Ilaria L.E. Ramelli


This is a remarkable book in many senses. It is voluminous (890 pages), it examines a period spanning nine centuries (1st to 9th c.), it deals with an enormous multiplicity and variety of texts, and it does so without losing its thematic unity, focus, and engagement. The book examines the Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*, which we first find in some form in Christian texts of the 2nd century, yet the doctrine was fleshed out and defended by Origen and was further articulated by his followers and the Cappadoceans, especially Gregory of Nyssa. In nutshell the doctrine of *apokatastasis* consists in two main claims, first that all human souls will be purified from evil and sin, which amounts to their salvation, and, second, that the universe will be cleansed from all evil and that would involve the restoration of devil and the demons. The eventual *apokatastasis* in these two senses is depicted as amounting to a restoration of humanity and of the world to their original condition, or to an even better one than the initial condition, since sin and evil will be ruled out from the world and definitely defeated. The book is a systematic investigation of that doctrine. It is a systematic investigation both in the sense that the arguments advanced for that doctrine are meticulously examined and in the sense that the historical evolution of the doctrine is closely studied.

Now, the Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis* has its antecedent in Stoicism, as Ramelli points out. In Stoic cosmology *apokatastasis* indicates the periodic repetition of cosmic cycles. The Stoics maintained that the world exists eternally in a succession of cosmic phases, each of which will end with a conflagration, but this resolution into fire will be the beginning of a new cosmic cycle. The Stoics were inspired in turn by Heraclitus and possibly also by Empedocles, who, too, maintains the existence of cosmic cycles. The Christians know of the Stoic doctrine. It is indicative that a number of the relevant Stoic testimonies come from Christian sources that favor *apokatastasis*. The difference between the pagan and the Christian testimonies of the Stoic doctrine is that the Christian sources, such as Eusebius (*Preparatio Evangelica*; *SVF* II.599) and Nemesius (*De natura hominis* 38; *SVF* II.625), for instance, use the terms ἀνάστασις and ἀποκατάστασις, while the pagan ones speak of παλιγγενεσία, that is, of rebirth (e.g. Alexander, *In Generatione et Corruptione* 314.13-15). One might justifiably think that the Christians use the specific terminology in order to suggest that there are pagan antecedents of the Christian doctrine marking the continuity of Christianity with the best of the pagan philosophy.
Origen, however, the main founder of the Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*, is concerned with distinguishing it from the Stoic doctrine, as Ramelli shows (pp. 8-10). Ramelli does not delve into the details of the Stoic doctrine, let alone its Presocratic roots. She rather moves straight to the Jewish and Christian background of the doctrine. The reader embarks on that section of the book with the impression that Ramelli endorses Origen’s claim about the difference between the Stoic and the Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*. This is not explicitly argued for, but is an inference based on the fact that the author devotes only ten pages to the treatment of the Stoic doctrine and two hundred and ten pages to the Biblical antecedents.

The first chapter entitled “The roots of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*” could be a study of its own (pp. 1-221), as is the case also with the following ones. The second chapter (pp. 223-278) focuses on Origen’s followers in Alexandria as well as his first detractors, the third studies Origen’s later followers, the Cappadocians, Evagrius, the Antiochenes, and the Fourth century Latin Origenians (pp. 279-658), while the final, fourth, chapter examines the development of the doctrine from Augustine to Eriugena including its Syriac reception of the doctrine (660-816). The conclusion summarizes the main features of the doctrine of *apokatastasis* and its theological significance (817-826).

The first chapter studies the Biblical passages that could be seen as offering some kind of justification of the Christian doctrine of *apokatastasis*, while also investigating Origen’s predecessors on this topic, such as Irenaeus (89-107), Pantaenus (107-110), the Syrian Christian philosopher Bardaisan of Edessa (107-119), Clement (119-136), with the rest of the chapter discussing Origen. Apart from Old and New Testament passages, Ramelli also considers apocryphal and Gnostic texts in remarkable scholarly detail. She summarizes all the necessary information concerning the nature, date and context of each text and discusses how these sources were exploited by the partisans of the *apokatastasis* doctrine. Regarding the early Christian thinkers before Origen investigated in this chapter, the reader is given abundant information about the context, date, and aim of the text under discussion. One wonders, however, how pioneering Origen was in establishing the *apokatastasis* doctrine, given that his predecessors, Clement for instance, not only espoused it but also associated it with Paul’s writings (pp. 133-4). Of course, as Ramelli shows, Origen argues at length and systematically in all of his works for the extinction of evil, the reintegration of the devil and the restoration of all human souls, and this doctrine is part of his cosmology, theology, salvation theory, and ethics. Almost all aspects of his doctrine, however, have been maintained by earlier Christian thinkers, as Ramelli shows. Still, one might argue, Origen is responsible for a great synthesis, and more argument would be welcome regarding the
difference between him and the earlier tradition as well as more justification for the claim of the book that he is the founder of the *apokatastasis* doctrine.

The second chapter focuses on Origen’s first followers and adversaries (pp. 223–277). Followers include Theognostus, Dionysius of Alexandria, Athanasius and Marcellus of Ancyra, while the main opponents are Methodius and Peter of Alexandria. Although the chapter does not lose its focus, much of the material discussed here does not directly relates to *apokatastasis* but pertains to Christology. It is true, admittedly, that Christ’s role as savior is crucial for the understanding of restoration, as Athanasius, for instance, shows (pp. 248–252) and that Christology in general constitutes the philosophical basis of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. But this only becomes clear as the book progresses and is stressed finally in the conclusion.

The third chapter discusses the development of the doctrine of *apokatastasis* in Origen’s followers in the broad sense, namely those who remain loyal to Origen’s theology as well as those who adhere to some aspects of Origen’s thought, such as the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. The former group includes Didymus the blind and Eusebius, while the latter includes Evagrius and the Cappadocians. The chapter is extremely long (pp. 279–658) and one wonders why it has not been divided into two parts at least, given that the section on the Cappadocians (pp. 344–461) constitutes a unity in itself. Ramelli shows an impressive knowledge of the relevant texts, including Syriac texts such as those of Ephrem. Although Ephrem is not explicitly adhering to the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, Ramelli is right to claim that in a number of passages he argues with such a view in mind (p. 331). The texts she cites (pp. 333–339) plainly shows this to be so. However, this is one of the cases in which the discussion could have been shorter. The same holds for Basil of Caesarea (pp. 344–372) who, as Ramelli admits, does not support the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, and yet Basil makes distinctions similar to those adhering to that view, such as that between *αἰώνιος* and *ἀίδιος*, which is crucial for the argument in favor of that doctrine, as becomes clear throughout the book.

Basil, however, may just have been cautious in the matter, as is the case with later Christian thinkers, such as Maximus the Confessor, and he may be avoiding approving the *apokatastasis* doctrine explicitly. The section on Gregory of Nyssa (pp. 372–440) and that on Gregory of Nazianzus (pp. 440–461) are extremely well argued and informative. Ramelli shows that Gregory of Nyssa takes over most of Origen’s arguments in favor of *apokatastasis*, as is evident in the main from his philosophically pregnant work *De anima et resurrectione*. The reason why the doctrine of *apokatastasis* is so prominent in this work has to do with the way Gregory understands resurrection, namely as restoration of the soul to its original condition, which involves purification.
from sin. A slight difference of emphasis can, however, be noticed between Origen and Gregory. The former speaks of universal salvation while the latter writes of universal resurrection amounting to universal purification. Of course, in the end, there may not be much difference between the two, but Gregory does appear to formulate his view more carefully and to take more care in defending himself from possible critics of his orthodoxy. His view, apparently, is that restoration is undeniable if the resurrection of all also is, because resurrection is tied to the notion of purification, and this in his view amounts to elimination of the good, that is, restoration.

The final chapter (pp. 659-815) examines the *apokatastasis* doctrine in Augustine, Ps-Dionysius Areopagita, Maximus Confessor, the Syriac tradition of 6th to 9th centuries including Isaac of Nineveh, and finally John the Scot Eriugena. Not all of these thinkers, however, are explicit adherents of the doctrine. Ps-Dionysius and Maximus are definitely not. The fact that they make remarks that are reminiscent of the doctrine indicates not necessarily that they endorse it; their remarks rather suggest that they renounce it. They were wary of openly embracing the doctrine, since Origen's philosophy was getting a bad press in their time. Ramelli speaks with clarity of these current and counter-currents despite the obscurity of the relevant sources (pp. 724-738). In the case of John Eriugena we encounter someone who, in *Periphyseon*, openly and strongly argues for the doctrine of *apokatastasis*. As Ramelli shows, Eriugena knows Origen's work directly. In this regard Eriugena is the opposite of Augustine. Eriugena actually goes as far as to preclude God's punishment of any of his creatures and to maintain a restoration of all creation, thus going further than Gregory of Nyssa.

The short conclusion at the end of the book (pp. 817-826) summarizes the main features of the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, but does not discuss such variations as surface in the book. Ramelli tends to treat the doctrine as a unified one, in spite of the fact that her own discussion gives us grounds to think of the existence of variations, for instance, as to whether restoration extends to all creation or just to humanity and whether restoration presupposes God's punishment or not. The conclusion suggests that Ramelli herself defends the doctrine as a Christian doctrine supported by many Biblical passages and, in this sense at least, not invented by Origen. It is, however, Origen who argued for this doctrine and who fleshed it out, as Ramelli shows. The Biblical passages do provide support for this doctrine, but on grounds that are, as Ramelli admits, philosophical and, in my view, predominantly philosophical: the *apokatastasis* doctrine does justice to God's goodness, omnipotence, and grace and also to human nature as created in similarity with God. These are the arguments, forcefully put forward by Origen, that vindicate this doctrine.
Let me conclude by stressing the scholarly quality of a book that rests on many years of laborious research. It is clearly written, abundantly documented, engagingly argued, and meticulously proof-read. The book delivers more than it promises in so far as it is not just an exemplary treatment of the doctrine of *apokatastasis* but also a mine of information about a range of issues in early and medieval Christian theology, such as Christology, salvation theory, ethics, and psychology. It will be the standard work on the subject for a long time and a book of reference for advanced students of early and medieval Christianity.

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