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Berglund, Carl Johan

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The Sychar Story as a Standard Conversion Narrative in Heracleon's *hypomnēmata*

Carl Johan Berglund

The second-century literary critic Heracleon has long been thought to interpret the story of Jesus's encounter with a Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4:1–42) as a paradigmatic conversion narrative for a particular group of people: those born with a spiritual nature, who therefore are predestined to be saved, and only need to be apprised of this fact. This common view is problematic, since such a deterministic soteriology is unattested in extant quotations from Heracleon's *hypomnēmata*, and only appears when Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254 CE) brings it in to refute Heracleon's views. This paper compares Heracleon's comments, as they can be constructed from Origen's references, to four modern conceptualizations of ancient religious and philosophical conversion: a recognition of one's superior nature (Pagels 1973), a deliberate change of perspectives (Nock 1933; MacMullen 1984), a transition of rhetorically expressed loyalty (Crook 2004), and a prolonged social process (Rambo 1993; Brandt 2019; Brandt 2020). It concludes that Heracleon views Christian conversion as a deliberate rejection of Gentile and Jewish worship traditions in favor of a Christian one, preceded by a shorter or longer process of interaction with Christian believers, who act as witnesses and spiritual guides to the potential converts. Thereby, Heracleon's concept of conversion comprises essential points from several modern conceptualizations of conversion.

Introduction

In his contribution to this volume, Pierre-Yves Brandt stresses the importance of standard conversion narratives for both ancient and modern conceptualizations of conversion. An identity transformation as extensive as a conversion, Brandt (2020, 25–27) maintains, is inevitably the result of a negotiation between the individual's inner construction of itself and an outer social authority in position to validate any new identity. This negotiation can be a lengthy process, Brandt (2020, 35–37) describes, where the final decision is not made entirely out of free choice, but under pressure of a cultural context that obliges the subject to choose between his or her previous religious affiliation and the desired new identity. To achieve a common understanding, Brandt (2020, 38–39) argues, converts often report their transformative process in the form of a self-narrative that, at certain crucial points, is made to

conform to a standard narrative to ensure that the case is perceived to qualify as a conversion. Different standard narratives express different conceptualizations of conversion, and even a lengthy conversion process driven mostly by internal factors can be summarized as a sudden divine intervention – if that is necessary to conform to the desired standard narrative, Brandt (2020, 39–42) concludes.

The wide gulf between standard conversion narratives and ancient historical actualities is further explored by Rikard Roitto, who emphasizes that not everyone in antiquity viewed early Christianity as a clear-cut alternative to Gentile and Jewish worship traditions. While early conversion narratives – Roitto (2020, 49–50) refers to Gal 1:13–17, Acts 2:37–41, and John 1:10–13 – are highly stylized to present a neat choice between traditional Judaism and Christ, Roitto (2020, 54–59) maintains that real converts likely had widely different perspectives on their new Christian identity: Some Gentile converts may have viewed it as subordinated to a Jewish identity, while others viewed it as separate, and a third group simply added the cult of Christ to their previous pagan cultic participations. Similarly, some Jewish converts likely saw themselves as having left their Jewish identity behind, while others saw a transition from one Jewish identity to another. Conversion to first-century Christianity was not a uniform phenomenon, Roitto (2020, 60) concludes.

One of the earliest traces of Christian reflection on a standard conversion narrative, and of an attempt to interpret it in view of contemporary experiences of conversions, appears in Heracleon's comments to the story of Jesus's visit to Sychar in John 4:1–42, which are partially preserved in Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. In the Johannine context, Jesus and his disciples are traveling from Judea to Galilee through Samaria. When they reach the town of Sychar, Jesus sits down at Jacob's well while the disciples go into the town to buy supplies. When a Samaritan woman approaches to draw water, Jesus engages her in a conversation, during which the woman recognizes him as a prophet, and he identifies himself as the Messiah. When the disciples return, the woman announces the good news of the arrival of the Christ to the other inhabitants of Sychar, and many come to believe in him.

Scholars have long recognized that Heracleon interprets the Sychar story as paradigmatic for conversion to a Christian identity. However, presupposing that Heracleon's exegesis is determined by his "Gnostic" conviction that some people are born with an inherent spiritual nature that predetermines them for salvation, they have maintained that he views the story as relevant only for such spiritual people. This understanding is stated as fact already by Alan E. Brooke (1891, 42), reiterated by Elaine Pagels (1973, 86–92), and repeated by Kyle Keefer

(2006, 39). Pagels, in particular, maintains that Heracleon speaks of the “pneumatic nature” (Pagels 1973, 83) of the Samaritan woman, and that he regards her as an immortal being with no need of forgiveness of sins, since “she needs only to call upon resources she already has without knowing it” (Pagels 1973, 88). As will be argued below, these assertions confuse Heracleon’s comments with Origen’s responses, read heresiological allegations into Heracleon’s interpretations, and are based more on Pagels’s assumption that Heracleon is a “Gnostic” exegete than on what can actually be reconstructed of his words.

Taken separately from Origen’s heresiological presuppositions, Heracleon’s notion of Christian conversion is comparable to modern scholarly conceptualizations of the phenomenon, and his interpretation seems intended to bridge the gap between the Sychar story – taken as a standard conversion narrative – and the conversion experiences of his own Christian community.

Heracleon, the “Gnostics,” and “those who bring in the natures”

Heracleon’s *hypomnēmata* is the first known commentary on the Gospel of John,¹ originating in the second half of the second century,² probably in an educational setting where Heracleon is teaching literary-critical interpretation of Christian gospels to his students. It is extant only in the form of references in later authors, mainly in Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Since we only have brief excerpts, summaries, and paraphrases, we do not know where Heracleon wrote,³ how extensive his comments were, or if he gave the work a title.⁴ Even though ancient authors regularly adapted what they quoted to their stylistic and argumentative needs (Brunt 1980, 479–84; Lenfant 2013, 295–301; Berglund 2017a), scholars generally trust Origen’s references to accurately reflect Heracleon’s views and – this paper argues – sometimes neglect to consider the difference between Origen presentations of Heracleon’s

¹ Modern scholarship on Heracleon begins with Brooke (1891), who analyzes the manuscript situation, collects the material and offers a synopsis on Heracleon that has proven remarkably stable in later scholarship. Pagels (1973) expresses an established consensus and discusses Heracleon’s position vis-à-vis other “Gnostic” scriptural interpreters. Wucherpfennig (2002) offers a fresh perspective on Heracleon by discussing his exegesis in the context of ancient literary-critical methodology, and concludes that Heracleon is a competent philologist.

² Bastit (2009, 151) dates Heracleon’s activities to 160–170 CE. Thomassen (2010, 174) argues that Heracleon must have been a well-known figure by 180 CE, since he is presumed to be known in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.4.1. Logan (2018, 183) points to the late 170s or 180s CE.

³ Heracleon is usually located either to Rome, where his alleged teacher Valentinus (ca. 100–175) was teaching, or to Alexandria, where Origen encountered his writing. Pearson (2007, 161–62) speculates that he was an Alexandrian who spent some time in Rome.

⁴ The description ὑπομνήματα (“notes” or “commentary”) is taken from Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 6.15/92. References to Origen’s commentary will be given with book number, chapter number, and paragraph number. Chapter and paragraph numbers will be separated with a slash rather than a dot, to signify that the paragraph numbering is continuous throughout each book and not subordinated to the chapter numbering.

interpretations and his responses to his predecessor. A recent reassessment of Origen's references to Heracleon permits us to assess Heracleon's views on conversion with more accuracy than has previously been possible.⁵

Ancient authors mentioning Heracleon generally describe him as a heretic teacher connected to Valentinus (ca. 100–175 CE),⁶ and scholars have usually considered him to be a “Gnostic” or “Valentinian” teacher, whose exegesis is determined by heterodox views such as those denounced in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* (Brooke 1891, 48; Sagnard 1947, 480–520; Pagels 1973, 11–19; Bastit 2009, 151 n. 8; Thomassen 2010, 173, 205; Cf. contrarian views in Langerbeck 1967, 67–72; Wucherpennig 2002, 332–57; Beatrice 2012, 206). In particular, scholars have argued that Heracleon believes that the ultimate fate of human beings is determined by an inherent nature that is either spiritual (πνευματικός), animated (ψυχικός),⁷ or material (ὕλικός). Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.7.5) explains that the “Valentinians” teach that earthly humans will inevitably perish, that animated ones will – by necessity – come to rest in an intermediate realm, and that spiritual ones are predetermined for an eternal spiritual existence as brides to the angels.

The criticism directed toward the overly generalized concepts of “Gnostics” and “Gnosticism” is well known. Michael A. Williams (1996, 76–79, 94–95) systematically relates the commonly repeated characteristics of ancient “Gnosticism” to the textual evidence, and finds no common agenda of “inverse exegesis,” rejection of the material world (113–15), hatred of the body (136–38), or a bifurcated choice between either asceticism or libertinism (160–62, 187–88). He does find the idea that certain people are predestined for salvation, but not as a common trait in “Gnostic” literature (211–12). Similarly, Karen King (2003, 1–4, 30–33, 54, 152–53, 226–28) evaluates the various ways in which scholars have defined “Gnosticism,” and concludes that the concept purports to describe a religious entity that never existed, other

⁵ In a recent dissertation, Berglund (2019c) sets out to discern verbatim quotations from less dependable material in Origen's references to Heracleon, reconstruct Heracleon's interpretations from Origen's quotations and summaries, and evaluate whether Heracleon belonged to two groups that Origen designates “the heterodox” and “those who bring in the natures.”

⁶ Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 2.4.1) mentions Heracleon briefly as a proponent of Valentinus's doctrines. Tertullian (*Against the Valentinians* 4) presents him as a follower of Valentinus's student Ptolemy. The author of the *Elenchos* (also known as Hippolytus's *Refutation of all Heresies*, 6.p.4, 6.29.1, 6.35.6) claims Heracleon to be a “Valentinian” follower from the Italian peninsula. Clement (*Miscellanies* 4.9.71–72; *Extracts from the Prophets* 25.1) introduces Heracleon as “the most notable of Valentinus's school” and cites two separate examples of his scriptural interpretations. Origen presents Heracleon as a personal acquaintance of Valentinus, and refers to his exegesis on four dozen occasions in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

⁷ Since “psychic” has other connotations, ψυχικός is not straightforward to translate into English. Since the basic meaning is “to be endowed with a soul,” we take the detour through the Latin *anima* (“air,” “breath,” or “soul”) and *animare* (“to blow” or “to give life”) and use “animated” in the sense of having been given a soul (Cf. Brakke 2010, 116; Dunderberg 2015b, 137 n. 2).

than as a way of denounce unwanted variants of Christianity. Some scholars have attempted to defend (Pearson 2005; van den Broek 2013, 1–12; Smith 2015, 60–88) or redefine (Brakke 2010, 19–51) the concept, while others (Desjardins 2005, 377–80; Denzey Lewis 2013, 26–28; Dunderberg 2015c, 5–10) have preferred to study the texts in question within a wider perspective of Christian and non-Christian literature, in order to let similarities and differences other than the dogmatic ones become visible.

Since it can be used to denote the followers of one particular teacher, the category of “Valentinians” is more reasonable than “Gnostics.” It should not, however, be used in order to presume a common set of “Valentinian” dogmatic ideas to be present as a “hidden agenda” in writings where no such doctrines are visible. Regardless of the historicity of the personal links between Valentinus, Ptolemy, and Heracleon, repeating such claims was a convenient way for ancient authors to persuade their readers to reject certain teachers before even considering their words and opinions.⁸ Considerations of Heracleon’s views and interpretations should not start with such assertions, but with his own words – as far as they can be reconstructed from Origen’s references.

The notion that some Christians distinguish between three different natures in their fellow humans is a recurrent one in Origen’s works. Origen denotes these scriptural interpreters “those who bring in the natures” (οἱ τὰς φύσεις εἰσάγοντες; *First Principles* 3.1.23, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 20.17/135, 28.21/179; Cf. *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 10.11), identifies them as heterodox followers of Valentinus (*First Principles* 3.1.8, *Against Celsus* 5.61), and describes (*Commentary on the Gospel of John* 20.33/287) their claim that there are “children of God by nature and original constitution, who through their kinship to God are uniquely capable of receiving the words of God.”⁹ Since Origen does not support these claims with quotations from his opponents’ writings, it is not apparent what, or who, his sources are.

Winrich A. Löhr (1992, 385) observes that Origen’s descriptions are remarkably similar to what can be discerned from the writings of Irenaeus and Clement, and suggests that “the cliché of Gnostic determinism is part of a distinct heresiological tradition that was inaugurated/created by Irenaeus, developed by Clement and perfected by Origen.” Paul

⁸ The common heresiological practice of presenting one’s opponents as linked in chains back to either Greek philosophers or the magician Simon of Acts 8:9–24 has been traced by Löhr (2012, 350), Behr (2013, 84–85), and Smith (2014, 4–5, 49–57, 131–34).

⁹ The references to this group in Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John* are analyzed by Berglund (2019b, 245–50).

Linjamaa (2018, 147–52) argues that the views Origen describes – according to which no one has a free will, but all humans have to play out the choices determined by their nature – match the ones expressed in the Tripartite Tractate (NHC I 5) rather well. Therefore, he maintains (2018, 45 n. 144) that Origen’s account is not a heresiological invention, but a caricature of an actual view held by certain early Christians. Since Linjamaa also argues (2018, 270) that the Tripartite Tractate derives from “an intellectual milieu in early third-century Alexandria,” it is reasonable to believe that Heracleon was not Origen’s only source – or even his main source – to these views.¹⁰

Competing conceptualizations of conversion

In lieu of presuming Heracleon to subscribe to a “Gnostic” concept of conversion, we will now present four modern conceptualizations of ancient conversion, to which Heracleon’s interpretation of the Sychar story will subsequently be compared.

1. Conversion as a recognition of one’s superior nature: Pagels (1973) insists that Heracleon maintains a “Gnostic” point of view where an ideal convert only needs to be apprised of his or her innate spiritual nature, which predetermines eventual salvation. She argues (1973, 86–90) that for Heracleon, the Samaritan woman has lost the vital awareness of her true life, grown increasingly frustrated and dissatisfied with the water from the well of Jacob – that is, the worship of ordinary Christians – since this erroneous worship is alien to her own identity as a member of the “pneumatic elect.” When the Savior offers her living water, she instantly recognizes what she already knows intuitively, and immediately accepts the offer, Pagels (1973, 87) explains. Thus, Pagels maintains that Heracleon views John 4:1–42 as a standard conversion narrative for spiritual people, who are to intuitively recognize “Gnostic” Christianity as true, and adhere without delay.

Taking other “Gnostic” writings into account, other scholars have developed Pagels’s simple soteriological determinism to a more nuanced concept. Paul Linjamaa maintains (2018, 144–46, 174–77) that the determinism of the Tripartite Tractate builds on a sophisticated reflection on the freedom of the will in relation to outer impressions and inner passions to express a view of humanity as a mix of three substances: one inclined toward good, one liable to passions, and one torn between the two. One of these substances is dominant, and while one’s

¹⁰ Linjamaa 2018, 150, recognizes several of the passages that Origen interprets in *First Principles* are not referenced in the Tripartite Tractate, and that other sources, therefore, must have expressed the same or a similar system, even though no such text can be identified with certainty. We might add that some of Origen’s sources may be oral rather than written.

nature cannot be changed, there is always a possibility of improvement within one's category, Linjamaa (2018, 177–88) describes. Similarly, Ismo Dunderberg (2015a, 130–33) argues that Heracleon views the human soul as a blending (κρᾶσις) of animated and spiritual human natures, and that the point of his interpretation of the Sychar story is that these natures are separated only by encountering Christ. In such a view, recognition of one's spiritual nature is still considered the crucial element of conversion.

2. Conversion as a deliberate change of perspectives: Arthur D. Nock views conversion as a deliberate decision to accept a new set of beliefs, while identifying one's older views as erroneous:

By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right (Nock 1933, 7).

Nock (1933, 1–16) stresses that Greco-Roman Gentiles did not expect religious conversion from anyone, not even from conquered barbarians. The cults demanded no particular convictions on the part of their participants, which is why foreigners could readily bring their cults with them into Greek cities, and eventually see their gods incorporated into the Greco-Roman pantheon. The Christian call to abandon traditional piety, Nock (1933, 7, 167–85, 213) argues, is more comparable to that of philosophical teachers, who aimed at explaining the universe and leading their adherents to an ideal life. While the Christian demand for cult abstinence obviously was unusual – although established in a Jewish context – their stipulations of accepting a triune God and striving for good future conduct were quite reasonable in a perspective given by the philosophies, Nock (1933, 213, 221–29, 246–53) argues. Athanasios Despotis continues this line of reasoning, and finds (Despotis 2020, 174–76) a broad cultural dialogue regarding conversion in the early Roman Imperial era, where Jews, Christians, and philosophers alike call people to turn away from ignorance and vice, in order to attain immortality.

Similarly, Ramsay MacMullen (1984, 5) defines early Christian conversion as “change of belief by which a person accepted the reality and supreme power of God and determined to obey Him.”¹¹ MacMullen (1984, 12–18) argues that acceptance of Christian monotheism was facilitated by the Greco-Roman distinction between the gods (θεοί) of the cults, the lower

¹¹ MacMullen (1984, 5) admits that his definition is of limited use after the conversion of Constantine, when social pressure and coercion in many cases may have overshadowed personal conviction. We may add that his definition is only applicable to one of Roitto's (2020, 54–55) cases – a Gentile who becomes a Christ-believer and abandons all other cults – as a Jew would already share the image of a supreme God.

divinities (δαίμονες) of the magical practices,¹² and the philosophical idea of a highest divinity – as the Christian insistence that the Greek gods were δαίμονες was merely a demotion within the existing system. The idea of a postmortem punishment awaiting those who persecute Christian believers must have appeared much more astonishing, MacMullen (1984, 18–20) holds.¹³ Both Nock and MacMullen emphasize the intellectual aspects of a conversion process, call attention to conceptual similarities that might be of use in the cognitive acceptance of new beliefs, and view the convert’s deliberate decision to proceed as a crucial step.

3. *Conversion as a transition of rhetorically expressed loyalty*: Zeba A. Crook (2004, 89) proposes that modern understandings of ancient conversion should be modeled on the systems of patronage and benefaction that permeated ancient society.¹⁴ Since ancient *collegia* invariably associated themselves to a patron deity, patronal clients, cultic worshippers, and philosophical disciples must have found themselves in virtually the same position, Crook (2004, 76–79) argues. This parallel illuminates the many similarities in the rhetoric of loyalty (πίστις or *fides*) in relation to gods and patrons, Crook argues,¹⁵ and explains why Jesus’s repeated instructions to keep quiet about his miraculous deeds – in Mark 1:44, 7:36, and 8:26 – are never followed: his beneficiaries “naturally take up the role of the client to a divine patron or benefactor, and honor him or her by going about bragging about the benefactions received, with the result that people were attracted to the movement” (Crook 2004, 115). Unfortunately, Crook seems entirely unable to provide examples of clients abandoning one human patron in favor of another,¹⁶ and has therefore little to say on the action or process of

¹² Cf. Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.68, where Celsus argues that Jesus is worshiped as a god, even though he, in Celsus’s view, is neither a god nor a δαίμων.

¹³ MacMullen (1984, 6–7) problematizes attempts to draw conclusions regarding ancient conversion from modern anthropological studies, arguing that such attempts presuppose, unwarrantedly, that the essence of Christianity has been perceived in the same way in vastly different cultural contexts, which is unlikely.

¹⁴ Patronage is defined by Richard P. Saller (1982, 1–3, cf. 8) as a personal relationship of some duration between unequal partners based on the reciprocal exchange of goods and services. Saller argues that it influenced how people in the early Roman empire viewed their world, earned their living, and associated with their society. Especially the weak had an interest in propagating patronal ideology in order to lay claim to the protection of the strong (Saller 1982, 37–38). Due to the asymmetrical nature of the association, the clients often received the more tangible of the benefits involved, while the patrons expected the rather intangible *beneficia* of public honor, such as expressed in extant inscriptions (Saller 1982, 8–11, 17–19). Crook (2004, 59–66) admits that there is a subtle difference between patronage and benefaction, but mostly treats the concepts as synonymic, arguing that the primary sources do not allow any clear distinction between these closely related practices. For the purposes of the present argument, no such distinction is needed.

¹⁵ Loyalty is a key concept in Crook’s (2004, 199–201) theory, and should be understood not in emotional terms, but as calculated behavior intended to stay in allegiance with one’s patron, teacher, or emperor.

¹⁶ To mitigate this deficiency, Crook (2004, 236–43) utilizes Sedley (1989) to argue that loyalty to the teacher was the primary unifying factor of ancient philosophical schools, and goes on to present cases where philosophical students changed allegiance, and went from expressing loyalty to criticizing his former teacher. It is, however, far from clear that teacher loyalty trumped intellectual deliberation in these transitions.

converting. Crook's model undoubtedly adds a perspective on ancient religious and philosophical adhesion that otherwise would go unnoticed,¹⁷ but might be better suited to describe the relationship between an ancient Gentile and his gods than to explain the process of replacing a Gentile identity with a Christian one, which is often an important aspect of standard conversion narratives.

4. *Conversion as a prolonged social process*: Lewis R. Rambo (1993) recognizes that conversion is a complex process that takes place over a period of time, and designs a model in seven consecutive stages: (1) a dynamic context in which a conversion takes place, (2) a crisis that provides an opportunity for a new option, (3) an active quest for something better than the status quo, (4) an encounter with an advocate for a particular solution, (5) an interaction that enables the potential convert to experience religion beyond the merely intellectual level, (6) a commitment that may include a psycho-spiritual experience of surrender or rituals of incorporation in the new community, and (7) a gradual realization of the consequences of the new position, during which the conversion is either nurtured or eventually reversed. Rambo (1993, 170–74) emphasizes that conversions cannot be understood without consideration of the specific cultural, social, and religious milieu in which it takes place, as different social contexts provide different supportive or discouraging elements.

Pierre-Yves Brandt (2019) conceptualizes religious conversion as a transformative construction of self-identity in order to fulfill five basic human needs: A need for social integration leads to participation in religious activities; a need for protection prompts the development of relationships with spiritual agents such as deities, saints, and priests; a need to manage one's impulses induces a search for rules and practices; a need for identity and self-esteem stimulates identification with religious role models; and a need to find meaning inspires a systematic construction of a consistent worldview. Brandt (2020, 25–27) accentuates that this process takes place in a given social context, and involves a negotiation between the convert's inner sense of self and the outer expectations of the environment. Such a process can take a long time, Brandt (2020, 31–38) stresses, but can simultaneously be honestly described as instantaneous, by accentuating the moment of eventual insight and reorientation at the expense of the preceding preparatory period. Whenever religious affiliation is understood as exclusive, a reorientation toward a new context necessitates a

¹⁷ Cf. Roitto (2020, 50–51), who finds Crook's model instructive for analyzing Paul's decidedly social discourse of conversion.

simultaneous rejection of the old perspective – which enables us to recognize the process as a religious conversion, Brandt (2020, 27–29, 40–41) holds.

Thus, we have three alternatives to Pagels’s conceptualization of ancient conversion as a recognition of one’s superior nature. Before we proceed to analyze Heracleon’s comments, we may note that all three are mutually compatible, as the deliberate decision that Nock and MacMullen call for may well be preceded by the lengthy process accentuated by Rambo and Brandt, and rhetorically expressed in the terms of loyalty examined by Crook.

Spiritual Worshippers

In what is probably the most influential monograph on Heracleon to date, Pagels (1973, 83) states as fact that Heracleon uses the term “pneumatic nature” to characterize the Samaritan woman, and asserts – repeatedly – that he regards her as a representative of the “pneumatic elect” (Pagels 1973, 72, 86, 89, 105, 108). However, as previously pointed out by Wucherpfennig (2002, 338–39) and Dunderberg (2015b, 143–44), a closer inspection reveals that Origen nowhere presents a quotation where Heracleon calls the Samaritan woman spiritual (πνευματική). All five instances where she is denoted with the expression ἡ πνευματική (“the spiritual woman”), and both instances where she is said to have a spiritual nature (πνευματικὴ φύσις), appear not where Origen is presenting Heracleon’s interpretations, but when he is responding to them and explaining how misguided they are.¹⁸ In these responses, Origen frequently restates Heracleon’s opinions in his own words, referring to his own understanding of what Heracleon is thinking.¹⁹

In two instances, however, the phrases οἱ πνευματικοί (“the spiritual people”) and πνευματικῶς (“spiritually”) appear in what appears to be verbatim quotations from Heracleon’s writing.²⁰ In both of them, Heracleon is interpreting Jesus’s assertions (John

¹⁸ In other instances, he is considerably more positive (Berglund 2017b).

¹⁹ In *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.11/73–74, Origen repeatedly uses πνευματική to emphasize how ludicrous it would be to regard – as he claims Heracleon to be doing – a woman who had sex with six different men as a spiritual paragon. In 13.31/190, Origen uses the same designation to criticize Heracleon’s interpretation of the abandoned water jar. In 13.20/122, Origen refers to a claim not by Heracleon, but by those who are of his opinion (οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς γνώμης αὐτοῦ), that the spiritual nature (πνευματικὴ φύσις) is lost. And in 13.25/149, Origen points out the contrast between the woman’s sexual practice and her putative spiritual nature. None of these passages give any dependable information of what Heracleon thought or wrote, only how Origen understood it, in all likelihood influenced by a larger group of scriptural interpreters, as suggested by the phrase “those who are of his opinion.”

²⁰ Criteria for discerning between verbatim quotations, summaries, explanatory paraphrases, and mere assertions in Origen’s references to Heracleon are developed in (Berglund 2019a, 489–96; 2019c, 114–29), based on a combination of linguistic theory and observation of Origen’s quotation practices: (a) Statements attributed to Heracleon with a *verbum dicendi* and presented in direct speech (*oratio recta*) are presented as verbatim quotations, whether or not this is made explicit by use of a phrase such as αὐταῖς λέξεσιν (“with the same

4:21–24) that the time has come to worship the Father “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” but “in Spirit and truth.” Heracleon takes “this mountain” to refer metaphorically to the Gentile cult of various divinities, and “Jerusalem” as a reference to the Jewish temple cult, which with its many sacrifices of animal flesh ends up serving not the true creator, but the Maker (δημιουργός), a lower being commissioned by the Logos to carry out the creative work. A spiritual believer, he insists, should worship none other than the Father:

Thus, he [Heracleon] says, “you as spiritual people (οἱ πνευματικοί) will worship neither the creation nor the Maker (τῷ δημιουργῷ), but the Father of Truth.” And “he [Jesus] does include her,” he says, “as already a believer (ἤδη πιστήν), and counts her among those who worship in accordance with the truth” (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.16/97).

Pagels (1973, 90) asserts that this is one of the cases where Heracleon calls the Samaritan woman “spiritual.” But a closer view reveals that Heracleon merely claims that she is a πιστή (“believer” or “loyal woman”), and that the connection to οἱ πνευματικοί (“the spiritual people”) depends on the proximity with which Origen presents these two quotations. In addition, we may note the temporal aspect added by the adverb ἤδη (“already”). Heracleon’s point is not that the woman is born with the status of a πιστή or πνευματική, but that she has reached this status quicker than expected. He is not presenting her as possessing an inherent spiritual nature, but as a loyal convert to Christ. He views her as a spiritual woman in the same sense that he views every Christian as a spiritual person.

By not leaving “this mountain” and “Jerusalem” (John 4:21) as a pair of alternatives with relevance only for the woman’s Samaritan perspective, but reinterpreting “this mountain” to refer to Gentile worship traditions, Heracleon demonstrates that he views the Sychar story as a standard conversion narrative, that ought to be updated to fit the context in which his students find themselves. By exhorting his students to reject both the Gentile and Jewish worship traditions in favor of his own Christian one, he reveals that he views these three communities as mutually exclusive categories, where the preference for one implicitly includes – or, at least, should include – a rejection of the other two.

The second case, where Heracleon is using the adverb πνευματικῶς (“spiritually”), tells us more of what spiritual Christian worship entails:

words”). (b) Statements attributed with a *verbum dicendi* but presented in indirect speech (*oratio obliqua*) are presented as summaries. (c) Statements attributed with a verb that refers to Heracleon’s thoughts rather than his words, such as οἶμαι or νομίζω (“think” or “believe”), or in other ways indicate that Origen’s presentation is separated from Heracleon’s words by a process of interpretation, are presented as explanatory paraphrases. (d) Statements attributed to Heracleon where neither the attribution formula nor the context provides a connection to Heracleon’s words are presented as mere assertions.

Believing that he is explaining “those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” he [Heracleon] says: “in a way that is worthy of the one being worshiped – spiritually, and not in the way of the flesh (πνευματικῶς, οὐ σαρκικῶς), for those who are of the same nature as the Father are also spirit, those who worship in truth and not in delusion, just as the apostle also teaches when he calls such a piety ‘a rational service (λογικὴν λατρείαν)’ (Rom 12:1)” (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.25/148).

Origen takes this comment to mean that Heracleon not only believes that some people are born with a superior, spiritual nature, but that they even share this spiritual nature with the Father himself (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.25/149). It may be noted, however, that Heracleon does not present his spiritual way of worshiping in contrast to “earthly” or “animated” ways, but as opposed to “the way of the flesh” – a contrast that is undoubtedly more Pauline than “Gnostic.”

Once we recognize the Pauline connection, it is not difficult to recognize that Heracleon is reading not only John 4:23–24, with its repeated assertion that God should be worshiped in spirit and truth, but also Paul’s letter to the Romans. This is apparent from his reference to λογικὴ λατρεία (“a reasonable service”), a concept that is found in Rom 12:1, but also from his previous distinction between worshiping the creator and worshiping the creation, which echoes Rom 1:23. It is therefore probable that Heracleon addresses his audience as spiritual people in the same sense as Paul does, most explicitly in 1 Cor 2–3, as mature Christians who worship God beyond the basics, informed not only by human teachers, but also by the Spirit of God, who is the only one besides Christ, who knows the full truth about the Father.

Those who, in Heracleon’s comment, are of the same nature as the Father are explicitly called “spirit.” The concept most readily includes the Spirit, but may also include Christ or spiritual beings such as angels – heavenly worshippers who have a more direct access to the Father than mere mortals. To worship spiritually and not in the flesh, may in Heracleon’s view be to emulate not other human worshippers, but the Spirit and the angels of heaven, who worship the Father in Spirit and truth.

The Savior’s Mission

Among Origen’s various references to Heracleon are a few statements that in a general way refer to human conversion and need for salvation. One such case appears in relation to Jesus’s remark “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work” in John

4:34. In what may be a summary of or a quotation from Heracleon's *hypomnēmata*,²¹ Origen writes:

[Jesus] said (ἔλεγεν) that the will of the Father was for humans to know the Father and be saved. This was the Savior's work, for which he was sent to Samaria – that is, to the world (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.38/248).

In this comment, Heracleon states his view on the overall purpose of Christ's earthly existence: to save humans, by getting them to know the Father. The stated importance of saving humans does not imply that some people are saved by default, and the emphasis put on knowing the Father suggests that what is needed is a personal relationship – or, possibly, patronal loyalty – rather than a realization of one's superior nature. Beatrice (2012, 204) is correct to assert that this statement “expressly and definitively contradicts any attempt to ascribe to Heracleon a doctrine of soteriological determinism.”

Another of Heracleon's comments lets us see how he imagined a conversion to the Christian faith would proceed. In reference to John 4:42, where the Samaritans express their final acceptance that “Jesus is the Savior of the world,” Heracleon states:²²

For people first come to trust (πιστεύουσιν) the Savior after being guided by people, but when they encounter his words, they no longer believe solely based on human testimony (μαρτυρίαν), but also based on truth itself (Heracleon *apud* Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.53/363).

In his comment, Heracleon presents two stages in a Christian conversion: The potential converts are initially guided by people into trusting Jesus, but when they encounter his words – either in person, as in the story, or in the form of early Christian literature – their trust is strengthened by interaction with truth itself. This second step of the process is remarkably similar to how Paul, in 2 Cor 2–3, describes how mature Christians learn not only from their human teachers, but also directly from the Spirit, and may, therefore, match Heracleon's references to “spiritual” Christians discussed above.

We may conclude that Heracleon presents conversion as a deliberate rejection of Gentile and Jewish worship traditions in favor of a Christian one, typically preceded by a period of interaction with Christians acting as guides and witnesses. His outlook on the text seems to

²¹ This sentence appears after what seems to be a summary of Heracleon's argument. Since the aorist ἔλεγεν (“he said”) must be referring to Jesus, not Heracleon, Origen seems to be switching from indirect to direct speech without adding a second attribution formula. The sentence may be taken as a continuation of the summary or – in conformance with the criteria presented above – a verbatim quotation (Berglund 2019c, 259–62).

²² This statement appears in direct speech and is attributed to Heracleon with a simple φησίν (“he says”). Thus, it is presented as a verbatim quotation (Berglund 2019c, 283–85).

have more in common with the models of Nock and MacMullen than with those of Pagels or Crook.

Germinating Seeds

Another insight into Heracleon's views on Christian conversion is given by one of his comments on Jesus's metaphors on sowing and reaping in John 4:35–38. In reference to Jesus's request that the disciples lift their eyes to see that the fields are already white for harvest, Origen presents Heracleon's model of how the soul of an individual believer can, in time, develop from a seed into full bloom, ready to be harvested and gathered into a barn:

But I wonder why he [Heracleon] has understood this harvest to be a harvest of the souls of the believers, as he says that they are already in full bloom, ready for harvest, and suitable to be gathered into a barn – that is, into rest by means of faith – as many as are ready. But not all, for “some were already ready (ἔτοιμοι ἦσαν),” he says, “but some were about to be (ἔμελλον), some are about to be (μέλλουσιν), and some are already sowers themselves (ἐπισπεύονται ἤδη)” (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.40/271).

Prompted by Jesus's metaphor of the fields being white for harvest, Heracleon reflects on the various states in which possible converts to the Christian faith may be found.²³ He presents four categories. The first category is easily recognized as those who were ready (ἔτοιμοι ἦσαν) for harvest as early as during the earthly ministry of the Savior. The two middle categories are distinguished by tense. The imperfect ἔμελλον (“were about to be”) readily refers to people whose conversion processes took more time, but nevertheless are in the past. The present form μέλλουσιν (“they are about to be”), on the other hand, can only refer to people who, in Heracleon's own time, are on the path toward conversion. In the last category, the middle-passive ἐπισπεύονται can be understood as referring either to those who even now (ἤδη), in Heracleon's time, are being sown – that is, who are the object of Christian preaching – or to those who already (ἤδη) have proceeded from receivers of the Gospel to sowers who plant the seeds in others. The latter alternative, which is reflected in the translation above, is consistent with the agricultural metaphor in that a fully developed tiller bears an ear filled with seeds that can be planted to produce the next crop. Heracleon's remark that the Samaritan woman “returned to the world to announce to the called ones (εὐαγγελιζομένη τῇ κλήσει) the good news of the arrival of the Christ” (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of*

²³ Since we already have identified 1 Cor as a potential influence on Heracleon's interpretation, it is reasonable to point to 1 Cor 3:6–9 as inspiration for his agricultural imagery. As pointed out by Wucherpfennig (2002, 164, 287), the imagery of humans as plants in a field is used by Plato (*Timaeus* 41a–43a), Paul (1 Cor 15:36–38, 42–44), and the authors of the Gospel of Truth (41.3–13) and the Tripartite Tractate (62.6–15). I do not, however, agree with Wucherpfennig (2002, 166–67) that Heracleon's comment refers to the creation, rather than conversion, of individual humans.

John 13.31/187) reflects his recognition that she reaches this stage before the end of the Sychar story.

Heracleon's comment on Jesus's harvest metaphor expresses his expectation that a Christian conversion, rather than an instantaneous transition, can be a process that demands a certain amount of time, that can be different for different individuals. In that idea, if not regarding the specific stages of the process, his outlook is reminiscent of Rambo's and Brandt's conceptualizations.

Hints of Reorientation

Two other passages may provide additional clues to Heracleon's view on the conversion of Sychar, since they concern two key points in the Samaritan woman's conversation with Jesus.

In the beginning of their dialogue, the woman responds to Jesus in the form of questions that display a healthy amount of skepticism. In *John* 4:9, she questions Jesus's motives by asking why a Jewish man would ask a Samaritan woman for water, and in 4:11–12, she questions Jesus's ability to draw water from the well without a bucket, arguing that he surely cannot be greater than Jacob, with whom this well originates. But in 4:15, when Jesus has offered her a miraculous drink that springs up to eternal life, she responds by a request: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." This can, arguably, be taken as a turning point in the conversation, where the woman's attitude changes from skepticism to enthusiasm.²⁴ According to Origen, Heracleon recognized this:²⁵

I wonder how Heracleon, unsupported by what is written, can say (φησι), concerning "give me this water," that (ὡς ἄρα) she, having been pierced (διανυθθεῖσα) by the word for a moment, thereafter despised (ἐμίσησεν) even the place of that so-called living water. Or how, concerning "give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water," he can say that (φησὶν ὅτι) the woman says this indicating that this water is laborious (ἐπίμοχθον), hard to come by (δυσπόριστον), and not nutritious (ἄτροφον). Where can he find evidence to show that Jacob's water is not nutritious? (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.10/65–66)

Although Origen is correct that Heracleon is overstating the woman's negativity toward her former tradition, this exaggeration seems to be done in order to bring out her change in attitude: Jesus's words, Heracleon claims, made the woman realize the deficiency of her

²⁴ The woman's request can, obviously, also be read ironically as a continued misunderstanding (Barrett 1978, 235) or even a mocking request for a magic drink (Beasley-Murray 2000, 61).

²⁵ The way Origen introduces these two references to Heracleon, with the *verbum dicendi* φησί(v) followed by a ὅτι or ὡς ἄρα ("that"), indicates that he is summarizing Heracleon's argument (Berglund 2019a, 493–94; 2019c, 218–20).

present source of water – that is, the Samaritan worship tradition – and search for another source. That water hand-drawn from a well and carried into town is ἐπίμοχθος (“laborious”) and δυσπόριστος (“hard to come by”) in comparison to the built-in water tap of Jesus’s image seems evident, and pure water without added sugar is undeniably ἄτροφος (“not nutritious”). Heracleon is, apparently, making the point that – in comparison to his own Christian tradition – the woman’s former worship tradition was unnecessarily demanding and unable to provide the eternal life that Jesus promises in John 4:14. At the same time, he definitely depicts a contrast between her previous and resulting perspectives that fulfills Nock’s (1933, 7) and Brandt’s (2020, 27) criterion of a rejection of the old beliefs.

In other words: Heracleon interprets the woman’s request as a signal that she is open for an invitation to a new worship tradition. In Nock’s nomenclature, this stage is the deliberation that precedes a turning “from an earlier form of piety to another” (Nock 1933, 7). In Rambo’s model, this point of the conversation may be identified with the “crisis” (stage 2) that provides an opportunity to consider a new option. Since this would place Rambo’s fourth stage – encountering an advocate for a particular solution – before his second, Rambo’s model does not fit the situation perfectly.

Another possibly decisive moment in the conversation is Jesus’s request πιστευέ μοι, γύναι (“Trust me, woman”) in John 4:21. We do not have Heracleon’s words in this case, but we do have Origen’s endorsement of his observation that the request comes at this particular point in the conversation:²⁶

Heracleon seems to have made a most plausible observation on this passage – that “Trust me, woman” is not said in answer to her previous statements, but is requested of her only now (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.16/95).

In the context of Heracleon’s comments, this observation is made shortly after Heracleon has remarked that the woman’s identification of Jesus as a prophet, in John 4:19, amounts to a graceful way of admitting that he, in John 4:18, has correctly described her sex life.²⁷ Such an extraordinary insight would only be available to a prophet, Heracleon remarks.²⁸ Heracleon

²⁶ Since this remark does not refer to Heracleon’s words directly, but to Origen’s understanding of them, it should be categorized as an explanatory paraphrase (Berglund 2019a, 495–96; 2019c, 228–32).

²⁷ In Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.15/91, Origen claims: “Heracleon says (λέγει) that the Samaritan is gracefully agreeing to what is said to her by him [Jesus].” Since this statement is presented in indirect speech, it should not be regarded as a verbatim quotation from Heracleon, but as a summary of his argument (Berglund 2019a, 493–94; 2019c, 225–28).

²⁸ In Origen (*Commentary on the Gospel of John* 13.15/91), the words “For only a prophet can know everything” is presented in direct speech and attributed to Heracleon with a simple φησίν (“he says”) inserted three words

seems, thus, to be stating that Jesus is asking her to trust him only after providing her with a valid reason to do so.

The phrase Heracleon is pointing out conforms to a rhetoric of loyalty that both Crook and Nock explores. Crook (2004, 108–15) identifies πίστις (“loyalty”) as a key concept in ancient rhetoric directed toward gods and human patrons alike, as both votive offerings and expressions of praise tend to express what the god has done for the believer, and can therefore be understood as part of the client’s expected response to his patron. The same rhetoric recurs, Crook (2004, 239–43) argues, when philosophers who have transitioned from one school to another declares their new adherence, including when Porphyry of Tyre (ca. 234–305 CE) expresses his reevaluation of Plotinus (ca. 204–270 CE) with the words “After this I believed (ἐπιστεύθην) in Plotinus’s writings” (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 18). Nock (1933, 181–85) argues that ancient teachers of philosophy, after having presented and explained all the rational arguments for their outlooks, asked their students to take the leap into trusting what they had learned, and beginning their new philosophical lives, with similar rhetoric. Epictetus (ca. 50–135 CE), for instance, declares his task to be to get his students to practice being “perfect, unhindered, unconstrained, free from embarrassment, free, successful speakers” and then urges them: “Let us just begin and – trust me (πιστεύσατέ μοι) – you will see!” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.19.29, 34). The Johannine Jesus seems to be doing a similar shift between rational argumentation and call to loyalty when he, in the opening of his farewell address to his disciples, caps his teachings with the exhortation “Trust me (πιστεύετέ μοι), for I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11).

Given this rhetoric, it is conceivable that Heracleon understood the exhortation πίστευέ μοι (“trust me”) in John 4:21 to be a call to conversion – an exhortation to begin a new worship practice that is “neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”²⁹ Heracleon’s remark that it is wise of Jesus to call for such commitment only now, after she has expressed interest in what Jesus can give her (John 4:15) and identified him as a prophet (John 4:19), suggests that he is observing how Jesus proceeds in guiding the woman toward conversion: By offering living water that gives eternal life, Jesus evokes the woman’s interest and gets her to request this water. By demonstrating a prophetic insight into her life, he gains her confidence as a prophet. Only then can he ask her to trust in him.

into the sentence. Thereby, this statement is presented as a verbatim quotation from Heracleon’s writing (Berglund 2019a, 492; 2019c, 225–28).

²⁹ John Chrysostom (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* 33.1) also identifies this moment as one in which Jesus uses the “holy anchor” (τὴν ἱερὰν [...] ἄγκυραν) of faith to bring the Samaritan woman over.

The stages of a conversion thereby depicted by Heracleon do not match Rambo's, but Heracleon is attentive to how the conversation moves from the subject of water, in John 4:7, to Jesus's declaration of being the Messiah awaited by the Samaritans in John 4:26. By pointing to the role of miraculous prophecy in convincing the woman, Heracleon conforms to MacMullen's claim that miracles, or depictions thereof, were instrumental in stimulating early Christian conversions.

Conclusion

This paper has used four modern conceptualizations of ancient Christian conversion to discuss Heracleon's exegetical comments on the Sychar story in John 4:1–42: a recognition of one's superior nature (Pagels 1973), a deliberate change of perspectives (Nock 1933; MacMullen 1984), a transition of rhetorically expressed loyalty (Crook 2004), and a prolonged social process (Rambo 1993; Brandt 2019; Brandt 2020). We have concluded that Heracleon's exegesis of John 4 is driven not by predetermined "Gnostic" dogmatics, but by interaction with Pauline literature. The notion that certain "spiritual" people are predestined for salvation is unattested in what can be reconstructed of Heracleon's words, and only introduced in Origen's responses. Rather than people born with a superior nature, Heracleon's "spiritual" people are mature Christians – a concept originating in 1 Cor 2–3. Therefore, the understanding of conversion as a revelation of one's superior nature (Pagels 1973, 83, 86–92) cannot be said to be Heracleon's view.

In his interpretation of Jesus's declaration that the time has come to worship the Father "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (John 4:21), Heracleon recognizes the story as paradigmatic for Christian conversion, and mitigates it to fit his own context by interpreting the for him irrelevant Samaritan "this mountain" as a symbol for Gentile worship traditions. He exhorts his students to reject both Gentile and Jewish ("Jerusalem") worship traditions in favor of his own Christian one, thereby adhering to Nock's and Brandt's view that an identity transition cannot be called a conversion unless it involves a rejection of an old perspective.

Heracleon emphasizes that the will of the Father, for which the Savior was sent to the world, is for people to know the Father and be saved, a process that typically occurs through the mediation of human guides and witnesses. That this mediation is a process that can take some time is clear from Heracleon's comment on Jesus's harvest metaphor in John 4:35, where Heracleon depicts potential Christian converts as plants in a field, developing from a seed into a fully developed, seed-bearing ear, ready to be harvested and gathered into a barn. Thus,

Heracleon is in agreement with Rambo and Brandt in that conversion is a potentially prolonged social process.

Heracleon seems to be pointing out key moments in the Samaritan woman's conversion process. According to Origen, he claims that the woman, when she asks for the living water in John 4:15, has been pierced (διανυχθεῖσα) by the word and, therefore, came to despise (ἐμίσησεν) her former worship tradition. His observation of Jesus's miraculous insight into the woman's life suggests that he would affirm MacMullen's claim that miracles, or at least miracle stories, were instrumental in early Christian conversions. His remark on at which stage in the conversation Jesus calls the woman to trust him seems to recognize this moment as a call to conversion, and might mean that he would agree with Crook that the ancient rhetoric of loyalty is applicable to gods and human patrons alike. Finally, Heracleon points out that the woman, in John 4:28–30, reaches the stage of announcing the good news (εὐαγγελιζομένη) of Christ's arrival to the world. Thereby, the seed planted by Jesus a moment ago has, miraculously enough, already developed into a fully-grown, seed-bearing plant.

In sum, Heracleon reads the Sychar story as a standard narrative for Christian conversion, and strives to interpret it in view of contemporary experiences of conversion: the call to convert should be made only after interest has been piqued, trust has been established, and the fruit has ripened for harvest – a process that may take much longer in real life than in the standard narrative of the Sychar story. In his view, the narrative does not end with her decision to convert, but continues with her own efforts to spread the new faith to her fellow Samaritans.

Extant material does not allow any conclusions regarding the prominence of the theme of conversion in Heracleon's *hypomnēmata* as a whole. The interest apparent from the few comments discussed in this paper, however, suggests that the Christian community in which he was involved had an aim to spread the Christian faith to outsiders, and some experience in guiding potential converts through the various stages of a conversion process. Then again, judging from the apparent growth of the second-century Christian movement, nothing else could really be expected.

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