

# 'Patristic Fathers' Study Guide

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## ***Clement of Alexandria***

Clement of Alexandria believed the purpose of hell was both pedagogical and medicinal helping to heal rather than hurt the sinner and that all people would eventually be restored to their pre-fall state (*apokatastasis*) and thus be reconciled back to God. God's punishments could never be vengeful or strictly retributive for that would be "contrary to the character of God."<sup>1</sup> To Clement, God's punishments had a purpose and that purpose was reconciliation.

Punishment is, in its operation, like medicine; it dissolves the hard heart, purges away the filth of uncleanness, and reduces the swellings of pride and haughtiness; thus restoring its subject to a sound and healthful state.<sup>2</sup>

- Clement of Alexandria

According to Clement of Alexandria,<sup>3</sup> since reconciliation is the purpose of punishment, hell's duration cannot be eternal and that this reconciliation to God will come of the sinner's own free will (i.e. not coerced).<sup>4</sup>

Clement's views of the purpose and duration of hell and the universal salvation of all were derived from the Scriptures. This was not, as some would propose, always an allegorical view since Clement interpreted both the "hell" passages and the universalistic passages quite literally<sup>5</sup> and that he was always concerned that the literal sense of the text be interpreted accurately.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Origen***

Origen's belief in the remedial nature of hell and the salvation of all men was "steeped in the Christian Scriptures."<sup>7</sup> It was his view that the purpose of hell was medicinal, purificatory, pedagogical, and redemptive<sup>8</sup> and that in the end, all would be saved.

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<sup>1</sup> Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.8, as cited in Thayer, Thomas Baldwin, *Theology of Universalism: An Exposition of its Doctrines and Teachings* (Boston: Tompkins and Company, 1863) p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> See Clement's *Stromata* 7.2.12.1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

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But our belief is that the Word shall prevail over the entire rational creation, and change every soul into his own perfection; in which will choose what he desires, and obtain what he chooses. For although, in the diseases and wounds of the body, there are some which no medical skill can cure, yet we hold that in the mind there is no evil so strong that it may not be overcome by the Supreme Word and God. For stronger than all the evils in the soul is the Word, and the healing power that dwells in him; and this healing he applies, according to the will of God, to everyman. The consummation of all things is the destruction of evil...<sup>9</sup>

-Origen

Thus Origen's view of the *apokatastasis* was a restoration back to the original condition prior to the fall when man shared unity with God.<sup>10</sup> But this universal restoration would never violate freewill according to Origen.

God the Father of all things, in order to ensure the salvation of all his creatures through the ineffable plan of his Word and wisdom, so arranged each of these, that every spirit, whether soul or rational existence, however called, should not be compelled by force, against the liberty of his own will, to any other course than that to which the motives of his own mind led him.<sup>11</sup>

- Origen

Like Clement, Origen's belief in the ultimate restoration of all to Christ was gleaned from the Scriptures. As Harmon notes, even a high-level review of Origen's views on the *apocatastasis* shows a man whose mind was firmly rooted in the Scriptures and who displayed solid exegetical reasoning.<sup>12</sup> This should not be surprising to anyone with knowledge about Origen since he was a man who knew the Scriptures very well.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.72 as cited in Hanson, John Wesley, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1899) pp. 151-52.

<sup>10</sup> Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *De principiis* 2.1.2, as cited in Hanson, John Wesley, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1899) p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aionios and Aidios in Classical and Christian Texts* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013) p. 128.

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### *Gregory of Nyssa*

Gregory of Nyssa believed that evil existed only through the improper use of our divine gift of freewill<sup>14</sup> and that eventually, all will be restored to God because evil—being the opposite of good—cannot exist forever.<sup>15</sup>

Like Clement and Origen, Gregory of Nyssa saw eschatological punishment as having a positive purpose (should we expect anything else from God?) and this “purpose” was the restoration of mankind to God. According to Gregory, divine punishment is like the painful cures of medicine that eventually bring healing and that divine punishment is not administered to exact vengeance, but to bring restoration.<sup>16</sup>

Let me just say that this view of eschatological punishment where there is a positive outcome rings with more truth and reason than the traditional model which teaches eternal torment for those who either did not make a decision in time (Arminianism) or those who were not selected to begin with (Calvinism). And like Clement and Origen before him, Gregory's views were not the result of a free-flowing ideological system that discounted Scripture to arrive at a pre-determined result; Gregory believed his understanding of the *apocatastasis* was "explicitly" taught in Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

What is noticeable in Gregory of Nyssa is that in [his teaching on universalism] there is no apparent consciousness that he is deviating into the bye-paths of new and strange opinions. He claims to be taking his stand on the doctrines...of the church in thus teaching with as much confidence as when he is expounding the mysteries of the divine nature as set forth in the creed of Nicaea...And the same absence of any sense of being even in danger of heresy is seen in most of those who followed in his footsteps or those of Origen.<sup>18</sup>

- E.H. Plumptre

So the claim that universalism is either “unbiblical,” “unhistorical,” or “heretical” can be put to rest. As Harmon attests, the patristic Universalists such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, believed the concept of the wider hope and that all men would be saved was the most “coherent” understanding of the Scriptures.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Plumptre, E. H., “Eschatology,” in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, Vol II, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1880) p. 194.

<sup>19</sup> Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) p. 2.

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A final point that must be made before leaving this discussion; these early Church Fathers were Godly men who took their views directly from Scripture as well as the teachings of the apostles before them.<sup>20</sup> They lived at a time during great persecution so there was absolutely no incentive to dream up the idea that all men will be saved...especially when these same "men" were committing horrible acts of brutality towards Christians.

The church was born into a world of whose moral rottenness few have or can have any idea. Even the sober historians of the later Roman Empire have their pages tainted with scenes impossible to translate. Lusted the foulest, debauchery to us happily inconceivable, raged on every side. To assert even faintly the final redemption of all this rottenness, whose depths we dare not try to sound, required the firmest faith in the larger hope, as an essential part of the Gospel...Thus it must have seemed in that age almost an act of treason to the cross to teach that, though dying unrepentant, the bitter persecutor, or the votary of abominable lusts, should yet in the ages to come find salvation. Such considerations help us to see the extreme weight attaching even to the very least expression in the fathers which involves sympathy with the larger hope...As the vices of the early centuries were great, so were their punishments cruel. The early fathers wrote when the wild beasts of the arena tore alike the innocent and the guilty, limb from limb, amid the applause even of gently-nurtured women; they wrote when the cross, with its living burden of agony, was a common sight, and evoked no protest. They wrote when every minister of justice was a torturer, and almost every criminal court a petty inquisition; when every household of the better class, even among Christians, swarmed with slaves liable to torture, to scourging, to mutilation, at the caprice of a master or the frown of a mistress. Let all these facts be fully weighed, and a conviction arises irresistibly, that in such an age, no idea of Universalism could have originated unless inspired from above.<sup>21</sup>

- Thomas Allin

Regarding the early church, there are two primary reasons why the amount of literature supporting Universalism is not extensive:

1. Many works of the early Church Fathers were destroyed after they were condemned by church councils.
2. The concept of "Reserve" meant that some doctrinal teachings were not widely shared with laypeople either verbally or in writing.

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<sup>20</sup> See quote by Clement of Alexandria from his *Stromata* 7.16.103 as cited in Harmon, Steven, *Every Knee Should Bow: Biblical Rationales for Universal Salvation in Early Christian Thought* (Dallas: University Press of America, Inc., 2003) pp. 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> Allin, Thomas, *Universalism Asserted: As the Hope of the Gospel, on the Authority of Reason, the Fathers, and Holy Scripture*, Fourth edition (London: 1891) pp. 83-84.

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## 1. Works of Early Church Fathers Destroyed

It's a sad reality that when a council determined a person to be a heretic, their works were destroyed. For example, after Theodore of Mopsuestia's works were condemned, Justinian had his entire library destroyed.<sup>22</sup> Origen's allegorization of the Genesis account was the reason his Commentary on that book was destroyed.<sup>23</sup>

While we mourn that so little of the literature of the early days of our religion remains, the wonder is that we have so much, rather than so little. The persecutions of Decius and Diocletian—especially of the latter—were most unrelenting towards Christian books. "The volumes which escaped from the perils of those days were like brands snatched from the fire." "A little dust—precious, indeed, as gold— in a few sepulchral urns, is all that now remains." And later, the burning of the Alexandrine library by the Arabs, the destructive persecutions of heretics, the ban of council, and the curse of pope and priest, in the church's long eclipse, destroyed innumerable volumes, so that there is ample reason to believe that, could we inspect all that Clement, Origen and others wrote, in the original Greek, untampered with, we should have pages where we now have sentences avowing Universalism.<sup>24</sup>

- J. W. Hanson

So if there is a lack of written support for universalism, some of it is due to the fact that opponent's of this theology had the writings destroyed.

## 2. The Concept of "Reserve"

It was a known practice among the patristic Fathers that certain doctrines were not to be discussed with those less learned in the Scriptures. Also known as "Discipline of the Secret," this concept sought to withhold the teaching of certain theological concepts from people until they were able to understand them in the spirit of Matt 7:6. The Catholic Encyclopedia defines "Discipline of the Secret" as follows:

A [theological](#) term used to express the custom which prevailed in the earliest ages of the [Church](#), by which the [knowledge](#) of the more intimate [mysteries](#) of the [Christian religion](#) was carefully kept from the [heathen](#) and even from [those who were undergoing instruction](#) in the [Faith](#).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McLeod, Frederick, "Theodore of Mopsuestia Revisited," *Theological Studies*, Vol. 61.3, 2000, p. 447.

<sup>23</sup> Ramelli, Ilaria, "Philo as Origen's Declared Model: Allegorical and Historical Exegesis of Scripture," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, Volume 7 (2012), p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Hanson, John Wesley, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1899) p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> Barnes, A. (1909). "Discipline of the Secret." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved April 30, 2015 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05032a.htm>.

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Those Fathers who believed in universalism also practiced the concept of "reserve." The fear was that if those untrained in the Christian religion understood the universality of Christ's salvation, they might not be able to handle this knowledge and live a life unpleasing to the Lord. Even today, one of the first objections one is likely to raise against Universalism is the claim that if everyone goes to heaven, then people are free to live anyway they want to. Right or wrong, the early Fathers who believed in Universalism were not immune from the fear that knowledge of the extent of Christ's love might lead to unrestrained behavior.

[A]ll that might be said on this theme is not expedient to explain now, or to all. For the mass need no further teaching on account of those who hardly through the fear of aeonian punishment restrain their recklessness.<sup>26</sup>

- Origen

Given that writings were destroyed by heathen and believer alike and given the concept of "Reserve," it's not unusual at all that we don't find more material regarding the doctrine of Universalism. But even with these two factors working against Universalism, the reader might be surprised to know just how widespread this theology was in the early church. Below is a list of church leaders for whom it is reasonable to think they "supported the doctrine of *apokatastasis*" (i.e. the restoration of all):<sup>27</sup>

- Bardaisan
- Clement of Alexandria
- Origen
- Didymus
- St. Anthony
- St. Pamphilus Martyr
- Methodius
- St. Macrina
- St. Gregory of Nyssa
- St. Evagrius Ponticus

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Hanson, John Wesley, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1899) p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Taken from Ramelli, Ilaria, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Brill, 2013) p. 11.

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- Diodore of Tarsus
- Theodore of Mopsuestia
- St. John of Jerusalem
- Rufinus
- St. Jerome (initially)
- St. Augustine (initially)