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# Patristic Views on Hell—Part 1

*Dr Keith's book* Hated Without A Cause? A Survey of Anti-Semitism *(Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997) is reviewed later in this issue. He has also done research in early Christian theology, and in this and the following issues offers studies of two contrasting understandings of the doctrine of Hell from Origen and Augustine.*

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Often we gain the impression that the early church was an unproductive period as far as the doctrine of Hell and that of eschatology in general is concerned. No general council, after all, treated eschatological doctrines in the way that Trinitarian and Christological themes were tackled. Credal statements, for their part, give only minimal attention to eschatological matters. Typical of this trend is the Apostles' Creed with its talk of Christ as coming to judge the living and the dead and with its simple affirmation of belief in 'the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life'.

The only creed to give a slightly more extended place to judgment is the late composition commonly but misleadingly known as the Athanasian Creed.[1] While most of its clauses detail the conclusions of Trinitarian and Christological doctrine, at the end there is a reference to Hell—'At Christ's coming all men shall rise again with their bodies, and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.'[2] To go into such detail reflects a relatively late development in the west, probably deriving from Augustine's influence.[3] Earlier creeds were more restrained in the ground they covered, since they were designed to be memorised by the simplest of believers during their training as catechumens.[4] Besides, such was the reverence

1 It should, however, be noted that mention of Hell does occur in some versions of the Rule of Faith, a sort of summary of biblical doctrine which was commonly used in the second and third centuries but differed from a formal creed—e.g. Irenaeus *Adv.* Haer. 1:2 and 3:4:1; Tertullian *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 13.

2 Section 41 of the creed.

3 J. N. D. Kelly *The Athanasian Creed* (London, A. and C. Black, 1964) 112–4 for the date. Direct influences from Augustine are noted at 27–9.

4 cf. the references collected by E. P. Meijering *Augustine: De Fide at Symbolo* (J. C. Gieben, Amsterdam, 1987) 17–18.

associated with the brief creed which was normally affirmed at baptism that there was a reluctance to change it even in a small way. The Athanasian Creed by its very length and detail marked a departure from this practice. It was not a creed for the simple believer at the time of his baptism; it reflected a different mindset that if salvation was to be assured, a believer needed a firm and detailed grasp of sound theology. This mindset, however, failed to supplant the earlier approach to credal statements which encouraged concentration on the bare essentials of Christian doctrine.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that there was no interest in the doctrine of judgment; only that a certain flexibility was permitted. By and large the church clearly affirmed both a resurrection of the body (or of the flesh as the earliest formulations put it) and a final day of judgment. These were points of direct confrontation with the pagan world almost from the beginning. If the pagan philosophers in Athens scoffed when they heard the apostle Paul speak of the resurrection, this pattern was to be repeated innumerable times.[5] Some philosophical traditions may have allowed for the soul to continue in existence after death while others did not; but all without exception agreed that the resurrection of the body was both impossible and undesirable. And where philosophers like Plato and the Pythagoreans did hold to a judgment, this amounted to a periodic examination of the health of the soul some time after it had left the body. It was not a final, irrevocable judgment of everyone at the one time.

In their teaching Christians closely tied the resurrection of the body to the reality of the final judgment. The apostle Paul had again provided the model in Athens. Not only did this offer a scenario at which a public, universal judgment could take place, but it was thought particularly appropriate that God should judge body and soul together. If judgment was to be based on deeds done in this life, where body and soul had always acted in concert, then both should either be rewarded or punished together.[6] Moreover, it was commonly believed that the soul, being incorporeal, could suffer neither pleasure nor pain unless it was somehow attached to the body.[7] While accepting the link between resurrection and final judgment, the most sophisticated of the early Christian Apologists, Athenagoras, regretted that other Christians had seen this as almost the exclusive reason for the resurrection.[8] To him it was subsidiary to more fundamental reasons. God's purpose in creating man had to come to fruition, and yet that purpose

5 Acts 17:31–2.

6 E.g. Tertullian *De Res. Carn.* 14–5; Athenagoras *De Res.* 20–3.

7 Tertullian op. cit. 17, though Tertullian dissents from this common view, which can be found at e.g. Cicero *Tusc. Disp.* 1:37.

8 Athenagoras op. cit. 14.

was frustrated by death. Moreover, it would be improper if man, a rational being with an innate sense of justice, were treated in exactly the same way as the irrational beasts. This would be the case if death were the end. For in this life man sees no ultimate justice since it is plain that the good do not gain the rewards of virtue and the wicked do not reap the proper wages of their evil. Nor can this happen immediately after death when body and soul are sundered. Only a resurrection day with its promise of reuniting body and soul guarantees ultimate justice and the fulfilment of man's true destiny under God. Athenagoras' analysis, however profound, remained somewhat idiosyncratic within the early church. Besides, it was better equipped to explain the resurrection hope of believers than it was to illustrate the deserts of those who would spend eternity in Hell.

If the resurrection of the body and the final judgment remained fixed points for the church, on other related issues varied views might be taken—for example, the nature of the resurrection body, the location of the soul in the period between death and the final judgment, and the duration of any penalties inflicted on the Day of Judgment. Even Origen, whose views are considered exceptional, falls into this pattern. For all the heterodoxy of which he was later accused, Origen desired no more than to place the apostolic faith on a sound footing. He inherited the doctrine of a just judgment of God assigning different lots to righteous and wicked souls. If there was to be such a judgment, then in Origen's view that implied that the rational creatures who were to be the objects of that judgment had to possess free will. Otherwise the judgment would not be fair. This was a timely point to make given, as we shall see, the presence of certain forms of determinism. His development, however, of the notion of free will led him into some strange bypaths. He certainly did not feel he was contradicting an accepted ecclesiastical tradition when he set out his case for a temporal limit to those sufferings the wicked were to endure in Hell. Here it is enough for us to note that at this period basic ecclesiastical faith left considerable room for manoeuvre on the details of judgment. And so it remained for some time. Provided we bear in mind the fundamentals of the resurrection of the body and the final judgment, we may concur with the verdict of E. R. Dodds—'When Origen wrote *De Principiis* Christian notions of eschatology were still in a state of flux, and for a long time they appear to have remained so.'[9] Indeed, a century or so after Constantine we have a surprising amount of evidence indicating widespread denial of eternal punishment within the church.

9 E. R. Dodds *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge, 1968) 131. cf. J. N. D. Kelly *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1960) 163–5 for the difficulties of Christians at an earlier time.

Augustine said that 'very many' denied it.[10] Jerome and Basil also expressed alarm about the prevalence of such doubts, while we know that Basil's own younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, accepted with a few modifications Origen's view of the eventual restoration of the devil and his angels.[11]

Seeing that attitudes were so fluid and no normative position was established, we can look on this period with special interest. It was a time when doubts and alternative hypotheses could be ventured without fear of recrimination. There was little of the secrecy and downright dishonesty which D. P. Walker illustrates in the attempts to move away from the doctrine of eternal punishment in the late 17th century.[12] By then theologians of liberalising tendency were held back by a concern that if the doctrine of eternal punishment was universally abandoned, there would be no way of halting the slide of society into gross wickedness. It was considered preferable for potential malefactors to be restrained by the (fictitious) fear of Hell than for the truth of the non-existence of Hell to be declared indiscriminately. While this attitude is not unknown in the patristic period, it was of minor importance within the church.[13] In a largely pagan society, where few admitted to strong convictions about Hell, there could be little deterrent value in a notion of eternal punishment. Within the church, moreover, it was assumed that with possibly a very few exceptions the people there were not going to Hell. That was for outsiders; and as far as church folk were concerned, there was room for differences of opinion on its precise nature.

My approach will be to concentrate first on Origen and then in a second part on Augustine of Hippo—two very different but highly influential figures. Both had, comparatively speaking, much to say on Hell. Both tied their remarks closely to their doctrinal scheme as a whole. With Origen the link was through a pre-cosmic fall of souls, and the subsequent movement of souls to and from union with God. Augustine's distinct emphasis was more decidedly scriptural. His concern was to trace out in history the judgment which had befallen the whole human reason as a result of Adam's sin. Origen's scheme never found much favour, but it was so widely known that some reaction was inevitable and that reaction highlighted certain dangers the church was keen to avoid. In particular, it became plain that Platonist philosophy, however attractive at some points, could not be imported wholesale into

10 Augustine *Enchiridion* 103.

11 Jerome *In Is.* 66:24; Basil *Reg. Brev.* 267. For Gregory of Nyssa's views see *Or. Cat.* 26, 35; and *De Anim. et Res.* at *PG* 46:104 and 133.

12 D. P. Walker *The Decline of Hell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) 3–8.

13 cf. F. Cumont *After Life in Roman Paganism* (Yale 1922) 78. Origen *c. Cels.* 5:15 assents to this use of the terrors of Hell.

biblical doctrine.[14] Augustine's legacy was more positive, its supreme merit being his desire to let Scripture speak for itself.

## Origen's understanding of the soul

Before we can understand Origen's views about Hell or about eschatology generally, we must take a broad look at his cosmology. Origen did not believe that bodily life was the beginning of existence for mankind. Their souls or rather intelligences had been created by God, along with other intelligences who would later become either angels or demons.[15] They were created together and absolutely equal. They were originally all absorbed in the contemplation of God. Their very being and goodness were conferred by God, but in a mutable condition. For these intelligences were given free will, or better, the power of self-determination.[16] It was God's desire that by appropriate use of free will they should make that goodness their own possession or, as we might say, internalise that goodness. Through satiety and consequent sloth, however, these intelligences mostly failed to take proper steps to preserve the good and to make progress (by imitation of God).[17] Inevitably they declined from the good. They had nowhere else they could go. 'To withdraw from the good,' claimed Origen, 'is nothing else than to be immersed in evil; for it is certain that to be evil means to be lacking in good.'[18] We should note that Origen did not envisage a deliberate choice of evil by these intelligences; he accepted the Platonist idea that a rational being could not deliberately select evil. Instead, the choice, if we can call it that, was a sort of unconscious one not to pursue the good. God responded to this development by various disciplinary and corrective measures on the fallen intelligences so that they should come to abhor everything sinful and love the good.

The choice which Origen envisaged for these intelligences in their original, unfallen condition is worth further elucidation. It was not a straightforward choice between good and evil such as might face the soul in this world. It was the opportunity of the created intelligence either to develop and grow by advancing toward God or to neglect the

14 Cumont op. cit. 188.

15 In using the term 'intelligences' I follow the practice of H. Crouzel *Origen* (ET, T and T Clark, Edinburgh, 1989) 206.

16 Origen *De Princ.* Preface 5 gives a sort of working definition of free will, which he lays down as part f the church's faith he has inherited. 'The power of self-determination' is a better way of rendering *to autexousion* than the weak and vague term 'free will'. It was precisely the strength of this term which was later to draw Calvin's criticism at *Institutes* 2:2:4.

17 Origen op. cit. 1:3:8 and 1:4:1.

18 Ibid. 2:9:2. All translations from this work are those by G. W. Butterworth (SPCK, London 1936).

good and in the process become abased. Origen backed this up with a confessedly speculative derivation of the word *psyche* (soul)—'We may perhaps hazard a guess that the soul received its name from the fact that it grew cool (*psychros*) when it lost its participation in the divine fire . . . without, however, losing its ability to restore itself to the state of heat in which it was in the beginning . . . All this points to the conclusion that mind, falling from its own estate and dignity, was made or called soul. And if the soul be amended and corrected, it returns to its own condition of mind.'[19] This view carried the greater weight with Origen as he viewed God as fire and warmth.[20] Hence a movement away from God could be conceived as a descent from intelligences into the coldness of souls. The falling away also admitted of degrees. Angels may have fallen only a small degree, and man a somewhat greater degree, while the demons had been the first to fall away and had fallen the furthest. Origen believed that by invoking different degrees of transgression or rather declension, he could give a satisfactory explanation of the diversity of beings found in the world, and even of the diversity of conditions among men.[21] This gave Origen the scope to counter the objections of those Gnostics and Marcionites who claimed that the present world with its manifest inequalities could never have been the product of a righteous God. Origen's answer, in effect, was to look back into the past for a vindication of God's righteousness. All rational creatures had here and now, he contended, the position their previous conduct deserved. Thus in a sense there had already been a judgment by God analogous to that which was to take place on the Day of Judgment.[22]

As for the perceptible and material world with which we are now familiar, Origen saw it as a sort of secondary creation by God, a penitential environment for souls in which they might learn to undo the effects of their fall. Never one to underestimate the demands of a holy life, Origen in his commentary on the Lord's Prayer described the whole life of man on earth as a temptation.[23] In an atmosphere of struggle against the demonic powers and against bodily lusts, the soul had a duty to persevere in an upward path, ever aspiring after that likeness to God which was part of its original endowment. In this context, as always in his treatment of rational beings, Origen stressed the soul's free will which would certainly be addressed but never cajoled by God (and by spiritual adversaries), because after this life the soul would face

19 Ibid. 2:8:3.
20 Crouzel op. cit. 210 and 245–6.
21 Origen op. cit. 2:9:5.
22 Ibid. 2:9:8.
23 Origen *On Prayer* 29:2.

judgment. And judgment was unthinkable if it was inappropriate to talk of merit and demerit. This in turn implied free will.[24]

We might feel Origen would have done better to contend for human responsibility than to advocate a power of self-determination which gave too much to the intrinsic power of the soul and effectively denied the biblical teaching that the will must either be a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness.[25] But we must recall the context in which Origen was writing. He faced a challenge from various forms of determinism—from the astrological fatalism rife among pagans to a more subtle form of determinism spread by the Valentinian Gnostics. The latter postulated three different types of soul—the 'pneumatics' who were saved without merit, the 'hylics' who were condemned without guilt and the 'psychics' who alone had some power to determine their own final destiny.[26] To counter this challenge to the Christian faith, Origen advocated a strong view of free will. Without this he believed talk of a just judgment by God would be a mockery.

The future judgment loomed large in Origen's thinking because traditional church doctrine affirmed two distinct categories after death. The soul 'will either obtain an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its deeds shall warrant this, or it must be given over to eternal fire and torments, if the guilt of its crimes shall so determine.'[27] It did not follow that the souls of the virtuous immediately attained perfection; there remained an ascent for them through various heavenly spheres. There were some too for whom the Day of Judgment would be a mixed blessing.[28] Those whose life was full of good deeds but also burdened with sins would find a painful, purgatorial fire, administered by Christ himself, at the end of this life.[29] Origen even admitted that he expected himself to undergo this experience. He commented that for that reason he could not share the apostle Paul's yearning to depart and be with Christ—'For my part, I cannot speak thus, for I know that, when I go hence, my wood will have to be burned in me.'[30]

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24 Origen *De Princ.* 3:1.

25 cf. Rom. 6:16–22.

26 Crouzel op. cit. 207–11. Cf. Origen op. cit. 3:1:8 where it is clear that Pharaoh is numbered among the 'hylics'.

27 Origen op. cit. Preface 5. The word 'eternal' need not imply never-ending in Origen's thought, as we shall see.

28 Ibid. 2:11:6–7.

29 Crouzel op. cit. 224–5 and 245–6. The influence of 1 Cor 3:12–15 is crucial to Origen's thinking. The fire mentioned there was to be distinguished from the eternal fire of Matthew 25 (cf. Crouzel 243).

30 Origen *Hom. Jr.* 20:3. The translation is that of Crouzel op. cit. 246. The wood is a reference to 1 Cor 3:12.

## Origen on sin and its development

Since Origen was aware that sin had serious consequences both for pre-mundane intelligences and for men in this world, we might expect a correspondingly grave account of the beginnings of sin. Yet here we are disappointed.[31] The process of falling away from God might indeed develop a momentum of its own, but in its beginnings it was insignificant enough. This is implicit in Origen's illustration for the initial falling away of the intelligences in terms of someone who has acquired an ability in (say) a foreign language. If he does not use that ability, he will lose it. But the loss will be gradual rather than catastrophic. After six months of not using the language he will have slipped back a little, but almost nothing by comparison with the extent to which he would have declined had he left off for over 20 years.[32] Similarly, the falling away of the intelligences is to be seen as essentially a gradual process. Origen expressed it in these terms—'If at any time satiety should possess the heart of one of those who have come to occupy the perfect and highest stage, I do not think that such a one will be removed and fall from his place all of a sudden. Rather must he decline by slow degrees, so that it may sometimes happen, when a slight fall has occurred, that the man quickly recovers and returns to himself. A fall does not involve utter ruin, but a man may retrace his steps and return to his former state.'[33] Given this optimism, it is no surprise to find Origen arguing that it is a comparatively easy matter for Christ to change inveterate wickedness—provided the person concerned is willing to submit himself to Christ for healing.[34]

Needless to say, such a scheme encountered difficulties if it was to be squared with Scripture and with experience. We might ask, for example, how Origen could account for the existence of evil demons if falling away was initially a slight thing with ample room for recovery. Or again, if life in a material body was intended as a training-ground in which the fallen soul might begin in co-operation with the Logos to regain hold of its grasp on virtue, why should there be so many men intransigently opposed throughout their life to the gospel? Origen was well aware that Scripture talked of some men at least as 'enemies' of God. How did their free will which was initially oriented towards the good become so neglected as to turn them into outright enemies? Origen faced a specific challenge from those who took the hardening

31 Origen did comment on Adam's sin, which for him would not be the original sin. Unfortunately, most of Origen's comments on Adam are lost—Crouzel op. cit. 218.
32 Origen *De Princ.* 1:4:1. I have adapted Origen's illustration in the interests of clarity.
33 Ibid. 1:3:8.
34 Origen *c. Cels.* 3:69.

of Pharaoh's heart (in Exodus) as an illustration that God had marked out some from the beginning for destruction.[35]3:1:8f.

Origen had to engage in some lengthy special pleading to suggest Pharaoh's condition was not as hopeless as it might seem. Pharaoh was, in his view, undergoing an extended period of correction by God. But if Origen was sensitive to this difficulty for his scheme, he did not offer any real explanation as to why the process of falling away should degenerate into outright opposition. He stated, 'Consequently it lies with us and with our own actions whether we are to be blessed and holy, or whether through sloth and negligence we are to turn away from blessedness into wickedness and loss; the final result of which is, that when too much progress, if I may use the word, has been made in wickedness, a man may descend to such a state (if any shall come to so great a pitch of negligence) as to be changed into an opposing power.'[36]

This passage is interesting because it brings together two related difficulties in Origen's scheme—at a philosophical level how neglect can be a possible use of free will (as distinct from a straightforward choice to do evil) and at a practical level when a simple decline turns to outright and vicious opposition. Origen was indeed conscious of the many ways in which sin multiplies in the world other than by neglect—through temptation, through upbringing, through an unfortunate environment, and particularly through bad examples. He could even talk of bad habits turning into second nature.[37] But these were all essentially observations on rather than explanations of the progress of sin. Origen's theoretical scheme could hardly cope with the realities of the spiritual life as Origen knew them—either the wrestling with the hosts of wickedness or the opposition of perseeutors who died firm in their hatred towards the gospel.

At the same time we must acknowledge that in comparison with the Bible Origen has toned down the seriousness of sin. This is manifest in the language he employed of the original sins of his intelligences. Words like 'neglect', 'sloth' and 'satiety' hardly do justice to a state of sinful rebellion. They are most appropriate of Christians in a backslidden condition. Indeed, it has been observed that Origen speaks of sin in terms reminiscent of the Letter to the Hebrews addressing, as it does, Christians in a state of spiritual lethargy.[38] Such an analysis may be useful for a particular category of sins, but Origen greatly exaggerated the scope of his diagnosis. We may agree that Origen is nearer the mark when he recognised that demons and outright opponents of the

35 Origen *De Princ.*
36 Ibid. 1:5:5.
37 Ibid. 1:6:3.
38 Crouzel op. cit. 210.

church have gone so much further into sin that it has become second nature to them. But against this we must reckon that Origen failed to give an adequate explanation of this important phenomenon, but also glossed over the Bible's teaching that all men, as they are born into the world, are at enmity with God whether or not that leads to outright persecution of God's people.[39]

Origen did have some problems with a related issue—whether or not the restoration of hardened sinners was always possible. In the first book of *De Principiis* he allowed his readers to take the view that in some cases restoration was impossible, though he himself gave a tentative preference to a different conclusion.[40] However much the soul had yielded to the path of sin, it had done so of its own volition; but given time and appropriate correction, it might recover itself. Here Origen was influenced by his concept of free will which was intended to undergird human responsibility, but in effect assumed an underlying health in the soul. (I doubt if Origen fully realised this assumption.) The soul might be seriously sick, but its condition was not terminal and never without the hope that due treatment would effect a restoration of health. Origen was wary of suggesting that some beings were so enmeshed in sin that they could not help but persist in wickedness, because that would have smacked of determinism and would have given a handle to the Valentinian Gnostics. Henri Crouzel, however, has shown that Origen was aware of the alternative possibility—that beings who began with free will might subsequently lose it—but he did not care to develop it.[41]

## Origen on punishment

If Origen modified the Bible's view of sin, it comes as no surprise to find a similar modification of its position on punishment. He did this by minimising God's role as judge and by keeping it an open possibility that even the most hardened sinners among men, perhaps even among demons, might be restored.[42]

We have seen that Origen inherited from ecclesiastical tradition a belief in 'eternal life and blessedness' for virtuous souls and in 'eternal fire and torments' for wicked souls. Origen, however, believed that the words for 'eternal' did not necessarily mean 'never-ending'. As he put it in his *Commentary on Romans*, 'Eternity signifies in Scripture some-

39 For man's natural enmity with God the classic biblical analysis is given by Paul—especially Romans 8:7. But it is by no means a Pauline peculiarity—cf. Jo 15:18; 1 Jo 5:19.

40 Origen op. cit. 1:6:3.

41 Crouzel op. cit. 263–4.

42 Crouzel op. cit. 264 suggests reasons for believing that Origen was more inclined to accept punishment for the demons than for men.

times the fact that we do not know the end, sometimes the fact that there is no end in the present world, but there will be one in the next. Sometimes eternity means a certain length of time, even that of human life.'[43] Equipped with this exegetical tool, Origen enjoyed considerable freedom in the way he might handle the traditional concepts of eternal blessedness and eternal punishment. He was generally willing to affirm the never-ending blessedness of the virtuous, though even here there were some hesitations.[44] He would not categorically affirm the never-ending duration of eternal fire.

Part of the reason for this was Origen's tendency to subsume the fire of judgment under the category of refining or purifying fire. And the key element in refining fire was corrective rather than punitive. Normally, under the hand of an all-wise and all-powerful God, these purifying fires had the desired effect. Malachi 3:3 was adduced as a proof text in this connection—'The Lord shall sift and refine his people as gold and silver; he shall refine and purify and *pour forth purified* the sons of Judah.'[45] You will note the emphasis on the successful purification once God's refining action is completed. Origen was not obliged to say these refining processes were complete in this life. And he had an unlimited timescale at the end of which these corrective measures would have their intended effect—which was invariably for the benefit of the recipients.

We may ask why Origen interpreted all the texts relating to the fire of judgment in terms of refining fire. Interestingly, one reason was common ground he shared with certain heretics. The Marcionites, in particular, had tried to drive a wedge between the God of the New Testament, a good God who did not bring about judgments like that on Sodom and Gomorrah, and the God of the Old Testament, a just God who brought punishment on men (and angels) because he hated them and their evil deeds. Of course, the Marcionites preferred the good God to the just God! Origen did not accept the dichotomy, but he did agree with the Marcionites that it was unworthy of a good God to punish out of a passionate and vindictive hatred. He felt bound to contend that God's judgments were invariably intended for the spiritual good of those who suffered as a result of them; no room was left for an ultimate judicial condemnation by God of persistent evil-doing. The issue was clear to Origen; he could challenge his Marcionite opponents in these terms—'If he whom they (i.e. the Marcionites) call good is good to all, undoubtedly he is good even to those who are destined to

43 Origen *Comm. on Romans* 6:5. Translation in Crouzel op. cit. 244, who provides further useful comment.

44 Origen *De Princ.* 2:3:3.

45 Ibid. 2:10:6. As further proof texts Origen adduced Isa 4:4; 47:14–15; and 66:16–17.

perish. Why, then, does he not save them? If he is unwilling, then he will not be good; if he is willing but cannot, he will not be almighty.'[46] Origen evidently assumed that for God to be good would always mean seeking to benefit all men—indeed all rational creatures—at every turn. He did not ask what makes for a good judge.

Talk of fire might suggest the process of judgment was distinctly God's work. Other passages, however, would balance this picture with the suggestion that God did nothing more than provide the appropriate environment in which the soul could carry on its own work of judgment, including self-reformation. More specifically Origen believed it was God's common practice to punish sinners by letting them taste the full bitterness of their own sins. He adduced in illustration of this the language of Romans 1, where the apostle Paul states that although men did know God, they did not honour him as God or give him thanks. And so God *gave them over* in a number of different ways—'to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another', or again 'to shameful lusts', or 'to a depraved mind and to do what ought not to be done.' Origen did not see these punishments as an end in themselves, but as a means to their purification. 'They do not so much receive the recompense of their error, as a help towards the purification of the evils of their error, bestowed on them along with the saving trials that come upon the lovers of pleasure.'[47]

We might wonder where in Scripture Origen could find evidence for his view that in the end all these judgments would have a salutary effect. Here Origen alluded to a story from the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert (from Numbers 11) where the people grow tired of eating manna all the time and crave flesh or meat to eat. God does answer their request, but there is a sting in the tail—'Now the Lord will give you meat and, you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it, because you have rejected the Lord . . .' Origen pointed out that as long as the Israelites' sinful craving was left unsatisfied, there was little chance of its removal. So, God's strategy was not simply to satisfy the craving, but to give them a surfeit. Only then would it appear to the Israelites how sinful their craving had been. Only then would they regain a proper hunger for heavenly things. In the passage from Numbers God's strategy is justified by a successful outcome. The lesson Origen drew was that this is the tactic God is invariably employing when we see certain individuals, including the Pharaoh in Egypt, plunging deeper and deeper into sin.

Origen could comfort himself that God had an extended timescale

46 Ibid. 2:5:2.
47 Origen *on Prayer* 29:15.

in which to work. In particular, he is under no pressure to produce an instant cure which as often as not would turn out to be shallow. For God to end a sinner's career abruptly in mid-course would run the risk that given the appropriate inducements, the sinner would soon relapse into his old ways. It was vital to Origen that the soul responded *freely* to God's overtures. It could not, therefore, be changed in the twinkling of an eye. A period of change there would certainly have to be, but the sort of change which relied on the outworking of the soul's natural processes rather than the direct action of God himself. Origen thus summarised the stages of healing he envisaged—'Through long continuance in evil and by having their fill of the sin they lust after, they by their satiety are to perceive the harm they have suffered and to hate what formerly they cherished. In this way they can be healed and enjoy with greater security the health of soul restored to them.'[48] What was remarkable in Origen's position was not so much the strategy he outlined for God as his confidence that the strategy would lead sooner or later to a willing response to God from the erring soul.

It is not easy clearly to distinguish God's role in punishment from that of the soul itself. The two evidently merge into one another. But the main thrust of punishment, if by that we mean the infliction of pain and torment, undoubtedly lies with the soul. This emerges from the stress Origen laid on Isaiah 50:11—'Walk in the light of your fire and in the flame *which you have kindled for yourselves.*'[49] Origen emphasised the underlined words and drew the conclusion that erring souls created their own miseries. Some psychological observations were adduced to corroborate this position.[50] The time would come, he believed, when the soul would be re-presented with all the circumstances leading up to its various sins. Only, the representation would be shorn of all the attractiveness which contributed to the actual sins. Instead, the stinging lash of conscience would condemn the soul and prompt due remorse. Origen did not entirely rule out a role for God in this process, but he undoubtedly minimised it. The soul's torment arises primarily from some natural mechanism as it reassesses the avenues which formerly led it into sin.

## Tensions in Origen's thought

God, according to Origen, was employing a general strategy whose aim was the correction of fallen beings. In this way Origen sought to guard

48 Ibid. 29:13.

49 Origen *De Princ.* 2:10:4.

50 In addition to that cited in the main text, ibid. 2:20:5 sets out two alternative pictures of the harmful an painful consequences of a surfeit of sin.

God against any insinuations that his judgments were cruel or arbitrary. Yet, at the same time Origen insisted on free will. God could use all sorts of tactics to restore an erring soul, but he must stop short of coercion.[51] It was difficult to square this with the idea that correction would invariably be successful; for in the nature of things correction can either be accepted or rejected. And in his treatment of the end or consummation Origen expressed his views cautiously, with the proviso that they should be taken as tentative proposals rather than dogmatic affirmations.[52] Hence it is not surprising to find some uncertainty and even inconsistency in Origen's statements from different contexts.[53]

If God has an ultimate purpose, it is simply that the end should be like the beginning.[54] Or to put it in the biblical terms Origen preferred, everything in the end was to be made subject to Christ so that God would be all in all.[55] This was how it had been at the beginning when God created all things through Christ. This subjection to Christ was interpreted by Origen in exactly the same sense as believers are subjected willingly to Christ in this life. For his controversial interpretation Origen invoked his version of Psalm 62:1—'Shall not my soul be subject to God? For of him cometh my salvation.' The subjection, therefore, of Christ's enemies was in this view to be willing submission.[56] Again, Origen's view of free will was playing a vital role.

But is the end to be exactly the same as the beginning? Could fallen intelligences, once they are restored to their pristine condition, ever fall away again? If their new situation was to be exactly the same as the old, and if we insist on free will in Origen's sense, then a further falling away seems a distinct possibility. And this is a view Origen put forth as a suggestion in his *De Principiis*—'It is evidently possible that rational natures, who are never deprived of free will, may be able again to be liable to change; for God grants them this privilege, lest if their condition were unchangeable they should fail to recognise that this condition of happiness was owing to the grace of God and not to their own virtue. The result of those changes would doubtless be once more a variety and diversity of bodies.'[57] But this was not Origen's only word on the subject. Elsewhere he could talk as though rational beings in their

51 cf. Origen *on Prayer* 29:15—'God does not wish that good be done to anyone against his own will, but that he accept it voluntarily.'

52 Origen *De Princ.* 1:6:1.

53 Crouzel op. cit. chapter 12, especially pp. 242–5 and 262–6, helpfully pinpoints Origen's inconsistencies.

54 Origen op. cit. 1:6:2.

55 1 Cor. 15:22–28 is the key passage.

56 Origen op. cit. 1:6:1. At section 3 of the same chapter he does hold out the possibility of some exceptions to everything being in subjection to Christ.

57 Ibid. 2:3:3.

return to God would be so strengthened in their devotion as to acquire an unbreakable habit. The divine initiative of love in Christ had a vital role to play—'We do not deny that material nature retains free will: but such is the power of Christ's cross . . . that it suffices for the healing not merely of the present and the future but even of past ages; and not only for this human order of ours but also for heavenly powers and orders . . . And we learn from the Apostle what it is that restrains free will in the ages to come, when he says "Love never fails" . . . And John says "He who abides in love abides in God." Thus love, which is the greatest of all things, will restrain every creature from falling. Then God will be all in all.'[58] Thus Origen seems to have been willing to modify his original concept of free will and to allow for an immutability in good for those rational beings who were restored to their true love of God. Their latter state would then be an improvement on their original situation.

With Origen's treatment of the wicked there emerges a similar tension between a free will which implies a never-ending openness to change and a different concept which allows for the development of ingrained and so irremediable vice.[59] There are indications that Origen inclined to the latter view for the devil, at least some of the demons and possibly some of mankind.[60] Nonetheless, even in his own lifetime Origen was misunderstood or misrepresented as affirming belief in the eventual salvation of the devil.[61] It appears that Origen denied this belief, but it is doubtful whether many paid heed to this denial. Certainly, the logic of his own system, such as we see it set out in *De Principiis*, with its exclusive concentration on corrective punishment did suggest an inherent universalism. At the very least Origen failed to grasp the nettle of the retributive element in God's judgment and of the finality of the Day of Judgment. Instead, he left the impression that if the devil and others were perpetually excluded from blessing, it was entirely as a result of a hardening in their own character. It had little to do with a decisive judicial act from God.

From the beginning Origen was subject to misunderstanding. This was in part due to the exploratory style of *De Principiis*, which was taken as a perfected doctrinal system.[62] Later generations, as we learn from Augustine, demurred both at Origen's suggestion that those believers

58 Origen *Comm. on Romans* 5:10. The translation is that of H. Bettenson in *Early Christian Fathers* (Oxford, 1956) 256.

59 Crouzel op. cit. 263–4.

60 for a detailed survey of the evidence see ibid. 262–5.

61 Ibid. 21–2.

62 For a good brief description of Origen's intentions in this work see ibid. 45–7. I think, however, that Crouzel is too pessimistic about working out some sort of system from *De Principiis*. J. W. Trigg *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (SCM, London 1983) 245–6 takes a more positive line on Origen's consistency.

who attained to blessedness might not be secure in that position and at the notion that corrective punishment would eventually work the transformation and restoration of the most hardened sinners—demonic as well as human.[63] Both these assertions not only seemed contrary to Scripture but robbed a virtuous, self-denying life of much of its point. The only certainty, it appeared with such an understanding of Origen, was that no one would be utterly lost! Naturally the vast majority of Christians reacted against such a view, but it was a reaction prompted as much by what Origen was thought to say as by what he really did say.

Origen may indirectly have played a significant role in the development of ideas about judgment and Hell, though the importance for us today of his particular ideas will be limited. Who would now accept his doctrine of the pre-existence of rational intelligences? Who would think it desirable to explain present diversities and inequalities in terms of behaviour in some previous existence? No doubt a believer in reincarnation would, but that was a view Origen emphatically denied.[64] Yet Origen did the church valuable service in his insistence that judgment cannot be an appendage to Christian theology. It must be an integral part of any systematic account of God's revelation. Perhaps we may focus the questions raised by Origen along the following lines. How do God's judgments as we see them in the world today relate to the final judgment? Is all divine punishment essentially corrective? We may not agree with Origen's answers, but at least he has induced the church to look more closely at the nature of divine judgment.

**Abstract**

In this period the doctrine of the last things was yet to be worked out in detail. Apart from the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment, no orthodox consensus was established. With such a climate Origen tried to extend the church's teaching. He tied the traditional idea of a final judgment to God's long-term strategy for the restoration of souls (or intelligences) after they had declined from the contemplation of God. In the process he produced a speculative and controversial picture which revolved round the willing subjection of all things to God. All God's judgments were essentially corrective. This meant that Origen at least considered the possible salvation of the devil and his angels. But his treatment did leave several inconsistencies. This was probably of more use to the church than a systematised dogmatic statement, because it focussed the mind of the church on certain key issues on which it had to work out a biblical consensus.

63 Augustine *De Civ.Dei* 21:17. For a good, brief account of other critics of Origen from the early church see Trigg op. cit. 246–55.

64 Origen *C. Cels.* 8:30; *Comm. in Matt* 13:1.