveling voice. She is the savior of mankind; she saves by preaching, demanding a reorientation of mind and heart. She invites comparison with the authority of Isis and thence Dame Wisdom. She is an element within those to whom she is sent: the instrument of broadcasting and the instrument of reception are one and the same.¹⁴ She and they are in the same paradoxical situation,¹⁵ so that self-knowledge and knowledge of the savior may at least partly be the same. Finally, she and the saved have the same home.

The exegetical crux, namely the meaning of the speaker's paradoxical self-predications, raises the acute question of whether or not one should take the text seriously (e.g., "It is I who am the mother of my father: and

Declare me publicly, o you that deny me: And deny me, o you who declares me publicly" (*Thund. VI,2:14,15 seq.*).

¹¹ *Thund. VI,2:13,2-4.*

¹² *Thund. VI,2:19,28-30.*

¹³ *Thund. VI,2:21,20-32.*

¹⁴ "I was found in those who seek me. . . . You listeners, listen to me!" (*Thund. VI,2:13,4,7.*)

¹⁵ Cf. the discussion above with n. 9.

the sister of my husband").¹⁶ Or should one, with modern interpretation, attempt only an overall history of religions assessment and assert that "the use of paradox in the I style . . . implies the rejection of all value systems that are at home in the world"?¹⁷

The broad solution is discomfiting: first, because the critic has a duty to work, if possible, at the level of textual details; second, because there is no substantial connection between the paradoxical omnipredication of our text and, as commentators have claimed,¹⁸ the philosophical method of *via negativa*. Few ancient Greek thinkers would have considered the *via negativa* and the assertion of antithetical paradox to be interchangeable in such a way.¹⁹

Consequently, one ought to ask, What was the normal locus of outrageous paradox in the ancient Mediterranean world? The very simplicity of the answer may explain why it has eluded earlier students of this text: it is the Greek riddle.²⁰

While *egō eimi* language has nothing in common with the Greek riddle as a specific grammatical form,²¹ paradoxical dichotomy is a very salient feature of the riddle genre, as Aristotle pointed out long ago.²² After Aristotle, the Peripatetic school took a serious interest in the topic, and theorists of the early Christian period continued to analyze the riddle mode.²³ Since modern scholars are not always acquainted with

¹⁶ Thund. VI,2:13,30–32.

¹⁷ MacRae, *Thunder*, 3.

¹⁸ MacRae, *Thunder*, 3, apparently accepted also by the discussants of the colloquy (*Thunder*, 25–26).

¹⁹ I should note, however, that apophatic language was on rare (I think) occasion combined with assertions of divine polyonymy. Thus, an oracle text in an inscription found at Oenoanda and studied by L. Robert (*CRAIBL* 1971, pp. 597–619) tells us that [Αἰ]τοφυῆς, ἀδίδακτος, ἀμήτωρ, ἀστυφέλικτος, οὐνομα μὴ χωρῶν, πολυώνυμος, ἐν πυρὶ ναιῶν, τοῦτο θεός κτλ (Robert, p. 602), which Robert translates "Né de lui-même, à la sagesse infuse, sans mère, inébranlable, ne comportant pas de nom, aux noms multiples, habitant du feu, voilà ce qu'est Dieu." It was Prof. H.-D. Saffrey who kindly drew my attention (in another context) to this interesting amplification of the *via negativa*. Needless to say, polyonymy in itself is old and fairly common in Greek religious philosophy; it is not the same as paradox.

²⁰ Basic studies include: Schultz, "Rätsel"; Schultz, *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreise*; Ohlert, *Rätsel*.

²¹ So at least as we find the examples cited, collected, or rephrased in ancient sources. For the Hellenistic period one of our principal sources is the literary epigram in which popular riddles were recast for a literate audience.

²² Po. 1458a26, αἰνίγματος ἰδέα αὕτη ἐστὶ τὸ λέγοντα ὑπάρχοντα ἀδύνατα συνάγει· κατὰ μὲν οὖν τὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων σύνθεσιν οὐχ οἶόν τε τοῦτο ποιῆσαι. κατὰ δὲ τὴν μεταφορὰν ἐνδέχεται, which Ohlert (*Rätsel*, 18) translates "Der Begriff des Rätsels ist der, dass man, indem man von wirklichen Dingen spricht, unmögliches verbindet. Das kann man nicht durch die Verbindung der eigentlichen Ausdrücke, aber man kann es durch die Anwendung der Metapher."

²³ Ohlert, *Rätsel*, 17–22.

the form of Greek riddles—the surviving examples are often in verse—it may be useful to quote some typical riddles.

οὐδεὶς βλέπων βλέπει με, μὴ βλέπων δ' ὄρᾳ·
ὁ μὴ λαλῶν λαλεῖ, ὁ μὴ τρέχων τρέχει·
ψευδὴς δ' ὑπάρχω, πάντα τ' ἀληθῆ λέγω.
No one seeing sees me, but one who does not see beholds me.
One who does not speak speaks; one who does not run runs.
And I am a liar, yet say all things true.
Solution—a dream.²⁴

μητέρα ἔμην τίκτω καὶ τίκτομαι· εἰμι δὲ ταύτης
ἄλλοτε μὲν μείζων, ἄλλοτε μειώτερη.
I give birth to my own mother, and I am born; and I am
Sometimes greater than she, sometimes lesser.
Solution—unfortunately, not preserved.²⁵

παρθένος εἰμι γυνὴ καὶ παρθένου εἰμι γυναῖκος
καὶ κατ' ἔτος τίκτω παρθένου οὐσα γυνή.
I am a virgin woman, and the daughter of a virgin;
And I give birth once a year, remaining a virgin.
Solution—a date palm.²⁶

Riddling²⁷ was an ancient and important social game in Greek-speaking culture, and so the style features of a riddle would have been easily recognized by an ancient Greek reader.²⁸ Riddles had not only a recognizable set of conventional forms, but also a characteristic logic—Aristotle called it *adynata synapsai*, "conjoin as mutually exclusive things." Riddle style, then, was recognizable in the ancient world; and it is likewise a recognizable element among the literary conventions of our text.²⁹

²⁴ AP 14.110 = Schultz, *Rätsel*, No. 4. Cf. also Ohlert, *Rätsel*, 178–79.

²⁵ AP 14.41 = Schultz, *Rätsel*, No. 6. Schultz, *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreise*, 1. 23 (differing from Ohlert, *Rätsel*, 96). I am told (by Victoria Lord) that this riddle is transmitted in modern Greek culture and that a traditional solution is "a child."

²⁶ AP 14.42 = Schultz, *Rätsel*, No. 90. According to a lemma in cod. Laurentianus, the solution is βάλανος φουίικων (Schultz, *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreise*, 1. 62). Ohlert (*Rätsel*, 174) proposes "a grapevine" as the true solution.

²⁷ The principal terms for riddle were αἰνίγμα and γράφος. For ancient theorists' attempts to explain a difference between these two words, see Ohlert, *Rätsel*, 17–22 (other ancient Greek words for riddle are noted there on 22 n. 2).

²⁸ For details one can consult Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* X 448b–459b.

²⁹ This is not, of course, to say that our text is a riddle pure and simple. However, some passages sound quite like a series or list of short riddles. E.g., 16:3 seq., "For, it is I who am the wisdom [of the] Greeks: And the acquaintance of [the] non-Greeks. It is I who am judgment for Greeks: And for non-Greeks. I am he whose image is manifold in Egypt: And she who has no image among the non-Greeks. It is I who have been hated everywhere: And who have been loved everywhere. It is I who am called life: And whom you have called death. It is I who am called law: And whom you have called lawlessness. It is I whom you have chased: And it is I whom you have restrained. It is I who am what you have scattered: And what you have collected."

Thus the *Thunder* owes its peculiar character to the blending of three ordinarily unrelated literary modes: the Isis/Wisdom proclamation, asserting the power, sovereignty, and special knowledge of the speaker; the philosophical sermon, with its vision of life falling into two neat moral, intellectual, and anthropological options (Two Ways) and exhorting the listener to choose only the higher way; and the riddle, which demands, first, a solution and, second, a reexegesis of the entire text as riddle to see how the solution applies. Riddles often speak with a mythic³⁰ directness that demands the active application of the listener's intellect, in a way that sermons and aretologies rarely do.

III. The Solution to the Riddle

A riddle is the occasion for rethinking the sense of what otherwise seems obviously impossible, a time for a shift in perspective, a search for a deeper meaning. Even when the solution has been revealed or recognized, the riddle itself must finally be reread—exegeted—to discover how the solution applies, how a seeming paradox is not really a paradox. This invitation to exegesis is part of the riddle game. Riddles share these features with gnostic ways of treating scripture and tradition. The hermeneutic of riddles compares with e.g., the rereading of Genesis proposed by texts such as the *Secret Book of John*, the *Reality of the Rulers*, or the *Revelation of Adam*.³¹ In one important sense, the function of such texts is not so much to replace Genesis as to lead the reader into a new relationship with it. Riddles can make use also of monologue, as in the *Thunder*.³² But riddles have one thing that most gnostic texts do not—namely, a definite solution. For this reason, to the extent that our text belongs to the riddle genre, it is not unreasonable to ask, "Who is the thunder?" External testimonia provide a narrative

³⁰ "The oldest riddles mostly have a mythical or cosmic origin, and hence they retain the oldest mythical view of nature in a purer manner than do many other branches of literature. Birth, growth, and decay in nature as well as in human life; the rising and setting of the stars; the struggle between light and darkness; the changing images formed by the clouds of heaven—all these were riddles which demanded a solution and which were clothed in the garb of a riddle because the solution could not clearly and meaningfully be found. Most peoples also clothed oracles and proverbs in the obscure language of the riddle; these were viewed as utterances of superior, divine insight. Hence in earliest times, riddles, oracles, and proverbs had the character of a secret and sanctified treasure. Even in the riddles of later time, many traces of early mythic components lie hidden. But in the course of time, profound insight into their original meanings became blurred in the spirit of the people and gradually was lost" (Ohlert, *Rätsel*, 1).

³¹ The Apocryphon of John, *Hypostasis of the Archons*, *Apocalypse of Adam*.

³² The three Greek riddles quoted above are typical. Descriptive (third-person) riddles are also common.

context for the riddle material in the *Thunder*. Both these testimonia and the internal details of the text point to one and the same solution: Eve.³³ Six items are worth noting.

(1) First, in the untitled tractate commonly called *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5) virtually an excerpt from the *Thunder* (though probably not an actual quotation from our text) is sung by Sophia Zoe, alias Eve of Life, the celestial androgynous child of Pistis Sophia, at the moment when she creates the animate or psychic Adam (see Table 1). This creation, for the author of *On the Origin of the World*, is distinct from the creation of fleshly Adam and the extraction of a fleshly woman from his side.³⁴

(2) Second, the *Reality of the Rulers* (*Hypostasis of the Archons*), a classic "Sethian" text in Schenke's terminology,³⁵ quotes the same material, although more briefly³⁶ and no longer as a monologue. The *Hypostasis of the Archons* narrates only a single creation of Adam, namely the fleshly one. Adam is originally a lifeless androgyne.³⁷ The female spiritual principle (*hē pneumatikē*) enters Adam's prone body and gives it life. When the rulers (archons) surgically excise the female half of the androgyne (that half is the fleshly Eve) the *pneumatikē* is excised along with her.³⁸ Adam, recovering from his post-operative trance, then addresses her with words of the same hymn that we find in *On the Origin of the World* (see Table 2). Because of its brevity, the paradoxical character of this second citation is much less obvious. But another element is now additionally present: a famous series of puns on *Hawa* (see Table 2), the Aramaic name of Eve.³⁹ The common source of these two texts probably contained both a riddle-like aretology and a

³³ Partly seen by Bethge, "Nebront," 99: "Nebront [i.e., *Thunder*] expliziert keinen Mythos, ist jedoch weitgehend nur dann in seinen Selbstaussagen verständlich, wenn hinter vielen der gegensätzlichen Aussagen ein Mythos vom Fall und der Errettung der Sophia steht." He goes on to refer to the split of Sophia in Valentinianism and the degrading fall of the divine female consort in Simonianism. For the mixture of contrary emotions in the Lower Sophia or Achamōth of Ptolemaean Valentinianism, see Iren. *Hæc*. I.4.1-2.

³⁴ For the creation of animate (psychic) Adam, see *Orig. World* II,5:113,25, and for fleshly Adam see *Orig. World* II,5:114,29.

³⁵ H.-M. Schenke, "Sethianism," 598-616.

³⁶ Not, I think, from the *Untitled Tractate* but from a common source, whose reconstruction I shall discuss below.

³⁷ *Hyp. Arch.* II,4:88,4-6.

³⁸ According to the author of *Hypostasis of the Archons*, the rulers' or archons' motivation for this surgical procedure is their desire to extract and rape the female spiritual principle.

³⁹ First explained, I think, by Alexander Böhlig in Böhlig-Labib, *Schrift ohne Titel*, 73-75. For the philological details, cf. now my notes 57-60 in "*Hypostasis*" (*HTR* 69 [1976] 55-58).

TABLE 1

The Song of Eve in Thund. VI,2:13,19-14,8
and Orig. World II,5:114,4-15

Thunder (rearranged for comparison)	On the Origin of the World
I am the <i>melē</i> of my mother. It is I who am the mother: and the daughter. It is I who am the wife (? <i>shime</i>): and the virgin (<i>parthenos</i>). It is I who am the barren: And who have many children. It is I who am the one whose marriage is magnificent; and who have not married. It is I who am the midwife: And she who does not give birth; It is I who am consolation: of my own travail. It is I who am the bride: and the bridegroom. It is my husband who has begotten me. It is I who am the mother of my father: and the sister of my husband. . . It is I who am the servant of him who prepared me. . . And my power (<i>dynamis</i>) comes from him. I am the staff of his power (<i>cōm</i>) in his childhood; [And] it is he who is the rod of my old age. And whatever he wishes happens to me.	Eve, then, is the first virgin, who gave birth to her first offspring without a husband. It is she who served as her own midwife. For this reason she is held to have said: "It is I who am the <i>meros</i> of my mother. And it is I who am the mother. I am the wife (<i>hime</i>) and the virgin (<i>parthenos</i>). It is I who am pregnant. It is I who am the midwife. It is I who am consolation of travail. It is I who am his mother. And it is he who is my father and my master. And it is he who is my power (<i>čōm</i>) He says whatever he wishes reasonably, I become (it)."

series of riddlesome Aramaic puns on the name of Eve.⁴⁰ The areta-logical material is more fully quoted in *On the Origin of the World*, the puns in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. Possibly the original setting is given by the *Hypostasis*, since *On the Origin of the World* distributes what ought to be one block of pun material—though not the aretalogy—over two episodes, that is, the two creations of Adam.⁴¹ The true setting, then, might be a monologue of the saving spiritual principle (*hē pneu-*

⁴⁰ They are also present in *On the Origin of the World*.

⁴¹ First episode, *Orig. World* II,5:114,8-15; second episode, *Orig. World* II,5:116,6-8 ("you have given me life" = Aramaic *ḥayyīṭani*).

TABLE 2

The Song of Eve in Thund. VI,2:13,15-22
and Song of Eve in Hyp. Arch. II,4:89,11-17

Thunder (selected vs. rearranged)	Hypostasis of the Archons
For— . . . It is I who am the mother. . . It is I who am the midwife. . . It is I who am the wife (? <i>shime</i>) . . . It is I who am the barren: And who have many children.	And the spirit-endowed woman came to him and spoke with him, saying, "Arise, Adam." And when he saw her, he said: "It is you who have given me life; You will be called 'Mother of the Living.' For— It is she who is my mother. It is she who is the midwife, and the wife (? <i>shime</i>), And she who has given birth."

NOTES: "you have given me life"—*ḥayyīṭani*
"mother of the living"—Gen 3:20
"my mother"—Gen 3:20, cf.
 Thunder
"midwife"—*ḥayyēṭā*
"the woman"—cf. Gen 2:23 and
 Thunder

COMPARE slightly later:

"she became a tree"—the tree of
ḥayyayyā' (life)
"the *pneumatikē* came [in] the
snake, the instructor"
"snake"—*ḥewēyā'*
"instructor"—**ḥāwā'* (hypo-
 thetical form)

matikē), spoken from within the body of the fleshly Eve after her separation from the masculine half of the Adam androgyne. It is a kind of encoded euaggelion, a good news riddle, which if solved will reveal the immanent but hidden presence of a savior principle within the world.⁴²

⁴² The hidden immanence of the divine within humankind appears to be an important theme also in the Sethian tractate *First Thought in Three Forms* (*Trimorphic Protennoia*), which in other important ways, discussed below, has connection with our text: cf. *Trim. Prot.* XIII,1:35,2.10.13-20.24-25; 36,23; 37,1 (?); 40,31; 41,20; 42,12.25; 45,21; 46,17.22-24; 48,20. Taken in isolation, some of these passages might be understood alternatively as referring to a *Messiasgeheimnis* ("messianic secret").

It is easy to construct kinship riddles⁴³ based on Eve once we review the cast of characters in the setting of the *Hypostasis of the Archons*.

<i>Fleshly Adam:</i>	the brother of Eve while they were an androgyne; her father or parent, because she was extracted from him; her husband, eventually; her son, because during her confusion with <i>hē pneumatikē</i> , she is (in the words of Gen 3:21) mother of the living, and Adam is alive.
<i>Fleshly Eve:</i>	the inverse of all the above.
The <i>pneumatikē</i> , the celestial Eve:	mother of Adam; mother of Eve (fleshly Eve); remains a virgin vis-à-vis the rulers when they rape the fleshly Eve. ⁴⁴

This paradoxical network of relationships will explain the kinship riddles in the *Thunder*, once we allow that in gnostic Sethian myth two figures are called by the name "Eve" (celestial Eve, fleshly Eve) and so the attributes of both figures can be invoked in the answer to the riddle ("Eve").

(3) Third, there may be a reference to this common source in Epiphanius' account of the *Gnōstikos* (or Sethian) sect who, he says, read a *Book of Nōrea*,⁴⁵ a prophecy of Barkabbas, a *Gospel of Perfection* (contents not summarized), and a *Gospel of Eve* (*Euaggelion Euas*), named after her on the grounds that she "discovered the food of *gnōsis* (divine acquaintance) through revelation spoken to her by the snake."⁴⁶ This is close to the setting of the *Hypostasis of the Archons*—since in the latter, the female spiritual principle returns precisely in the snake to teach the good news of liberation. Thus in the *Gospel of Eve*, or at least in one part of it, the heavenly Eve or *pneumatikē*, speaking now from within the snake, addressed the fleshly Eve. Epiphanius then goes on to characterize the literary mode of the *Gospel*: its predications (*rhēmata*) are self-contradictory (*ouk isa*)—one should recall Aristotle's definition of riddle, *adynata synapsai* (conjoin as mutually exclusive things)—"as though," says Epiphanius, "(uttered) in the unstable frame of mind of a drunkard given to uncontrollable talk; some (predications) are made for

⁴³ This basic class of riddles is briefly investigated by Schultz, *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreise*, 2. 22.

⁴⁴ *Hyp. Arch.* II,4:89,23-28. Even Epiphanius (*Pan.* 39.6.3) had to admit that in a certain sense Adam's wife was his own sister, since she was formed of his own flesh and blood. He adds that this was not illegal since at the time there were no other women to marry.

⁴⁵ Explicitly cited by the author of *On the Origin of the World* (II,5:102,10.24) as one of his sources of information.

⁴⁶ *ὡς εὐρύσης τὸ βρῶμα τῆς γνώσεως ἐξ ἀπακαλύψεως τοῦ λαλήσαντος αὐτῆ ὄψεως* (Epiph. *Pan.* 28.2.6 = I 278.1-2 H.).

laughter, the others filled with weeping."⁴⁷ Epiphanius quotes from the opening frame story of the *Gospel*. The story is set on a high mountain—like Paradise, according to *On the Origin of the World*.⁴⁸ The speaker, presumably the fleshly Eve, hears a *phōnē brontēs*, a voice of thunder, and it—the voice of thunder⁴⁹—speaks:

I am thou, and thou art I,
And wherever thou art, it is I who am there;
And I am sown in all things.
And whence thou wilt, thou gatherest me;
But when thou gatherest me, then gatherest thou thyself.⁵⁰

The first part of this quotation ("I am thou, etc.") disappointingly has no verbal parallel in our text. It can nonetheless be understood as a kinship riddle; indeed, it is the voice of one Eve addressing the other. But what the thunder says about her own paradoxical dispersion in the hearers is used in the Nag Hammadi *Thunder*: "I was found in those who seek me" (13,4); "It is I who am what you have scattered:/ And what you have collected" (16,18 seq.); "Do not cause greatneses, (dispersed) in parts (or particulars), to turn away from smallneses;/ For it is from greatneses that smallneses are recognized" (17,28 seq.). Here the words spoken by the thunder to fleshly Eve are generalized and extended to all the saved.

There is some chance that the *Gospel of Eve* used by Epiphanius' *Gnōstikoi* is the text that stands behind the two main testimonia (nos. 1 and 2 above) and the Nag Hammadi *Thunder*. If so, one is faced with a situation in which it is possible to detect ancient literary responses—all of them in mighty works—to what critics might call a presupposed "strong text." While one can point to some of its probable characteristics, a definite reconstruction of even a part of the text is out of the question.

Let me throw caution to the wind for a moment and speculate on these probable characteristics, realizing that some will probably be only incidental to our testimonia and not in the original. It is a riddle gospel, called *euaggelion*, in which the possibility of liberation is implied by monologues of the heavenly Eve or female spiritual principle. It uses the authoritative Isiac and/or Jewish Wisdom style, combined with the paradox of Greek riddle. It is set in Paradise atop a high mountain, where reference to thunder (*brontē*) is at home. It also contains riddle-

⁴⁷ *καὶ ὡς περ ἐν ἀσάτω γνώμῃ μεθύοντος καὶ παραλαοῦντος οὐκ ἴσα εἶη τὰ ρήματα, ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν γέλωτι πεποιημένα ἕτερα δὲ κλαυθμοῦ ἔμπλεα* (*Pan.* 28.2.6 = I 278.3-5 H.).

⁴⁸ *Orig. World* II,5:121.1, where the rulers expel Adam and drive him down (Coptic *epitn*) from Paradise to (Coptic *ejn-*) the adjoining land.

⁴⁹ And not, as Wilson translates, "he" (Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *NT Apocrypha* 1. 241).

⁵⁰ *ἐγὼ σὺ καὶ σὺ ἐγὼ, καὶ ὅπου ἐὰν ᾦς, ἐγὼ ἐκεῖ εἰμι, καὶ ἐν ἅσασιν εἰμι ἐσπαρμένος, καὶ ὅθεν ἐὰν θέλῃς, συλλέγεις με, ἐμὲ δὲ συλλέγων ἑαυτὸν συλλέγεις* (*Pan.* 28.3.1 = I 278.8-13 H.).

some puns based ultimately on a Semitic language.⁵¹ It is addressed in the first place to one or both of the fleshly protoplasts, perhaps alternately. The speaker also lapses into the style of the gnostic diatribe (it is hard to imagine just how this transition was made, or how often—our Thunder text was not necessarily arranged like the lost gospel). The time is perhaps a series of moments between the vivification of Adam and the birth of Nōrea and Seth, with whom a new incarnation of the spiritual seed begins; perhaps it was at this point that the Gnostic *Book of Norea* took up the story.

(4) The likelihood that such a text actually existed is strengthened by the existence of a Hellenistic Jewish tradition of paradoxical Eve riddles in Greek. An instance of this riddle type in the Planudean Appendix to the *Palatine Anthology* combines the two main motifs of Greek riddle, impossible kinship ties and self-contradictory predicates.

ἄνθρωπος με γεννᾷ, καὶ πατὴρ ὑπὲρ φύσιν
ζῶην καλεῖ με καὶ θάνατον προσφέρει.
A human being begot me, and my father is supernatural.
He calls me Life, and I bring him death.

The solution is given by Michael Psellus: Eve.⁵²

(5) This riddle would be hard to date and call Jewish, were it not for a similar turn of thought in Philo (*Quis Rerum* 11.52), who speaks of the fleshly Eve—allegorized as sensory perception—whom Adam, the earthbound intellect, saw just after her creation and “gave the name of Life (Ζῷῆ) to his own death,” i.e., to the eventual source of his sin and death.⁵³ Schultz, the learned editor of the Greek riddle corpus, thinks that this may be an allusion to an Eve riddle,⁵⁴ and I am inclined to agree. The circulation of such an Eve riddle, and the theological reflection surrounding it, could have been the seed from which the *Gospel of Eve* developed.

(6) I am loath to comment upon the sixth item—the speech of a fallen

⁵¹ As I have noted in “Hypostasis” (*HTR* 69 [1976] 53) the presence of such puns does not in itself indicate that the work was originally composed in a Semitic language. The circulation of etymological glossaries of Semitic biblical names, composed in Greek, made the necessary philological information available to any interested Greek-speaking readers. Ancient glossaries of such a type have been collected and edited by Wutz, *Onomastica*. We can see their use reflected as early as the time of Philo.

⁵² *API* 7.44 = Schultz, *Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreis*, no. 100.

⁵³ Cf. *Thund.* VI,2:16,11 seq. “It is I who am called life: And whom you have called death.”

⁵⁴ Referring, of course, to Gen 3:21 in the LXX, where Adam is said to call his wife not “Eve” but “Ζῷῆ” (life). Schultz (*Rätsel aus dem hellenischen Kulturkreise*, 1. 65) does not commit himself on the precise relationship of the Philonic passage to the riddle as phrased in the Planudean Appendix.

Wisdom figure, Ewath-Ruha, in the Mandaeen *Ginza*.⁵⁵ The *Ginza* is presumably much later than the hypothetical gospel, and may merely attest to the hardness of the *Gospel of Eve's* influence, perhaps in mediated forms. Does the speaker's unusual Mandaean name (Ewath) encode the original solution (expressed not in Mandaean Aramaic but in Greek) to our riddle, namely *Eua* (Eve)?

IV. Conclusions

From this solution of the riddle of the *Thunder*, several conclusions can be drawn.⁵⁶

(1) One is now closer to understanding the obvious resemblance of the *Thunder* to certain passages of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and *On the Origin of the World*, and possibly even a part of Mandaean scripture. This resemblance can be explained by the hypothesis of a common textual antecedent, known and responded to by the authors of these works. But from another perspective, one is also talking about ancient authors' perception of a distinct and indelible persona belonging to the main feminine character of the gnostic Sethian spiritual drama, a persona developed at a stage before the composition of these four works and marked by such strength and rhetorical peculiarity that subsequent writers did not escape it when writing of this character's interventions in our world.

(2) The exploration of the persona's antecedent components—the self-predications of Isis-Wisdom, the paradoxes of the Eve riddle, the diatribic language of sapiential exhortation—allows one to postulate a concrete literary antecedent in which these strands were fused and against which we might measure other literary works. That this antecedent was the *Gospel of Eve* is by no means the only possible construction of the evidence, though it may be the simplest one. The specific literary hypothesis is unproven and unprovable. The real point

⁵⁵ Lidzbarski, *Ginza* (right), 205–207 (noted by MacRae, *Thunder*, 7).

⁵⁶ It is not within the scope of this essay to exegete the text in detail or to examine all the evidence for the speaker's identity. This evidence is summarized above in n. 5. For her paradoxical family relations see discussion above with n. 43; on this basis can be explained her paradoxical abilities. Both the speaker's puzzling genealogy and her social and moral ambiguity were first encapsulated in the vulgate tradition of Eve riddles (above, with n. 53) and no doubt given poignancy by the widespread belief that biblical Eve had on one occasion disported with the devil (*Tg. Ps.-J.* Gen 4:1; *Klijn*, *Seth*, 3–8); in gnosticism this ambiguity finds systemic expression in tandem pairs of female emanations called *pronoia:spinoia* (forethought:afterthought) or high and lower wisdom (*sophia*), who are (respectively) less and more involved in materiality. The speaker's philosophical attributes are discussed in the section that follows below. Pearson's remarks in MacRae, *Thunder*, 11, partially and unconsciously anticipate the correct solution.

of this essay is only to show the coherence and identity of the persona as such, and to assert that the presence of this persona in a certain body of ancient texts indicates that they are somehow genetically related.

(3) The ambiguous Eve (who is essentially the female spiritual principle or heavenly Eve) is another strand in the network of evidence that binds certain texts together in the so-called gnostic Sethian system. Establishing the identity of this persona might lead one to the conclusion that the *Thunder* is gnostic and Sethian to the same degree that the *Hawa* puns in the gnostic Sethian *Hypostasis of the Archons* are gnostic and Sethian.

(4) Probably this persona is also Jewish to the same degree that the *Hypostasis of the Archons* is Jewish. The literary mode of Eve texts is, however, not predominantly "targumic" but rather "Isiac" (biblical critics have for some time recognized Isis rhetoric as a characteristic of Hellenistic Jewish wisdom texts).

(5) From Epiphanius one knows to associate the persona as found in the *Gospel of Eve* with a sect called *Gnōstikos*. The relationship of this sect to the texts under discussion, and indeed to the whole gnostic Sethian cluster, needs careful consideration.

(6) Incidentally, one gains new awareness of a link between the Nag Hammadi corpus and a heresiological report in one of the antignostic fathers.

(7) Despite certain resemblances to Dame Wisdom of Hellenistic Judaism, the most obvious cross-referent of the persona was Isis—an essentially Egyptian or Egyptianizing feature within gnostic Sethianism. This feature constitutes a kind of evidence, though certainly inconclusive, that the persona was invented and known in Egypt. This Egyptian connection is suggested also by other kinds of evidence: Epiphanius knew the *Gnōstikos* sect from a personal visit to that country;⁵⁷ *On the Origin of the World* was obviously written in Egypt; all the texts under consideration in this essay, indeed all the texts in Schenke's gnostic Sethian cluster (except perhaps some excerpts in Irenaeus) were at least transmitted in Coptic-speaking Egypt.

(8) After hypothesizing that the *Thunder* belongs to the gnostic Sethian group, one is entitled to look for individual details or parallels in the *Thunder* that echo other texts of the Sethian group. There are a few obvious possibilities:

- a. *Thund.* VI,2:13,1 (title), "Thunder—Perfect Intellect."
Trim. Prot. XIII,1:43,13–15, "The lots of destiny and those which traverse (or measure) the houses were greatly disturbed by a sharp thunderclap."

- b. *Thund.* VI,2:18,9, "It is I, however, who am the [perfect] intellect."
Trim. Prot. XIII,1:47,7–9, "And I taught [. . .] by the [. . .] by perfect intellect."
Steles Seth VII,5:121,23–25, "O you (sc. Barbēlō) who are called perfect!"
Ibid. 123,21, "You are intellect."
- c. *Thund.* VI,2:13,4, "I was found in those who seek me."
Trim. Prot. XIII,1 (cf. passages listed in n. 42; there are no verbatim parallels).
- d. *Thund.* VI,2:14,4, "My power comes from him (my offspring).
I am the staff of his power in his childhood."
Ap. John II,1:22,32–23,2, "And it (the ruler) extracted a portion of his power from him and performed another act of modeling, in the form of a female . . . and into the modelled form of femaleness it brought the portion it had taken from the power of the human being."
- e. *Thund.* VI,2:14,9–10, "It is I who am . . . afterthought, whose memory is so great."
Ap. John II,1:30,24, "I, who am the memory of the forethought."
(Cf. *ibid.* 28,1–2, "The afterthought of the luminous forethought.")
- f. *Thund.* VI,2:14,12–14, "It is I who am the voice whose sounds are so numerous:/ And the discourse whose images (or kinds) are so numerous./ It is I who am the speaking: of my (own) name."
Ibid. 20,30–31, "It is I who am the speaking that cannot be restrained./ It is I who am the voice's name, and the name's voice."
Ibid. 19,9, "It is I who am . . . unrestrained."
Ibid. 19,20–22, "It is I who am . . . the speaking that cannot be restrained."
Ibid. 19,32, "It is I who am acquaintance with my name."
Trim. Prot. XIII,1:37,20–24, "The sound that has derived from my thinking exists as . . . a voice. . . . It contains within it a verbal expression. . . ."
Trim. Prot. XIII,1:38,11–16, "It is I who am . . . the unrestrainable and immeasurable sound."
- g. *Thund.* VI,2:15,8, "You will find me in the kingdoms."
Apoc. Adam V,5:77,27–82,19.
- h. *Thund.* VI,2:16,6–8, "I am he whose . . . and she who. . . ."
Trim. Prot. XIII,1:45,2–3, "I am androgynous."
Ap. John II,1:27,33–28,2, "It is the mother-father who is greatly merciful . . . and the afterthought of the luminous forethought."
Gos. Eg. IV,2:73,11–12 [=III,2:61,25–62,1] "The masculine female virgin, the Barbēlō."

⁵⁷ *Pan.* 26.17.4 = I 297,15–21 H.

- i. *Thund.* VI,2:20,1, "I am manifest [and . . .] travel [. . .]"
Ap. John II,1:30,13-14, "I existed . . . traveling in every path of
 travel"; similarly 30,17; 30,23; 30,33.

On balance, this evidence is inconclusive. I regard the hypothesis as not yet verified.

(9) It is historically necessary to understand the literary background of *Thunder* as including a traditional female figure known from religious literature. Yet insofar as our text treats that figure as the solution to a riddle, she no longer functions here as a persona but is reduced to a mere word ("Eve"). It lies in the nature of riddle solutions that such a word can be construed in various ways, that is, can have a multiplicity of referents (see above with n. 43).

(10) Finally, there are many predications in the *Thunder* that cannot be explained by simple reference to the solution "Eve." It is undeniable that the genuine riddle mode is mixed with traditional *topoi* from Jewish sapiential tradition or Isiac propaganda, transmuted of course into dichotomous paradox. This has a purpose. It strengthens the speaker's claim to authority, but also undermines confidence in the content of the actual Wisdom tradition. Much of gnosticism can be seen not as a revolt against, but as a revision of, traditional religions, especially in their textual manifestations. What the *Hypostasis of the Archons* does to Genesis, what the *Treatise on Resurrection* does with second-century Christian creeds,⁵⁸ and what the *Gospel According to Thomas* presumably would have us do with the sayings tradition⁵⁹ (if only it would tell us how!), the *Thunder* does to traditional sapiential aretology. On the one hand, it presupposes the normative authority of the sapiential persona, while on the other hand, it hollows this traditional form of its original meaning and refills it with what, for gnostics, always takes precedence over scripture and tradition: namely, the gnostics' own myth of the origin and fate of the soul, her salvation by a heavenly teacher, and her ultimate return to her home.

The mythic figure of *Thunder* says as much, in her own words (at least in my translation):

It is I who am the meaning of text,
 And the manifestation of distinction; . . .
 Behold, then, . . . all the texts that have been completed.⁶⁰

It has generally been held that the *Thunder* contains no distinctive Christian, Jewish, or gnostic allusions and does not seem clearly to presuppose any gnostic myth. Perhaps this essay, for all its brevity, has suggested another way out.

⁵⁸ Layton, "Resurrection," 190-217, esp. at 209-17.

⁵⁹ *Gos. Thom.* II,2:32,12-14.

⁶⁰ *Thund.* VI,2:20,33-21,12.