
**Origenes Vindicatus vel
Rufinus Redivivus? A Review of
Ilaria Ramelli's *The Christian
Doctrine of Apokatastasis*
(2013)**

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Abstract

Against a backdrop of surging interest in the topic of universal salvation (or universalism, *apokatastasis*), Ilaria Ramelli's major tome places Origenian and Origenist universalism at the center of Christian theologizing during the first nine centuries. She claims that Origen was misunderstood rather than rejected, that textual interpolations have distorted the ancient record, and that the young Augustine was a universalist. Historiographic problems abound in this book, which does not clearly distinguish Origen from Gregory of Nyssa and others, nor account for the countervailing views of early nonuniversalists.

Keywords

apokatastasis, early Christianity, Gregory of Nyssa, Ilaria Ramelli, Origen, Origenism, universal salvation, universalism

Christian universalism—or the teaching that all human beings (and angels perhaps) will receive eternal salvation—has been a hot topic since the start of the new millennium. Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (2011), became a *New York Times* bestseller,

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and provoked a *Time* magazine 2011 cover story during Holy Week that emblazoned the question, “What If There’s No Hell?”¹ But Bell’s book is not alone. During the last 15 years, a wide range of popular or semipopular books have addressed the question—mostly defending the idea of universal salvation, and arguing that it should be regarded as an acceptable Christian belief or teaching.² Recent titles suggest a wave of interest among the Christian laity, pastors, and priests, and scholars alike. Against this backdrop of surging popular and scholarly interest, the appearance of a major academic book on the theme of universal salvation by an acknowledged and well-published scholar of early Christianity—surveying no less than nine centuries in over 900 pages—is a publishing event of some significance. Before scrutinizing Ilaria Ramelli’s tome, however, let me set a context by saying something about the church’s historical and 20th-century reception of Origen, the central figure in Ramelli’s narrative.

Shifting Views of Origen over the Last Century

From his own lifetime up through the past 19 centuries, Origen’s reputation was mixed. Later writers often borrowed from Origen’s biblical exegesis, though the source of the ideas or quotations was usually not credited. The medieval author Peter Comestor (d. 1178) laid down the principle, *Non credas Origeni dogmatizanti*.³ This Latin tag is interesting not only because of what it says but because of what it implies (in brackets): “[Learn from Origen’s biblical interpretations and spiritual writings, but] don’t believe Origen when he theologizes!” Such a stipulation of distrust made sense

1. The *Time* magazine cover (April 25, 2011) read, “What If There’s No Hell?—A Popular Pastor’s Best-Selling Book Has Stirred Fierce Debate about Sin, Salvation and Judgment,” while Jon Meacham’s article (38–43) bore the title, “Is Hell Dead?” Bell subsequently published *The Love Wins Companion: A Study Guide for Those Who Want to Go Deeper*, ed. David Vanderveen (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
2. Among the many titles are: Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God* (n.p.: Universalist, 1999); Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (New York: HarperOne, 2003); Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2006); (Bishop) Carlton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self* (New York: Atria, 2006); Bradley Jersak, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hell, Hope, and the New Jerusalem* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009); Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about God’s Wrath and Judgment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010); Ted Grimsrud and Michael Hardin, eds., *Compassionate Eschatology: The Future as Friend* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). Also noteworthy is Gregory MacDonald (Robin Parry), ed., “*All Shall Be Well*”: *Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, From Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade), exploring the historical lineage of universalist thinking from the early church period to the present.
3. Peter Comestor, *Historia scholastica*, Migne, PL 194.1764D; cited in Bernard McGinn, “The Spiritual Heritage of Origen in the West: Aspects of the History of Origen’s Influence in the Middle Ages,” in *Origene maestro di vita spirituale*, ed. Luigi F. Pizzolato and Marco Rizzi (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2001) 263–89, at 267.

only if there was some situation where one might believe Origen. Where exactly was it that Origen was “dogmatizing”? The saying applied above all to Origen’s *Peri Archon* (*On First Principles*), and particularly to the speculations in that work regarding preexistent souls, the nature of the resurrected body, the reconciliation of Satan and demons, multiple lives, and the possibility of universal salvation. It was not Origen’s exegesis but his “dogmatizing”—and that of his followers—that stirred controversy for over a century and a half in the early church (390s–550s CE).

During the last century, Origen’s theological reputation has steadily advanced, as one can see by comparing works by Eugène de Faye (1926), Jean Daniélou (1955), and Henri Crouzel (1989).⁴ De Faye was generally wary of Origen, whom he accused of presenting Platonic or gnostic ideas in Christian dress. Purportedly imbued with Platonic notions of the soul’s gradual self-purification and ascent to its divine source, Origen made Christ all but irrelevant to the process of salvation. At the same time, de Faye believed that Origen deserved further scholarly scrutiny.

Some 30 years later, Daniélou offered a different picture. In connection with the *nouvelle théologie* and its recovery of the ancient Christian heritage, Origen came into his own, no longer a dubious figure at the periphery of church tradition, but now a central figure in his own right. Nonetheless Daniélou’s verdict on Origen’s theology was mixed. Daniélou argued that Origen’s interpretation of the Bible was often subjective and arbitrary, and that it sometimes paralleled ancient gnostic interpretations of events in the Gospels in terms of a cosmic drama of the fall and restoration of souls. While Daniélou made no effort to defend Origen’s teaching on universalism, nonetheless he argued that Origen’s biblical interpretation contained valuable insights for the church. For Daniélou, when reading Origen one needs to separate the gold from the dross; it was in the field of spirituality that Origen shone.

Crouzel offered an account of Origen that was much more positive than either de Faye’s or Daniélou’s. Crouzel offered no substantive criticism of Origen’s ideas. When he confronted aspects of Origen’s thought that seemed at odds with church teaching, he argued that Origen, properly understood, was indeed orthodox. Crouzel preoccupied himself not only with Origen but also with later Origenism, and published a book on the Renaissance debate centered on Pico della Mirandola and his argument for Origen’s salvation. In sum, Crouzel strove to vindicate Origen’s reputation.⁵

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4. The publication years listed above apply to the English translations, all from French: Eugène de Faye, *Origen and His Work*, trans. Fred Rothwell (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1926); Jean Daniélou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955); Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
 5. Henri Crouzel offered his own assessment of scholarship on Origen in “Current Theology: The Literature on Origen 1970–1988,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 499–516. In “Origène est-il un systématique?,” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 10 (1961) 81–116, he denied that Origen can be regarded as a “systematic” thinker in the usual sense. Crouzel dealt with Origen’s eschatology in “A Letter from Origen ‘To Friends in Alexandria,’” in *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Georges Vasilievich Florovsky*, David Neiman and Margaret Schatkin (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1973) 135–50;

Ramelli's Book in Overview

Ramelli's advocacy of Origen makes Crouzel's look tepid by comparison. Her book offers what one might call an "Origen-centric" account of theological history during the church's first millennium. What Origen's previous defenders regarded as a liability—namely, his universalism—Ramelli treats as an asset:

Although Origen is credited with being the founder of this doctrine [*apokatastasis*] in Christianity, I shall argue that he had several antecedents. I shall also argue that this doctrine was abundantly received throughout the Patristic era, up to the one who can be regarded as the last of the Fathers: John Eriugena (1).⁶

Ramelli argues that Christian universalism has its roots in the New Testament, and that Origen was not influenced by gnosticism but was resolutely antignostic (*pace* de Faye and Daniélou).⁷ She describes her own volume as "the result of almost fifteen years of scholarly research" (ix). Her wide reading in the primary and secondary sources is evident. The ambitious scope of her inquiry appears in the summary statement offered at the outset: "My analysis will extend to the whole of the Patristic age, from the New Testament—and indeed the whole of the Bible, which is the basis for any Patristic

several of his essays on Origen's eschatology appear in *Les fins dernières selon Origène* (Brookfield, VT: Gower, 1990). The Renaissance debate over the possibility of Origen's salvation is the theme of Crouzel's *Une controverse sur Origène à la Renaissance: Jean Pic de La Mirandole et Pierre Garcia* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1977).

6. Numbers in parentheses after quotations are page references in Ramelli's book. Her assessment of Eriugena as a "Father" or acknowledged Catholic author needs a supporting argument, given that Pope Honorius III in 1225 judged Eriugena's major work, the *Periphyseon*, to be "swarming with worms of heretical perversity" and called for all copies of the book to be destroyed (quoted by Jean A. Potter, "John the Scot, and His Background," introduction to *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*, trans. Myra Uhlfelder [1976; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011] ix–xli, at xxiii).
7. The idea that Origen's universalism drew from earlier gnostic universalism—which existed in Alexandria prior to Origen's lifetime among the Carpocratians, Basilideans, and Valentinians—deserves more attention than the three pages Ramelli devoted to it (87–89). She ignores Holger Strutwolf's *Gnosis als System: Zur Rezeption der valentinianischen Gnosis bei Origenes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), which argues for continuities between Origen and second-century gnosis. Hans Jonas adopted a view like Strutwolf's in "Origen's Metaphysics of Free Will, Fall, and Salvation: A 'Divine Comedy' of the Universe," *Journal of the Universalist Historical Society* 8 (1969–1970) 3–24. Because Ramelli typifies gnosis in terms of soteriological elitism and determinism, she sees Origen's stress on free will and universal salvation marking him as "anti-gnostic." Yet she overlooks the larger patterns—highlighted by Strutwolf—of the fall-and-restoration-of-souls motif as found among the Nag Hammadi community, the Valentinians, Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists, and Origen's *Peri Archon*. Moreover, Ramelli's reduction of gnosis to soteriological determinism is out-of-step with recent scholarship and does not take account of Michael A. Williams's *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1996)—another major book

speculation—to John the Scot Eriugena, whose thought was nourished by the best of Greek Patristics” (2).

Throughout her book, Ramelli reveals her ambition to vindicate the doctrine of *apokatastasis* as a Catholic Christian teaching that does not violate either the teachings of Scripture or the decisions of church councils. For this reason, one must take with a grain of salt her claim that “the present study is not primarily concerned about ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’” (2 n. 3). Her book is more than a dispassionate analysis of ancient texts. In fact, on the very same page where she claims to disavow the categories of “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” she argues for the salience of ancient discussions of universalism by appealing to statements by contemporary African-American Pentecostal bishop Carlton Pearson, by Christian Orthodox scholars such as Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev of Vienna and Bishop Kallistos Ware, by the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Murphy O’Connor, and by Pope John Paul II (2–3 n. 6).⁸ To assess the work, one must regard it in terms not only of its historical analysis but also of its implied theological arguments.

Broadly speaking, Ramelli offers revisionist theological history and a new paradigm for understanding the church’s first millennium. She rarely engages the second millennium, though there are a few ad hoc comments toward the end of the book (820–26). Throughout the book she intersperses footnoted references to recent debates over universalism. Repeatedly Ramelli returns to two figures, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, who, taken together, seem to be the touchstone for her theological analysis.

Some of Ramelli’s claims may raise eyebrows. For example, she states, “Augustine espoused Origen’s *apokatastasis* doctrine” (659; see also 659–76).⁹ This assertion regarding Augustine is touted on the book’s back cover as among the “surprises [that] await readers of this book.” What is more, Ramelli states that the anathema naming

that (like Strutwolf) Ramelli never cites or discusses. Her essay, “Apokatastasis in Coptic Gnostic Texts from Nag Hammadi and Clement’s and Origen’s Apokatastasis: Toward an Assessment of the Origin of the Doctrine of Universal Restoration,” *Journal of Coptic Studies* 14 (2012) 33–45, denies that “Coptic Gnostic texts” teach “universal salvation,” and yet her cited sources do not allow a definitive conclusion. The larger strategy of differentiating Origen from his second- and third-century context leaves us with a decontextualized Origen.

8. In favorably citing Carlton Pearson, Ramelli may not be aware of Pearson’s arguments for universalism based on claims that human beings are divine by nature and that evil is “part of God.” In *The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self* (New York: Atria, 2006), Pearson states that “we [i.e., human beings] are made of the same substance as Divinity. . . . God created us out of Himself, which means that we are innately, internally, and eternally divine” (44). Pearson comments, “Evil would not exist were it not part of God” (104).
9. The text on which Ramelli bases her conclusion regarding Augustine is taken from *On the Morals of the Manicheans* 2.7.9, where Augustine writes, “Dei bonitas . . . omnia deficientia sic ordinat . . . donec ad id recurrent unde defecerunt” (cited in Ramelli 663). Ramelli renders the passage into English—without ellipses—on the following page: “The goodness of God orders and leads all the beings that have fallen until they return/are

Origen in the official acts of the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553 CE, Anathema 11) was likely interpolated into the text. This assertion allows Ramelli to state plainly, “Origen was never formally condemned by any Christian ecumenical council” (737, with n. 210). To her mind, Origen’s fall from ecclesial favor rests on a mistake—an error lasting 15 centuries.¹⁰

Ramelli also insists that Basil of Caesarea’s statements on everlasting punishment were likewise not original but probably were interpolated into the texts (354–58). Her claims of interpolation are designed to uphold Origen’s reputation and minimize disagreements between Origen and other ancient Christian authors. Those acquainted with early Christian history will recall Origen’s pro-Nicene defender, Rufinus of Aquileia, who argued that the apparent unorthodoxies of Origen’s writings were due to widespread interpolations into his texts “by heretics and evilly disposed persons.”¹¹ While modern scholars have not embraced Rufinus’s interpolation theory, Ramelli exemplifies a certain “Rufinian” quality in her multifarious effort to vindicate Origen and

restored to the condition from which they had fallen” (664). The verb is *ordinat*, which translates as “orders” and not as “orders and leads.” There is no second verb alongside of *ordinat*. Moreover, Augustine’s statement that creatures are *ordered* toward restoration did not imply that all will attain it. In *Retractiones* 1.6, Augustine discusses this very passage—a point Ramelli fails to mention. He disavows the idea of creatures’ returning to God “as it seemed to Origen,” indicates that the statement applies only “to all those things that return,” and adds that the wicked “are most suitably in a place of punishment” (Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. Mary Inez Bogan [Washington: Catholic University of America, 1968] 26–27). Since Augustine’s “retractions” were often clarifications of his originally intended meanings, it does not follow that the presence of the text cited above in the “retractions” means that Augustine had changed his mind or had once agreed with Origen.

10. One indication of Origen’s reputation as a heretic during late antiquity and the early medieval period is found in the wholesale destruction of most of his writings. If, as Ramelli suggests, the anathematizing of Origen—in the last place in Anathema 11—was not original, then the interpolation must have been added so quickly to the original text that no one recognized it as an interpolation. But then how is Ramelli—almost 1,500 years later—able to identify an interpolation when no one before her seems to have done so?
11. In the preface to his bowdlerized translation of Origen’s *Peri Archon*, Rufinus of Aquileia wrote that Origen’s writings “are known to contain in the original a good many statements likely to cause offense, so smoothed over and emended these in his translation, that a Latin reader would find in them nothing out of harmony with our faith. His example, therefore, I am following to the best of my ability . . . taking care not to reproduce such passages from the books of Origen as are found to be inconsistent with and contrary to his true teaching. The cause of these variations . . . [is] that these have been corrupted in many places by heretics and evilly disposed persons” (Rufinus of Aquileia, “Preface of Rufinus,” in Origen, *On First Principles: Being Koetschau’s Text of the De principiis*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, intro. Henri de Lubac (1966; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973) lxiii. Rufinus’s letter on the corruption of Origen’s works has been translated in Pamphilus, *Apology for Origen with The Letter of Rufinus on the Falsification of the Books of Origen*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2010).

Origenism—through biblical exegesis, claims of interpolations into ancient texts, and her own philosophical and metaphysical argumentation.¹²

Ramelli's book is curiously organized and argued. The reader will be struck at once by the literally thousands of citations from ancient sources in three languages—English, Greek, and Latin. The Greek and Latin citations are not limited to the footnotes, but appear also in the main text, sometimes as lengthy block quotations, but with no explanation as to why some texts are in English and others in the original. For linguistically trained scholars, the blocks of Latin and Greek prose will not be off-putting. Yet one never knows from page to page in what language the sources will be cited; the tri-language citations, therefore, give the book a rather jumbled appearance. Because so many citations are not in English, this work seems to be intended only for scholars. Another striking feature is that the book includes no less than 530 self-citations in its footnotes. The authority to which Ramelli most frequently appeals is herself—her own articles, monographs, and translations. A widely published scholar is bound to cite her prior work to some extent, yet Ramelli has gone so far in this direction as to have virtually turned her writings into a private discourse.

The book's chapter and section titles do not give clear indications of their contents. While almost 80 pages are devoted to Origen (137–221), there is no chapter on Origen *per se*; rather, the discussion of Origen is incorporated into a mega-chapter on “The Roots of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis” (1–221), which includes a discussion of New Testament texts (10–62). The blurred boundaries between biblical and patristic evidence may reflect Ramelli's desire to establish historical continuities in the teaching of *apokatastasis*, but the chapters' arrangement is likely to confuse readers. Another sort of blurring takes place by inserting quotations from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa outside their respective sections. This is apparent, for instance, in the section on Isaac of Syria (or Isaac of Nineveh) (758–66). As a result legitimate distinctions between Isaac and both Origen and Gregory are lost. This problem is not limited to the section on Isaac; it occurs throughout the book.

In Ramelli's account, almost everyone from the first-century New Testament authors to the ninth-century Eriugena were either witting or unwitting followers of Origen.¹³ If Ramelli is correct, then patristic and medieval scholars have long labored under the misapprehension that there was a diversity of views in the early church on the scope of final salvation. One searches this massive book in vain to find a single case in which Ramelli admits that someone understood Origen and then disagreed with him. Dissent from Origen, as she says again and again, was due to misunderstanding—by

12. Ramelli commends “the perspicacious Rufinus” (211) and writes that “Rufinus was a faithful Origenian for the whole of his life” (656) who sought “to show directly from the evidence of the texts Origen's greatness and orthodoxy against his detractors” (636). Yet it should be noted that Rufinus tampered with the textual evidence and saddled later scholars and readers with a skewed, inaccurate Latin rendering of *Peri Archon*.

13. According to the book's table of contents (vii), chapter 2 covers Origen's “First ‘Detractors,’” but the word “detractors” is set in scare quotes, as if to imply that the “detractors” were perhaps not detractors at all, just mistaken.

Augustine, Emperor Justinian, and others. Not even the Fifth Ecumenical Council is justified in its dissent, for Ramelli's claim here is that "Origen was never formally condemned by any Christian ecumenical council" (737). Nor is Augustine permitted to dissent. Instead he appears as a sort of Origenist manqué who early attained a blessed vision of universal salvation but then fell away. The bishop of Hippo failed to understand Origen.¹⁴ In every contest of ideas, Origen always wins, even when apparently he loses. Wherever ancient authors express ideas like Origen's, Ramelli attributes to the author in question the other ideas she associates with Origen—like someone who sees a few brush strokes on a canvas and then reconstructs the same portrait again and again.¹⁵

Of all the authors treated in this book, Ramelli assigns most space to Origen (137–221), Gregory of Nyssa (372–440), and Johannes Scotus Eriugena (773–815). Conspicuously missing from her expositions of Origen and Gregory are acknowledgements of differences between them. Without prior knowledge of early Christian literature, a reader of Ramelli's book would not surmise that Gregory deviated from Origen in basic ways and repudiated Origen's teaching on preexistent (or premortal) souls.¹⁶ Gregory also rejected the idea of the *eschaton* as restoration of a primal condition of stasis. In Gregory's mature theological teaching, the final state was one of continuous change and development—a conception that contradicted Origen's *apokatastasis*, in that Gregory, Maximus Confessor, and Eriugena all rejected Origen's static afterlife. In this sense, Origen's *apokatastasis* had no sequel or successor; the teaching began and ended with Origen. In several ways Ramelli glosses over differences, and sameness prevails.

Moderate followers of Origen (e.g., Gregory) rejected the idea of a primal fall of souls, followed by embodiment and a final restoration to God. It was only Origen's more radical followers (e.g., Evagrius of Pontus and Stephen bar Sudaili, presumed author of *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*) who maintained the fall-and-restoration of souls motif basic to Origen's *Peri Archon*. On the other hand, the vision of the *eschaton* in Evagrius's *Great Letter*—and even more obviously in Stephen bar Sudaili—involved

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14. Ramelli speaks of "how distorted Origen's thought was in Augustine's reports" (670). The implication seems to be that Augustine did not reject Origen's theology but misunderstood it. With more justification, Ramelli claims that Origen was misunderstood by Emperor Justinian and others in the sixth century (724–38)—yet this point was already well established half a century ago in Antoine Guillaumont, *Les 'Képhalaia Gnostica' d'Évagre le Pontique et l'Histoire de Origenisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens* (Paris: Seuil, 1962).
 15. Irenaeus gives us "a notion [of eschatology] that is close to Origen's own idea" (105). Athanasius gives us "an Origenian idea" (245). The theology of the image is "the same in Origen, in Methodius here . . . and in Gregory of Nyssa" (267). Ephrem's teaching is "clearly the same position as Origen's" (337).
 16. Ramelli admits that Gregory rejected the preexistence of souls, yet she insists that his argument to this effect was *not against Origen* (729), a position that makes no sense in light of Gregory's statement that his argument against preexistent souls had to do with "those before our time who have dealt with the question of 'principles'"—an obvious reference to Origen (*On the Making of Man* 28.1).

a pantheistic or pantheizing dissolution of the Creator–creature distinction.¹⁷ Stephen was even more radical than Evagrius, claiming that even the names “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” would pass away in an eschatological state of oneness. While the point may be disputed, Evagrius and Stephen seem to have affirmed the final unity of creatures with their Creator in a way that Origen did not.¹⁸ It is difficult to claim a common tradition of Christian *apokatastasis* when Christian thinkers construed the *eschaton* in differing and even contradictory ways. I come back to this point in my conclusion. The differences between the eschatological teachings of Origen, Gregory, Evagrius, Maximus, and Eriugena were perhaps as striking as their similarities.

In a brief section entitled “The Syriac Heritage” (690–94), Ramelli treats Evagrius of Pontus, Stephen bar Sudaili, and *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*. The terse treatment belies the fact that Evagrius and Sudaili both clearly taught universal salvation, and both were widely read and debated figures in early Christian literature. Since most scholars regard Evagrius and especially Stephen bar Sudaili as representatives of a gnosticizing and/or pantheizing version of *apokatastasis*, Ramelli’s failure to deal more fully with these writers makes it look as though she is slighting the evidence that does not fit her Origen-centered interpretation of the history of Christian *apokatastasis*. The space Ramelli allotted to ancient authors depends not on their intrinsic importance as teachers of universal salvation, but on the degree to which she can successfully incorporate their ideas into her interpretive framework.

In her opening pages, Ramelli seeks to show that the Bible supports universalism. Yet one of the oddest aspects of this book is the attempt to clinch a biblical or exegetical argument by appealing to early translations—sometimes *against* the Hebrew or Greek texts. She appeals to the Vulgate when its rendering supports her scriptural interpretations (14, 23, 45, 47, 51 n. 122).¹⁹ She also cites Syriac (12, 48), Coptic (47), Sahidic (47), and Boharic versions of the Bible (48). The reader is left wondering: What is the point? An answer appears in Ramelli’s discussion of Matthew 17:11, “Elijah will indeed come and restore all things” (NAB). Ramelli objects to the seeming implication in this verse that Elijah is one who will “restore all” (*apokatastesei panta*). She insists instead that “God is the agent of the eschatological universal

17. According to Augustine Cassiday, Evagrius’s *eschaton* is nonpantheistic. Compare M. Parmentier, “Evagrius of Pontus’ ‘Letter to Melania,’” *Bijdragen tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 46 (1985) 2–38, and Julia S. Konstantinovskiy, “The Last Things,” in Julia S. Konstantinovskiy, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009) 153–78; with Augustine Casiday, “Universal Restoration in Evagrius Ponticus’ ‘Great Letter,’” in *Studia patristica*, vol. 47, ed. J. Baun et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2010) 223–28.

18. Jerome, in his *Epistle 124 (ad Avitum)*, and the early modern Jesuit Pierre-Daniel Huet, in *Origenis in sacras scripturas commentaria* (Rotterdam: Ioannis Berthelini, 1668) held that Origen’s theology made the human spirit or mind consubstantial with God. On this reading, such Origenists as Evagrius were merely making explicit what was already implicit in Origen’s thought, namely, a final merging or nondistinction of creatures from the Creator.

19. There is one case where Ramelli cites the Vulgate and rejects its rendering (32).

restoration” (13). She then proceeds to find an early translation that uses a passive construction in the verse’s second part. The Syriac Harklean reads (in her translation), “Elijah will indeed come first, and all beings/everything will be restored” (13). The problem is not just with the rendering of one verse, but with the methodological assumptions that allow Ramelli to reject the New Testament Greek text in favor of a Syriac translation of it. She forces the evidence to fit her preconceptions—in this case, the assumption that God must be the subject of the New Testament phrase “restore all” (*apokatastesei panta*).

Daley versus Ramelli: *The Hope of the Early Church* (1991) and *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (2013)

Scientific researchers try to avoid what is sometimes known as “selection bias.” Hypotheses that would not find support from a randomly selected data set might become plausible—or seem to be provable—if one uses a skewed data set. One question to be posed regarding Ramelli’s book is whether the whole idea of a “Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*” is based on “selection bias” in the choices of authors and texts to consider.

To evaluate Ramelli’s presentation of her evidence, it may be instructive to juxtapose her book to Brian Daley’s *The Hope of the Early Church* (1991), which is perhaps the most carefully argued and copiously documented guide to early Christian eschatological views. Daley’s work is widely acknowledged and regarded as a model of careful reading and scrupulous attention to detail.²⁰ In his analysis, a large number of authors or texts affirmed the idea of everlasting punishment and so should be regarded as antiuniversalist; I list them in roughly chronological order: *1 Clement*, *2 Clement*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Ignatius of Antioch, *Sibylline Oracles* (apart from one passage), *Epistula Apostolorum*, Aristides, Athenagoras, Justin Martyr, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Victorinus of Pettau, Lactantius, *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Aphrahat, Ephrem (in Daley’s analysis), Cyril of Jerusalem, Apollonaris of Laodicea, Basil, Epiphanius, Firmicus Maternus, Hiliary of Poitiers, Zeno of Verona, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Theodore of Mopsuestia (in Daley’s analysis), Theodoret of Cyrus, Hesychius of Jerusalem, the Pseudo-Macarian *Homilies*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, Gaudentius of Brescia, Maximus of Turin, Hilarianus, Tyconius, Augustine, Evodius of Uzala (or whoever wrote the dialogue of Zaccheus), Orosius, *Liber de Promissionibus*, Salvian of Marseilles, Pope Leo the Great, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, Paulinus of Nola, Orientius, Commodian, Peter Chrysologus, Agathangelos, Shenoute of Atripe, Narsai, Jacob of Sarug, Oecumenius, Pseudo-Dionysius (in Daley’s analysis), Severus of Antioch, Leontinus of Byzantium (in Daley’s analysis), Cyril of Scythopolis, Barsanuphius, John of Gaza, Aeneas of Gaza,

20. Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (New York: Cambridge University, 1991; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

Cosmas Indicopleustes, Andrew of Caesarea, Romanos the Melodist, Maximus the Confessor (in Daley's analysis), and John of Damascus.

Other authors and texts are difficult to interpret on the question of universalism. In Daley's analysis this includes: Clement of Alexandria, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Sibylline Oracles* (in one passage), Eusebius, Gregory Nazianzus, Ambrose (who seems to oscillate), and Jerome (who seems to oscillate, both before and after 394 CE). Another position exists that could be labeled as pantheizing and ought to be distinguished from universalism in Origen's sense; Stephen bar-Sudaili and Evagrius of Pontus would likely fall into this category.

So who then is left clearly teaching or asserting universalism in an Origenian way? The list includes Origen (though a few scholars disagree), Gregory of Nyssa (also with some dissenters), Didymus the Blind, and Isaac the Syrian (in all likelihood).²¹ Marcellus of Ancyra seems to have held to a non-Origenist version of universalism. The data that Daley has carefully sifted show 68 authors and texts that clearly affirm the eternal punishment of the wicked, while seven authors are unclear, two teach something like eschatological pantheism, and perhaps four authors appear to be universalists in the Origenian sense.

To summarize, the support for universalism is paltry compared with opposition to it; there is not much of a universalist tradition here. The 68 nonuniversalist authors come from each of the centuries surveyed, from both East and West, and wrote in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian. From Daley's analysis, one can see the distortion involved in claiming a "universalist East" versus an "infernalist West." The Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian opposition to Origenism is little known and yet noteworthy. Also striking is that there are no unambiguous cases of universalist teaching prior to Origen. This observation undercuts Ramelli's claim that Origen was not an innovator in his eschatology, and that universalism was either implicitly or explicitly maintained from the first century up to the early third century when Origen wrote *Peri Archon*. Even if one were to agree with Ramelli that the New Testament teaches universal salvation, then second-century Christian literature represents a problem for her historical reconstruction. To the extent that second-century authors agreed in teaching everlasting punishment, the claim of an unbroken tradition of Christian universalism is called into question.²² Daley's overview indicates that early Christian writing on

21. Essays by Giulio Maspero, "Apocatastasis," and Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco, "Eschatology" (in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Lucas Francisco Mateo-Seco and Giulio Maspero, trans. Seth Cherney [Leiden: Brill, 2010] 55–64 and 275–88), acknowledge evidence in Gregory that both contradicts and supports universalism. Mario Baghos, "Reconsidering *Apokatastasis* in St. Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Soul and Resurrection* and the *Catechetical Oration*," *Phronema* 27 (2012) 125–62, challenges the majority view of Gregory as a universalist.

22. Admittedly, Christian literature is less abundant in the second century than in the third or fourth century. Yet the absence of second-century Christian universalist texts—except among Carpocratians, Basilideans, Valentinians, or other "gnostics"—lends support to the idea that Origen's universalism was innovative.

eschatology—as early as the third century—could be seen as an extended argument *against Origen*.

Is Ramelli guilty then of “selection bias”? To be fair to Ramelli, she does not claim to offer a general or comprehensive account of early Christian eschatology, as Daley does. Because she seeks to give an account of Christian teaching on the *apokatastasis*, her choice of authors and texts is necessarily selective. Yet one of the biggest problems lies in the book’s homogenizing tendencies. Despite their many differences, Origen, Bardaisan, Gregory of Nyssa, Issac of Syria, and Eriugena all go into the blender and come out looking alike. Attentiveness to nonuniversalists and antiuniversalists might have added color to the narrative. How much more interesting her book might have been had Ramelli shown us the thrusts and counterthrusts by such fourth-to-fifth-century figures as Epiphanius, Theophilus of Antioch, Jerome, Augustine, and Shenoute of Atripe, and by the sixth-century authors Severus of Antioch, Cyril of Scythopolis, Barsanuphius, John of Gaza, and Jacob of Sarug, all of whom took vigorous exception to universalism. In largely omitting the anti-Origenists, Ramelli’s presentation becomes less engaging and less intelligible. If one were to imagine the early Christian debate over Origen as a telephone conference call with six, eight, or ten or more voices, then how well might one discern the flow of conversation if one could hear only one or two voices? Despite the book’s length, much of the contextual information on the Origenist debates is not here. The voices of the anti-Origenist authors are rarely heard, and their absence gives the book a hollowed-out appearance.

Concluding Assessment

The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis contains a number of lines of argument that I cannot consider here.²³ To appraise the larger sweep of Ramelli’s historical reconstruction, we have to ask, What exactly *is* “the doctrine of *apokatastasis*” that was supposedly passed from Origen to his successors through the centuries?

Origen himself stressed the parallel between cosmic beginnings and endings: “For the end is always like the beginning.”²⁴ *Apokatastasis*, in this sense, was a restoration and return of a state of affairs that had previously existed. Gregory of Nyssa, for his part, rejected the idea of souls existing outside of mortal bodies, and so he offered a teaching on *apokatastasis* no longer consonant with Origen’s. If one interprets

23. Ramelli develops at some length the familiar argument that *aionios* in ancient sources need not mean “eternal” in the absolute, unqualified sense—a point that has some merit. Yet she claims, mistakenly, that in the New Testament “*aidios*” means “absolutely eternal” and so “*never* refers to punishment . . . in the other world” (26, emphasis original; see also 33) even though the word occurs in reference to the fallen angels’ “eternal chains” (Jude 6). Another of Ramelli’s arguments (based on Origen and Gregory) is that evil was not created by God, and/or is ontologically weak or deficient, so that it cannot endure forever. She speaks of “the ontological non-existence of evil and its eventual disappearance in *apokatastasis*” (210; cf. 51, 142–48). But this argument might prove too much, namely, that evil will defeat itself, apart from divine agency.

24. Origen, *Peri Archon* 1.6 (Butterworth trans., Origen, *On First Principles* 53).

apokatastasis to mean not “the restoration of fallen souls to their original condition” but simply “universal salvation,” then one might link Origen to Gregory. On the other hand, Origen and Gregory held differing conceptions of salvation: a static condition versus a continuously changing one, respectively.

The effort to extend the idea of “universal salvation” to Eriugena creates yet another problem. As Willemien Otten has demonstrated, Eriugena’s notion of the *eschaton* involved a universal return of souls to God, according to Jesus’ saying, “in my Father’s house are many mansions” (Jn 14:2). Strangely enough, though, for Eriugena not all souls were happy in their final state with God, and some were seemingly stuck within the hurtful, misleading, and even hellish fantasies that captivated them during their earthly lives. There would be no shared beatific vision. Indeed, those in the afterlife might be compared to people placed into private video booths, each staring at a separate screen.²⁵ If Origen’s *apokatastasis* is a state in which all souls share in blessed contemplation of God, then Eriugena in that sense did not follow Origen.

The deceptively simple question, Did such-and-such a thinker teach the *apokatastasis*?, proves to be more complex than it first appears to be. Instead we must ask a series of questions: Was there a preexistent state of souls to which all souls will finally return (Origen)? Will all souls enter into a static heaven (Origen), or rather into a heaven that is constantly changing and dynamic (Gregory and Maximus)? Will souls in returning to God retain their individuality (Origen and most of his followers)? Or will the soul be changed into God’s nature, like water flowing into the ocean (Evagrius)? Will God cease to be trinitarian and enter a post-trinitarian state of ultimate oneness (bar Sudaili)? Will all souls returning to God be truly happy with God, or might some souls be unhappy in God’s presence (Eriugena)?

In arguing for a “Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*,” Ramelli glosses over the disparities and contradictions that appear over nine centuries of Christian teaching and debate over *apokatastasis*. Her book is large, abundantly documented, yet oversimplified. Because of the blurred distinctions between Origen and Gregory, neither author is accurately rendered. Ramelli downplays differences between Origen and Gregory to make Origen seem more like Gregory—who may after all be the hidden hero in this book. So a certain “Nyssification” and homogenization of early Christian teachings occurs. To guide one into the diversity of early Christian eschatological teachings, Brian Daley’s *The Hope of the Early Church* (1991) is much more reliable. As a “critical assessment” of early Christian teaching on *apokatastasis*, Ramelli’s book comes up short. Further research and writing in this area will engage the wealth of material presented here. Yet it will also need to reconsider the arguments and claims offered in this book

25. Willemien Otten, “The Dialectic of Return in Eriugena’s *Periphyseon*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 84 (1991) 399–421. In Eriugena’s eschaton, “these theophanies [i.e., divine manifestations] are said to be manifold . . . since each saint will have his or her own theophany. . . . A clear, unimpaired vision of God appears not to be reached” (418). Eriugena writes that “all . . . shall return into Paradise, but not all shall enjoy the Tree of Life—or rather . . . not all equally” (*Periphyseon* 1015A; citing trans. by I. P. Sheldon-Williams, rev. John J. O’Meara [Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987] 705–6).

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