

Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Brill, 2013. 890 pp. €249,00/\$346.00).

Steven Nemes
Fuller Theological Seminary

Ilaria Ramelli's tome, "the result of almost fifteen years of scholarly research" (ix), is a labor of manifest erudition and capability. Addressing in impressive detail texts written within the span of a thousand years, translating and commenting upon varied sources in Latin, Greek, Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopian, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* documents the development of the doctrine of universal salvation (or closely related notions) through the first millennium of the Christian church. It is the most complete work ever dedicated to this subject. The evidence brought forth is compelling; the conclusion is the doctrine of *apokatastasis* is "a Christian doctrine and is grounded in Christ," "an authentically Christian, or Jewish-Christian doctrine," and fundamentally orthodox, regularly espoused in defense of orthodoxy against the heresies of the times (817, 819, 823).

The opening chapter addresses the biblical roots of the doctrine. *Apokatastasis* refers to "restoration, reintegration, reconstitution" (1). Understood as the restoration of all of creation (including all human persons) to their former and proper place in fellowship with God, it is a doctrine for which there was a tradition antedating Origen (3), as is evidenced by the language of this theologian himself. The Christian doctrine is to be sharply distinguished from Stoic variants, which were necessitarian and involved an eternal cycle of fall-restoration. Origen criticizes this theory on the basis that it denies human freedom (9). The Christian doctrine is grounded not in a philosophy of history and nature, but in the scriptures and the apostolic testimony (10). Drawing from passages such as Acts 3:21 or 1 Cor 15:22-28, "Bardaisan, Clement, Origen, Didymus, St. Anthony, St. Pamphilus Martyr, Methodius, St. Macrina, St. Gregory of Nyssa (and probably the two other Cappadocians), St. Evagrius Ponticus, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, St. John of Jerusalem, Rufinus, St. Jerome and St. Augustine (at least initially), Cassian, St. Isaac of Nineveh, St. John of Dalyatha, Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite, probably St. Maximus the Confessor, up to John the Scot Eriugena, and many others, grounded their Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis* first of all in the Bible" (11).

Importantly, the Bible describes the punishments of the judgment as *aionia*, which does not mean "eternal" unless used in reference to God (26), as Ramelli extensively evidences. The word *aidios* unqualifiedly refers to eternity, but the Bible does not use it to describe the punishments of the age. Ramelli instead offers "otherworldly," or "of the age to come," or perhaps "nextworldly" as an adequate

translation of *aionion* when describing the punishment at the judgment. This point receives philological confirmation in a passage in Origen in which he speaks of “life after *aionios* life” (160). As a native speaker of Greek he does not see a contradiction in such phrasing; that is because *aionios* life does not mean “unending, eternal life,” but rather “life of the next age.” Likewise the Bible uses the word *kolasis* to describe the punishment of the age to come. Aristotle distinguished *kolasis* from *timoria*, the latter referring to punishment inflicted “in the interest of him who inflicts it, that he may obtain satisfaction.” On the other hand, *kolasis* refers to correction, it “is inflicted in the interest of the sufferer” (quoted at 32). Thus Plato can affirm that it is good to be punished (to undergo *kolasis*), because in this way a person is made better (*ibid.*). This distinction survived even past the time of the writing of the New Testament, since Clement of Alexandria affirms that God does not *timoreitai*, punish for retribution, but he does *kolazei*, correct sinners (127).

Ramelli also spends some considerable space addressing the exegetical case for universalism in early extra-biblical texts. She addresses the works of the apostolic fathers, wherein there are affirmations suggestive of the doctrine of *apokatastasis* which may have influenced later authors. Theophilus, for instance, refers to the return of the human race to a state of moral transformation and freedom from evil, which will subsequently pacify the animal kingdom as well (65-66; cf. Isa 11:6-9). Likewise she discusses many provocative passages from the *Apocalypse of Peter* and other texts which depict the eventual release of those suffering in hell (67). These texts are important insofar as they demonstrate belief in the eventual restoration of those suffering punishment among numerous circles of Christians.

The first chapter contains a very long discussion of the doctrine of *apokatastasis* as affirmed by Clement of Alexandria and Origen. The latter author especially will prove particularly influential over the development of Christian understanding throughout the subsequent centuries, inasmuch as almost all major theologians read and respected Origen’s work as of one of the highest and greatest theologians. For Origen the universal *apokatastasis* meant *theosis* (137), a deification of rational creatures as they participate in God. This will be God’s final victory over the forces of evil (138), when “God will be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). It is God’s goal, as the good creator, that all his creatures enjoy the good of fellowship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in knowledge of the truth (140). Important for Origen’s *apokatastasis* theory is an understanding of evil as privation (141): “Evil is non-being; only God/the Good is the true Being. ... Evil has no ontological stance.” Choosing to do evil is choosing annihilation, but Origen denies that God’s creatures can be ontologically annihilated (*ibid.*). They may undergo spiritual death and spiritual destruction, which involves the destruction of the evil self and its return unto the Good (142). The understanding of evil as privation is important for interpreting the statement “God will be all in all”: “if God is really to be in all, this implies that evil, which is the opposite of God (qua non-Good and non-Being), will no longer be in any being” (143). Likewise because evil was not created by God, there will come a time when it will no longer exist (144). Origen further affirms that all rational creatures have freedom—demons and angels and the devil included—and thus may do good or evil as they choose (147). Yet Christ’s work is sufficiently

powerful to bring all rational creatures freely to choose salvation in him in the end (152). Sinners will be saved following their conversion, not automatically while they are still evil; the devil will be saved *qua* archangel but not *qua* devil, death, enemy (154-155).

Origen's view is that the *apokatastasis* occurs *after* a limited series of ages in which the process of the perfection and deification of rational creatures is realized, painstakingly for some (160). For Origen, the "*aionios* life" (see, e.g., Mt 25:46) is not the goal, but a stop along the way. Insofar as the life of the Father is beyond the ages, these perhaps best understood as the contingent configurations of the created order, so also the goal of *theosis* requires a move beyond *aionios* life into a transaemonic existence in God. (Here Origen provides compelling philological corroboration of Ramelli's thesis that *aionios* life does not (need not) mean "unending" life.) Only God is properly eternal, whereas creation is not; consequently death or languishing in sin cannot in principle be eternal, whereas life as participation in God can be so eternal (162).

Moreover, despite his insistence that rational creatures retain their free will at all times, he insists that Christ's salvation has so affected the cosmos and all the aeons as not to allow any fall which might require a second sacrifice (169). Salvation's work is complete; what remains is its appropriation. Importantly, too, "love never falls" (1 Cor 13:8), and so those who love God will freely cling to him for eternity (170). Interestingly, Origen upholds *apokatastasis* precisely when he argues against "Gnostic" predestinationism: people are not determined ahead of time to be evil or good, but they become so freely; God instructs them through his providence, respecting their choices and leading them to the knowledge of the truth through what happens to them (176). The sufferings in hell are also a part of God's providential care for the sinful. Even the imposition of death after the fall was an act of providence and grace (185), insofar as it limits their culpability as sinners to those sins committed within their lifespan.

It is important to remember Origen does not posit a sort of quasi-existentialist freedom of the will lacking an antecedent nature. He is an ethical intellectualist, as were Gregory of Nyssa and others (178), and so affirmed a priority of intellect to will. People will freely be saved because they will be convinced of the true nature of good; "evil is never chosen *qua* evil, but because it is mistaken for a good, out of an error of judgment" (*ibid.*). Tensions may exist now but not in eternity, when God's will and the will of humanity will coincide (180). The torments of hell are the cures given by the Christ-Logos-Physician to treat the illness of the soul that is sinful (185-186), namely its ignorance and deception; and "No being is incurable for the Christ-Logos" (193).

Origen affirms *apokatastasis*, as I've said, in contexts in which his object is to combat pernicious heresies. Against "subordinationists" who argued for ontological inequality between the Son and the Father on the grounds of 1 Cor 15:28 ("then the Son himself will also be subjected to [God]"), Origen's argument is that this is a reference not to the Son as divine, but as human, and more specifically, in his union with all of humanity. The submission is of the body of Christ, which is all of humanity which he assumed in his incarnation, to God—clearly a salvific submission (193-196). In fact, only submission-as-salvation is worthy of the majesty and

goodness of God, a criterion of great importance for Origen and subsequent Origenian theologians (195).

Now, Origen recognized the risk in disclosing the doctrine of universal salvation to the public (206), insofar as it may be abused by the spiritually immature to provide license to sin. On the other hand, those lacking in rigorous theological training and experience of dialectic may reject it off-hand as heretical without making any attempt to reason about the matter (205). Still, even in the homilies directed at simpler audiences, Origen upholds that the punishments of the next age are limited and calculated with regard to the gravity of the sin and guilt of those to undergo them (207). In the end, Ramelli demonstrates that “Apokatastasis is professed by Origen in all of his works” (208). Importantly, too, Origen’s doctrine “developed from Christian antecedents” (209), demonstrating that the esteemed author was not the originator of a universalist tradition but one link (if a highly significant one) in the middle of a long chain. Ramelli emphasizes too that the various elements of Origen’s philosophical theology—his concern to theologize compatibly with God’s goodness and majesty, his ethical intellectualism, his conviction that *apokatastasis* results from enlightenment and illumination, his privative conception of evil, his understanding of God’s punishments as curative and educative—are not only philosophical convictions but thoroughly grounded in Scripture and regularly defended through citation of some biblical text or other (209-210).

In subsequent chapters Ramelli effectively documents the propagation and rejection of Origen’s theological system—or, more accurately formulated, the rejection of its caricatures by many who had never read the man himself and simply repeated the same arguments borrowed from one another (579). Many subsequent authors straightforwardly affirm universal *apokatastasis* (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the many others cited above and more). There are other authors who, so she argues, were most probably proponents, too. These latter authors betray obvious Origenian influence, and some speak especially highly of him and respect him. This strongly suggests they are proponents of the doctrine, even though they do not make many (or even any) straightforward affirmations of universal *apokatastasis*. These authors use phrases and concepts and arguments clearly drawn from Origen, whether knowingly or not, which are relevant to *apokatastasis*, thus strongly suggesting that they agree with him on the topic. An example would be the great Athanasius of Alexandria (242ff.), who highly praised Origen and whose thought contains many of the Origenian themes enumerated *super*. Consider his statement that it would be unfitting and unworthy of God’s goodness to allow his creation to be destroyed, whether of its own fault or through the deception of demons (*De Incarnatione* 6). It is also important to note this: the fact that an author may use the language of “*aionios* fire,” “*aionios* punishment,” etc., is not conclusive evidence that he was *not* a proponent of *apokatastasis*. This is merely the biblical language that Origen and others happily and readily used, affirming universal salvation all the while, as Ramelli shows. If an author speaks this way and yet demonstrates clear Origenian influence, it is not unlikely that his original understanding of these phrases was in keeping with Origen’s. Moreover, the authors may have been convinced—as Origen himself recognized—that it would not be wise explicitly to

advertise adherence to *apokatastasis* for fear of abuse on the part of the spiritually immature.

Origen's influence was vast. It extended to many of the names in the long list cited above of patristic proponents of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, which is not a complete presentation of the adherents Ramelli discovers throughout the book. She very ably gives the reader a sense of the ubiquity of the doctrine in the ancient church, conferring plausibility to Augustine's words that many Christians of his day embraced the doctrine, *immo quam plurimi*, "indeed the vast majority" (673). The book is eminently valuable and worth reading for at least this reason: universalism becomes a live option for the one to whom Christian tradition is dear, and she furthermore spends much time sketching the contours of a coherent conceptual schema within which the doctrine of *apokatastasis* is motivated and plausible.

With regards to the fifth ecumenical council, Ramelli writes: "The so-called 'condemnation of Origen' by 'the Church' in the sixth century probably never occurred proper, and even if it occurred it did so only as a result of a long series of misunderstandings" (724). Moreover the condemnation did not touch upon Origen so much as "a late and exasperated form of Origenism; moreover it was mainly wanted by emperor Justinian ... and only partially, or even not at all, ratified by ecclesiastical representatives" (*ibid.*). Justinian's letter to Men(n)as is full of refutations of doctrines ascribed to Origen but were certainly not affirmed by the man (726). Justinian associates Origen with Arians and Manichaeans, "to whose subordinationism and dualism, respectively, Origen's thought was diametrically contrary" (727). He accuses Origen of defending *metensomatosis*, which Origen rejected (728). Justinian brings forth the argument against Origen that if the punishments at the judgment are not eternal, then neither is the life (731). Ramelli does well to point out that this ignores the fact that the life and punishment are *aionia*, which does not mean "eternal" but "of the world to come." The argument itself is patently invalid: the temporal finitude of the punishment does not entail that someday those who enjoyed the life of the age to come will also go out of existence or out of life; after all, God's goal is that all enjoy life and works in his providence to accomplish this end (see 1 Cor 15:22-28; Eph 1.9-10; etc.). This is why there is an asymmetry and why life alone is truly eternal: because God works to save us, and the punishments are a means to that end. Ramelli further notes that the ecumenicity of the fifth council is doubtful since it was not convened by the bishop but by Justinian (736). Plus its condemnations do not actually address any substantial proposals of Origen; "Origen is not the object of any authentic anathema" (737). The council's controversial origin thus calls into question its authoritative place in Christian tradition. This goes a long way to demonstrating the orthodoxy of *apokatastasis*, though certainly it is too brief a discussion to convince every opponent. She quotes G.L. Prestige: "Origen is the greatest of that happily small company of saints who, having lived and died in grace, suffered sentence of expulsion from the Church on earth after they had already entered into the joy of their Lord" (quoted *ibid.*). Importantly, Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocians were recognized as proponents of *apokatastasis* yet never condemned (737-738).

The case against Origen compels not, and the arguments adduced against *apokatastasis* are largely weak. Justinian's argument from the supposed symmetry

of the eternal punishment and eternal life is demonstrably invalid. The same argument appears in a passage in Basil which Ramelli persuasively argues is interpolated (354). Ramelli also offers some admittedly brief remarks in response to the contemporary analytic theological discussion of universalism in the final pages of her work (820-823), drawing from Origen's insights and those of others. She affirms along with Origen and others that God is able to save all by their own free will, because he persuades them voluntarily to be saved (823). Persuasion, of course, is not violation of free will, but precisely its upholding.

This discussion may seem too quick for some analytic theologians who object to universalism precisely on the grounds that it seems incompatible with a robust conception of human freedom along libertarian lines. After all, freedom requires the ability to make multiple, mutually exclusive choices, being able to accept God's call as well as to reject it. How can we dogmatically affirm universalism, if God does not violate human freedom and if free agents may always reject God? It may be that some never accept God's offer of salvation. Alternatively, the only way God could guarantee that all persons are saved is if he were to determine them in some way to accept salvation. This would be incompatible with a libertarian conception of freedom. Ramelli's ethical intellectualism may fit nicely with a compatibilist conception of human freedom, but it will not immediately convince the libertarians. A further difficulty would seem to arise in light of the fact that many (if not all) of the proponents of universal *apokatastasis* which Ramelli enumerates appear to be libertarians. They hold that human beings act independently of God's determination.

Of course, it is far beyond the scope of Ramelli's project to engage these problems with adequately philosophical detail. Nevertheless I believe that a convincing case may be made in favor of a moderately libertarian doctrine of *apokatastasis*. To begin, Ramelli may reject leeway incompatibilism in favor of source incompatibilism, insisting that freedom is ultimately grounded *not* in the ability to choose a thing or not, but in being the ultimate causal source of our actions. This entails that irresistible manipulation and compulsion by other agents compromise our freedom, whereas being unable to do otherwise does not necessarily do so (cf. Frankfurt cases). In ordinary conditions of ambiguity and epistemic uncertainty, we are able to act in different ways because different paths seem acceptable to us. But in other cases, we may find ourselves persuaded that something is right and act accordingly. Indeed we may even be so impressed by the truth of the matter that we feel ourselves to be unable to do anything except respond in the appropriate way. Suppose Paul intensely rebukes Peter for fleeing table fellowship with Gentiles in contradiction with the gospel of Christ. Peter may come to so powerful a realization of his guilt that he feels he cannot deny Paul's admonition. Even granting that he retains some metaphysical ability to do otherwise, the phenomenology of the situation may be such that he feels he cannot respond to the truth as it hits him except with repentance and remorse. Presumably we have all had moments such as these in which we were confronted with an undeniable reality. It is implausible to suggest that Peter does not act freely when he repents in this situation, even though he feels no psychological ability to do otherwise. Peter's freedom is not ultimately grounded in some arcane metaphysical power to do otherwise, unperceived even by himself and by the rest of us. Rather it

is grounded in the fact that we see he comes to perform an action entirely on his own, without compulsion or manipulation by the rest of us. Moreover, Ramelli may insist that this act is especially a free act because Peter is aligning his will with reality.

Thus it is with the persons who are in hell. There they are confronted with the horrible reality that the lives they have chosen to live in separation from God are miserable and evil; they are confronted with their sinfulness and the futility of their thinking; they experience on their own skin the consequences of a life lived in wickedness, its misery and anguish. Eventually they become persuaded that to persist in sin is pointless, and so they repent and are saved. Experience teaches them that the choices they have made are poor, and they make different ones which better orient them to that which they sought all along – an enjoyable existence. They come to this conclusion entirely on their own when they learn the consequences of their actions. No one obliges them or forces them, but their experience with reality itself convinces them. This is not a compromise of their freedom any more than it is a compromise of our freedom, when we come face to face with the world and can no longer live in delusion.

Here we see the importance of the church fathers' inherited philosophical anthropology, which included ethical intellectualism. They all hold that human beings, as created *ad imaginem Dei*, have an essential, unconscious orientation towards God as the ultimate good: "human orientation toward God is part and parcel of human creatural nature" (820). Some analytic theologians seem to deny that human beings have an intrinsic orientation towards the good and thus towards God, since they suppose humans may come to the realization that God exists, that he is the source and fount of all goodness and life, and yet they still decide that they don't want to live with him. This is by no means an obviously defensible position. If we grant that God created the world and human persons for fellowship with him, we would expect him to create them with a construction which orients them to find him. Further, this position seems to deny that there is any ultimate object of all human agency, since even the good itself, recognized as such, may be rejected. Arguably this conception affords the human will with exaggerated autonomy, denying any antecedent orientation towards a definite end in God; to my mind it appears more existentialist than Christian. In this way, then, Ramelli may defend the incompatibilist doctrine of *apokatastasis* of the ancient church fathers. More may be said, but it is not by any means obviously implausible or absurd. Its ethical intellectualism, moreover, arguably coheres better with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

Though her work is not strictly speaking a piece of analytic theology, nevertheless *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* is a treasury of philosophical, theological, exegetical, historical, and philological insights of great value to the philosophical theologian. It provides us with a way of doing theology as a proponent of *apokatastasis*: a concern above all for God's goodness and majesty, the former demonstrated in his opposition to all evil and desire to save all, the latter in his ability to realize this end for his glory. Her extensive documentation of supporters of the doctrine, furthermore, works to situate the proponent of the *apokatastasis* in continuity with very many, very highly respected pillars of Christian orthodoxy. My

complaint against her work is singular and minimal: there are numerous passages cited from Latin which are left untranslated for no apparent reason; nothing would have been lost had these passages been translated and crucial phrases included in Latin in brackets. Nevertheless these are not an impediment to enjoying her presentation of so much valuable information.