Once you begin to look for them, the number of female characters in the Nag Hammadi texts turns out to be great. They appear across a broad spectrum of texts and occupy every cosmological level: from Mary, Norea, and Zoe to Sophia, Epinoia, and Barbelo. Even though these texts operate from within a male-dominated worldview, the female figures often seem to hold important roles within the narratives. These roles have been explored a number of times and by different scholars, among whom our jubilarian is one of the most prominent, due to his piercing work on Mary Magdalene.¹

In this article, I shall explore one of these female characters who remains relatively poorly-understood: the female spiritual principle, who appears in the Hypostasis of the Archons (NHc II 4). In related texts, this principle is called Epinoia (Ἐπινοία), not by coincidence, as I will argue, but due to highly elaborate theorizing of the provenance of the human ability for reflection and for the construction of language. The female spiritual principle and Epinoia appear for the most part in Genesis-narratives, and thus they are closely related to the figure of Eve. However, as we shall see, the various authors differ in their depictions of these figures, which invites us to understand them not only as “spiritual Eves,” but as multi-faceted heavenly entities, shaped according to the authors’ specific intentions.

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* It is a great honor to take part in celebrating Prof. Antti Marjanen. I was fortunate to have him as a co-supervisor on my PhD project, during which he guided me with much patience and insight through difficult topics and passages. I have deep admiration for him and his careful and detailed exegetical style.

1 Besides the work of Antti Marjanen, I would like to highlight the volume edited by Karen L. King, Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism, SAC (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).
Women and Knowledge

As the title of the present volume indicates, women and knowledge are closely related not only in many Nag Hammadi texts, but also in a variety of myths from across the world. Within the ancient Mediterranean literary environment (in its broadest conception) in which the Nag Hammadi texts are usually placed, we encounter many literary female figures who are associated with knowledge in one way or another: Athena, Isis, Minerva, Sophia, and Eve. From the human world, figures such as Diotima, Mary, and Thecla could be mentioned. Thus, it goes without saying that the association of women with knowledge in the female characters of the Nag Hammadi texts is not a unique phenomenon, but seems to form part of a widely-spread notion of goddesses and other female divine (or human) figures representing, possessing, or providing knowledge. From the Nag Hammadi collection, one of the most famous is Sophia (ⲥⲟⲫⲓⲁ), who has her very own myth according to modern scholarship. I refer to the “myth of Sophia” in which Sophia, with an anarchistic approach to “divine reproduction,” gives birth to her monstrous offspring and ultimately to the creation of the material world. This myth varies greatly from text to text in line with each author’s aims and approaches. Nevertheless, certain features allow us to see repeated cross-textual patterns, and further permit us to compare the “myth of Sophia” with parallel mythological material outside the Nag Hammadi corpus. According to George W. MacRae’s seminal article, the gnostic Sophia myth has its background in the Jewish wisdom tradition.2

On the other hand, James E. Goehring reminds us that the Sophia myth likewise has many traits in common with Classical Greek traditions about the birth of the snake-headed Typhaon, who was cast into Tartaros.3 Goehring does not seek to exclude the Jewish personified Wisdom as a possible source of influence on the Nag Hammadi writers. Instead, he understands the “Gnostic author and exegete [as being] capable of multiple exegetical manoeuvres” and thus he concludes: “the relationship of the Gnostic Sophia myth to the classical traditions concerning Hephaistos and Typhaon ... reveals the extent of the syncretistic cooking pot from which the Gnostic drew.”4

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2 George W. MacRae, “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” *NovT* 12 (1970): 86–101. MacRae lists fifteen parallels between the gnostic Sophia and her Jewish counterpart. I shall not repeat them here, since they are generally known, but a few of them will be considered below.
