

# Predestined for Conversion? Reconsidering Heracleon's "Valentinian" Reading of John 4:1–26

Carl Johan Berglund, Uppsala University  
carl.johan.berglund@adverb.se

*Heracleon's interpretations of the Gospel of John are often presumed to be determined by a sectarian doctrine, according to which the eternal fate of human beings is determined by one of three distinct human natures: the spiritual ones are predestined to be saved, the material ones are irredeemably lost, and the animated ones have a choice to make. But this soteriological determinism is not substantiated in Origen's verbatim quotations from Heracleon's writing, only from the paraphrases in his responses, and may be a later development among Heracleon's followers, that Origen is reading into his interpretations of the Fourth Gospel.*

*The term ἡ πνευματικὴ appears only in Origen's responses*

(Example 1) It must be said to him that if the **spiritual woman** really had sex with them, the **spiritual woman** sinned. But if the **spiritual woman** sinned, she was not a good tree—for “a good tree cannot bear bad fruit” according to the Gospel. It is clear that their imagination has carried them away. If it is impossible for the good tree to bear bad fruit, and if the Samaritan was a good tree because she happened to be **spiritual**, it would be consistent with this to say that either was her sexual practice not a sin, or she did not have sex with them.<sup>1</sup>

(Example 2) And how is the **spiritual** woman, after so many arguments, still not particularly convinced about the Christ, but says: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”<sup>2</sup>

*The term πνευματικὴ φύσις appears only in Origen's responses*

(Example 3) But since those who are of his opinion are inventing fiction—I do not know anything they present clearly about the **spiritual nature** being lost, and they teach us nothing articulate about the times and eternities before it was lost, for they cannot even make their own teachings clear—we decidedly dismiss them with these criticisms.<sup>3</sup>

(Example 4) Let us consider if it is not extremely impious to say (λέγειν) that those who worship God in **spirit** are consubstantial with the unborn and totally blessed nature, those

---

<sup>1</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.11/73–74: Λεκτέον δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ὅτι εἶπερ ἐπόρνευεν ἡ πνευματικὴ, ἡμάρτανεν ἡ πνευματικὴ· εἰ δὲ ἡμάρτανεν ἡ πνευματικὴ, δένδρον ἀγαθὸν οὐκ ἦν ἡ πνευματικὴ· κατὰ γὰρ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον· «Οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς πονηροῦς ἐνεγκεῖν.» Καὶ δῆλον ὅτι οἴχεται αὐτοῖς τὰ τῆς μυθοποιΐας. Εἰ δὲ ἀδύνατόν ἐστι τὸ ἀγαθὸν δένδρον φέρειν πονηροῦς καρποῦς, καὶ ἀγαθὸν δένδρον ἡ Σαμαρεῖτις ἄτε πνευματικὴ τυγχάνουσα, ἀκόλουθον αὐτῷ λέγειν ἐστίν, ὅτι ἦτοι οὐκ ἦν ἁμαρτία ἢ πορνεία αὐτῆς, ἢ οὐκ αὐτὴ ἐπόρνευσεν.

<sup>2</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.31/190: Πῶς δὲ καὶ ἡ πνευματικὴ μετὰ τοσοῦτους λόγους οὐ πέπεισται σαφῶς περὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἀλλὰ φησι· «Μήτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Χριστός;»

<sup>3</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.20/122: Ἐπεὶ δὲ μυθοποιοῦντες οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς γνώμης αὐτοῦ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅ τί ποτε τρανῶς παριστᾶσιν περὶ τῆς ἀπολωλυίας πνευματικῆς φύσεως οὐδὲν σαφές διδάσκοντες ἡμᾶς περὶ τῶν πρὸ τῆς ἀπωλείας αὐτῆς χρόνων ἢ αἰώνων—οὐδὲ γὰρ τρανοῦν δύνανται ἑαυτῶν τὸν λόγον—, διὰ τοῦτο αὐτοὺς ἐκόντες παραπεμψόμεθα, τοσοῦτον ἐπαπορήσαντες.

who the same Heracleon shortly before has said (εἶπεν) were fallen, when he said (λέγων) that the Samaritan woman, who had a **spiritual nature**, had sex with several men.<sup>4</sup>

*Origen refers to a group of interpreters, “those who bring in the natures”:*

(Example 5) Let there also be a third category who call some people **animated** (ψυχικοί) and others **spiritual** (πνευματικοί)—I think he refers to those of Valentinus. What does that concern us who are of the church, who denounce those who bring in natures that are saved or perish on account of their inherent constitution?<sup>5</sup>

*Origen is interleaving presentation and response, and may have chosen the word φύσις here*

(Example 6) But he [Heracleon] also commends (ἐπαινεί) the Samaritan woman who, showing this undoubting faith that corresponds to her inherent **nature**, did not doubt what he [Jesus] said to her. If he then had approved her choice, without hinting at her **nature** as being superior, we would have agreed entirely. But if he brings up her natural constitution, and argues that the cause of her agreement is something not present in everybody, his claim must be refuted.<sup>6</sup>

*Heracleon speaks of spiritual and fleshly people in the Pauline sense—cf. Rom 1:23, 12:1–2, 1 Cor 3:1*

(Example 7) In addition, he [Heracleon] believed (ἐνόμισεν) one mountain to be the creation worshiped by the non-Jews, and Jerusalem to be the creator whom the Jews served. “Thus you,” he says (φησίν), “as **spiritual people** will worship neither the creation nor the Maker, but the Father of Truth.” And “he does include,” he says (φησίν), “her, as already a believer, and counts her among those who worship in accordance with the truth.”<sup>7</sup>

(Example 8) Believing that he is explaining “those who worship him must worship in **spirit** and truth” he says (φησίν): “in a way that is worthy of the one being worshiped—**spiritually**, and not in the way of the **flesh** (σαρκικῶς), for those who are of the same nature as the Father are also spirit, those who worship in truth and not in deception, just as the apostle also teaches when he calls such a piety a ‘reasonable service.’”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.25/149: Ἐπιστήσωμεν δὲ εἰ μὴ σφόδρα ἐστὶν ἀσεβὲς ὁμοουσίους τῇ ἀγεννήτῳ φύσει καὶ παμμακαρία λέγειν εἶναι τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας ἐν πνεύματι τῷ θεῷ, οὓς πρὸ βραχέος εἶπεν αὐτὸς ὁ Ἡρακλέων ἐκπεπτωκότας, τὴν Σαμαρεῖτιν λέγων πνευματικῆς φύσεως οὖσαν ἐκπεπορευκέναι.

<sup>5</sup> Origen, *Cels.* 5.61: Ἐστω δὲ τι καὶ τρίτον γένος τῶν ὀνομαζόντων ψυχικούς τινας καὶ πνευματικούς ἐτέρους· οἶμαι δ’ αὐτὸν λέγειν τοὺς ἀπὸ Οὐαλεντίνου. Καὶ τί τοῦτο πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, κατηγοροῦντας τῶν εἰσαγόντων φύσεις ἐκ κατασκευῆς σωζομένας ἢ ἐκ κατασκευῆς ἀπολλυμένας;

<sup>6</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.10/63–64: Ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπαινεί τὴν Σαμαρεῖτιν ὡσάν ἐνδειξαμένην τὴν ἀδιάκριτον καὶ κατάλληλον τῇ φύσει ἑαυτῆς πίστιν, μὴ διακριθεῖσαν ἐφ’ οἷς ἔλεγεν αὐτῇ. Εἰ μὲν οὖν τὴν προαίρεσιν ἀπεδέχετο, μὴδὲν περὶ φύσεως αἰνιττόμενος ὡς διαφερούσης, καὶ ἡμεῖς ἂν συγκατεθέμεθα· εἰ δὲ τῇ φυσικῇ κατασκευῇ ἀναφέρει τὴν τῆς συγκαταθέσεως αἰτίαν, ὡς οὐ πᾶσιν ταύτης παρουσίας, ἀνατρεπτόν αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον.

<sup>7</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.16/96–97: Ἀλλὰ καὶ δευτέρως ὁρος μὲν ἐνόμισεν εἶναι τὴν κτίσιν ἢ <οἱ> ἐθνικοὶ προσεκύουν· Ἱεροσόλυμα δὲ τὸν κτίστην <ῶ> οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἐλάτρευον. Ὑμεῖς οὖν, φησίν, οἶονεἰ οἱ πνευματικοὶ οὔτε τῇ κτίσει οὔτε τῷ δημιουργῷ προσκυνήσετε, ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ τῆς ἀληθείας· καὶ συμπαραλαμβάνει γε, φησίν, αὐτὴν ὡς ἤδη πιστὴν καὶ συναριθμουμένην τοῖς κατὰ ἀλήθειαν προσκυνηταῖς.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.25/148: τὸ δὲ «τοὺς προσκυνοῦντας ἐν πνεύματι καὶ ἀληθείᾳ δεῖ προσκυνεῖν» σαφηνίζειν νομίζων φησίν· ἀξίως τοῦ προσκυνουμένου πνευματικῶς, οὐ σαρκικῶς· καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ τῆς αὐτῆς φύσεως ὄντες τῷ πατρὶ πνευμά εἰσιν, οἵτινες κατὰ ἀλήθειαν καὶ οὐ κατὰ πλάνην προσκυνοῦσιν, καθὰ καὶ ὁ ἀπόστολος διδάσκει λέγων λογικὴν λατρείαν τὴν τοιαύτην θεοσέβειαν.