

Universal Restoration Substituted for Eternal Torment

Third School Now Completes Theological Trilemma—
Origen Replaces Endless Torment With Universalism

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Alexandria was not only the seat of a famous Catechetical School but a gathering place for numerous groups of philosophers, Gnostics, Christians, and heretics of all sorts. Especially was it the rallying point for Platonic philosophy, or more accurately of Neoplatonism. From here and from other North African centers such as Carthage and Hippo the blight of Platonism continued to obscure the light of the gospel more and more, until at last, after a few centuries, the church was encompassed by the midnight of the Dark Ages. The evidence is overwhelming that from the third century onward Christianity was increasingly perverted by the penetrations of Neoplatonic philosophy.

1. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ALEXANDRIAN SCHOOL

Prior to Origen, Christian writers had fully and freely discussed and defended individual doctrines. But this was usually because of attacks made upon them by heretics. None had previously attempted a systematic exposition of the Christian faith as a whole. Now, however, such a bold scheme got under way at Alexandria around the close of the second century. And as Alexandria was the primal seat of speculative philosophy, it was but natural that Alexandrian Christianity should assume a speculative form. The Alexandrian Christians were Platonists, and sought to explain Christianity according to Platonic categories, just as two centuries prior, in that same city, Philo had similarly attempted to explain Judaism in the Platonic framework. In fact, these Christian Platonists were definitely indebted to Philo, as well as to Plato. But that was not all. While most of the other Christian writers of the time still held to the divine authority of the Old and New Testaments in their most obvious meaning and form, the Alexandrians came to pay little heed to the historical literal sense in interpretation. The allegorical method of exegesis was reduced to a system. And significantly enough, the chief speculations of this group turned to the Godhead, the problem of evil, and the origin, nature, will, and destiny of man, and the related consummation of all things—the subject of our survey. Thus it was that Alexandria became the spawning ground of many a far-reaching and subversive development.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW ALEXANDRIAN SCHOOL

The new Alexandrian School emphasis was eclectic in principle. Certain philosophers had devised the plan of gleaning the "good" from the various systems of philosophy—Egyptian, Oriental, Pythagorean, Platonic, and now the dynamic Christian faith. But Platonism formed the integrating bond, and the postulate of the Innate Immortality of the soul assumed a central place. Ammonius Saccas gave new life to this coalition of opinions, and the virility of the new Christianity gave it new impetus. So it was that Neoplatonism gradually crowded all other contenders into the background, and like the rising sun began to eclipse every lesser light.

Moreover, it had wide appeal, both to Christian and to pagan, for the transition in emphasis was easy. But it became the nursery school of error, for Plato's doctrine of Innate Immortality was now incorporated as one of the main planks in its platform. In fact, Immortal-Soulism became the corner stone of the new system, and men were urged to free the immortal spirit from all encumbering influences. Even the perplexing restoration, or resurrection of the dead, was so interpreted as to accommodate it to the tenets of the Greek sages.

3. HOUR OF PERIL FOR EXPANDING CHURCH

And now we turn to the second great hour of peril for the rapidly expanding church. It had reached another determinative fork in the road, as had previously confronted it when Tertullianism arose. And from this new turning point onward a major segment of the church began to veer farther and farther away from her original primitive position and course. The finger boards at this new fork had been turned at a divergent angle by the Platonic philosophers, and now pointed down the tangent road of departure. As a consequence there were progressive digressions during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, stemming from the aggressive teachings and illustrious names of Tertullian, Origen, and finally Augustine. In the departure from, and actual abandonment of, the apostolic principles of historical and literal Biblical interpretation, Origen now led the way with a new boldness—breaking away from the older accepted landmark principles of Biblical exegesis. He was, in fact, the first to reduce the allegorical method of interpretation to a definite system, like that of Philo for the Jews.

His aim was to harmonize the Scriptures with the Platonic modes of thought, which had become the essence of his own thinking. In this he exerted a profound influence, for from his day until the time of Chrysostom (d. 407) there was scarcely a commentator who did not borrow heavily from his words, and pattern his method of exegesis more or less after Origen's revolutionary Allegorical School of Interpretation.

4. GRAVE INVOLVEMENTS OF ORIGENISM

It may there fore be fairly said that, perhaps more than any other single individual of that era, Origen—scholar, philosopher, Immortal-Soulist, and allegorizer—set in motion those diverting forces that ultimately crowded the Advent hope and expectancy into the background. Prior to Origen, church leaders had looked for the triumph of righteousness to be brought about through the supernatural interposition of Christ at His second advent, and the concurrent literal resurrection of the righteous dead. And these were tied in with the cataclysmic end of the world, which was expected by many within a fairly short time—at most by A.D. 500. But Origen now introduced his theory of the ultimate establishment of Christianity in this present world by gradual growth, and throughout the universe by the ultimate universal restoration of all the wicked. However, in order to establish his postulate Biblically, he was compelled to spiritualize the resurrection, to mysticize and neutralize the Second Advent, as well as to allegorize the prophecies concerning the last things.

Farrar, *Mercy and Judgment*, p. 321.

He thus struck at the very heart of the primitive Christian hope, substituting therefore a radically new type of Christianity, and implanting a new concept of the relationship between God, man, and sin, and of the destiny of the race. It was a fateful day for the church, fraught with far-reaching consequences.

5. ROSEATE EXPECTATIONS, BUT GROSS PERVERSIONS

Origen's speculative scheme for resolving the moral problems of life, death, and destiny, consistent as he thought with divine love and justice, was his revolutionary theory of universal restoration. It was a new and enticing concept. Salmond calls it "the dreamland, the enchanted land of theology." Another refers to it as "the cloudland looming with rose-tinted peaks in the far aionian future." It was all that, and more. It involved a radically new eschatology.

But it was all curiously shot through with the notion of the pre-existence and transmigration of souls, the baptism of purifying fire in the other world, the ministry of spirits in the afterlife, and the persistence of something in every life superior to evil, leading at last to the triumph of righteousness for all. It was a roseate picture, appealing to the natural heart of man. But even according to Origen this was not an absolute restoration, but one that might, alas, be followed by new falls and new restorations. So, quite apart from its anti-scriptural basis, it was not without its drawbacks, reservations, and uncertainties.

And not all, by any means, followed Origen's philosophical and theological speculations. In fact, their projection caused grave concern to a large and powerful group, and resulted in open opposition. As a consequence, the Christian Church, as concerns the nature and eternal destiny of man, became divided into three major groups, each battling the other vigorously. Irenaeus had taught the final annihilation of the wicked, Tertullian their eternal torment, and now Origen their ultimate restoration.

S. D. F. Salmond, *The Christian Doctrine of Immortality*, p. 630. Quoted in Salmond, loc. cit.

The tension of the contending forces mounted. Gradually, however, the Tertullian-Augustinian position of Eternal Torment gained the ascendancy, and the other two views (eternal death and ultimate restoration for the wicked) were relegated to the background. Note the progressive steps of accomplishment in broad outline.

6. THE PROGRESSIVE PATH OF DEPARTURE

Origen followed the tangent path of departure through to its ultimate. His third-century spiritualization of the resurrection and the Second Advent—blended with his allegorization of the rest of Scripture—coupled with the postulate of the indefeasible immortality of the soul, together constituted the first fatal step in the great departure from the earlier Christian faith.

The second step followed in the fourth century under Eusebius, likewise an Immortal-Soulist, who conceived the newly elevated Christian Church, now under imperial preferment, protection, and patronage, to be the prophesied "kingdom of God." Thus he carnalized, or materialized, the kingdom aspect of Early Church expectation.

The third step, constituting the climax of the progressive departure, came under Augustine's fifth-century contention (along with retention of the previous two) that the predicted thousand-year binding of Satan had already begun with the First Advent. Augustine maintained that they were, in fact, already living in the millennial period. And all three men—Origen, Eusebius, and Augustine—held, of course, to the basic Neoplatonic postulate of universal Innate Immortality. And now, under Augustine's powerful influence this elaborated thesis became virtually universal. By this time the early simple Christian faith was so mangled and overwhelmed that it was scarcely recognizable, and remained under a virtual blackout for more than a thousand years. Not until Reformation times and influences did it emerge from the long eclipse, as the light of the gospel dispelled the darkness of departure.

Constantine's public espousal of Christianity introduced within a single generation the most remarkable revolution in the thoughts, laws, and customs of an empire recorded in history, and thus afforded a plausible basis for the revolutionary "kingdom" concept, when not checked with Scripture. For a full portrayal see L. E. Froom, *Prophetic Faith*, vol. 1, chaps. 14-20.

7. PLATONIC INFLUENCE SUPERSEDES THAT OF APOSTLES.

The influence of Plato was now definitely impressed upon the thought and language of all who followed either Tertullian or Origen, especially on those of philosophic background. Upon some it had profound effect. But both groups followed Plato implicitly in asserting that "every soul is immortal." Indeed, this proposition became the common bond of unity between these two conflicting schools of theological thought as to the destiny of the soul.

On this point of Innate Immortality Plato was now definitely placed above the prophets and apostles, and accorded a deference and an authority greater and wider than he had ever contemplated. In fact, Plato was actually dominating the church under the guise of the authority of Christ, and often in opposition to, and subversive of, the explicit doctrines of the apostles. Particularly in Alexandria, through Origen, were these new, unnatural, and far-fetched meanings read into the language of both the Old and New Testaments through mysticizing, allegorizing, and spiritualizing away their natural sense. The nature and destiny of man was now definitely Platonized. Thus it was that the teachings of Plato came to be palmed off on the church under the sanction of Scripture. But even more tragic, the actually uncertain and merely tentative suggestions of Plato on the soul were now boldly taught by the schools of Tertullian and Origen as established truth in the realm of the soul. "Tertullian and Origen, whose views differed on other subjects, agreed in this one point, that they, in accordance with their peculiar notions concerning the nature of the soul, looked upon its immortality as essential to it."—Hagenbach, *Compendium of the History of Doctrines*, vol. 1, p. 163.

8. BALEFUL EFFECTS OF ACCEPTING PLATONISM

The baleful effects of accepting the Platonic thesis of the immortality of the soul soon began to appear. The body came to be despised and held in contempt. It was consequently disciplined and weakened, in order that the "spark of divinity" in the immortal spirit might be exalted and freed. And as the "immortal soul" was considered imprisoned and debased by the body, its corporeal

habitation, so it was held that in proportion to disengagement from this encumbrance would the soul be prepared for its restoration to purity. Thus asceticism and devotion to a life of seclusion and solitude followed, accompanied by the upspringing of monasteries, abbeys, hermits, and anchorites.

Celibacy likewise developed out of the same rootage. And this, in turn, was followed by the worship of saints and relics, and the concept of patron saints and the intercession of saints, inasmuch as after death the saints were believed to be more active and powerful than before, now having free access to Heaven and to God. Purgatory was introduced to mitigate the terrors of the Eternal Torment of Tertullianism. The soul was held to be part of the divine nature but confined to the body. And the sins that clung to it must be purged away, and the soul purified from sin.

Such were the blighting effects resulting from the introduction of Platonism into the precincts of the church. So we say that beyond controversy Origen's innovations were largely instrumental in accelerating the early great apostasy of the church. To these we now turn. His doctrine of the progressive final triumph of the church on earth, which undermined the Biblical doctrine of the kingdom of God, and his ridicule of Chiliasm, all paved the way for the later Augustinian concepts of the millennium as embracing the Christian Era, and the earthly church as constituting God's promised kingdom, and the soul as innately immortal. These, in turn, gave rise to the fullblown Catholic system of the Middle Ages.

9. ORIGENISM BANNED UNDER JUSTINIAN

Although Origenism never became general, it had numerous adherents, especially in the East, including Gregory Thaumaturgus, Pamphilus, Titus of Bostia, Basil, Diodorus, Didymus, and Gregory of Nyssa. But there were opponents—Cyprian, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Jerome. But in the age of Justinian free inquiry was proscribed, and all such questions came to be settled by authority. The keys of Heaven and Hell were by now in the hands of the hierarchy, through the exclusive privilege of the priesthood to administer the sacraments, and thus admit or exclude souls from the church and Heaven. In 544, at an imperial synod of bishops, held at Constantinople, Origen's name appears in the list of those condemned and anathematized as heretical. Thus Origenism, in the sixth century—in the sense of Universal Restorationism—came to be treated as a heresy, as Augustinianism rose to dominance. It was suppressed by the church for a thousand years. It did not, in fact, reappear until post-Reformation times, and then in modified form. But the allegorical principle of exegesis persisted, and was widely employed—and still is by many to this day.

Under Petersen. Bengel, Oetinger, and Michael Hahn in Germany, Newton in England, and Lavater of Zurich, et cetera.