

[MJTM 21 (2019–2020)]

BOOK REVIEW

Ilaria L. E. Ramelli. *Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich*. Vol. 1 of *A Larger Hope?* Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019. xxviii + 286 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-6109-7884-2. \$36.00.

Robin A. Parry with Ilaria L. E. Ramelli. *Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 2 of *A Larger Hope?* Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019. xii + 313 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4982-0040-0. \$29.00.

In *A Larger Hope?*, the two volumes are split between the specialties of the two authors. Ilaria Ramelli charts universalism from the early church up to Julian of Norwich. One can see from her previously published work on ancient thought that she is more than qualified for this task, and contributes a concise, compact, and yet comprehensive discussion of the topic. Robin Parry, the author of the second volume, expositis universalism from the Reformation to the nineteenth century, and does so with his characteristic irenic precision.

This book stands in the shadow of Michael McClymond's 1300+ page history of universalism, *The Devil's Redemption* (2018), which was published the year before. A book of such sprawling size can be a tough act to follow. Yet, just as going second in curling and other sports gives a player a significant advantage, so also *A Larger Hope?* strategically succeeds McClymond's work. One should note, this is not either author's first attempt at a history of universalism. Ramelli, for example, has already offered a massive tome, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (2013). In comparison, while McClymond offers a sizeable treatment of Universalism, Ramelli and Parry offer a

more succinct one.

While the size of *A Larger Hope?* makes it easier to digest, this might be attributed to its more modest aim. As a book written from the perspective of someone ardently opposed to universalism, McClymond's history of universalism is supplemented by his attempt to demonstrate that universalism is always beyond the pale. While both give theological interpretations of history, McClymond has to constantly filter and downplay the fact that there are sincere, biblically minded Christians that hold to universalism, whereas Ramelli and Parry do not have that intention. Their work is ironically more empirical because it is also more sympathetic.

Ramelli begins her volume with the brief insistence that universalism is based on the Old and New Testaments. Ramelli does a fine job plotting the traces of universalism in the works of Ignatius and Theophilus of Antioch as well as its fuller expression in Bardsarian, Clement, and Origen. This still leaves some questions as to the origins of universalism. While she shows some evidence of universalism from the Apostolic Fathers to Origen, that still leaves a large segment of early Christianity as an anomaly. Brian Daley also noted the diversity of early church eschatology (*Hope of the Early Church*, 1991), and that there seems to be a development in the tradition amidst an early diversity which needs to be accounted for methodologically. Why was the early church not uniformly universalist? If universalism is a systematization of the Bible, why, one may ask, does it need systematizing?

Perhaps the most outstanding contribution of the book is that Ramelli notes that Athanasius, Basil, and Gregory Nazianzus, while not offering their own account of eschatology in the way Origen and Nyssa do, nevertheless, state their agreement with these more explicit universalistic thinkers in various ways. This poses a significant challenge for anyone that views universalism as fundamentally incompatible with Nicene orthodoxy.

However, if this is the case, the question of orthodoxy (that is, as a traditional conciliar consensus on what is most faithful and essential to Christian faith) is rendered problematic through the course of the book. Ramelli argues that the Council of

Constantinople in 553 did not definitively condemn Origen's universalism (yet it nevertheless was portrayed that way ever since). The anathemas against Origen are not part of the actual proceedings of the council, and, as Ramelli argues, were possibly attached by the Emperor Justinian which places their conciliar status in doubt. While her argument that the Emperor attached the anathemas by ill-intent is a speculative case that needs further exploration, she succeeds in showing that appealing to the authority of this council in any straightforward sense simply does not settle the matter.

Some of the most important parts of volume one are actually its appendices. Here, Ramelli offers a defense of the terms for eternity (*'ōlām* and *aiōnios*), a reply to McClymond, and a rebuttal to his noteworthy historiographic claim that universalism comes from Gnosticism. In the latter two appendices, she convincingly dismantles McClymond's metanarrative and asserts that Origen did not arrive at universalism because of Gnostic influence, but because of his commitment to Scripture.

However, her insistence that *'ōlām* and *aiōnios* do not describe infinite duration or enduring permanency is not as effective. She is correct in stating that the terms are often not quantitative, but she proposes definitions that are more philosophical, making these words seem much less precise. Both of these words do have usages that suggest something more enduring than merely "an age." The examples cited in support of her position are problematic. For instance, she cites Lam 3:31 ("the Lord will not reject forever") where the word used for "forever" is *'ōlām*. It also does not work, as she insists, to assert that *aiōnios* only means eternal when referring to God and everywhere else something more like "age," as that kind of distinction does not account for how *aiōnios* can mean "never" or "always" in a variety of contexts. Not to mention, when used to describe the action of God, the distinction is less than useful. Thus, Revelation describes Christ as reigning "forever and ever" (Rev 11:15) and also judging the disobedient with torment that will be "forever and ever" (cf. Rev 20:10; 22:5). While much of her rationale for universalism is quite robust, there is often an assumption of the text being uniform when its passages may in fact be more multi-faceted.

Parry's contribution is perhaps less weighty for discussions about the legitimacy of universalism, but nevertheless, he offers a clear, well-researched history. He begins with a quick summary of universalist arguments. While the book is succinct, perhaps this treatment is too brief. The best exposition of the biblical passages and arguments from a universalist standpoint is still Parry's previous work, *The Evangelical Universalist* (2012).

Parry's treatment is rigorous, adding depth to many lesser-known figures such as Jane Lead, but since it stops at the nineteenth century, the volume fails to discuss the most interesting developments of the modern era. In this regard, Parry's edited volume, *All Shall Be Well* (2011), whose authors treat modern scholars such as Balthasar, Barth, Moltmann, and others, is still unsurpassed. Frankly, the current work feels like it needs a third volume in order to be complete, although Parry seems content to allow that history to be told by others like McClymond.

In this volume, he charts several genealogies of universalist thinking and different rationales associated with each. Similar to Ramelli's volume, his appendix is indispensable and likewise contributes significantly to his overall argument. Parry contends that McClymond's thesis about modern universalism being traceable to Jakob Böhme is vastly overstated. It is true that Böhme influenced some universalists with ideas that aided their thinking, but still, there are many who were universalists because they disagreed with him. In fact, there are Calvinist universalists (such as Relly), and still others, such as Gregory MacDonald, who were universalists not because of prior influences but simply because of their own creative engagement with the biblical text.

Parry concludes with a helpful methodological culmination looking at how Scripture, tradition, and experience are used to support universalist doctrines. For instance, one may be a universalist because of the possibility being suggested by a traditional writer such as Origen or Nyssa, but then again, one could be a universalist because of reflection on some analogical experience, such as a parent reflecting on the nature of love for one's child being similar to God's saving love. Whatever the route, Parry, a confessedly evangelical universalist, insists that Scripture must

be taken seriously.

With the publishing of this book alongside of McClymond's, a new era of universalist scholarship is emerging. Whether one is for or against the doctrine, one thing is for sure: the position cannot remain ignored or dismissed as absurd or obscure. To even call it "heresy" as this book shows, begs deep methodological questions over the nature of the biblical text and the meaning of church tradition. Yet, is the matter settled in favor of a plain, clear, systematic universalism? Here caution is warranted as well.

Spencer Miles Boersma
Acadia Divinity College
Wolfville, NS