THE PLACE OF JEROME'S COMMENTARY ON EPHESIANS IN THE ORIGENIST CONTROVERSY: THE APOKATASTASIS AND ASCETIC IDEALS

BY

ELIZABETH A. CLARK

In his Apology against Rufinus, Jerome criticized Rufinus' translation of Origen's On First Principles: "...however much you may change them, however much you may correct them, you will not credibly demonstrate them to be catholic. If the error existed only in the words or in some few passages, what is bad might be cut out and replaced with what is good. When, however, the whole argument [of the Peri Archôn] is alike and rests on a single point, namely, that the whole universe of rational creatures who fell by their own will will hereafter return to a condition of unity, and that again from this starting point other falls will occur, what can you emend, except you change the entire book?"¹

Jerome here claims that Origen's cosmological monism, his view that all rational beings at the beginning were and at the end will be in a condition of unity, is the central error from which his others derive. Although here, in 402, Jerome rages against Origen's cosmological scheme, just six years before, in 396, he had claimed that Origen's mistakes on the condition of souls and the future repentance of the devil were not as serious as his erroneous view that the seraphim described in Isaiah 6 were the Son and the Holy Spirit.² But if we move back still further to Jerome's Commentary on Ephesians, composed in the late 380's, we would be hard-pressed to decide if he considered Origen's views mistaken at all, so weakly does he dissociate himself from them.

Why, we must ask, did Jerome move progressively away from Origen's teaching on the apokatastasis,³ "the restitution of all things" mentioned in Acts 3:21? The most obvious answer is that after 393, the date of the Origenist controversy's eruption in Palestine, he wished to extricate himself from any connection with Origen's theology. This was a difficult task, since he had earlier mined Origen's exegetical works to compose his own Scriptural commentaries. But since obvious answers rarely capture the whole truth, a second, more properly theological,
reason can be posited for Jerome's rejection of the *apokatastasis*: it did not allow sufficient room for a differentiation of heavenly rewards based on ascetic renunciation. Although Jerome confessed the ultimate forgivability of all sins, a confession that might have pushed him to affirm a universal restitution to goodness, he was more strongly committed to a hierarchy in the hereafter based on degrees of ascetic rigor. That commitment, although present in his early writings, was undoubtedly heightened in the controversy with Jovinian, which fell midway between Jerome's writing of the *Commentary on Ephesians* and his self-defense against charges of Origenism in the *Apology against Rufinus*.

Two brief citations from Jerome's anti-Origenist writings will here suffice to illustrate the point. In his *Apology against Rufinus*, dating to 401-402, Jerome strenuously objects to Origen's teaching on "the restitution of all things", in which the devil, Jews, and heathens will be saved and a new world will begin, but from which there could also be a new "fall". If such were the case, Jerome posits, "we would have to fear lest those of us who are now men would afterwards be born as women, and she who is today a virgin might by chance be a prostitute. These things I point out as heresies in the books of Origen". And in *Epistle 84*, composed two years earlier, Jerome denounces "the restitution of all things" because the concept implies that "it will be the same for Gabriel as for the devil, for Paul as for Caiaphas, for virgins as for whores".

This essay will argue that the *Commentary on Ephesians* was central to the altercation between Rufinus and Jerome, and will suggest how Jerome's commitment to ascetic ideals worked against his more-than-passing interest in Origen's teaching on the *apokatastasis*.

Jerome, in his dispute with Rufinus, may have been his own worst enemy: it was he, not his adversaries, who insisted that his orthodoxy was proved by his treatment of Origen's views in his *Commentaries* on Ephesians and Ecclesiastes. In letters dated to 396 and to 400, Jerome urges his audience to seek out these *Commentaries* in order to judge his orthodoxy for themselves. Unfortunately for Jerome, Rufinus did just that. His response was the *Apology against Jerome*, in which Rufinus argues that the *Ephesians Commentary* reveals Jerome to be a bedfellow, not an opponent, of Origen. Defenders of Jerome such as J. Brochet, call Rufinus' accusations "artifices", and claim that, at the worst, Jerome was guilty only of a "lack of clarity of expression". Ferdinand Cavallera, however, following the suggestion of Tillemont, ex-