



**ROB BELL AND ORIGEN:  
THE ESCHATOLOGICAL  
CONCEPTION OF  
APOKATASTASIS**

CHRIS HANNEN

## INTRODUCTION

...beginning with the early church, there is a long tradition of Christians who believe that God will ultimately restore everything and everybody...

In the third century the church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen affirmed God's reconciliation with all people.

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa and Eusebius believed this as well.

In their day, Jerome claimed that "most people," Basil said the "mass of men," and Augustine acknowledged that "very many" believed in the ultimate reconciliation of all people to God.

Central to their trust that all would be reconciled was the belief that untold masses of people suffering forever doesn't bring glory to God. Restoration brings God glory; eternal torment doesn't. Reconciliation brings God glory; endless anguish doesn't. Renewal and return cause God's greatness to shine through the universe; never-ending punishment doesn't.

To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed and trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit forever, because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.<sup>1</sup>

In this extract from Rob Bell's influential and controversial book *Love Wins*, Bell suggests universal reconciliation/salvation as an option when considering doctrines of eternal destiny. Bell is alluding to the ancient concept of *apokatastasis* ("the return of all things") as the basis for his idea of "reconciliation," "restoration," "renewal" and "return." The four church fathers selected by Bell are representative of a school of thought that held to an eschatological concept of *apokatastasis*, albeit with differing emphases and views. Clement and Origen are credited with coining *apokatastasis*; the return or reconciliation of all things to God.<sup>2</sup> Following Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Eusebius were both influenced by Origen's teachings.

However, *apokatastasis* was not without its detractors in the third and fourth centuries. Jerome, Basil (Gregory of Nyssa's older brother) and Augustine were not of the same theological

persuasion as the other four. These three church fathers held to a very different view of eternal destiny. And, within two centuries after Origen, his views would be looked at with great suspicion and antipathy, to the point of later being declared anathema at the fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 (although the exact who, how and what is subject to dispute).<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, this article sets out to determine if Rob Bell's contemporary use of *apokatastasis* is appropriate with a particular focus on Origen's understanding of the concept. That is, can Rob Bell use Origen to support what he is claiming? In particular, we will look at the issue of the universality of *apokatastasis* and Origen's view of punishment as part of the process of restoration. To this end, we begin with a brief survey of Origen and his context, textual issues related to his writings and his theological methodology. Key primary sources of *Peri Archon* and *Contra Celsum* are consulted in investigating Origen's understanding and use of the concept of *apokatastasis*.<sup>4</sup> Finally, reference to commentary in recent scholarship will assist in drawing a conclusion as to the appropriateness of Bell's contemporary use of the ancient concept of *apokatastasis*.

### SCHOLARS ACKNOWLEDGE THE VAST INFLUENCE OF ORIGEN.

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Scholars acknowledge the vast influence of Origen. Rowan Williams thinks, "Probably no single figure in the Greek-speaking Christian world had an influence comparable to that of Origen."<sup>5</sup> He is regularly ranked as one of the greatest church fathers, "As a theologian, Origen stands as one of the high points of the ancient church, rivalled only by Augustine in the scope of his influence."<sup>6</sup> And, "Origen is a great theologian, Augustine and Aquinas his only peers in Christian history."<sup>7</sup> Or again, "Origen was the greatest and most influential Christian theologian before Augustine – the founder of Biblical study as a serious discipline

3 Gregory MacDonald, ed., *"All Shall Be Well" Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Molmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 4–5. also see Hubertus R Drobner and Siegfried S Schatzmann, *The Fathers of the Church: a Comprehensive Introduction* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 148. Drobner argues Origen's name, whilst listed among the heretics in canon 11, was not included in the Emperor's draft nor the Popes letter of sanction for the Council. Hence he assumes the council did not in fact condemn Origen.

4 This research article is necessarily limited to source material available in the English language.

5 G. R. Evans *The First Christian Theologians An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publish), 132.

6 Bradley G. Green, *Shapers of Christian Orthodoxy: Engaging with Early and Medieval Theologians* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 147.

7 Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh S. Pypier, *Key Thinkers in Christianity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.

1 Rob Bell, *Love Wins: At the Heart of Life's Big Questions* (London: Collins, 2012), 107–108.

2 There were however significant antecedents to the Christian view of *apokatastasis*. Refer Ilaria Ramelli, "Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (April 2009): 135–68.

in the Christian tradition – and a figure with immense influence on the development of Christian spirituality.<sup>8</sup> Yet this legacy is dogged by controversy, his brilliant intellect and intense fervour produced such immense and inspirational thought that, for some, went too far. Maybe the vehemence of attack in later centuries highlights the comparative level of influence of Origen's thoughts.

Origen (circa 186–255 C.E.) grew up in Alexandria where he was well educated, learned in philosophy – particularly platonic – and devoted to reading and interpreting Scripture. A highly regarded teacher and preacher, he was ascetic and decried laxity in the church. Legend has it that as a youth he castrated himself but the historicity of this is highly dubious.<sup>9</sup> Origen was not a systematic theologian (in our strict sense of that term) but rather a constructive pastoral theologian.<sup>10</sup> He had a huge intellect and prodigious output of written material. Origen was arguably “less safe” in his Alexandrian years (being particularly concerned with fighting Gnosticism) and, after moving to Caesarea in mid-life, he appears more concerned with orthodoxy in his later years. Origen was a Christian who adapted Platonist philosophy.<sup>11</sup> As such, he was criticised by Christians and Greek philosophers alike.<sup>12</sup> Always a polarising figure, “Origen once complained that he found himself excessively admired paragon for some, maliciously misrepresented by others. He regretted both attitudes.”<sup>13</sup>

## TEXTUAL ISSUES

Origen's intended audience shaped his content and argumentation. This can be confusing as he may withhold an idea or change an opinion dependent on who he anticipated would be hearing/reading his views. This was for him, entirely virtuous and necessary, but allowed different parties to paint him in various ways. “As Origen had feared, the common run of Christians could not, after all, appreciate the more bold and advanced elements of his teaching. Some of the books he had written for private circulation had been leaked and misunderstood by

8 Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (London ; New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1998), i.

9 Evans, *The First Christian Theologians*, 133.

10 Tim Vivian, review of *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, by John Anthony McGuckin, ed. *Anglican Theological Review* 87, no. 2 (2005): 358.

11 W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 368.

12 Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63, no. 3 (July 2009): 217.

13 Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 143.

lessor minds.”<sup>14</sup> This heterodox approach presents challenges to modern scholars especially when combined with textual issues relating to Origen's writings.

Marten identifies three basic textual issues with the corpus we now have. First, due to antiquity and deliberate destruction, much of Origen's writing is lost. Only fragments remain of what was a huge library of original Greek texts. Second, that which remains must be cautiously assessed for interpolation (Origen himself complained of this issue). Third, the Latin translations of fourth and fifth centuries are at times markedly different.<sup>15</sup> For example, Rufinus translated Origen's Greek text, *Peri Archon*, into Latin in order to favour and defend Origen in the context of fourth century debates and consciously changed and omitted original teaching.<sup>16</sup> Jerome objected to such liberties and undertook an alternative Latin translation, with a tendency to judge Origen quite harshly at times, and of this translation

only small portions remain.

A way through this maze is to reference multiple quotations and triangulate as much as possible the

Latin of Rufinus, the Latin of Jerome and a third source preserved in the original Greek.<sup>17</sup> For this article we will rely on translations and secondary sources that take these type of textual issues into consideration.

## THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Origen was committed to creating a Christian philosophy that stood up to the intellectual elite of his day and particularly used platonic structures and ideas. Origen “almost singlehandedly ...dragged Christianity into intellectual respectability.”<sup>18</sup> The rational soul is important, “Origen does not think in terms of humanity, but in terms of rational creatures.”<sup>19</sup> Allegorical interpretive methodologies, with inspiration from Greek myths, were employed in philosophical defence of the bible. Ramelli contends there is no precedent for such an ambitious enterprise as *Peri Archon* (On First Principles) where Origen looks to pagan philosophy in order to express Christian content.<sup>20</sup>

14 Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought* (Oxford, England: Lion Pub., 2003), 43.

15 Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, 19–21.

16 Drobner and Schatzmann, *The fathers of the church*, 137.

17 Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, 21.

18 Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, 37.

19 Jennifer L. Heckart, “Sympathy for the Devil?: Origen and the End,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 60, no. 3–4 (2007): 53.

20 Ramelli, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism ReThinking the Christianisation of Hellenism,” 245.

Biblical interpretation was privileged space for Origen in the story of Salvation.<sup>21</sup> He produced a huge quantity of exegetical work at a high level of scholarship, including the impressive hexapla.<sup>22</sup> He affirmed speculation as good and necessary but only in areas where the Church left this option open. In a significant departure from pagan philosophy, and more in line with Philo, he insisted on the unity, wholeness and coherence of Scripture along with the continued importance of the literal meaning.<sup>23</sup> But literal interpretations could also be problematic. Regarding some literal interpretations, Origen states, “the simpler of those that boast of belonging to the church... take for granted things about God that they would not believe about the most savage and the most unjust of men.”<sup>24</sup> For Origen, allegory – levels of deeper meaning in Scripture – was the answer to problematic literal text. Origen was committed to expounding his ideas primarily from biblical exegesis even if the use of such allegory feels odd or extreme today. And he did not do so in a “systematic” way as we would understand that term in the twenty-first century.<sup>25</sup> Origen refers to Scripture as the basis for *apokatastasis*, but only after passing this Scriptural foundation through allegorical exegesis and using philosophical arguments to shape and form his argument.<sup>26</sup>

Across a range of academic literature scholars identify a few key heresies that significantly influenced Origen’s theology. Crouzel identifies the trio of Basilides-Valentinus-Marcion<sup>27</sup> and Williams emphasises Marcion and Valentinus.<sup>28</sup> Against the Marcionites, Origen affirms the goodness of the creator, the integrity of Old and New Testaments (that is, one God, not two gods) and Jesus in the Father.

21 Peter William Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 242.

22 The Hexapla was a comprehensive analysis of the Hebrew Scriptures comparing six different Greek translations including the Septuagint. Origen was effectively the father of textual criticism of the Bible in the Christian tradition. Refer Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: Knox, 1983), 82–86.

23 Ilaria Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance of Allegory in Stoicism and Its Reception in Platonism, Pagan and Christian: Origen in Dialogue with the Stoics and Plato,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18, no. 3 (September 2011): 348–358.

24 *Peri Archon* 4.2.1

25 Evans, *The First Christian Theologians*, 175.

26 Ilaria Ramelli, “Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism: Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Biblical and Philosophical Basis of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 61, no. 3 (2007): 313.

27 Henri Crouzel, *Origen – The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian* (San Francisco: T & T Clark, 1989), 153.

28 Evans, *The First Christian Theologians*, 134.

Against Valentinians and astrological predestination he argues for the goodness of creation, human free-will and personal responsibility.<sup>29</sup> Ramelli contends *apokatastasis* was developed in polemic with such determinism.<sup>30</sup> Kelly also thinks concepts of human free-will and the goodness of God dominated Origen’s formulation of *apokatastasis*.<sup>31</sup>

## APOKATASTASIS

### DEFINITION

In defining *apokatastasis* there appears to be a general consensus, “The doctrine of the *apokatastasis*: The Son’s act of redemption ultimately leads every being, including Satan, back to its eternal state, according to 1 Cor 15:23–26.”<sup>32</sup> Alternatively, “The doctrine of *apocatastasis*...maintained that the entire creation, including sinners, the damned, and the devil, would finally be restored to a condition of eternal happiness and salvation.”<sup>33</sup> Or another

definition “...of the eventual return of all creatures to the Good, that is, God, and thus universal salvation...”<sup>34</sup>

The contentious elements may be the connection of *apokatastasis* to certain universal salvation, disputed by some, and the inclusion of Satan in this salvation.

### ROOTS IN PHILOSOPHY AND SCRIPTURE

The word “*apokatastasis*” appears once in Scripture, in Acts 3:21. Von Balthasar determines two alternative translations: “until the time of universal restoration of which God spoke” or “until everything predicted by God’s prophets has come about.” The first corresponds to the literal meaning of the term, restoration. The second translation is preferable in the literary context but he argues one cannot entirely discount the first.<sup>35</sup> Origen explicitly refers to Acts 3:21 in his commentary on John “the so-called restoration when no enemy will remain ... and there will be one activity – the apprehension of God.”<sup>36</sup>

29 Hastings, Mason, and Pyper, *Key Thinkers in Christianity*, 12.

30 Ramelli, “Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation,” 167.

31 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London [etc.]: Continuum, 2003), 473–474.

32 Drobner and Schatzmann, *The Fathers of the Church*, 145.

33 John R. Sachs, “Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,” *Theological Studies* 52, no. 2 (June 1991): 227.

34 Ramelli, “Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation,” 135.

35 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?* *With a Short Discourse on Hell* (San Francisco, Calif: Ignatius Press, 2014), 181–183.

36 Commentary on John, Book 1, XV1, 91.



The ideas Origen used to develop his version of *apokatastasis* are not original with him nor Clement before him.<sup>37</sup> In fact, “The idea of an *apokatastasis panton* was well known in ancient religion and philosophy.”<sup>38</sup> An Eastern concept of time is cyclical with the end involving a return to the beginning. Persian, Syrian, Stoic and Platonic philosophy all have ideas of a return to perfection often through fire, destruction and purification. Stoic philosophy maintains a cosmic conflagration destroying the present world and a new world appearing in never ending cycles of repeating destruction and renewal. This idea from philosophy that “...the end is always like the beginning” is an important dictum of Origen.<sup>39</sup>

Ramelli convincingly demonstrates that early Christian Apocrypha were also significant in forming Origen’s view of *apokatastasis*. For example the Apocalypse of Peter contains the notion of sinners, after a shorter or longer period of suffering in the afterlife, being with the blessed all together enjoying communion with God.<sup>40</sup> Bardaisan of Edessa (154–222 CE), a Hellenised Syrian Christian philosopher, developed a parallel idea of *apokatastasis* that is remarkably similar to that of Origen and may well have influenced Origen’s concepts.<sup>41</sup>

Although cyclical concepts of time are not evident in Scripture, which tends to conceive of time as lineal, there are, nonetheless, cyclical themes within Scripture which Origen draws upon in synthesising Scripture and philosophy.<sup>42</sup> In drawing from platonic philosophy, similarities between Plato and Origen abound, for example, the idea that the end is as the beginning, the free will of all rational creatures and that evil is not ontologically subsistent. However there are also differences between Plato’s and Origen’s philosophy. For example, Plato maintained some souls were incurable which Origen rejected outright, because he held that no being is incurable for the one who created it.<sup>43</sup>

37 Although Heckart states it was Clement who first outlined the main points of the Christian doctrine. Heckart, “Sympathy for the Devil?,” 49.

38 Sachs, “Current Eschatology,” 227.

39 Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, 228–229.

40 Ramelli, “Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation,” 138–139.

41 Ramelli, “Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation,” 150–151 and 167.

42 von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men Be Saved”?*, 183–188.

43 Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance of Allegory in Stoicism and Its Reception in Platonism, Pagan and Christian,” 363–368.

Such differences in Origen’s conceptualisation of *apokatastasis* arise from his commitment to Scripture. Origen makes extensive use of Scripture, both explicit reference and integration of concepts, words and phrases throughout his works. Origen’s oft-repeated phrase that “God will be all in all” is extremely important and straight from Paul (1 Cor 15:28). The passage points to the elimination of evil, the victory of Christ, universal submission of all things to him, the resurrection body and the destruction of death and sin.<sup>44</sup>

#### ON FIRST PRINCIPLES (GREEK: PERI ARCHON, LATIN: *DE PRINCIPIIS*)<sup>45</sup>

#### CONTEXT

Trigg argues *Peri Archon* is a mature theological vision which Origen never altered significantly.<sup>46</sup>

Origen’s *De Principiis*... is the most philosophical and comprehensive work of Origen, in comparison to other works which are mainly exegetical; nevertheless...

all philosophical arguments... are based on numerous Scriptural

quotations that ground and confirm his statements.<sup>47</sup>

Whilst it contains speculative elements, it is very important to understand how Origen views his work. For Origen, adherence to biblical and apostolic faith was primary, but beyond what was affirmed in the apostolic rule he was free to speculate (and such freedom alarmed later generations).<sup>48</sup> He specifically frames his eschatology as “research theology”<sup>49</sup> not hard and fast doctrine. Therefore in Book 1, chapter 6 “On the End or Consummation,” Origen indicates this is a difficult and important topic to be handled with “...great solicitude and caution, in the manner rather of an investigation and discussion, than in that of fixed and certain decision.” He delineates this chapter, as distinct from his previous chapters, as best conducted in the manner of “disputation” rather than “strict definition.”<sup>50</sup>

44 Ramelli, “Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism,” 314–322.

45 Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Vol X Writings of Origen* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869).

46 Trigg, *Origen*, 1983, 91–92. *Peri Archon* was probably written around 229, Origen was over 40 years old.

47 Trigg, *Origen*, 1983, 354–355.

48 Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 144.

49 Crouzel, *Origen*, 163–168.

50 *Peri Archon* 1.6.1

## UNIVERSALITY

Origen's *apokatastasis* incorporates an understanding of incorporeal rational souls (or 'intelligences') that pre-exist the material creation. The Greek word "soul" is derived from the word meaning "cooling" and Origen speculates that all souls were in communion with God but, by an act of free-will or neglect, fell from this union. The Logos (Jesus Christ), however, did not do so but remained in the Father as iron in the midst of fire is like fire.<sup>51</sup> So pre-existent, incorporeal souls fell from the fire of union with God and cooled (so to speak), some more than others. Origen postulated that some souls fell a short way and became angels, others fell very far and became demons. Human beings in turn are somewhere between angels and demons. God, in his mercy, created material beings in order to allow these souls to make their way back to God. Therefore matter is good, being made for purposes of pedagogy and purification, and is not intrinsically bad, irrelevant or evil as determined in some Greek philosophies. For Origen, coming back to God is a matter of moving from passions and sin to rationality; true knowledge and imaging of God.<sup>52</sup>

In participation in Christ we can progress back or "up" to be like God (divinisation). After physical death the soul progresses "not suddenly but slowly and gradually" through a process of amendment and correction taking place "imperceptibly in the individual instances" over "countless and unmeasured ages" some progressing faster than others until "numerous and uncounted progressive beings" are reconciled to God.<sup>53</sup> It is likened to a classroom with levels of teaching as we ascend back to God, a progression of revelation and knowledge (requiring purification) as you pass each stage in return to God.<sup>54</sup> The freedom of the creature, the termination of bondage, is when all of the kingdom in Christ is delivered to the rule of the Father so that God shall be all in all.<sup>55</sup> Through submission to the Logos (Jesus) a return to a pre-lapsarian state is

### ORIGEN SPECULATES THAT ALL SOULS WERE IN COMMUNION WITH GOD BUT, BY AN ACT OF FREE-WILL OR NEGLIGENCE, FELL FROM THIS UNION.

possible, arguably inevitable, for "the end is always like the beginning" and "God shall be all in all."

This universal submission leading to universal restoration comes through – not pressure or necessity (for God should not be imagined to subdue the world by force) – but by "word, reason, and doctrine," a call to "better things, the best systems of training and appropriate discipline," all safeguarding the rational creatures free-will.<sup>56</sup> Such submission does not override human free-will hence Origen is able to rebut concepts of absolute determinism. "... it lies within ourselves and in our own actions to possess either happiness or holiness; or by sloth and negligence to fall from happiness into wickedness and ruin..."<sup>57</sup> So, for Origen, particular human freedom and divine determinism or predestination are not in conflict.<sup>58</sup>

The logical outcome of Origen's system is that it is possible for demons to be restored to their former place. "There is resurrection of the dead, and there

is punishment, but not everlasting. For when the body is punished the soul is gradually purified, and so is restored to its ancient rank. For all wicked men, and for demons, too, punishment

has an end, and both wicked men and demons shall be restored to their former rank."<sup>59</sup> This idea of the salvation of demons was (and is) particularly controversial and Origen presents contradictory statements.<sup>60</sup> He categorically denies that he taught the salvation of Satan yet elsewhere admits the possibility.<sup>61</sup> Irrespective of the destiny of Satan, the broader idea of a limited time of punishment leading to universal restoration, rather than eternal separation from God in hell, is a key element of *apokatastasis*.

## PUNISHMENT

God is the physician of our souls and punishment is in order to expunge sin from the soul, to purify us for our betterment; in the same way a disease is remedied by bitter, unpleasant medicine, or amputation or burning out and cleansing by fire.<sup>62</sup> According to Origen, the "fire of destruction" is actually kindled by the flame of one's own fire and

<sup>51</sup> Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, 52.

<sup>52</sup> Brandon Lee Morgan, "'We Will All Be Changed': Materiality, Resurrection and Reaping Spiritual Bodies in Origen's *Peri Archon*," *American Theological Inquiry (Online)* 7, no. 2 (July 15, 2014): 16–19, <http://library.laidlaw.ac.nz:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001993198&site=eds-live>.

<sup>53</sup> *Peri Archon* 1.7.5

<sup>54</sup> There is a purgative element to this journey or progress and one can see how the idea of purgatory sprung from such roots in later church doctrine.

<sup>55</sup> *Peri Archon* 1.7.5

<sup>56</sup> *Peri Archon* 3.6.8

<sup>57</sup> *Peri Archon* 1.5.5

<sup>58</sup> MacDonald, "All Shall Be Well," 33. And Ramelli, "Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation," 167.

<sup>59</sup> Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, 54. From *On First Principles*, 2.10.3

<sup>60</sup> Lisa R. Holliday, "Will Satan Be Saved? Reconsidering Origen's Theory of Volition in 'Peri Archon,'" *Vigiliae Christianae*, 2009, 23.

<sup>61</sup> Heckart, "Sympathy for the Devil?" 57.

<sup>62</sup> *Peri Archon* 2.10.6

fuelled by one's own sins; the conscience becomes an accuser and witness against itself. Certain tortures are produced by the hurtful affection to one's sin.<sup>63</sup> So excruciating pain (like limbs being loosened and torn from the body) may be produced when the soul is in a disordered condition until such time as the dissolution and "rending asunder of souls" effects a "firmer structure" and restoration occurs.<sup>64</sup>

Punishment for Origen is always a means to an end. The pain incurred by the physician is to heal the sickness and the discipline of the teacher is in order to train the student. Punishment is therefore not eternal although hell may be.<sup>65</sup> There is no moral outrage in Origen at the thought of rational creatures being punished (as there may be today). In fact, for Origen, the fear of punishment is very healthy for the "masses." In Origen, some argue that substitutionary atonement is underplayed and pedagogical sanctification emphasised.<sup>66</sup> This makes sense given his focus on the journey of rational souls back to God. As part of this process, for pedagogical reasons, punishment is sometimes necessary. He does not deny or underplay punishment but neither does it coerce or violently force change.

AGAINST CELSUS (LATIN:  
*CONTRA CELSUM*)<sup>67</sup>

**CONTEXT**

In response to Celsus' charges against Christianity Origen writes a rebuttal, called *Contra Celsum*. In this text, we receive clear statements from Origen that align with some of his eschatological views in *Peri Archon* but he seems more circumspect and measured in how he communicates. The editors of the 1869 Ante-Nicene Christian Library believe it fair to judge Origen on his "perfectly orthodox" *Contra Celsum* written in old age to a wide audience as opposed to *De Principiis* (or *Peri Archon*) which was substantially orthodox but also indulged in "vain and unauthorised speculations."<sup>68</sup>

63 *Peri Archon* 2.10.4

64 *Ibid.*, 2.10.5

65 Sachs, "Current Eschatology," 236.

66 Bryan M Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 148.

67 Henry Chadwick with Origenes, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

68 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Vol X Writings of Origen*, viii-ix.

**PUNISHMENT**

Origen notes that Celsus critiques the Christian's belief that "God will come down and bring fire like a torturer"<sup>69</sup> and "when God applies the fire (like a cook!) all mankind will be roasted and they (Christians) alone will survive..."<sup>70</sup> In response, Origen states Christians believe that the fire that is brought upon the world is purifying, and it is probable that it is applied to each individual who needs judgement by fire together with healing. The fire burns and purifies from sin, not consuming the soul itself and Scripture testifies that this fire is beneficial in its effect. He notes the observant person will find an indication of an end to the pains inflicted on those who suffer. He also notes "we have been compelled to hint at truths which are not suitable for the simple-minded believers." So consistent with *Peri Archon* there appears to be limited period of punishment, although maybe only the "observant person" will note this. Origen is also

carefully managing what he reveals to the reader. Origen thinks that simple Christians hold such ideas of God as a "torturer" and a "cook" due to their immaturity and ignorance. Pastorally he thinks it best

for them to keep believing this so they live virtuously. But Origen is clear that the Bible teaches those who are pure need no punishment but those that live contrary to the nature of the image of God will suffer punishment for an appointed time determined by God.<sup>71</sup>

**UNIVERSALITY**

In response to Celsus' incredulity that uniting every rational being under one law is not possible, Origen responds, it is both possible and true. In opposition to a Stoic conflagration

...we believe that at some time the Logos will overcome the entire rational nature... remodelling every soul to his own perfection... when each individual simply by the exercise of free-will chooses what the Logos wills and will be in the same state which he has chosen... it is unlikely in the case of souls that any of the consequences of evil would be incapable of being cured by the rational and supreme God. The Logos and the healing power within him are more powerful than any evils of the soul, he applies this power to each individual soul

69 *Contra Celsum* 4:11-13

70 *Contra Celsum* 5:14

71 *Contra Celsum* 5:16

according to God's will, and the end of the treatment is the abolition of evil.<sup>72</sup>

In this text Origen appears to be pointing to a universality of restoration where each particular individual will freely choose what the Logos wills and evil will be abolished.

However, in other parts of *Contra Celsum*, Origen seems to advocate for separatism after death with no hint of universal restoration. For example, Celsus derides the "terrors Christians invent" but Origen in response argues that both he and Celsus believe in a doctrine of punishment and that both Bible and rationality support God as a judge.<sup>73</sup> Origen further states people should strive for divine teaching and to please God so at the divine judgement they may receive what they deserve, either good or bad.<sup>74</sup> Origen defends Christian teaching as he is concerned with improvement of the human race and will use threats of punishments (which he is persuaded are necessary for the whole world and also not unbeneficial for those who will suffer them) or promises for a blessed life in God's kingdom after death to those that are worthy to be under his rule.<sup>75</sup>

The reason for this tension between universal restoration and separatism after death appears pastorally motivated. Threats can have value if they help (uneducated) people choose life as there is a continuity from this life into the afterlife. Origen does not wish to remove the importance of individual free-will and growth in faith toward God in the here and now.<sup>76</sup> Whilst there may be some tension or paradox, it seems clear that there is still punishment, judgement, universal submission to Christ and the abolition of evil within *Contra Celsum*, all ideas consistent with *Peri Archon*.

#### CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP - EVALUATING APOKATASTASIS

On such an understanding, both Sachs<sup>77</sup> and Ramelli<sup>78</sup> hold to universal salvation being an integral part of Origen's eschatological understanding. Ramelli further points out that Neoplatonist philosophers later adopted Origen's concept of universal restoration within *apokatastasis* as their own and even ascribed it to Plato to give it

72 *Contra Celsum* 8:72

73 *Contra Celsum* 3:16

74 *Contra Celsum* 3:31

75 *Contra Celsum* 4:10

76 MacDonald, "All Shall Be Well," 44.

77 John R. Sachs, "Apokatastasis in Patristic Theology," *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4 (December 1993): 629.

78 Ramelli, "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism," 317.

greater legitimacy.<sup>79</sup> Hill states that it is clear that universal salvation follows inexorably from the claim that God only punishes creatures in order to improve them.<sup>80</sup> Such a systematic reading of Origen can be challenged but, in part answer to the inherent inconsistency found in Origen, Greggs asserts that Origen clearly took a different stance on universalism dependent on the genre of his work.<sup>81</sup>

Contrary to these views, Crouzel asserts that Origen's view on *apokatastasis* was non-systematised with no clear universal restoration as there are too many nuances, qualifications and inconsistencies to allow for a universalist reading. The best we can ascertain is that Origen hoped for universal salvation.<sup>82</sup> Heckart is concerned that an absolute universalist reading may contravene human free-will.<sup>83</sup> In a similar vein, Mario Baghos distinguishes the notion of a nuanced and complex view of *apokatastasis* from a simplistic, modern concept of universal salvation.<sup>84</sup>

Ronald Heine's recent book suggests Origen may have been rethinking aspects of *apokatastasis* developed in the Alexandrian years. "There is a basis for thinking that in his later life Origen did

think there were limitations on the redemptive work of God. It seems to me a defensible, but not an unquestionable, conclusion that in Caesarea Origen was in the process of rethinking his view of the ultimate salvation or restoration of all beings."<sup>85</sup> Ramelli would likely disagree, arguing that the Commentary of John, written many years after *Peri Archon*, still holds to an interpretation of *apokatastasis* that confirms Origen did not later change his mind on key principles.<sup>86</sup>

79 Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "The Debate on Apokatastasis in Pagan and Christian Platonists: Martianus, Macrobius, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine," *Illinois Classical Studies*, 2009, 201.

80 Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, 43.

81 Tom Greggs, "Exclusivist or Universalist? Origen the 'Wise Steward of the Word' (CommRom. V.1.7) and the Issue of Genre," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 3 (July 2007): 315.

82 Crouzel, *Origen*, 257–266.

83 Heckart, "Sympathy for the Devil?" 59.

84 Mario Baghos, "Reconsidering Apokatastasis in St Gregory of Nyssa's On the Soul and Resurrection and the Catechetical Oration," *Phronema* 27, no. 2 (2012): 150–151. He argues modern scholars override the tension Gregory has in his writings between evil being totally defeated and God being "all in all" in a future *apokatastasis* and the realised *apokatastasis* already fulfilled in Christ, to be partaken of freely by individuals in living a life of virtue in ecclesial community. Whilst he is writing about St Gregory and not Origen, the principles remain the same.

85 Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 256.

86 Ramelli, "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism," 316.



However, Heine argues this re-think was not from developing an “alternate system” but rather a growing hesitation on Origen’s part to go beyond what Scripture says. At Caesarea Origen becomes more engaged with the Jewish roots of Christianity, less concerned with esoteric doctrine and treats Scripture more holistically. “According to Heine, the mature Origen was less confident in logical deduction, and more prone to struggle with the ambiguities of Scripture and not resolve what it leaves as mystery (244).”<sup>87</sup>

The task of evaluating Origen’s *apokatasiasis* is complex. The emphasis one places on his view of *apokatastasis* as “research theology” or more certain doctrine is significant. Overlaying this, the task is complicated by the mass destruction of the Greek corpus, subsequent diverse Latin translations and questionable redaction. Origen’s pastorally motivated heterodox content, dependent on his audience, adds further complication. The judgements of anathema in 553 also need to be considered. Origen’s idea of pre-existent souls was judged heretical but other extreme views (associated with *apokatastasis* and also judged as heresy) arguably evolved later from Origen’s teachings and, as such, some of the judgements on Origen are anachronistic.<sup>88</sup> Gregory of Nyssa followed Origen’s *apokatastasis* but rejected pre-existent souls. Interestingly, his views do not appear to have been challenged in later Church Councils. Will there ever be real clarity? Certainly, accomplished and respected scholars are divided over the issue of universal salvation in Origen’s *apokatastasis*.

## CONCLUSION

It seems clear Origen was personally committed to *apokatastasis* as a concept within his Greek worldview and understanding of the witness of Scripture. Importantly, it answered many issues lying beyond the apostolic rule of faith, integrated platonic philosophy and refuted prevalent heresies of the day. Was it systematic and comprehensive as Ramelli contends or more speculative and idiosyncratic as Crouzel may argue? If we take seriously Gregg’s thesis that Origen posited

87 Paul R. Kolbet, Review of *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* by Ronald E. Heine, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 19.4, Winter 2011, n.p.  
[https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal\\_of\\_early\\_christian\\_studies/v019/19.4.kolbet.pdf](https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal_of_early_christian_studies/v019/19.4.kolbet.pdf) (accessed 3 July 2015).

88 Hastings, Mason, and Pypier, *Key Thinkers in Christianity*, 14. The authors argue that the pre-existence of souls was the only demonstrable heresy condemned in 553 directly attributable to Origen.

different views on universalism dependent on genre then I think the weight of evidence surveyed here is that Origen had a sophisticated, comprehensive and universal view of *apokatastasis* which he was committed to in a “systematic” sense (in that it influenced and was a foundation for other aspects of his thought and exegesis). He may have, in his mature years at Caesarea, had concern to moderate some of his more speculative philosophising which was subject to criticism in his desire to be a man of the church (for example, the salvation of Satan). However, there is no apparent evidence of a major recant or u-turn on Origen’s part.

*Apokatastasis* is, in my view, primarily an imperative of ontological reality for Origen; there will be nothing short of a full return of all rational souls to God because “the end is always like the beginning” and “God shall be all in all.” Therefore Rob Bell can look to Origen as an indicator that there are different eschatological perspectives within church history and that *apokatastasis* may well point to a universal restoration in which people, of their own free-will, are reconciled to God. However, Origen came to such a conclusion based on a vastly different approach to Scripture and from Greek philosophical concepts which are alien to most (if not all) of us today.

The logic of the universality of restoration/salvation is reliant on the presupposition of the nature of souls that Origen holds to. If we question Origen’s conception of rational souls then that in turn questions the logical outcome of the associated universal restoration. Likewise, Origen is at times seemingly dispassionate about the length of suffering some will have to endure to purify their souls. Bell suggests that many believe “...God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts” but, for Origen’s *apokatastasis* in particular, this may necessitate a gruesome, painful and aeons-long process of punishment, purification and education for many. These two elements highlight the type of difficulties that can arise when appealing to ancient figures in simplistic terms as authorities to support contemporary theology.

**CHRIS HANNEN** lives in Christchurch with his wife, Belinda and three children. As a family they attend Life Church. Chris studied at Laidlaw College in Christchurch (2004–2006), and returned to Laidlaw in 2014 as the Director of the Christchurch Campus. Alongside his work, Chris is working part time towards a Master of Theology Degree with Laidlaw’s Graduate School.