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Evangelical Quarterly

**An International Review
of Bible and Theology**
in Defence of the Historic Christian Faith

Vol. LXXXIII No. 4 October 2011

Editors: I Howard Marshall, John-Paul Lotz,
John G F Wilks



The Holy Spirit in Cyprian's *To Donatus*

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KEY WORDS: Cyprian; Donatus; Holy Spirit; conversion¹

In the midst of the chaos that plagued the Roman *Imperium* during the third century – the rapid and violent turnover of emperors, the constant warfare against the Sassanians in the east and the Germanic tribes to the north, the collapse of key aspects of the monetary system, the political eclipse of the Senate, and the significant decline in fresh architectural projects² – a North African *rhetor* from the curial class, Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus (c.200-58),³ better known simply as Cyprian of Carthage, suggested a radical solution to the anxieties and fears of the day: conversion to the one true God who had revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This was the ‘one sure means to peace and to calm,’ Cyprian affirmed in a tract written for a Christian friend named Donatus,⁴ the only ‘genuine and steadfast place of security’ amidst ‘the storms of this restless age.’⁵ This tract, *To*

1 For help with the acquisition of some of the secondary sources used in the preparation of this paper, I am indebted to Joe Harrod, one of my PhD students, Paul Roberts, librarian at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, and Dr. Fred Zaspel of Pennsylvania.

This paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2010.

2 For a succinct summary of these military, political, and social ills, see Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire AD 284-430* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-12.

3 For Cyprian's social status, see Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Patristic Monograph Series, no.1; Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation Ltd., 1975), 98-100 and 105-10. As Maurice Wiles has noted, Cyprian ‘was a man of wealth with a considerable personal fortune’ (‘The Theological Legacy of St Cyprian’ in his *Working Papers in Doctrine* [London: SCM Press, 1976], 68).

On his name, see W. D. Niven, ‘Leaders of the Ancient Church. V. Cyprian of Carthage’, *The Expository Times*, 44 (1932-1933), 363; Sage, *Cyprian*, 98-100.

4 For the difficulty in identifying this individual, see Jean Molager, trans., *Cyprien de Carthage: A Donat et La Vertue de Patience* (Sources chrétiennes, no. 291; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 9, n.2.

5 *To Donatus* 14, trans. Allen Brent, *St Cyprian of Carthage: On the Church: Select Treatises* (Popular Patristics Series, no.32; Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 64. Subsequent quotations from *To Donatus* will be taken from either this translation – cited simply as Brent with the page number – or that of Roy J. Deferrari, *Saint Cyprian: Treatises* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 7-21 – cited simply as Deferrari with the page number. The Latin, when referenced, is from Molager, trans., *Cyprien de Carthage: A Donat*, 74-116.

Donatus, is the earliest of the authentic writings of the North African theologian and appears to have been written in the autumn of 246, not long after Cyprian's conversion and baptism.⁶ Both Michael Sage, in his detailed theological biography of Cyprian, and Allen Brent, a recent translator of this work, have argued that it is intended to be an evangelistic tract that would lead Cyprian's pagan contemporaries in Roman North Africa to see the folly and vanity of their entire culture, and so turn to Christ.⁷ In point of fact, both the military and political turmoil and the massive moral declension, which Cyprian scathingly details in *To Donatus* 6-13, may well have played a role in Cyprian's own conversion.⁸

What is so striking about Cyprian's salvific solution to the problems of his day is his insistence that it was ultimately not attainable by human energy – it was a free gift of God by means of the Holy Spirit. Prior to launching into his overview of the breakdown of Roman society and moral order, Cyprian argues this point through an account of his own encounter with the message of Christianity. When Cyprian first heard the gospel he was a man in the meridian of life, a patron with numerous clients and laden with the public honors that his social status brought. He was used to extravagance in food and dress, and, in short, so immersed in the privileges and pleasures of the Roman world that, although he disliked the way he was and the way he lived, he could not envision how his lifestyle could ever be changed.⁹ For a period of time after hearing the Christian message Cyprian despaired of ever changing his life. He thus plunged back into his personal maelstrom of sin.¹⁰ But during this time he was befriended by one of the elders in the Carthaginian church, Caecilianus, who persuaded him to study the Scriptures,¹¹ and in due course, he became a Christian.

'When I drank in the Spirit'

As Michael Sage has noted, Cyprian's account of his conversion highlights the fact that 'the major propulsion' towards the Christian 'way of life came from God.'¹² In Cyprian's own words: 'everything we are able to do is of God. From him we live, by him we are empowered...'¹³ In particular, Cyprian emphasizes the role played by the Holy Spirit:

6 Sage, *Cyprian*, 110, 118, 380, 383; Molager, *Cyprien de Carthage: A Donat*, 12. On the time of year, see *To Donatus* 1. Cyprian alludes to the relatively brief time he had been a Christian in *To Donatus* 2.

7 Sage, *Cyprian*, 128; Brent, *St Cyprian of Carthage: On the Church*, 47.

8 Sage, *Cyprian*, 126-27.

9 For these details, see *To Donatus* 3, which I am taking to be a somewhat autobiographical reflection. Support for this interpretation can be found in the first sentence of *To Donatus* 4, where Cyprian notes that what he describes in the previous sentences 'often applied to me' [*To Donatus* 4 (Brent, 52)]. See also Sage, *Cyprian*, 111.

10 *To Donatus* 4.

11 Pontius, *The Life of Cyprian* 4, 2.

12 *Cyprian*, 129.

13 *To Donatus* 4 (Brent, 53). See also *To Donatus* 14.

When I drank in the Spirit from heaven a second birth made me into a new man. Immediately in a marvellous manner what was doubtful was confirmed, what was closed opened, what was shadowy shone with light, what before seemed difficult I was granted the means to do, [and] it was possible to practice what I had thought impossible...¹⁴

Maurice Wiles has argued that this conversion account does not bespeak 'a deep transformation of personal life or moral ideals.' It is that of a man who wishes to make a clean break with his past, but who did not have the capacity to 'make that break effective at the deeper levels of his thinking.' The result is that Cyprian cannot really be reckoned as a 'profound Christian theologian.'¹⁵ While Wiles definitely has a point regarding the depth of Cyprian as a Christian thinker, a close reading of the text cited above, alongside Cyprian's earlier statements about his pagan past, actually conveys quite a different impression about his conversion. The change wrought by the Spirit in Cyprian's life gave him a deep sense of the truth of the Christian faith. It illuminated key aspects of that faith that had hitherto been totally unclear. And, most significantly, it gave him a real measure of moral victory over his sins. Before, it seemed as if his sins and his bent to sinning were insuperable. God's power, as experienced through the Holy Spirit, proved otherwise. As Rowan A. Greer has rightly pointed out, Cyprian's experience of deliverance, which gave him the 'power to live in hope and freedom' and enabled him to have a life of true virtue, was actually an experience 'central to early Christianity.'¹⁶

Cyprian also linked this powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit to baptism. Immediately before the passage cited above, Cyprian observed that 'when the stain of my past life had been washed away by the aid of the water of regeneration, a light from above poured itself upon my chastened and pure heart.'¹⁷ This is not the first mention of baptism in *To Donatus*. Cyprian had already referred to it as 'the bath/washing of the saving water' (*lavacro aquae salutaris*) when he had been detailing the sins of his pagan days.¹⁸ What is the relationship in Cyprian's mind between the gift of the Spirit and baptism? The very fact that he can use the adjective 'saving' (*salutaris*) about baptism here indicates that he sees water baptism as a vital part of the experience of salvation. It is part of the salvific 'package.' On the other hand, when Cyprian tells the pagan Demetrian in 252, six years after he wrote *To Donatus*, what salvation entails, he simply tells him, 'we have been recreated in the Spirit, having laid aside our earthly birth, and have been reborn.'¹⁹ Ultimately, the all-important element in conversion is the

14 *To Donatus* 4 (Brent, 52, altered).

15 'Theological Legacy of St Cyprian', 69-70.

16 *Broken Lights and Mended Lives: Theology and Common Life in the Early Church* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 22-23.

17 *To Donatus* 4 (Deferrari, 9).

18 *To Donatus* 3. For this way of referring to baptism, see also Cyprian, *The Dress of Virgins* 23.

19 *To Demetrian* 20 (Brent, 89).

person of the Holy Spirit and his saving power: without him there is no rebirth.

In later writings, Cyprian would refine his thinking about the relationship between water baptism, the laying-on-of-hands that normally immediately followed baptism in the North African Church's rite of initiation, and the gift of the Spirit.²⁰ Much of this refinement came as a result of the bitter controversy between Cyprian and Stephen of Rome (died 257) over whether or not heretics and schismatics who returned to the catholic church were to be baptized or not.²¹ This controversy is usually described as a controversy about rebaptism, though, in many ways, the real issue at stake had to do not so much with baptism as with the Spirit.²² Was the Spirit present within heretical or schismatic assemblies? If not, then, as Cyprian argued, the only valid baptism that the Spirit would honour as a true baptism is that given within the church that he indwelt.²³ In the way that Cyprian developed his later thought about the Holy Spirit, he thus effectively 'locked the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit into the one Catholic communion,' which he identified as that body that was bound together by the bishops who were the successors of the apostolic college.²⁴

But when he wrote *To Donatus* Cyprian was not a bishop and the issues of his future controversy with Stephen were not at all in his immediate purview. The central focus of his reflections in this treatise is very much the Spirit's powerful work of conversion and its concomitant fruit.

'The encampment of the Spirit'

With regard to this fruit, Cyprian first of all focuses on the Spirit's power. The North African author is insistent that the power which the Spirit gives to believers is first of all power to live a life of virtue.

If you keep to the path of innocence, of righteousness, with the firmness

20 See especially Cyprian, *Letters* 63, 69-74. See also the extensive treatment by Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church. History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2009), 351-61, 388-92. For the history of this controversy, see Sage, *Cyprian*, 295-335. There were two other postbaptismal aspects of the rite of initiation in the North African Church: unction and signation (Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 353).

21 For example, Stephen's last word about Cyprian, cited by Firmilian in *Letter* 75.25.4 was that he was 'a bogus Christ, a bogus apostle, and a crooked dealer' [trans. G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage* (Ancient Christian Writers, no.47; New York/Ramsey, New Jersey: Newman Press, 1989), IV, 94].

22 Michel Réveillaud, 'Note pour une Pneumatologie Cyprienne' in F. L. Cross, ed., *Studia Patristica* (Texte und Untersuchungen, vol. 81; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 6:181-82.

23 Brent, *St Cyprian of Carthage: On the Church*, 32-33.

24 J. Patout Burns and Gerald M. Fagin, *The Holy Spirit* (Message of the Fathers of the Church, vol.3; Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1984), 80, 88. For a similar conclusion, see F. LeRon Shults and Andrew Hollingsworth, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2008), 23-24.

of your footsteps unfaltering – if, consecrated to God with all your strength and with all your heart, you become merely that which you have begun to be, [and] you will be granted freedom of action according to the measure in which spiritual grace increases. For there is neither measure nor limit in grasping God's favour, as is the custom in earthly benefactions. When the Spirit bountifully flows forth, it is suppressed by no boundaries... He flows forth continually, he bursts forth abundantly to the extent that our heart thirsts for him and is open to him.²⁵

The key to understanding this passage is the pneumatological affirmation that there is no limit to the Spirit's sovereign and free presence.²⁶ He is not hemmed in by boundaries. As such, the believer, if he or she wishes to flourish and mature as a Christian, must increasingly draw upon the Spirit's sovereign power. In Cyprian's words, there must be a thirst for it, an openness to it.

At the close of this treatise, Cyprian returns to this theme of the life of holiness. Speaking about the freeness of salvation, the escape from this world of misery and sin, he is led to reflect on the nature of the Christian life. He writes:

[This salvation] is the gift of God, given for naught and willingly. Just as the sun shines of its own accord, the day gives it light, the fountain waters, the shower its light rain, so the celestial Spirit outpours himself... You, however, whom the heavenly warfare has marked for the encampment of the Spirit (*spiritalibus castris*), hold fast the imperishable, hold fast the sober discipline in religious virtues. May your prayer or reading (*oratio...lectio*) be often. At one time you speak with God, at another God with you.²⁷

To experience the free outpouring of the Spirit of God is to become a soldier in the Spirit's army, where, like the imperial legions, there is discipline. In this case, the disciplines of prayer and the reading of Scripture are mentioned. While Cyprian would have affirmed that prayer should be a part of every Christian's spiritual regimen, his mention of reading (*lectio*) should not be so interpreted, since literacy levels in Roman North Africa, like the rest of the empire, would not have been much higher than ten to fifteen per cent.²⁸ This instruction must therefore be understood as being recipient-specific, namely, addressed primarily to Donatus.

Cyprian now shifts his imagery from the military camp to the villas of the wealthy, places he knew well. They have 'paneled ceilings embellished with gold' and are 'decorated with slabs of costly marble.'²⁹ Such places might once have seemed quite desirable, but now they will seem of little true value to the Christian who is

25 *To Donatus* 5 (Brent, 53, altered).

26 Réveillaud, 'Note pour une Pneumatologie Cyprienne', 182.

27 *To Donatus* 14-15 (Brent, 65, altered).

28 W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 1989).

29 *To Donatus* 15 (Brent, 65-66, altered).

to be adorned and decorated better than this. You are instead to be God's dwelling place, occupied by the Lord in place of a temple, in which the Holy Spirit has commenced his habitation. Let us paint this house with the colors of integrity (*innocentiae*), let us enlighten it with the light of righteousness (*iustitiae*). This house will never fall into ruin over the long course of old age, nor will the color or gold of the wall deteriorate and be marred.³⁰

Drawing upon his memory of how the wealthy adorned their houses and employing the Pauline imagery of the believer as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), Cyprian admonishes his reader that the Spirit's indwelling of the Christian must be honoured with a life of integrity and righteousness, a life that will endure and whose 'splendour [is] permanent.'³¹

The imperium of the Holy Spirit

According to Cyprian, the power that the Spirit gives to believers is not restricted to the moral realm. It can 'cleanse the defects of foolish souls by restoring their health' and 'command those reacting with hostility' to Christians 'to be at peace, to be quiet instead of violent, gentle instead of savage.'³² From the surrounding context, it appears that the restoration of health that Cyprian has in mind relates to physical healing.³³ The second clause refers to individuals indwelt by demonic powers, for Cyprian immediately goes on to talk about the Spirit's empowering of Christians to exorcise 'unclean and erring spirits, who have plunged themselves into human beings.'³⁴

Cyprian spends some time describing the way that Christians can defeat such spirits, and then reiterates that the power Christians have received is not

simply that our human spirit can withdraw itself from destructive contacts with the world, so that anyone who has received atonement and purification sustains no damage from the attacking enemy. Rather, our human spirit is made greater and stronger in its powers so that it has dominion by an imperial right over every attack of a raging adversary.³⁵

Cyprian's pneumatology: an overview

After the Scriptures, the most important influence on Cyprian's life and thinking

30 *To Donatus* 15 (Brent, 66, altered).

31 *To Donatus* 15 (Brent, 66). Cp. Cyprian, *Letter* 55.27.2: 'evil deeds do not proceed from the Holy Spirit' [trans. G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage* (Ancient Christian Writers, no.46; New York/Ramsey, New Jersey: Newman Press, 1986), III, 50].

32 *To Donatus* 5 (Brent, 53).

33 Earlier in the passage, Cyprian states that Spirit-indwelt Christians who are living holy lives are able 'to provide curing medicine for the sick' [*To Donatus* 5 (Brent, 53)].

34 *To Donatus* 5 (Brent, 53).

35 *To Donatus* 5 (Brent, 54).

were the works of Tertullian (fl.190-220),³⁶ and it was Cyprian's daily habit to peruse one or more of the works of his fellow North African. According to a report by the fourth-century Latin translator and polemicist Jerome (c.347-419/420), Cyprian would tell his secretary, 'Hand me the master', by which he meant Tertullian.³⁷ The influence of Tertullian on Cyprian is indeed unmistakable in a number of key areas,³⁸ but a quick reading of the Cyprianic corpus – his eighty or so letters, the three volumes of the *Testimonia*, and his eleven treatises³⁹ – appears to reveal that very little of Tertullian's ardent interest in pneumatology has rubbed off on the younger North African. Tertullian has extensive discussions of the Spirit especially in his Montanist treatises as well as in his *Against Praxeas*, which is a vital work in the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity.⁴⁰ Compared to Tertullian's pneumatological passion, some scholars have argued that there is a distinct decline of interest in the Spirit in Cyprian. Adhemar d'Alès, for example, maintained that in Cyprian's writings 'le Saint-Esprit n'apparaît presque pas',⁴¹ while Manlio Simonetti sees Cyprian as one example of a 'regresso' in third-century pneumatology.⁴² On the other hand, as Michel Réveillaud has noted, these judgments fail to take note of how frequently Cyprian does mention the Holy Spirit.⁴³

Cyprian habitually thinks of the Holy Spirit as the prophetic Spirit, the inspirer of the Scriptures. So, for example, in *To Demetrian* 20, Cyprian states that the Spirit speaks through the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk. The soul of the believer is filled with joy and is 'always free from anxiety, even as the Holy Spirit says and exhorts through the prophet, strengthening the sure foundation of our hope and faith with his heavenly voice', and Cyprian then cites Hab. 3:17-18.⁴⁴ Or

36 'Theological Legacy of St Cyprian', 69-70.

37 Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 53. For Jerome's mini-biography of Cyprian, see his *On Illustrious Men* 67.

38 Wiles, 'Theological Legacy of St Cyprian', 69-70; Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy & "New Visions": Evidence of Montanism in The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 104. For some details, see Molager, *Cyprien de Carthage: A Donat*, 140-55; J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 102; 157 and 229, n.66; 176.

39 For details about this corpus and the individual dates of each of the items, see Sage, *Cyprian*, 377-83.

40 For Tertullian's pneumatology, see especially Claire Ann Bradley Stegman, 'The Development of Tertullian's Doctrine of "Spiritus Sanctus"' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1978). For the importance of *Against Praxeas*, see, for example, the lucid discussion of Benjamin B. Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*, vol. 3 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1930; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 3-109.

41 *La théologie de Saint Cyprien* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1922), 11.

42 'Il regresso della teologia dello Spirito santo in Occidente dopo Tertulliano', *Augustinianum* 20 (1980), 655-69, *passim*.

43 'Note pour une Pneumatologie Cyprienne'" 181.

44 *To Demetrian* 20 (Brent, 89).

again, in 253/254, just prior to Cyprian's controversy with Stephen, he can state in *Letter* 69:

[T]he Church is declared one by the Holy Spirit in the Song of Songs, speaking in the person of Christ: 'My dove, my perfect one, is but one; she is the only one of her mother, the favourite of her who bore her' [Cant. 6:8]. And the Spirit again says of her: 'An enclosed garden is my sister, my bride, a sealed fountain, a well of living water' [Cant. 4:12].⁴⁵

The Spirit also frequently appears as the One who strengthens the martyrs in their time of trial and speaks through their lips a powerful witness for Christ.⁴⁶ Then, there is the extensive appeal to the Spirit as the One who indwells the Church and so makes her the one true Spouse of Christ, which the section cited above from *Letter* 69 is seeking to argue from the Song of Songs and which has been discussed briefly above.

There are also a few references in Cyprian's writings to the triunity of God that are usually made by means of the citation of the baptismal command from Matt. 28.⁴⁷ The most famous of these is the statement in *On the unity of the Catholic Church* that 'it is written concerning Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: "And the three are one"', the latter quote being a citation of 1 John 5:8.⁴⁸ This gloss on 1 John 5:8 is almost definitely the origin of the *Comma Johanneum*.

Unique among Cyprian's discussions of the Spirit, though, is what we have examined in *To Donatus*, which, from one perspective, is an extended meditation on his personal experience of the empowering Spirit, and from another perspective, given the evangelistic purpose of the document, a call to his fellow Romans to experience the same. Michel Réveillaud has rightly observed that the importance of this document for understanding the shape of Cyprian's theology as a whole should not be underestimated.⁴⁹

The Spirit of martyrdom

Just as the Spirit figured prominently at the outset of Cyprian's Christian life, so he also appeared at the close. In August of 258, the Roman emperor Valerian (r.253-260) initiated the bloodiest persecution of the church prior to that of Diocletian (r.284-305).⁵⁰ His goal was to decimate the leadership of the church throughout the Empire in the hope that the Christian movement would soon fall apart. Cyprian was living in exile not far from Carthage, where he had been for the previous year for refusing to worship the Roman gods. Towards the end of

45 *Letter* 69.2.1 (trans. Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, IV, 33). The instances of Cyprian's depiction of the Spirit as the prophetic Spirit are too numerous to list in this context.

46 See, for example, Cyprian, *Letter* 6.2.1; 10.4.1; 57.4.2; 58.5.2; 66.7.2.

47 See, for example, *Letter* 27.3.3; 73.5.2; 73.18.1;

48 *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 6 (Brent, 157).

49 'Note pour une Pneumatologie Cyprienne', 181.

50 For the details of what follows, see Sage, *Cyprian*, 337-53.

August, he was summoned back to Carthage to face trial. Just before he left for his home city, he wrote a letter to his congregation, in which he informed them that 'whatever a confessor-bishop speaks at the very moment he confesses his faith, he speaks under inspiration of God.'⁵¹ As G. W. Clarke has noted, Cyprian is clearly thinking of Matt. 10:19-20, one of Cyprian's favourite verses, which encourages Christians not to be anxious about what they will say during times of persecution for they will be given the words to speak, for 'the Spirit of [their] Father' will speak through them.⁵² Within two weeks of writing these words, on the morning of September 14, 258, Cyprian was beheaded on the *ager Sexti* on the outskirts of Carthage after he had refused to worship the Roman gods at the behest of the proconsul Galerius Maximus. To the end of his Christian life, Cyprian sought to be a Spirit-filled man.

Abstract

Cyprian's *Letter to Donatus*, written in autumn 246, shortly after his conversion, is an extended meditation on the power of the Holy Spirit and is unique among the Cyprianic corpus in the amount of space it devotes to pneumatology. Cyprian is sometimes taken as an example of the decline of interest in the Spirit that marks much of third-century theology after Tertullian's *Against Praxeas*. In point of fact, this treatise reveals a deep interest in the work of the Spirit that marks Cyprian as a Spirit-filled man.

51 *Letter* 81.1.2 (trans. Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, IV, 105).

52 Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, IV, 316. On Cyprian as a prophetic figure, see Adolf von Harnack, 'Cyprian als Enthusiast', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 3 (1902), 177-91.

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978-1-84227-483-5 / 216 x 140mm / 220pp (est) / £19.99

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