

## **HERACLEON**

A [gnostic](#) teacher in Alexandria about 170-180, who had great influence on Saint CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA and ORIGEN. Clement described him as “the most esteemed [*dokimatotos*]” disciple of VALENTINUS (Clement *Stromateis* 4. 9. 71. 1).

Heracleon is the first known commentator on the [New Testament](#) after BASILIDES, and fragments of his commentaries on Luke and, in particular, John have survived. He seems to have made a large contribution to ORIGEN’s great *Commentary on John* (started c. 227), which sought to explain the Fourth Gospel within the framework of orthodox teaching.

Heracleon believed that there was significance in every single word in the Gospels. The Gospels, especially the Fourth Gospel, were the message of the Divine Logos, proper understanding of which provided the means of spiritual [salvation](#) to the believer. Thus, the interpreter must look at every word and understand why that, and not some other, expression had been used.

In the fragment of his commentary on Luke 12:8 (“Whosoever confesses in me before men, in him also will the Son of Man confess before the angels of God. But whoever denies me before men will also be denied before the angels of God”), Heracleon makes much of the fact that Luke writes “confesses in me” and not “confesses me.” He points out that simple confession of Jesus could be verbal only, while the force of “in me” was the implication of a right attitude of mind, for “whoever [lives](#) in him can never deny him” (Clement 4. 9. 72. 4).

The passages preserved by Origen from Heracleon’s *Commentary on John*, chapters 1, 2, 4, and 8, show a concern for the equation of moral with spiritual values. This underlies an often fanciful allegorization of what he is interpreting. There is also attention to the exact wording of

each text, as in his work on Luke. Thus, he points out that Jesus spoke of [salvation](#) being “of” the Jews and not “in” them (Origen *Commentary on John* 13. 52), and emphasizes that Jesus “went up” to Jerusalem (Origen 10. 33), [meaning](#) that he “ascended from the realm of the material to the psychic place which is an image of Jerusalem.”

The whole tenor of Heracleon’s [interpretation](#) of John shows that its message was that the true Christian must progress from the material or pagan view of the world, through the “psychic” Jewish or orthodox understanding of scripture and liturgy, to the real and spiritual apprehension of divine truth. Thus his interpretation of John 4:22 includes the injunction quoted from *The Preaching of Peter*, that we must not worship as the Greeks do, who believe in material things and worship wood and stone, nor worship the divine as the Jews do, for they who think they alone know [God](#) do not know Him but worship angels, the month, and the moon.

“Orthodox” Christians also “worshipped, in flesh and in error, him who is not the Father: they worshiped the creation and not the true creator” (cited in Origen *Commentary on John* 13. 17, 19). Spiritual beings “comprehended the Passion of the [Savior](#) as the symbol of their restoration to the Father” (Origen 10. 19.). Similarly, “psychic” (i.e., orthodox) baptism was only bodily and imperfect, “the baptism of John,” whereas baptism by the Gnostics was “for perfection” and was “spiritual.”

Origen dismissed some of Heracleon’s interpretations as speculative, but others he was prepared to accept. “Not improbably,” he writes concerning Heracleon’s exegesis of John 4:12-15, “the springing up” (verse 14) refers to those “who receive what is richly supplied from above and who themselves pour forth for the eternal life of others that which has been supplied to them.”

The commendation of this and other fragments of Heracleon’s exegesis shows how indebted Origen was to his [Gnostic](#) predecessor. Heracleon’s

commentaries on the [New Testament](#) prepared the ground for those of the Christian Platonists of Alexandria. They also saw the Word speaking through scripture and therefore requiring a spiritual and allegorical interpretation. Clement and Origen may both be seen in this respect as the theological descendants of Heracleon.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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