Predestined for Conversion? Reconsidering Heracleon’s “Valentinian” Reading of John 4:1–26

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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 πνευματική 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.¹

(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?”²

The term πνευματική 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.³

(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

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¹ Origen, Comm. Jo. 13.11/73–74: Λεκτέον δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ὅτι εἴπερ ἐπόρευεν ἡ πνευματική, ἡμαρτανεν ἡ πνευματική· εἰ δὲ ἠμαρτανεν ἡ πνευματική, δένδρον ἀγαθὸν οὐκ ἦν ἡ πνευματική· κατὰ γὰρ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον· «Οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς πονηροὺς ἐγενεῖν.» Καὶ δήλων ὅτι οἴχεται αὐτοῖς τὰ τῆς μυθοστασίας· Εἰ δὲ ἀδύνατον ἐστὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν δένδρον φέρειν πονηροὺς καρποὺς, καὶ ἀγαθὸν δένδρον ἡ Σαμαρείτης ἀπετύχεψεν τὴν πνευματικήν τυχάνωσιν, ἀκόλουθον αὐτῷ λέγειν ἔστιν, ὅτι ἤτοι οὐκ ἦν ἀμαρτία ἡ πορεία αὐτῆς, ἢ οὐκ αὐτὴ ἐπόρευεν.

² Origen, Comm. Jo. 13.31/190: Πῶς δὲ καὶ ἡ πνευματική μετὰ τοιούτους λόγους οὐ πέπεισται σαφῶς περὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἄλλα φησί· «Μὴν οὖν ἐστίν ὁ Χριστὸς·»

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.4

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?5

Origen is interleaving presentation and response, and may have chosen the word φύσις here
(Example 6) But he [Heracleon] also commends (ἐπαινεῖ) 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.6

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 (εὐνόησεν) 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.”7

(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.’”8

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4 Origen, Comm. Jo. 13.25/149: Ἐπιστήμουμεν δὲ εἰ μὴ σφόδρα ἐστὶν ἀστεῖος ὁμοσυὼς τῇ ἀγεννητῷ φύσει καὶ παμμορφαὶ λέγειν εἰναὶ τῶν προσκυνοῦντας εἰν πνευματικῷ τῷ θεῷ, σὺν πρὸς βαρσέος εἶπεν αὐτὸς ὁ Ἡρακλείως ἐπεταχώκοτα, τὴν Σαμαρετῖν λέγων πνευματικῆς φύσεως ὑπάρχειν εκποιησθεῖκεν.
5 Origen, Cels. 5.61: Ἑστῶ δὲ τι καὶ τρίτον γένος τῶν ὁνομαζόντων ψυχικοῖς τινὰς καὶ πνευματικούς ἐτέρους: οἷμα δ᾽ αὐτὸν λέγειν τοὺς ἀπὸ Ὀσυλεντίνων. Καὶ τι τουτού πρὸς ἡμᾶς τούς ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, κατηγοροῦντας τῶν εἰσαγόνων φύσεων ἐκ τακασκευῆς συκεμένας ἢ ἐκ κατασκευῆς ἀπολλυμένας;
7 Origen, Comm. Jo. 13.16/96–97: Ἀλλὰ καὶ διετέροις όροις μὲν ἐνόησεν εἰναὶ τὴν κτίσιν ἢ ψαλαί εἰθοκοὶ προσεκυνηκέναι. Ἱεροσολύμα δὲ τὸν κύριον εἴ οἱ Ιουδαίοι ἐλάττειν. Ὡμεῖς οὖν, φησίν, οἰ Πνευματικοὶ οὔτε τῇ κτίσει οὔτε τῷ δημιουργῷ προσκυνηστε, ἀλλὰ τῷ πατρὶ τῆς ἀληθείας· καὶ συμπάρα λαμβάνεις γε, φησίν, αὐτὴν ὡς ἤδη πιστὴν καὶ συναρχή μοιμενὴν τοῖς κατὰ ἀλῆθεν προσκυνητέσα.