

The Duration And Nature Of Future Punishment

By HENRY CONSTABLE, A.M.

Prebendary of Cork

Fifth Edition - 1875

CHAPTER XX

Rise Of The Theory Of Universal Restoration - Origen

"No language can express too strongly our conviction of the danger as well as the error of this view"

NOT surely without reason did Paul warn against philosophy, when the admission of one philosophical dogma led good men, under the specious pretext of exhibiting the Divine justice and holiness as infinite, to paint God as a monster of unutterable cruelty. We will now see the wisdom of the apostle's warning in the result from this same source of another school of theology, which, while seeking to free God's character from the charge of injustice or cruelty, would probably, if generally accepted, be in its immediate consequences in this world far more injurious to truth and godliness. No language can express too strongly our conviction of the danger as well as the error of this latter view. It gilds with seductive light the ways of sin. It would, we firmly believe, if commonly accepted, in a single generation reduce the morals of the world to a level with those of Sodom. Its ablest advocates confess this. Bengel tells us that it is "a doctrine not *to be preached*." Dr. Thomas Burnet advocated it in *Latin*, and charges ministers on no account to proclaim it to their hearers.¹



2. The fearful picture of God, exhibited by Tertullian, could not be laid in its bare horrors before the mind without drawing forth some protest. The doctrine of the age upon the soul gave the shape to the protest, and Origen came forward to make it under the title of "*universal restoration*." Tertullian had consigned reprobate men and devils to endless pain in hell. Origen converts hell into a vast purgatory, and sends men and devils forth from it, purified and humbled, to the feet of the Great Father, and to the joys which are at His right hand for evermore. It is the old story of human thought from one extreme to its opposite. The truth always lies between the two.

3. Origen had seized hold of a scriptural truth, the final extinction of evil, which was just as much a part of our Father's revelation as Tertullian's eternity of punishment.² Each had his undoubted share of truth; and if the question lay between their two systems alone it could never be set at rest. If Tertullian could appeal to Scripture for the overthrow of the wicked, whether

men or angels, as being of an endless nature, Origen could point from the same source to a blissful coming time when all that had breath should praise the Lord.

4. What was there which prevented Origen from going back to the old scriptural doctrine of death as the end of sinners, which places the two scriptural truths just mentioned in harmony and not in opposition? It was the very same dogma of the immortality of the soul which had led Athenagoras and Tertullian to their endless life in hell.³ This dogma first taught by Satan to Eve, and handed down through Egyptian priests and heathen philosophers to fathers of the Christian church, made the revolt from Tertullian to be only the exchange of one human system for another, instead of being a return from man's heresy to God's truth.

5. Origen had exceeded the views of the earlier fathers on the soul. Jerome's charge against the school of Origen, that he and his followers held the souls of men and the angelic natures to be a part of the Divine substance and nature of God Himself, though it appears inconsistent with some of the statements of Origen, yet shows the tendency of his teaching, and the manner in which it was regarded in his time.⁴ He certainly held the most exalted notions of the dignity and nature of the soul. It had with him an existence long anterior to that of the body, even though he may not have held it to have been created from eternity: it was wholly incapable of death or destruction: it possessed an immortality of which nothing could deprive it. Here was Origen's axiom, a first truth with him. It was in connection with this that he held the scriptural truth to which his opponents had shut their eyes—the abolition of evil: it was with this, as a main part of his system, that he looked on hopefully to the times of which the Scriptures are full, when all things should again be very good.⁵

6. How were they to be brought about? Not by the casting away of the barren branches, leaving only the fruitful branches on the tree.⁶ Not by the disappearance out of the realms of life of the wicked, leaving in the land of life only the lovers of God and of Christ. Not by the destruction of a single unit from the multitudinous creation which occupied in God's world a rank higher than the brutes. This could not be with Origen. With him, if it was not "life from eternity to eternity," it was at least "once living, always to live." Death might come and close the eye of the bright-plumaged bird: death might come and still the roar of the young lion that shook the earth: death might lay its unresisted hand upon that leviathan, so fierce that none "dare stir him up:" death might even for a space paralyse the strength of man's body, and corrupt the beauty of his countenance, and mingle dust with dust; but to the Divine soul of man death and destruction could not come. It was stronger than death: mightier than destruction: pain could not weaken it: fire consume it: it was indestructible. How then could the glorious picture of prophecy prove more than a fond conceit? Only by converting hell into a universal purgatory, where evil was destroyed and the evil-doer purged, where sin was blotted out while the sinner was preserved.⁷

7. Heathen philosophy had uttered Origen's theory long before Origen was born, just as it had sketched out that of Augustine. Plato may be said to stand sponsor for both views. We have already seen that in his Tartarus he has given the exact prototype of Augustine's hell. But endless misery for the wicked was what Plato could endure only for *a very few*, whom he called "*incurable*." The vast majority of the wicked were, in Plato's conception, "*curable*," For all these, the scene of punishment after death was *the place of their purgation*. He had an Acherusian lake to which the majority of wicked souls went, and from which, after a longer or a shorter period of

suffering, they were released. He had his lake of Acheron where souls of a moderate amount of crime went, and from which, after due suffering, they were released. Even into his Tartarus, into which incurable souls were sent for unending torment, some very wicked yet curable souls were also sent, and after suffering there came forth to pass through the places of lighter suffering to a complete purgation.⁸ We thus see that Plato suggested his idea to Origen as he did to Augustine. Very little need be added to Plato's teaching in order to make it one of *universal* restoration. It was but to suppose that his *few incurables* were not absolutely incurable, but might be ranked among the curable, and the full idea of Origen was displayed.

8. Heathen philosophy had given his idea to Origen; but he had, as a Christian teacher, to apply it to the language of Scripture. It took its place easily and naturally in the speculations of Plato; because he taught of those souls which he brought forth from his penal and purgative fires, that in those fires they did not die, did not perish, and were not destroyed. It might seem rather a stumbling-block to Origen that the souls which he brought forth from the fire of hell were said in Scripture to die, and perish, and be destroyed there. For Origen knew very well the meaning of those Greek words which are thus translated in our English version. He knew that the terms of the Greek language applied to the future punishment of sinners were the very strongest terms that could be chosen from that copious language to express the utter destruction of organization, the utter loss of life, and being, and existence. What was to be done with these?

9. *Were they to be explained away?* That is what the holders of Augustine's theory have done. They have ransacked the language of poetry and passion, of exaggeration and hyperbole, to find out remote secondary senses to impose on the plain terms of the Divine law, and, where these have failed, they have put senses on those terms which neither poetry nor passion, exaggeration nor hyperbole, justify. With them death means life, and life means happiness, and being destroyed means being made miserable, and so on. Having put these convenient meanings on the phraseology of Scripture, and interpreted it as not one of them would dare to interpret the code of a human legislator, they look placidly upon a thousand texts which contradict the lie they teach from platform, and pulpit, and press, and instill into children's minds almost with their mother's milk. Origen could not, or would not, do this. He gives, as any Greek scholar not possessed with the spirit of Augustine would do, their proper force to the terms of the New Testament, the same meaning which Plato, or Demosthenes, or Cicero, would attach to them.

10. We will give an example of this. Every one is familiar with the solemn warning of our Lord: "Fear not them which *kill* the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him who is able to *destroy* both body and soul in hell." We remark in the English version the change from "kill," in the first clause, to "destroy," in the second, a change exactly answering to the Greek original, which lives *apokteino* (apokteinw) in the first clause, and *apollumi* (apollumi) in the second. The maintainers of Augustine's theory attempt to take advantage of a change which is in reality only a heavier blow to their system. They generally explain "destroy" as a term of *inferior* force to "kill." Now anyone who came unprejudiced to this passage of our Lord would acknowledge that every law of right reason would lead us to conclude that the force of the term in the second clause must *at least equal* that in the first, else the warning is diminished in its intensity. Let us hear the Greek scholar, Origen, on the proper force of this word "destroy." He is commenting on [1 Cor. 3:9](#), in connection with [Jer. 1:10](#): "See what is said to the people of God, 'Ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building:' therefore the words of God over nations and

kingdoms are, 'to root out, and to throw down, *and to destroy*.' If it be rooted out, and that which is rooted out *be not destroyed, that which is thrown down still exists*. It is therefore the result of God's goodness, after the rooting out, *to destroy what is rooted out*; after the throwing down, *to destroy what is thrown down*.⁹ Such is the mighty power which Origen, a Greek scholar, gives to this word "destroy." With him it means *blotting out of all existence, obliterating the very form and appearance*. It is thus a stronger word in sense than "kill." Death, for a time at least, leaves the shape and parts unaltered: destruction removes the organization and resemblance altogether.

11. But, it will be asked, if such be the true force of the words applied in Scripture to future punishment, how did Origen defend his theory of universal restoration with these meeting him in the face? Very easily. Origen never found any difficulty in Scripture. If it was apparently for him, well and good; if it was apparently against him, he made it without any ceremony speak as he wished. Scripture has, with him, not only a "*historical, but a spiritual method of interpretation*:" it has "a meaning, not such only as is apparent at first sight, *but also another, which escapes the notice of most*."¹⁰ Origen, it must be confessed, very frequently takes the latter meaning; for his explanations of Scripture constantly merit the praise of excessive singularity. But it will be evident to all that in laying down the above rule of interpretation, Origen gives himself full scope for assigning any meaning that he pleases to Scripture, and fully merits Mosheim's description of him as one who "neglects and despises, for the most part, the outward letter, and in this devious path displays the most ingenious strokes of fancy, though always at the expense of truth, whose Divine simplicity is scarcely discernible through the cobweb-veil of allegory."¹¹

12. Every reader of Scripture knows that its solemn warnings are addressed *to the sinner in person* "*O wicked man, thou shalt surely die*." Death, destruction, perdition, loss of life—all the multiplied phrases and illustrations of the Bible, are in it directed against *the persons* of the wicked. With regard to those redeemed ones in whom while sin is destroyed they are themselves saved, we constantly find such expressions as "the old man crucified," "the body of sin destroyed," "the flesh crucified," "the old leaven purged out," "the deeds of the body mortified."¹² But expressions of this kind are never used in Scripture of the wicked. It is *they themselves* who are threatened with destruction. Origen's simple mode of neutralising their force is by directing them against *their sin*. True, that few readers of Scripture perceive this application of Scripture; but Origen perceives it and that is enough. It is one of those meanings which "*escape the notice of most*," but lie open to his gaze. And so his point is gained. Their force cannot be too strong for him; for with his spiritual direction it makes for him and not against him. So he does not attempt to diminish it. The Augustinian, directing them correctly against the sinner, puts upon them a false meaning: Origen, directing them with his spiritual vision against his sin, leaves them their proper sense. Both pervert Scripture, and it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to say against which the charge lies heaviest.

13. We meet with Origen's free and easy method of interpreting Scripture everywhere throughout his writings. The object of the fire of hell with him is thoroughly to root out and destroy *wickedness* of every kind. Iniquity, and evil thoughts, and false dogmas, and the scandals which offend, are the fuel for the unquenchable fire of hell.¹³ On these it preys with ruthless force. Till these are thoroughly extinct, completely eradicated, blotted out of all being, the unquenchable fire of hell burns on. But this process, which is destructive of evil, is a purgation to the evil doer.

While the sin that had hindered his entrance into his Father's Kingdom at an earlier period is being diminished to its extinction, the sinner is growing into the likeness of God which has been defaced. The process complete, they who had suffered and been purged in hell take a place, a lower one, it is true, but still a place, in glory.

14. Origen's view required the admission of two things which no genuine reverer and follower of Scripture will allow to him. He required first, as the very foundation of his system, that the Platonic dogma of the *inalienable immortality of all souls* should be admitted. He found no difficulty on this point in his day. We now ask for a better proof of this than heathen philosophers give us, and which did not satisfy even themselves. Finding Scripture not merely silent but putting its decisive negative on the Platonic dogma of immortality and the modified one of the Christian fathers, we reject it as a tradition of men. We know that Platonism here had its element of truth. It was the longing of the heart for what man once had and lost through sin. We know that Platonism finds its glorious response in Christianity—in that Gospel of Christ which brings, as its inestimable gift, eternal life to those who believe in the Son of God. But the system of philosophy which controverted the school of Plato had also its element of truth. While our sympathies are with Plato in the mighty argument of life and death, we must needs admit that *Lucretius reasoned* better than the greater sage of Athens. If human reason and speculation alone were to decide the question, reason would decide in favour of Epicurus and Lucretius. The longings and aspirations of the soul would indeed always enlist some on the side of its immortality; but it would not be on reason they could rest, but on some undefined, indistinct, shadowy, yet dearly cherished hope, coming they could not tell whence, shining they could not be certain whether with true or fatuous light, but which they would and must follow, for everywhere else there were only the shadows of death. To this unbroken darkness, the philosophy of Lucretius led. It had its miserable element of reality. It spoke with truth of an eternal death for souls that would not seek the life.

15. The other requirement of Origen was liberty to alter the application of Scripture to suit his views. Neither can we admit this. While against the followers of Augustine we bring the heavy, sore, awful charge of altering the meaning of the plainest language of Scripture, in order to force life on those for whom God had decreed death, against Origen we must bring the equally grave charge of so dealing with Scripture as to make it absolutely worthless as an authoritative teacher of truth. What it says of *the sinner* we have no right to apply to *his sin*. If hell has within its terrible womb the elements of utter death and destruction, it is *for the wicked* they are being stored up there. *It is they themselves that die, and* perish, and come to a fearful end.

16. But Origen had one grand truth in his system—the glorious scriptural truth of the extinction of all evil. There is a time to come, to which prophecy points onward, when the evil which has, for wise and wondrous and merciful purposes, been permitted to obscure the bright face of heaven to our poorcontracted view, shall have passed away. The idea of Augustinian theorists, that evil for a time and evil for eternity are essentially one and the same thing, is as opposed to Scripture and God's mind as it is ridiculous in the eye of common sense.¹⁴ It is making no difference between time and eternity; whereas to him who embraces eternity time is as nothing. God expressly tells us that the question of *duration is* with Him of the utmost consequence. Why does He permit the triumphing of the wicked? *Because it is short*. If any one were to say that God might just as well permit the wicked to triumph for ever as He has permitted him to triumph

for a time, God would answer him even through uninspired Zophar precisely on this point of duration: "Though his excellency mount up to the heavens, and his head reach unto the clouds; yet he shall perish for ever." And so with other things of a painful kind. With God, "*heaviness may endure for a night;*" but it shall not endure for ever. The transitory and the temporary are not with Him the same as the enduring and the eternal: with Him, the heaviness which endures for a night is borne for the eternal "joy which cometh in the morning."¹⁵ It is not the same thing to God that evil and its sufferings should be allowed for some few thousand years, a speck indistinguishable between the two eternities of the past and the future, evil too, of which good will be the final goal; and that evil, black, foul, and unmitigated, should through all eternity exist in the centre of God's world of righteousness. With this truth, the final extinction of evil, in his possession, and the dogma of the inalienableimmortality of the soul admitted, the theory of Origen is fully able to stand its ground against the rival view of Augustine. It possesses at least as much truth, and presents a more pleasing view of God.

17. But it is after all a human system, and as such is to be condemned. God's Word contradicts it in a thousand places. It holds out *no hope* to those who stand condemned in the judgment. This world and its peoples will again be all righteous, all rejoicing; but the reprobate will have passed away out of being, their names blotted from the book of life. Whatever be our opinion of Origen personally, of his learning, his brilliancy, even of the truth of much of his teaching, his teaching *here* places him among those prophets condemned by Ezekiel for "strengthening the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, *by promising him life.*" In that future age which has no end, the reprobate have no abiding name or place. Their image has vanished out of the city. Life for them, whether a thing to be desired or shunned, whether with Origen in heaven or with Augustine in hell, is the devil's lie, repeated now from a thousand high places, as it was once whispered in Eve's credulous ear in the garden, when the tempter said: "Thou art immortal:" "Thou, certainly, shalt not die."

18. Only second to the condemnation of Scripture is the fact that of the theory of universal restoration *Origen is the earliest known advocate.* The modern advocates of Universalism are compelled to admit that it found no advocate in the primitive church.¹⁶ Among the *followers* of Capocrates, a heretic of thesecond century, it is said that a theory resembling that of Origen prevailed,¹⁷ just as the Augustinian theory was held by men of heretical tenets before it was adopted by men of a sounder faith: but we cannot find, either among heretical or orthodox teachers, the *name* of a single writer who advocated the theory before Origen. It finds no countenance whatever in the writings of the apostolic men who walked with Peter, and John, and Paul. Eternal punishment is their uniform teaching. Just as little countenance does it find in any existing writings of the second century. It required the rise in this century, and the prevalence towards its close, of a theology more black and cruel than heathenism had ever taught, to enable even Origen, with all his vast learning and daring genius, to put forward in the first half of the third century after Christ his theory of restoration. Pleasing as it was to human sin, supported as it was by the man of the greatest genius among the fathers, having in it a most important element of truth, it made no progress in the church. The men of the first centuries knew that Origen was not connected with Christ—could not stretch back his hand and grasp that of an apostle. They knew that his doctrine had no foundation on the rock; but was a vision floating in the air, a fancy dreamed on a summer night: and so it soon came to lie treated as a heresy; and Augustine rose up and crushed it out of the church for twelve hundred years and more.

19. For the benefit of our readers we subjoin a table which will enable them at a glance to see the relative antiquity in the primitive church of the three great theories of future punishment which are at this day maintained in the Christian church. The dates given for the death of each father are, of course, only vouched for as a probable approximation to truth.

Theory of Scripture: <i>Eternal Death</i>	Died A.D.	Theory of Augustine: <i>Eternal Life of Misery</i>	Died A.D.	Theory of Origen: <i>Universal Restoration.</i>	
Barnabas	90				
Clement of Rome	100				
Hermas.....	104				
Ignatius, Martyr	107				
Polycarp, Martyr	147				
Justin Martyr.....	164				
Theophilus, of Antioch.....	183				
		Athenagoras.....	190		
		Tatian.....	200		
Irenaeus Martyr	202				
Clement Alexandrinus.....	212				
		Tertullian.....	235		
		Hippolytus.....	240		
				Origen	253
Arnobius.....	303				
		Athanasius.....	373		
				Gregory, Nys.	394
		Augustine	430		

20. From the above table we see how comparatively late the theory of Augustine appears in the list of patristic writings, while that of Origen's is later still. That blank space between them and primitive truth is fatal to both. Of Origen, we now take our leave. In one grand feature he commands our entire sympathy. He looked forward to the extinction of evil. His yearning for it was true—was but following out the judgment and reason as well as the longing of every right heart. We cannot look at evil—its hatefulness, its misery, its pollution—and think that with such a God as ours this evil will be permitted to extend or to exist for ever. So thought Origen, and Scripture bears him out. But he erred most fatally as to the means. He left the plain words of Scripture to carry out a human tradition. The inalienable immortality of the soul was the *ignis fatuus* which led this brilliant thinker through depths and over heights which weary the imagination of common minds to follow him. It compelled him to promise life where God had threatened death. His theory is, no doubt, very captivating, very seductive; but it is false. It is destructive of the true nobility of that nature a false idea of whose nobility led Origen into his error. To suppose that a responsible being, capable of good and evil, may deliberately choose the latter, and deliberately continue in it, and yet that God is bound in every instance to win or to force back that responsible agent to the path of life which he had forsaken, is destructive of the quality which distinguishes the higher from the lower order of creation, viz., *the freedom of their will*. God says to those whom, in making capable of knowing Him, He has made capable of sharing in his own immortality: "You may and can choose evil, and with it death." Origen says to them, "You cannot, and you shall not: the evil you would choose shall be severed from you, do what you will; the good you would not shall be forced upon you, struggle against it as you may."

He reduces the creature, made to walk in the field of freedom, to the creation regulated by the iron law of necessity.

Footnotes

1. * The Lord's Prayer, Rev. A. SAPHIR, 378; Death, Not Life. BLAIN, p. 114.
2. † De Principus, b. i., c. vi.; b. ii., c. i.
3. * De Principus. b. i., c. ii., par. 4.
4. † Hieronymus, Epistle, 59; Ad Avit, c. iv.; ORIGEN, De Principus, 1., iii. 3; ii., ix. 1, 2.
5. ‡ De Principus, i., vii. 4; iii., 1. 13; iii., vi. 5.
6. * [John 15:6](#).
7. † De Principus, i., vi: 1, 2, 3.
8. * PLATO, Phaedo, par. 61, 62.
9. * Commentaries, [Matt. 10:28](#).
10. * De Principus, i., iii. 3; Preface, par. 8.
11. † MOSHEIM, Eccl. History, Cent. iii., c. iii., part ii.
12. * [Rom. 6:6](#), [8:13](#); [1 Cor. 5:7](#); [Gal. 5:24](#)
13. † De Principus 2., x. 4, 5, 6.
14. * Rev. W. KER, Popular Ideas of Immortality, 2nd ed., 64.
15. † [Job 20:6](#); [Psalms 30:6](#); [1 Pet. 1:6](#).
16. † HIPPOLYTUS, Refutation of Heresies, b. vii., c. xx.
17. * The Second Death, ANDREW JUKES, 2nd ed., 92.