THE GODDESS WITH A FIERY BREATH:  
THE EGYPTIAN DERIVATION OF A  
GNOSTIC MYTHOLOGOUMENON  

by 

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In his paper "'Gnosticism and Egyptian Religion', Douglas Parrot states that "'scholars have neglected Egyptian religion as a significant influence in the origin and development of Gnosticism.'" Parrot shows the strong similarities between the pattern of the Urzeit in the Nag Hammadi text Eugnostos and in Egyptian mythology, suggesting an Egyptian derivation of this portion of the gnostic text.

This brief paper will examine a possible Egyptian derivation of a mythologoumenon in two other Nag Hammadi texts, On the Origin of the World and the Hypostasis of the Archons. These texts contain a description of a warfare between evil gods who enslave man in a deathly world and the goddess Zoe, who guides man to the imperishable life of the Spirit.

In On the Origin of the World, the mother of the evil demiurge, Yaldabaoth, sends her daughter, Zoe, who is called Eve, as an instructor to the demiurge's imperfect creation, Adam. When the demiurge and his archons learn that this luminous woman has endowed their modelled form with life, they become troubled and plan to rape her, "so that when she becomes soiled she may not be able to ascend to her light." But Eve-Zoe, being a spiritual power, "laughed at their decision. She put mist into their eyes and secretly left her likeness with Adam. She entered the tree of acquaintance and remained there. And they pursued her and she revealed to them that she had gone into the tree and become a tree. Then,
entering a great state of fear, the blind creatures fled” (115,31-116,34).

In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Zoe is again pitted against the gods of death. When the chief god of the lower realm blasphemed the holy Spirit by declaring himself the god of the Entirety, Zoe repudiated him, and “she breathed into his face, and her breath became a fiery angel for her; and that angel bound Yaldabaoth, and cast him into Tartaros below the abyss” (95,5-13).

The mythologoumenon of Zoe’s battle against the evil archons resembles the description of certain Egyptian goddesses that battle harmful gods who threaten the deceased seeking immortality in the netherworld, recorded in two spells in the ancient Egyptian coffin texts.3 3

In Spell 575, the deceased voices the desire to be transformed into “the real form of a living spirit”, so that he may attain the stature of the immortal ones who help him to overcome obstacles in the netherworld. He declares, “I have seen the gods bowing in the haze of the fiery breath of my mother Ernutet, and she has struck their hearts.”

Faulkner translates “haze” as “‘bleariness’ of vision ... here perhaps thought of as ‘haziness’ induced by the fiery breath of the goddess”.4 This translation approximates the description of Zoe, who blinds the evil gods in *On the Origin of the World*, and who uses a fiery breath against Yaldabaoth in the *Hypostasis of the Archons*.

This weapon is also used by the goddess described in Spell 937, in which the deceased is transformed into a spiritual being identified with the goddess who is described in the following manner, “I have strength by means of my utterance. These harmful gods come to me trembling, they have taken me into the firmament ... I have gathered together the fiery breath for the blast of this spirit of fire; I will leave them on the threshing floors...”.

In both the gnostic and the Egyptian texts, goddesses associated with a liberation from death use their powers to defeat harmful gods. Zoe’s use of a fiery breath is especially striking,5 since fire is

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5 In the *Hypostasis of the Archons* (II, 4), 92,15-19, Norea (who, like Zoe, is sent to assist mankind) blows a fiery breath that destroys Noah’s ark, which the demiurge instructed Noah to build to save that remnant of mankind willing to serve him.