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Wucherpfennig, Ansgar

Heracleon Philologus: Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert

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This book is the latest in a series of German monographs on second-century heterodox Christian teachers to be published in the WUNT series. Earlier volumes have dealt with such figures as Valentinus, Basilides, and Marcus the Magician, and now it is Heracleon's turn. But before turning to this specific volume, notice ought to be taken of the uniformly high quality of these monographs. Whether or not one agrees with the conclusions reached by their various authors (Christoph Marksches's volume on Valentinus has been particularly controversial), the volumes are excellent works of scholarship and tremendously useful. One hopes that further books on the other idiosyncratic geniuses of the patristic era are in preparation.

Aside from scattered and brief references in heresiological literature, our knowledge of Heracleon's work derives from Origen's use (and rebuttal) of it. Heracleon seems to have been the first person to write a commentary on the Gospel of John, and Origen was compelled to respond to his predecessor in his own commentary on that Gospel. Although disagreeing profoundly with many of Heracleon's exegeses, Origen nonetheless includes many citations of Heracleon's work in his own. These citations make up the extant corpus of Heracleon's work.

Heracleon was described by Clement of Alexandria as "the most celebrated of Valentinus' school" (fragment 50, following Foerster's enumeration) and is likewise associated with Valentinian Gnosticism by later heresiologists. Modern scholarship has generally accepted this affiliation, but Wucherpfennig makes a strong case for revising this view. He sees Heracleon's commentary on the Gospel of John as being gnosticizing,

not necessarily gnostic,¹ and convincingly situates Heracleon's work in the context of contemporary philological and exegetical writings. In other words, he presents a case for understanding Heracleon as a contemporary, philosophically minded literary critic rather than as a teacher of hidden gnostic doctrines. This is not to say that later readers of Heracleon's commentary could not have read a gnostic mythological framework into the work, of course, but this would be a case of eisegesis, not a necessary reading of the work.² Wucherpfennig's conclusions with regard to Heracleon are similar to those reached by Marksches with regard to Valentinus, in that they criticize and nuance the overly simplistic assumptions of heterodox group composition and affiliation that we have inherited from the heresiologists by means of a careful reexamination of the primary sources. The results produced have the effect of, in essence, pushing the emergence of full-fledged Christian Gnosticism back yet another generation, so that rather than emerging in the apostolic age (with Simon Magus or with Paul's Corinthian opponents, to take two popular examples), or in the first half of the second century, it is now being at least suggested by Wucherpfennig and Marksches that it comes into its own in the second half of the second century, with the successors to Valentinus and Heracleon. It can thus be seen as contemporaneous with, rather than predating, the earliest heresiological works that seek to rebut it.

Wucherpfennig's work is introduced and concluded by sections discussing the general question of the relationship of the Gospel of John to Gnosticism, an issue of much interest in the second as in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. This discussion extends the relevance of his work for students of early Christianity, putting his specific discussion of Heracleon in its general context in the history of the exegetical tradition.

Wucherpfennig's conclusion in these sections is elegant. He maps out a trajectory of interpretation of the significance of Jesus' life and teachings, a trajectory that includes the Fourth Gospel, which Wucherpfennig sees as motivated by theological and critical reflections on the meaning of the early Christian traditions about Jesus. The next point on

¹ "Herakelons Johanneskommentar lässt sich deswegen insgesamt wohl eher als *gnostisierende* denn als wirklich gnostische Schrift einstufen" (402, italics original).

² Speaking of one particular later reader, Wucherpfennig feels that Origen himself considered Heracleon to be a Valentinian gnostic, but as I have argued elsewhere ("Was Heracleon a Valentinian? A New Look at Origen's *Commentary on John*," paper presented at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Canadian Society of Patristic Studies section, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, May 2004), a careful reading of Origen's references to Heracleon do not support this conclusion. Origen recognizes that *others* consider Heracleon to have been an associate or student of Valentinus (*Comm. Joh.* 2.100), but Origen himself does not endorse this position, and when addressing Heracleon's arguments, he never links Heracleon with Valentinianism or postulates the influence of Valentinian beliefs on Heracleon's exegeses—and this despite the polemical gains that such behavior would gain him in his rebuttals. It is instructive in this regard to compare Origen's treatment of Heracleon with his treatment of Celsus in the *Contra Celsum*. In this latter work, Celsus's alleged Epicurean sympathies are repeatedly exploited for rhetorical effect.

this trajectory is Heracleon's commentary, which is a reflection on John's Gospel, drawing on the wider world of Hellenistic philological and philosophical thought and seeking to integrate the Gospel into this world. Origen's work can be seen, from this point of view, as an apparently successful attempt to change the direction of the trajectory.

The majority of this book is taken up with an examination of Heracleon's exegeses of the Prologue to the Gospel, the cleansing of the temple, the figure of John the Baptist, and Jesus' healing of the Roman official's son (John 4:46–54), finding no evidence in these exegeses that a stereotypically Valentinian or gnostic underlying myth must necessarily be assumed.³ Wucherpfennig uses the categories of philology and literary criticism of late antiquity as organizational principles for these sections, to great effect. Through their applicability, his thesis as to Heracleon's Hellenistic background is firmly supported.

While the Nag Hammadi text *The Tripartite Tractate* has been linked by some to Heracleon, Wucherpfennig quite intriguingly points out suggestive similarities between Heracleon's commentary and a very different Nag Hammadi text, the *Exegesis on the Soul*. Wucherpfennig does not argue that they are directly related but rather points out that both attempt to harmonize the Hellenistic intellectual world (particularly Platonic ideas, but also Homeric material in the *Exegesis*) with the Judeo-Christian writings through the imposition of a gnosticizing mythological structure of the descent and redemption of the soul. The *Exegesis* has always been seen as something of an anomaly in its lack of identifiable affiliations with any of the supposed gnostic movements, and Wucherpfennig's discussion of it is illuminating, both in terms of Heracleon's commentary and in terms of the *Exegesis* itself.

This book is highly recommended. It is thorough and precise, and its nuancing of the traditional understanding of Heracleon both helps us to see the primary sources with fresh insight and also to understand Heracleon's work not just as the idiosyncratic expression of a gnostic early Christian, a marginal member of a marginal religion cut off from the rest of the society, but rather as a worldly and intellectual work conversant with and availing itself of a developed tradition of literary analysis.

³ Wucherpfennig argues that there is, in fact, a mythic substructure to Heracleon's thought but that this substructure is of a philosophical variety, comparable to the sorts of myths presented in the Platonic dialogues, intended as a didactic tool that would "das Johannesevangelium für zeitgenössisches philosophisches Denken verständlich zu machen" (396).