

BOOK REVIEW

Universal Salvation in Late Antiquity: Porphyry of Tyre and the Pagan-Christian Debate. By MICHAEL BLAND SIMMONS. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xlv + 492. Hardcover, £64.00. ISBN 978-0-19-020239-2.

This stimulating monograph situates Porphyry—who is enjoying a welcome revival in scholarly interest—within late antique debates about universal salvation. It argues that Christian universalism was the central theme of Porphyry’s work against the Christians and universal salvation was a core concern in his whole oeuvre, especially *De regressu animae*, *Contra Christianos*, and *Philosophia ex oraculis* (in this chronological order, against Bidez’ chronology). Simmons oddly fails to refer to the only comprehensive critical study of universal salvation in late antiquity,¹ but he virtually cites no scholarship after 2012 besides Aaron Johnson²—not really deployed in his lengthy notes. Simmons takes “universal salvation” in a different sense than I do in my monograph on *Apokatastasis* and other scholarship: not as a synonym of *apokatastasis*, restoration and salvation as eventually achieved by all humans or rational creatures (what I will call “the strong sense”), but as salvation offered to all regardless of social class, gender, ethnicity etc., though not achieved by everyone (“the weak sense”). By this definition, the late Augustine and all patristic theologians were universalists—not by the former definition.

Simmons concurs with Elizabeth Digeser that Porphyry played a remarkable role in the outset of the Diocletian persecution, taking part in the 302 CE imperial conference. He rightly observes that no other religion or philosophy—no “pagan” cult, nor even the imperial cult—offered such a crisis-management soteriology as Christianity did with its universalism (in the *weak* sense), which was ultimately the reason for its triumph in late antiquity. I also agree that a closely related ground for Christianity’s appeal to people was the Christians’ tendency to help everyone, including “pagans” (199).³ I argued that no other religion or philosophy before the

¹ Ilaria Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.

² Aaron Johnson, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry*, Cambridge: CUP, 2013.

³ See my *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery*, Oxford: OUP, 2016.

Christian doctrine of apokatastasis offered a universalistic soteriology in the *strong* sense, not even Zoroastrianism, which is rather likely to have been influenced by Christian *apokatastasis* theories.⁴ I definitely concur with Simmons (159–160) that Plato’s eschatological myths and their reception in Neoplatonism still await serious investigation—this is indeed part of a large, ongoing research project on eschatology and soteriology in Neoplatonism, and I already devoted scholarship to the reception of Plato’s myths in Origen and Proclus. I also agree with Simmons that Porphyry likely knew Syriac (4): he might have read Bardaisan in Syriac.⁵

Simmons argues that Porphyry, increasingly worried by Christian expansionism favored by its soteriological universalism, to refute Christian claims that Christ was the common Savior of all people, and having fallen short of finding a unitary way of salvation for all (as Augustine claims), theorized a three-layered hierarchical soteriology that offered salvation to all: (1) for the uneducated masses, traditional polytheism and animal sacrifices, which purify the soul’s lowest parts through civic virtues; (2) for philosophical beginners, liberation from passions through purificatory virtues; (3) for advanced philosophers, Neoplatonic philosophy through contemplative and paradigmatic virtues, to achieve contemplation and union with the One. Aaron Johnson denies that Porphyry supported a three-tiered path to salvation and was a universalist with inclusionary aims; rather, he had an “exclusionary” strategy: “the plethora of material cult acts was categorized as inappropriate to the transcendent philosophical life and deemed to be misleading to the pursuit of wisdom” (*Religion and Identity*, 123, 104, *passim*). Like Gillian Clark,⁶ Johnson deems Augustine’s testimony unreliable and suspects that Porphyry never sought a universal way of salvation

⁴ As argued in *Christian Doctrine*; “Zoroastrianism and Apokatastasis,” lecture, Harvard-Providence Patristics Group, Patristica Bostoniensa, forthcoming.

⁵ See my *Bardaisan of Edessa*, Piscataway: Gorgias, 2009, 107–126.

⁶ E.g., Gillian Clark, “Augustine’s Porphyry and the Universal Way of Salvation,” in *Studies on Porphyry*, eds. G. Karamanolis - A. Sheppard, London: University of London, 2007, 127-140. According to Jeremy Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2008, 71, Porphyry attacked Christian’s pretense to universalism on the ground that Christianity was both chronologically and spatially delimited. Although Porphyry may have been really interested in a universal way of salvation, he criticized Christianity precisely for not providing it.

(*Religion*, 105–106). Porphyry countered the universal ways of both Origen and Iamblichus according to Elizabeth Digeser.⁷

I find it possible that Porphyry was sensitized to the necessity of seeking a universal path of salvation, especially since he was certainly influenced by Origen—the greatest supporter of *apokatastasis*—and perhaps by Plotinus' Platonopolis. The latter was an inclusive project, encompassing philosophers as well as non-intellectuals. I agree with Simmons that Porphyry likely studied under Origen. Only, Origen supported universal salvation in the *strong* sense (as defined above), while Simmons consistently reasons with the *weak* sense on his mind. A fragment from Porphyry's *Contra Christianos* in Nemesius confirms my point: it nominally criticizes Christian ἀποκατάστασις, in that it entailed a resurrection taking place “only once, not periodically” (as Proclus later will theorize it⁸). Now, *apokatastasis* was Origen's doctrine of universal salvation in the *strong* sense, which Porphyry knew. Thus, Porphyry was well aware of the Christian doctrine of universal salvation in the strong sense (Origen's *apokatastasis*), not simply in the weak sense.

Notwithstanding many typos (e.g. αὐταρκής for αὐτάρκης, 212; ἀγών for ἄγων, ὁδοῦ for ὁδοῦ, 220), this is an interesting book, as will be Simmons's announced monograph on Eusebius' soteriological universalism (392). I also argued that Eusebius was a soteriological universalist, like his inspirer Origen, but, again, in the strong sense: that is, following Origen, Eusebius likely embraced universal restoration, as especially his polemic with Marcellus of Ancyra in the exegesis of 1 Cor 15:28 makes clear.⁹ Simmons' suggestions that Eusebius was responding to Porphyry's three-tiered soteriology and that his *Chronicle* intended to prove not only the antiquity of Christianity, but also its soteriological universality make sense, and both Simmons and I have noted that Eusebius repeatedly calls Christ “the common Savior of absolutely all,” κοινὸς πάντων Σωτήρ (not only in the *Theophany* and *Demonstratio Evangelica*, as Simmons highlights, but also in *Contra*

⁷ Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, “The Power of Religious Rituals,” in *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. Noel Lenski, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, 81–92.

⁸ See my “Proclus of Constantinople and Apokatastasis,” in *Proclus and his Legacy*, eds. David Butorac–Danielle Layne, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017, 95–122.

⁹ “Origen, Eusebius, and the Doctrine of Apokatastasis,” in *Eusebius of Caesarea: Traditions and Innovations*, eds. Aaron Johnson – Jeremy Schott, Center for Hellenic Studies 2013, 307–323; *Christian Doctrine*, 307–331.

Marcellum and *Ecclesiastica Theologia*¹⁰). But does this mean that Christ merely offers salvation to all, or that he will actually achieve salvation for all? If Eusebius—like Porphyry—was following Origen, and in light of many other elements I highlighted, the latter option is likely.

ILARIA L. E. RAMELLI

Catholic University-Angelicum- Oxford- Princeton, ilaria.ramelli@unicatt.it

¹⁰As I pointed out in the works referenced above and another in *Studia Patristica*.

