Was Heracleon a Valentinian? A New Look at Old Sources*

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Heracleon was a great second-century Christian thinker, and the author of the first known commentary on a New Testament text, the Gospel of John. Although we do not have Heracleon's commentary itself, Origen integrated a great deal of it into his own commentary on the fourth gospel.

Historically, Heracleon has always been associated with the school founded by the infamous heresiarch Valentinus and many have considered him to be one of the best-known Valentinians along with such figures as Ptolemy, Theodotus, and Marcus, although modern scholars have hotly debated the degree to which one may properly describe him or his teachings as "Valentinian."[1] This is natural

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[1] Many scholars consider Heracleon's teachings considerably different from those characteristic of Valentinianism (Origène, *Commentaire sur saint Jean* [ed. and trans. Cécile Blanc; SC 120; Paris: Cerf, 1966]; Domenico Devoti, "Remarques sur l'anthropologie d'Héracléon: les psychiques," SP 16 (1985) 143–51; Eugène de Faye, *Gnostiques et gnosticisme* [Paris: Geuthner, 1925]; Ekkehard Mühlenberg, "Wieviel Erlösungen kennt der Gnostiker Herakleon?" *ZNTW* 66 [1975] 170–93; Gilles Quispel, "From Mythos to Logos," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 39 [1970)] 323–40). Others (Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* [New York: Harper & Row, 1987]; Jean-Michel Poffet, *La méthode exégétique d'Héracléon et d'Origène, commentateurs de Jn 4: Jésus, la Samaritaine et les Samaritains* [Paradosis: Études de littérature et de théologie anciennes 28, Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1985]; François Sagnard, *La gnose valentinienne et le témoignage de Saint Irénée* [Études de philosophie médiévale 36, Paris: J. Vrin, 1947]; Jean-Daniel Kaestli, "L'exégèse valentinienne du quatrième évangile," in *La communauté johannique et son histoire: la trajectoire de l'Évangile de Jean aux deux premiers siècles* [ed. Jean-Daniel Kaestli et al., Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1990] 323–50) have tended more towards seeing Heracleon as a faithful student who, in the words of Alan E. Brooke, "did not materially alter the system of Valentinus" (Heracleon, *The*

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enough, given that the very meaning of describing someone as a "Valentinian" remains somewhat unclear.

If to count as a Valentinian means to identify oneself as such, then Valentinians probably did not exist; our evidence suggests that only the enemies of "Valentinianism" referred to people as "Valentinians."[2] Other meanings, however, may prove more relevant for our purposes. The term "Valentinian" could refer to a disciple or student of Valentinus or to someone who belonged to or whom others identified with the school or tradition founded by Valentinus. It could also refer to someone whose beliefs or approach conform to what a given author understands as characteristically "Valentinian" beliefs or approach.

Discussions ancient and modern over Heracleon's alleged links to Valentinus have not always clarified what these linkages mean. In our investigation into Heracleon's status and allegiances, we shall look at the testimony of the patristic authors. Now, modern scholarship has often assumed that these authors have identified Heracleon unambiguously as a member and representative of Valentinus's school, but in what follows we shall demonstrate that for most of the authors the situation appears by no means so clear as that—rather, they show signs of uncertainty and hesitancy.

We shall also see that while Clement, on the one hand, clearly links Heracleon to Valentinus's school, Origen, on the other, does not, and even seems to cast doubt on this linkage. In examining their testimony, we shall see that whether or not one considers Heracleon a Valentinian varies depending on how one defines the term and that one can clear this apparent contradiction by understanding what it means for each of these authors to associate someone with a given school or teacher. We shall argue that, based on our analysis of Origen's discussion of Heracleon, modern scholarship can no longer continue simply to assume Heracleon's Valentinian status. Rather, we must, first, define what exactly we mean by calling someone a Valentinian, and, second, examine carefully whether Heracleon fits that definition.

The Ancient Heresiologists

All the ancient authorities, who give any indication of Heracleon's allegiance or lineage, associate Heracleon in some way with Valentinus. When we examine the relevant texts closely, however, it becomes apparent that only Clement of Alexandria straightforwardly and unambiguously asserts that Heracleon belongs to Valentinus's school. For the purposes of this investigation, we may leave to one

Fragments of Heracleon: Newly Edited from the MSS, with an Introduction and Notes [ed. Alan E. Brooke; Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature 1.4; Cambridge: The University Press, 1891] 105).

[2] Given that the name "Valentinian" is thus derogatory in origin, we might like to replace it. However, two difficulties would arise: the people commonly called "Valentinians" do not seem to have identified themselves as anything other than Christians, and "Valentinian" as a designation has become by now so deeply rooted in scholarship that it would probably be impossible to get rid of it.

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side the references to Heracleon found in Photius, Praedestinatus, and Clement of Alexandria's *Eclogae Propheticae*, as they do not contribute to our discussion of Heracleon's affiliation.

a) Irenaeus mentions Heracleon in his *Adversus Haereses* after a satirical dismissal of the Valentinian theory of aeonic emanation.[3] Irenaeus argues that Heracleon and Ptolemy emanated from Valentinus, just as the Aeons did from the primal Father. In the conclusion to this section, however, one can see clearly that Irenaeus bases his affiliation of Heracleon and Ptolemy with Valentinus on the basis of their views. He regards everyone who holds the same opinions as they do as an "emanation" of Valentinus. The citation thus tells us that Irenaeus linked Heracleon with Ptolemy in his mind and that he linked both to Valentinus, but it does not directly state that Heracleon studied with or followed Valentinus.

b) In the *Adversus Valentinianos*, Tertullian presents Heracleon as a successor to Ptolemy, both of whom he calls Valentinians, although he admits that they have separated themselves from Valentinus and his beliefs and that the name "Valentinian" represents a designation that polemicists have given them, not one that they have chosen.[4]

c) Hippolytus merely mentions Heracleon in the table of contents to the sixth book of his *Philosophumena*. He says that he intends to discuss "what Simon has dared (τετολμημένα)," and then "what Valentinus has laid down (δογματίζει)," and then adds, "and what is thought (δοκοῦντα) by Secundus, Ptolemy, and Heracleon, and how they have used as their own, but with different words, the thought of those whom the Greeks think wise [i.e., they have all plagiarized the Greek philosophers]."[5] Note yet again the association of Heracleon with Ptolemy and the separation of their thought from that of Valentinus. The order of names clearly intends to establish a link between Valentinus and Ptolemy and Heracleon. This alleged link does not necessarily have a historical grounding, however, as we see when Hippolytus makes the same implicit link between Simon Magus and Valentinus. Furthermore, while Hippolytus discusses the alleged systems of both Secundus and Ptolemy after the exposition of Valentinus's own system, he says

[3] Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.4.1 (see Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les Hérésies* [ed. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau; 2 vols.; SC 293–294; Paris: Cerf, 1982] 2:47).

[4] Tertullian, *Val*. 4.2 (see Tertullien, *Contre les Valentiniens* [ed. and trans. Jean-Claude Fredouille; SC 280–281; Paris: Cerf, 1980] 87). In this passage, Tertullian aims to reap the rhetorical benefits of two paradoxical assertions simultaneously. On the one hand, he wants to consider them as Valentinians so as to clearly link them to a heretical, debased tradition, i.e. Valentinianism. On the other hand, he uses their deviations from the doctrines of Valentinus to present them as being unfaithful even to their heretical teachings, arguing that only Axionicus among them has adhered to Valentinus's teachings ("solus ad hodiernum Antiochae Axionicus memoriam Valentini integra custodia regularum eius consolatur").

[5] Hippolytus, *Philosophumena, or the Refutation of All Heresies, Formerly Attributed to Origen, but now to Hippolytus, Bishop and Martyr, Who Flourished about 220 A.D.* 6.2-4 (trans. Francis Legge; Translations of Christian Literature 1.20; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1921) vol 2, p. 1.

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nothing more of Heracleon, which indicates perhaps that Hippolytus did not know Heracleon's system. He knows only that Heracleon has some link to Valentinus.

d) In terms of Heracleon's relation to Valentinus, Pseudo-Tertullian makes a clearer reference than the others cited above but basically follows in the same line. He writes, "There is also Heracleon another heretic, who thinks similarly to Valentinus, but wants to appear to think differently by using a somewhat novel formulation."[6] In other words, he asserts an association on the level of ideas between the two "heretics" but specifies no direct relationship, and presents a certain distancing of Heracleon's thought from that of Valentinus, as in the reference of Tertullian discussed above.

e) Epiphanius refers to Heracleon as a disciple of Colorbasus, himself a member of Valentinus's school.[7] Epiphanius also presents Heracleon as influenced by Marcus, an allegation that he supports by taking Irenaeus's description of Marcosian practices and applying it to Heracleon.[8] Epiphanius's rebuttal of Heracleon appears quite generic and tells us little about Heracleon or his beliefs.

Thus far, then, we see evidence of a heresiological impulse to link Heracleon to Ptolemy and to Valentinus. One could ascribe part of this to a common dependence of the later authors on Irenaeus.[9] We find it significant, however, that all the later authors go into greater detail regarding the apparent separation and real linkages between Valentinus and Heracleon than does Irenaeus. It therefore seems that Irenaeus had less of a problem with the issue of Heracleon's dependence on Valentinus than did his successors. Irenaeus simply associated the two; later authors had to work hard to give the linkup plausibility.

To sum up, we can say that the above references taken together suggest that Heracleon's teachings had similarities to those of Valentinus, that he had some association with students and coworkers of Valentinus like Ptolemy, and that heresiologists considered it polemically advantageous to describe him as a Valentinian. But we should also note that Heracleon has a much less direct link to Valentinus than, for instance, Ptolemy. His "Valentinian" status remains somewhat ambiguous.

Clement

We must still, however, take Clement's reference in the *Stromateis* into consideration. It presents nothing ambiguous or tentative: Clement describes Heracleon as ὁ τῆς Οὐαλεντίνου σχολῆς δοκιμώτατος, "the most celebrated of Valentinus's

[6] Pseudo-Tertullian, *Adversus Omnes Haereses* 4.4.8 (*Quinti Septimi Florenti Tertulliani Opera* [CCSL 2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1954] 1407). "Extitit praetera Heracleon alter haereticus, qui cum Valentino paria sentit, sed nouitate quadam pronuntiationis uult uideri alias sentire."

[7] Epiphanius, *Panarion* §36 (see *The* Panarion *of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book 1 (Sects 1–46)* [trans. Frank Williams; Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies 35; Leiden: Brill, 1987] 236–41).

[8] Found in Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.5.

[9] See Gérard Vallée, *A Study in Anti-Gnostic Polemics: Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Epiphanius* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 1; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982) 6 n. 5 for a very useful chart detailing the relative dependencies of the heresiologists.

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school."[10] While this assertion may have problematic elements, namely in that it presents Heracleon as much more prominent than in the other accounts, nonetheless it clearly attests to Heracleon's status as a Valentinian and comes from an early, knowledgeable, and relatively trustworthy source.

Clement's attitude with regard to Valentinians is nuanced. Speaking generally, he is liberal and comparatively open minded in accepting diversity within Christianity. As Le Boulluec points out,[11] Clement derives his dominant model from Greek philosophical schools and thus permits of disagreement. Although one can learn the full truth only from the divine Logos, he admits nonetheless a place within Christianity for debate, argument, and the use of philosophical tools such as dialectic and other forms of sophisticated reasoning. He does, of course, move to a more stereotypically heresiological model, when fundamental, underlying elements of Christianity come into question, but this seems not to have occurred with regard to Valentinus or his followers. One could not say that he approves of them overall, but he found them certainly more acceptable than, for example, the Carpocratians,[12] who remained entirely outside the Christian community.

This appears particularly evident in the passage from *Strom*. 7.17.108 cited above, in which he goes on to cite Heracleon's exegesis of Luke 12:8–11, which deals with the ways in which one can confess one's faith. In this passage, Clement identifies Heracleon as belonging to Valentinus's school simply to specify about whom he is talking; he presents no polemic here.[13]

Clement, then, clearly considers Heracleon a Valentinian. But another author, writing only two generations after Clement, also an Alexandrian, also relatively trustworthy, quite well informed, and familiar with heterodox Christian movements does *not* seem to consider Heracleon a Valentinian— contrary to prior scholarly readings. This author is Origen.

Origen

In his *Commentary on John*, Origen quotes extensively from Heracleon's earlier commentary on that gospel and repeatedly refers to Heracleon.[14] Origen provides far and away our most detailed source for information about Heracleon. Therefore, at this point we would like to examine several significant passages in this work,

[10] Clement, *Strom*. 4.8.73.

[11] Alain Le Boulluec, *Clément d'Alexandrie et Origène,* vol. 2 of *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque, IIe–IIIe siècles* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985) 264–70.

[12] *Strom.* 3.4.25; see discussion in Le Boulluec, *Clément d'Alexandrie et Origène*, 329–30.

[13] As Henry Chadwick famously noted, "With the teachings of Basilides and more especially of Valentine, Clement found himself in a fair degree of sympathy" (John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954] 31)—and this applies to Valentinus's school as well.

[14] Regarding the fidelity of Origen's citations, see Poffet, *Méthode exégétique*, 17-18, and Bart D. Ehrman, "Heracleon and the Western Tradition," *NTS* 40 (1994) 161–79.

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passages where Origen links Heracleon with others, in order to see what light they can shed on Origen's understanding of Heracleon's affiliations.

In *Comm. Jo.* 2.100, by far the most important of these passages, Origen refers to Heracleon as τὸν Οὐαλεντίνου λεγόμενον εἶναι γνώριμον "the one who is said to be a disciple of Valentinus" roughly.[15] Some have read this passage as proof that Origen considered Heracleon a disciple of Valentinus, but such an interpretation remains far from certain.[16]

For our present purposes, this passage has two interesting features. The first has to do with the precise meaning of γνώριμος, which can mean "pupil" or "acquaintance."[17] In Christian usage, however, from Justin on, the word often indicates the apostles (οἱ γνώριμοι) and bears the meaning of "disciple" or "follower," a sense that occurs widely in non-Christian writings as well (Xenophon, Strabo, Josephus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Philo, etc.). One has thus no reason not to apply this meaning in the present circumstances.

The second interesting aspect of this phrase lies in the fact that Origen says, not that Heracleon is a disciple of Valentinus, but rather that "it is said (λεγόμενον)" that he is. This clear "it is said" meaning of the passive participle of λέγειν has not changed from classical times down to its use in modern Greek. It indicates that others say such-and-such without necessarily indicating that the author him- or herself says this. In the present case, Origen reports the fact that others have described Heracleon as "being a Valentinian" (τὸν Οὐαλεντίνου λεγόμενον εἶναι γνώριμον).

Now, if Origen had written simply τὸν Οὐαλεντίνου λεγόμενον γνώριμον, omitting the εἶναι, the phrase could then simply identify "Heracleon, that is, the one who is called a disciple of Valentinus." By this Origen would identify a par-

[15] Origen, *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis*. All citations of the *Commentary on John* are translated from the Greek in the appropriate volume of the Sources chrétiennes edition (ed., trans., and introd. Cécile Blanc; Paris: Cerf): Books 1–5: Vol. 1, SC 120 (1966); Books 6 and 10: Vol. 2, SC 157 (1970); Book 13: Vol. 3, SC 222 (1975); Books 19 and 20: Vol. 4, SC 290 (1982); and Books 28 and 32: Vol. 5, SC 385 (1992).

[16] Scholars dealing with Heracleon usually render the passage correctly in translation but tend to pass over its ambiguity. Cristoph Markschies provides one prominent exception to this trend (*Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* [WUNT 65; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1992] 393) in writing that "Auch Herakleon gehört nicht so eng zu Valentin, wie man gemeinhin anzunehmen bereit ist; hier bleiben Lebenszeit und Ort ebenfalls nur ungefähr eingrenzbar: Origenes bestätigt uns als erster mit einer gewissen Reserve, daß Herakleon für einen persönlichen Schüler Valentins gehalten wurde."

[17] LSJ gives its meanings as "pupil, acquaintance and (exceptionally) kinsman" (Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* [9th edition, revised and augmented; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968] s.v. γνώριμος, §3b). See also Brooke, *Fragments of Heracleon*, 31 n. 2. Markschies presents γνώριμος as a virtual synonym of such words as ἀκουστής and ἀκροατής and of such phrases as οἱ ἀμφί τινα and οἱ περί τινα (*Valentinus Gnosticus*, 393 n. 37). Rudolph Pfeiffer uses it to mean "acquainted with or a pupil of" (*History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968] 155).

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ticular Heracleon as the Heracleon known as a follower of Valentinus in order to distinguish him from other men with the same name.

Even this use of it in order to identify the person under discussion need not mean that Origen himself agrees with the description. Origen frequently uses a bare λεγόμενος to indicate that he reports knowledge, the validity of which he does not vouch for. For example, see *Comm. Jo.* 2.23 (ἢ λεγομένων μὲν οὐδαμῶς δὲ ὄντων θεῶν [speaking of beings which are called gods, but are not]); *Cels.* 7.7 (ὑπὸ μυρίων ἄλλων λεγομένων θεοπρόπων [referring to a thousand other allegedly divine oracles]); or *Cels.* 8.5 (πολλῶν τοίνυν λεγομένων ἢ ὄντων θεῶν [referring to many alleged or real gods]).[18]

So one need not read even a bare λεγόμενος as representing Origen's own opinion, and in fact, what we have here seems yet more uncertain. In this passage, it is not a question of describing Heracleon as a Valentinian, but rather acknowledging that some consider him to be one.[19] The sentence as it stands gives us Origen's report that some consider Heracleon a Valentinian rather than Origen's identification of which Heracleon he means. Had Origen wished merely to identify Heracleon, he had no need to include εἶναι. On the other hand, had Origen intended to designate Heracleon as a Valentinian, he could have done without both the λεγόμενον and the εἶναι and could simply have written τὸν Οὐαλεντίνου γνώριμον, a phrasing which would approach much closer in spirit that provided by Clement. In fact, when Origen discusses the group affiliations of others, he tends to use the banal formula οἱ ἀπὸ τοῦ. Here, he probably intends his use of γνώριμον to state precisely what others think about Heracleon.

The fact that Origen takes such pains to signal this identification as one reported by others, using both λεγόμενον and εἶναι, suggests strongly that he does not agree with that identification and distances himself from it, even while using it as a convenient way of indicating the person about whom he writes. Rather than proving that Origen considers Heracleon a Valentinian, as many have assumed, the use of the phrase τὸν Οὐαλεντίνου λεγόμενον εἶναι γνώριμον actually argues that he did not consider Heracleon a Valentinian but knew that others had considered him one.

Origen's opinion is worthy of serious consideration. We know that he was well-informed regarding heterodox Christians in general and Valentinians in specific, through his patron, the previously Valentinian Ambrose. We know as well that he wrote this part of the commentary in Alexandria,[20] where just two generations before Clement had written that Heracleon stood out as the most celebrated member of

[18] It should be noted, of course, that a bare λεγόμενος can also be used in contexts where there is no indication that Origen doubts the information.

[19] It is significant that the passage under discussion is the only occasion on which Origen uses the clause λεγόμενον εἶναι.

[20] Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 6.2.6–12.

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Valentinus's school.[21] Furthermore, even if Origen knew nothing else of Heracleon's writings or teachings, he had at the very least a familiarity with his commentary on John. Origen based his opinion, then, on knowledge both of Heracleon's reputation and of his actual work.

Although he does not affirm that Heracleon belongs to the Valentinian school, Origen does refer to Heracleon's own circle of followers at least twice (13.114; 13.122; and possibly also 10.117; 13.147–50; 20.54; 20.217–19). He thus presents Heracleon as the head of his own school.[22]

In three places Origen associates Heracleon with "the heterodox" always in passages having to do with the subordination of the Creator god, or the Old Testament god, to the real God, or the God of the New Testament (6.116; 13.95; 13.101). Furthermore, he twice associates Heracleon with those who believe that different souls have different natures (20.54, 20.287). These two beliefs, for Origen, often go together and form the basic core of all non-Judaizing heterodoxy, and the denunciation of either or both of them occurs extremely commonly.[23] In his denunciations of them, he frequently calls their adherents "the heretics," or cites as the most notorious proponents of these errors a group made up of Marcion, Valentinus, and Basilides.[24] In these cases he uses the names as usually no more than clichés to represent the great, undifferentiated mass of heretical Christians. Such general denunciations do not point towards any one specific heresy.

The last passage that we need to mention occurs at 13.294. In his discussion of John 4:36, Origen points out that both Heracleon and a member of the Church (τις καὶ ἐκκλησιαστικός) might come to the same erroneous conclusion, albeit by different routes, thus implying that, for Origen, Heracleon stands outside the church. This passage, however, contains purely negative information: Origen does not consider Heracleon a member of the Church but leaves his status unspecified.

[21] Ansgar Wucherpfennig explains this by arguing that Origen, writing forty years or so after Clement, would have heard of Heracleon only through the heresiological literature or through his patron Ambrose, but we have two objections to his argument (*Heracleon Philologus* [WUNT 142, Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2002] 370). First of all, would the fame of the most celebrated Valentinian (according to Clement) have faded so quickly? And secondly, if Ambrose and others vouch for Heracleon's Valentinian status, why would Origen remain dubious? Apelles is farther from him in time than Heracleon, and yet Origen has no hesitation in describing him accurately both as "Marcion's disciple" and as the author of his own heresy (*Cels*. 5.54). Furthermore, Origen attests that he knows something of the exegetical practices of Heracleon's disciples (*Comm. Jo*. 13.114; 13.122), indicating that Heracleon's cannot have been merely an unknown name from the past for him. And since Origen elsewhere speaks of Valentinians and a Valentinian school (see *Princ*. 2.9.5; *Cels*. 5.61; *Comm. Rom*. 8.11.2; *Hom. Luc*. 20.2; *Fr. Eph*., commenting on Ephesians 4:5–7; *Fr. Prov.* 2.16), it is clear that he believes that a Valentinian tradition exists—a tradition to which, from Origen's point of view, Heracleon does not belong.

[22] Praedestinatus (*Haer*. 16), Augustine (*Haer.* 16), and Epiphanius (*Pan*. 36) say the same.

[23] To choose but a few of the possible references: *Hom. Jos*. 10.2, 11.6, 12.3; *Hom. Lev.* 13.4.2; *Princ*. 2.9.5, 3.1.8; *Comm. Rom*. 1.19.6, 2.4.6, 2.13.27; *Comm. Jo*. 1.82. 1.253.

[24] See *Comm. Rom*. 8.8.7; *Hom. Luc*. 29.4; *Hom. Exod*. 3.2; *Hom. Jer.* 10.5.1; *Hom. Jos*. 7.7, 12.3.

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Contrast with Celsus and Apelles

We have seen in the above that at no point does Origen refer to Heracleon as a Valentinian, although he does identify Heracleon as remaining outside the Church and as having his own followers. Origen's decision not to identify Heracleon as a Valentinian—to say nothing of his choice not to use this well-known designation against Heracleon—appears especially striking, when we consider a parallel case. In Origen's rebuttal of Celsus in the *Contra Celsum*, Origen repeatedly brings up Celsus's alleged Epicureanism and uses it polemically to undermine both Celsus's character and his arguments.[25]

Despite Origen's dislike for the Valentinian school,[26] Ambrose's former attachment to it, and the fact that Origen considered Heracleon a heterodox teacher who stands outside the Church proper, Origen does not, in the present case, make rhetorical or argumentative use of Heracleon's ties to the Valentinian school. In fact, in addition to not capitalizing on Heracleon's alleged Valentinianism, Origen even goes so far as to downplay Heracleon's connection to Valentinianism at 2.100, as we discussed earlier.[27] One would find this lack of reference to Heracleon's Valentinianism extremely odd, if Origen did in fact consider Heracleon a Valentinian.[28]

Another suggestive parallel occurs in Origen's treatment of Apelles, Marcion's successor. In this case Origen clearly indicates both Apelles's prior membership in Marcion's school and his subsequent establishment of his own teaching.[29]

[25] *Cels.* 1.8; 1.10; 4.36; 4.54; 4.75; 5.3.

[26] See *Cels.* 6.36; *Hom. Luc.* 20.2.

[27] This difference is especially striking if one accepts Wucherpfennig's plausible argument that Origen intended his commentary to be taken primarily as a rebuttal of Heracleon (*Heracleon*, 20), thus increasing its similarity to *Contra Celsum*. Wucherpfennig further argues that in fact Origen is writing his commentary as an attack on the Valentinian teachings which so interested his patron Ambrose and possibly others of his circle, and that he is using Heracleon as the figurehead of this movement ("Für diese Auseinandersetzung hat Origenes sich Herakleon als Kontrahenten gewählt, da er ihm als γνώριμος τοῦ Οὐαλεντίνου bekannt war," [*Heracleon*, 25]). But this seems unlikely given the almost complete lack of references to Valentinianism, polemical or otherwise, in the work.

[28] Might Origen have deliberately minimized Heracleon's connections to Valentinus for the purposes of strengthening his (Origen's) case against him (Heracleon)? It seems unlikely. First of all, if this were the case, one would expect Origen to make some use of this separation somewhere in *Hom. Luc.*, especially at 2.100. Nowhere does he compare or contrast Heracleon with Valentinus. Furthermore, Origen would hardly gain any polemical benefit by separating Heracleon from Valentinus, one of his three arch-heretics (along with Basilides and Marcion). True, Tertullian did make polemical use of the fact that Valentinus's disciples seemed to have altered their master's system, but only after first identifying them, in a clear and definite way, as being followers of Valentinus. Origen neither argues for Heracleon's earlier association with Valentinus, nor exploits his alleged later distance from his teacher. He presents the whole issue in a decidedly understated and unargumentative manner. One could, perhaps, imagine Origen separating Heracleon from Valentinus in order to argue that, as bad as the latter is, the former is somehow even worse—but this tactic, again, would require a great deal of development and proof, and, furthermore, would be quite unlike Origen's general attitude towards the heretical leaders.

[29] *Cels.* 5.54; *Hom. Gen.* 2.2.

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Again, this contrasts strikingly with Origen's treatment of Heracleon's links to Valentinianism.

No Assumption of a Valentinian System

We should mention a further intriguing point related to the lack of identification of Heracleon as a Valentinian. Although Origen repeatedly censures the allegedly arbitrary, inconsistent, or unsupported nature of Heracleon's exegeses, he does not adduce any sort of grand Valentinian system as the cause for this.[30] All his rebuttals are addressed to Heracleon personally. Origen does occasionally say that a given exegesis springs from Heracleon's belief in souls having fixed natures but never says or implies that Heracleon owes his exegeses to the influences of a specifically Valentinian system of beliefs or to the importation of such a belief system into his exegetical work. If a Heracleonian exegesis appears counterintuitive or paradoxical, Origen ascribes its unlikeliness to Heracleon alone.

This appears especially relevant at 2.103, where Origen has just announced (at 2.100) that some call Heracleon a Valentinian, and now he turns to criticize Heracleon's exegetical practice for its radical conclusions based on insufficient proofs. But even here, he makes no use of or reference to Heracleon's alleged Valentinian status. He assumes that Heracleon's interpretations spring from his own imagination, not from a Valentinian system of beliefs that he has inherited.

Origen's reticence in this regard becomes most apparent, when one compares it to the practices of modern commentators on this text, who frequently avail themselves of alleged parallels with Valentinian texts or beliefs to explain Heracleon's exegeses; Origen, by contrast, never does this. This appears especially significant given Origen's comments at 13.104. There, he dismisses some of Heracleon's interpretations as borrowed from an apocryphal work, the *Kerygmata Petrou*: "But it would take too long to cite here Heracleon's words taken (παραλαμβόμενα) from the writing called 'the Preaching of Peter.'" Origen evidently has the will and the ability to identify Heracleon's sources explicitly and to use this identification as a means of dismissing his arguments. If Origen considered Heracleon a Valentinian, surely he would have used the same strategy to rebut other interpretations.

On the other hand, at least one passage (2.155–156) in the *Commentary on John* shows where one can plausibly argue that Origen rebuts Valentinians.[31] He writes (2.155) that he addresses himself to "those who have invented fables (μυθολογίαν)[32]

[30] For example, take his comments at 6.111 ("If he [Heracleon] brought even the least bit of persuasiveness to his defence of these doctrines, we would exert ourselves in refuting them: but a transcription without comment is sufficient for refutation") or 10.118.

[31] There are other passages where Origen's comments could well be directed at Valentinians, but where it is also possibly that they are meant as a general refutation of all those who believe that souls can be of different natures. We have generally preferred to err on the side of caution, but Origen's reference here seems quite clearly to be targeting Valentinians.

[32] Le Boulluec argues that in Origen's polemical writings, "fables" becomes "l'équivalent de 'doctrines des Valentiniens'" (*La notion d'hérésie*, 508).

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concerning the Eons and their companions (συζυγίαις), and who imagine that the Word and Life were emitted by Mind and Truth." But nothing links this passage to Heracleon. Origen does not rebut a Heracleonian exegesis here but rather comments in the midst of a long rumination on John 1:4. Furthermore, in referring to his opponents, Origen writes that, "it is probable that the more reasonable (among them), troubled in their researches and struck by our questions, will question us (ἀντερωτήσειν) as well."[33] Note the use of the future tense. Origen anticipates these questions rather than responding to already existent exegeses, as he does with Heracleon.

Origen Does Not Consider Heracleon a Valentinian

In short, Origen never refers to Heracleon as a Valentinian, never explains Heracleon's exegeses by reference to any possible Valentinian influence, and in the one section where there is clear evidence that Origen rebuts Valentinians, he makes no reference to Heracleon.

Considering the above, then, we have no reason not to accept a straightforward reading of 2.100 as reflecting Origen's attitude vis-à-vis Heracleon, namely, that Origen himself does not consider Heracleon a Valentinian, but that he admits that others have linked the two figures. This point of view appears quite compatible with most of the ancient references to Heracleon with the significant exception of Clement of Alexandria. These other references associate Heracleon with Valentinus, especially in terms of showing him as a member of a series of teachers descending from Valentinus. But they do not directly and explicitly make him out to be a Valentinian, and, when carefully read, grudgingly admit the existence of considerable differences between his beliefs and those of Valentinus.

Origen Harmonized with Clement

We can harmonize Origen and the heresiological literature easily enough. But what are we to do with the contradiction between Origen's point of view and that of Clement? Although one cannot say for certain, the difference in their opinions may well be the result of a difference in definition regarding what it means to belong to a given heterodox group.

As Le Boulluec has pointed out, Clement's conceptual model when dealing with Christian sects, and especially with regard to naming them, involves the "assimilation complète des 'hérésies' aux écoles philosophiques."[34] In *Strom.* 7.108.1–2,[35] Clement discusses the ways in which sectarian groups acquire their names. Some, such as the Docetists, acquire their names and definitions from the specific opinions

[33] Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 2.156.

[34] Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie*, 264

[35] Alain Le Boulluec, *Clément d'Alexandrie, Les Stromates, Stromate VII* (SC 428; Paris: Cerf, 1997) 323-25.

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they hold. Others acquire names after places, nationalities, characteristic activities, or—as in the case of the Valentinians—the name of their founder or master.

Thus to call someone a member of the Valentinian school does not, for Clement, necessarily involve the adoption of specific beliefs; rather, it indicates that this person belongs to the lineage of teaching descending from Valentinus. One becomes a Valentinian, because one learned from Valentinus or one of his successors, or because one associated with him, and not necessarily because of any given beliefs that one holds.[36] Clement's reference to Heracleon as a member of Valentinus's school, then, does not automatically tell us anything about Heracleon's doctrine or beliefs; it could simply indicate that he had Valentinus as his teacher or associate.[37] This would accord with the heresiological references as well.

The case appears differently, when one studies Origen. Le Boulluec argues persuasively that in Origen's writings the affiliation of a given piece of writing or teaching with a given heterodox school has very much to do with its content, including the doctrines that it presents or the belief system that it assumes.[38] Origen tends, in dealing with the great heretical "schools" of Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus, to reduce each of them to one or two basic doctrinal ideas and focuses on these rather than on alleged chains of heretical succession.

This comes out quite clearly in the excerpt from Origen's commentary on Titus, preserved in Pamphilus and Eusebius's *Apology for Origen*. In setting out to describe a heretic, he refers exclusively to the realm of beliefs and ideas; a heretic denies the unity of the god of the Old Testament with the god of the New Testament, or the divine origin of the Law, or the virgin birth of the pre-existent Jesus, and so on. He defines sectarians by their adherence to the characteristic ideas of their sects.[39]

Thus Origen defines Marcionism by its contempt for the creator god, the Basilidean school by the refusal of martyrdom and the belief in reincarnation, and Valentinianism by "l'aspect mythique de la théologie valentinienne,"[40] including the elaborate narratives detailing pleromatic existence, such as Irenaeus presented. The absence of these mythological features from Heracleon's work might well explain why Origen would not have considered it Valentinian, despite the fact (which he notes at 2.100) that others, perhaps those working with a more

[36] C. Wilfred Griggs argues, drawing on *Strom*. 3.5.41, that the real center of Clement's concern is with movements that encourage excessive behaviour, whether in a libertine or an ascetic direction. He notes that "the so-called heretics are designated by Clement primarily because of their non-ethical way of life (as determined by Clement), rather than by their doctrinal positions" (*Early Egyptian Christianity from its Origins to 451 C.E.* [Coptic Studies 2; Leiden: Brill, 1990] 100; see also 60).

[37] As Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie*, 264, points out, citing its similarities with Diogenes Laertius's work, Clement's attitude follows the traditional genre of περὶ αἱρέσεις writings.

[38] Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie*, 508; see also 441, where Le Boulluec argues that, unlike Clement, Origen "n'exploite pas l'argument . . . des 'successions'."

[39] See *Apologie pour Origène* (ed. and trans. René Amacker and Éric Junod; vol. 1; SC 464; Paris: Cerf, 2002) 81.

[40] Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie*, 508.

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Clementine concept of the use of genealogical standards for determining affiliation, do consider him a Valentinian.

We should note here that Origen's understanding of Valentinianism coheres much more closely with modern scholarly understandings than does Clement's. Modern discussions of Valentinianism almost always focus on elaborate mythical systems, such as one finds exposed in Irenaeus, which detail aeonic emanation and the fall from pleromatic harmony into the world of multiplicity.[41] This holds especially true with regard to analysis of the Nag Hammadi corpus, our most significant new source of Valentinian writings. These texts give no information as to their authors' identities or affiliations, and thus the only way to identify which of them to consider Valentinian, and which not, involves examining them in accordance with doctrinal, theological, or mythological definitions of Valentinianism. Origen's assessment, then, has direct ramifications for the modern study of Heracleon and Valentinianism.

Conclusion Regarding Heracleon

We can therefore bring together all the ancient references to Heracleon by assuming that he lived contemporaneously with Valentinus, knew him as an associate or a student, and that although he worked alongside or under the shadow of his more (in)famous colleague, he nonetheless developed his own theological and philosophical views, views which one might not consider Valentinian by modern scholarly standards. If this scenario proves correct, it would explain why Clement would see him as a Valentinian, why Origen would not, and why the other ancient authorities would tentatively present him as linked to Valentinus.

This hypothesis is not radical, and does not go tremendously further than earlier analyses by Blanc, Devoti, de Faye, or Quispel.[42] It also accords well with the recent work of Wucherpfennig, who suggests that Valentinus and Heracleon had headed in similar directions, exploring similar terrain, but doing so with some degree of independence.[43]

[41] Perhaps the best recent attempt—certainly among the most sensible—to define Valentinianism is that of Einar Thomassen ("Notes pour la délimitation d'un corpus valentinien à Nag Hammadi," in *Les textes de Nag Hammadi et le problème de leur classification: Actes du Colloque tenu à Québec du 15 au 19 septembre 1993* [ed. Louis Painchaud and Anne Pasquier; Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1995] 243-59). In his attempt to establish a corpus of Valentinian works among the Nag Hammadi writings, he very wisely tailors his criteria to fit in with his source material. His focus is always specifically on the Nag Hammadi texts as he constructs a set of heuristic criteria that allow him to determine which ones are to be excluded from, and which included in, the category of Valentinian writings.

[42] See above, n. 1.

[43] Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon,* 367, 371.

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Ramifications of This Conclusion

This conclusion has significant ramifications for our understanding of Heracleon and Valentinianism generally. The lack of characteristically Valentinian mythological features in Heracleon's commentary has presented a noted and persistent problem for modern readers, and it seems that this appeared problematic for Origen as well. On the one hand, by Origen's day Heracleon had already acquired the reputation of an associate or student of Valentinus, as we see from Origen's comment and the references to Heracleon in Clement and Irenaeus. On the other hand, his commentary did not possess the distinctive characteristics that Origen associated with Valentinianism. Origen's resolution to this dilemma, it seems, lay in noting but not supporting Heracleon's alleged Valentinianism.

This dilemma has plagued modern scholarship as well. Certainly one could assimilate many aspects of Heracleon's commentary to a Valentinian system, but then, one could say this of the apostle Paul's letters as well, as many Valentinians did. We have no unambiguous evidence that would permit us to assert that Heracleon's system represents a Valentinian one in the sense of presenting or assuming a distinctively Valentinian mythological and theological worldview.

In attempting to explain this, some scholars have argued that Heracleon wrote his commentary as an exoteric work, and that in it he hides these features so as to make his beliefs appear more Christian. As Elaine Pagels writes, "this discrepancy [between the supposed Valentinian system and the fragments of Heracleon] offers a clear example of how a Valentinian theologian could present a clear, consistent and intentionally exoteric or publicly oriented exposition of his theology for non-initiates . . . while reserving his esoteric theology . . . for initiates."[44] Or, in Kaestli's words, "Notre conclusion sera donc qu'Héracléon n'a ni ignoré, ni éliminé le mythe des éons et de Sagesse, mais qu'il l'a délibérément laissé de côté parce que son commentaire s'adressait à un public pas encore initié à toutes les dimensions du mythe."[45]

For reasons of literary genre alone this explanation seems unlikely. Wucherpfennig has recently examined the generic significance of Origen's description of Heracleon's work as ὑπομνήματα. Looking at the understanding of, and expectations for, this genre of literature in antiquity, Wucherpfennig writes that "diese Hypomnemata-Literatur beschäftigte sich mit der Überlieferung und Erklärung literarischer Werke und würde heute der Literaturwissenschaft zugerechnet," and argues that certain schools would have published and circulated it for the benefit of students. "Als solche war sie wohl nicht eigentlich für die Öffentlichkeit bestimmt, sondern primär für eine schulinterne Verwendung."[46] Thus the genre of the work

[44] Elaine Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (SBLMS 17; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973) 18.

[45] "L'exégèse valentinienne," 350.

[46] Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon*, 34. See also Pfeiffer, *History*, 29, who writes that this sort of literature "never meant an independent, finished writing; it may refer to notes reminding one of

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as identified by Origen would argue against the idea that Heracleon had intended it for exoteric use.

But going beyond this specific objection to a specific issue, we must note that Origen, faced with the same puzzling situation as modern scholars, did not choose to resolve it in such a way. Now, Origen grew up in Alexandria towards the end of the second century and debated with Valentinians, read their works, and had as his patron the ex-Valentinian Ambrose. In short, Origen knew about Valentinians and their writings, and he knew as well that some considered Heracleon a Valentinian. Yet he gives no sign whatsoever that he considered Heracleon's commentary an exoteric work concealing and simultaneously depending on a classically Valentinian mythological system. This argues strongly against the "exoteric" hypothesis of Pagels and Kaestli. It suggests instead that, while Heracleon qualifies as a Valentinian by Clement's genealogical definition, he does not qualify as such by the more doctrinal and systematic standards that Origen uses. We have no justification, therefore, to proceed from Clement's assertion to the assumption that some grand theological or mythological schema must underlie Heracleon's exegeses.

The foregoing discussion of Heracleon's alleged Valentinianism has also made apparent the importance of definitional clarity. We have seen how the apparent contradictions between Origen and Clement's reports disappeared when we took into account their different ideas of a Valentinian. Before one can evaluate reports that a person "is" something—whether a Valentinian, or a gnostic, or even a Christian—one must clarify what "being" that thing actually means. Such a consensus, we have seen, did not exist in the ancient world, and neither does it exist in the modern world.

In an era when the gnostics are no longer gnostics, and when research has shown that Valentinus himself probably did not hold many of the beliefs thought characteristic of Valentinianism, the time appears ripe for a new debate over what, if anything, we want "Valentinianism" to mean. But until such a debate gets under way, the patristic evidence suggests that we must exercise caution in calling Heracleon a Valentinian, and even more caution in letting his alleged affiliation condition how we read his writings.

facts heard or seen in the past, or to notes jotted down and collected as rough copy for a future book, or to explanatory notes to some other writing, that is, a commentary," and Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (*ASP* 26; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996) 53–55.

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