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Original article



On the Question of Jerome of Stridon's Understanding of Apocatastasis

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Abstract

Introduction. In this study, the authors address the question of whether Jerome Stridon confessed apocatastasis, since in some works, he affirms the eternal torment of sinners and in others he denies it.

Materials and methods. The authors turn to the works of Jerome Stridon, investigate the socio-cultural and background of his life, and also turn to the authors who held opposing views on the eschatology of Jerome Stridon. Hermeneutics and the method of historical reconstruction are used to solve the tasks set in the research.

Results. The conclusion says that for Jerome of Stridon the question of apocatastasis either was not of special importance and thus did not receive theological prophecy, or he deliberately avoided disputation on this topic, which was due to his education and the general spirit of the epoch.

Discussion and conclusion. Church dogmatics were born in polemics influenced by a great number of factors, but each time dealt with a different issue. The polemic on eschatology took place in the time of Jerome of Stridon, but he addressed a different aspect of it. The attempt of scholars of later times to give an unequivocal answer to whether Jerome of Stridon adhered to the theory of universal salvation or not is anachronistic.

Keywords: apocatastasis, Christianity, Jerome of Stridon, Augustine, Bible, Rufinus, purgatory, anachronism, millenerionism, eschatology

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Научная статья

К вопросу о понимании апокатастасиса Иеронимом Стридонским

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Аннотация

Введение. Рассматривается вопрос о том, исповедовал ли Иероним Стридонский апокатастасис, поскольку в одних произведениях он утверждает вечность мучения грешников, а в других отрицает.

Материалы и методы. Авторы обращаются к произведениям Иеронима Стридонского, исследуется социокультурный фон его жизни, а также теоретические источники, авторы которых придерживались противоположных взглядов на эсхатологию Иеронима Стридонского. Для решения поставленных в рамках исследования задач используется преимущественно герменевтика и метод исторической реконструкции.

Результаты исследования. Сделан вывод, что для Иеронима Стридонского вопрос апокатастасиса либо не представлял особой важности, а потому богословской проработки не получил, либо он намеренно избегал диспута на эту тему, что обусловлено его образованием и общим духом эпохи.

Обсуждение и заключение. Церковная догматика рождалась в полемике, на которую оказывали влияние огромное количество факторов, но каждое время решало свой вопрос. Полемика по вопросам эсхатологии уже велась во времена Иеронима Стридонского, но он затронул иной ее аспект. Попытка ученых более поздних времен дать однозначный ответ на то, придерживался ли Иероним Стридонский теории всеобщего спасения или нет, является анахронизмом.

Ключевые слова: апокатастасис, христианство, Иероним Стридонский, Августин, Библия, Руфин, чистилище, анахронизм, миллениерионизм, эсхатология

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Introduction. The materials for this study were the extant texts of Jerome of Stridon, mainly his letters and commentaries on the books of the Bible, as well as the studies of specialists such as A.R. Fokin, N.A. Khandoga and some others.

We face a daunting task. The point is that in some works Jerome strongly denies apocatastasis, most often in the context of the Origenist disputes, and in others, on the contrary, he leans toward it. Thus, in the Letter to Amandus, one can read: “But in the end of the world when all His members shall see Christ, that is their own body, reigning, they also shall be made subject to Christ, that is to their own body, that the whole of Christ’s body may be subject unto God and the Father, and that God may be all in all” [1. Vol. 2. p. 209].

Here Jerome interprets the book of Jeremiah, and one other similar place from it might be cited, though there are many more, such as: “At the second coming the Lord will appear in His majesty, and the full number of the Gentiles will enter [His church], so that all Israel will be saved, and God will no longer be only in part and in some individual [people], but all in all” Vol. 2. p. 205].

But in other works he explicitly affirms the eternity of the torment of sinners. For example, in “Commentary on Matthew”, commenting on Mt. 10:28, he writes: “Fear him who can destroy soul and body in Gehenna” ...Therefore, the future punishments and the eternal penalties with which sinners are to be tormented are denoted by the name of this place” [1. Vol. 2. p. 415].

Materials and methods. The authors turn to the works of Jerome of Stridon, explore the sociocultural and political background of his life, and to theoretical sources whose authors held opposing views on Jerome of Stridon’s eschatology. A number of general theoretical methods, including hermeneutics and the method of historical reconstruction, are used to solve the tasks set in the research.

Results. In his Commentary on Matthew, Jerome speaks more than once in favor of apocatastasis, which makes our task considerably more difficult, but the legacy of Jerome is very extensive, and we shall nevertheless proceed to investigate. Of course, we are not the first to point out this contradiction; scholars have been pondering this question for a long time. Some are of the opinion that Jerome did share the concept of apocatastasis, e.g., A.R. Fokin: “At the same time, however, in his conceptions of the Last Judgment and the future fate of sinners, st. Jerome could not completely get rid of the influence of Origen’s ideas about universal salvation and the purifying character of fiery punishments” [3. p. 58]. There are other points of view as well: “In many of the works we see an attempt to answer the question: who will be honored with salvation? And one summarizing answer is the one who leads a righteous, ascetic lifestyle” [4].

In the research literature there is an opinion according to which Jerome changed his views over time; from our point of view, this position does not deserve close attention due to the low level of argumentation, because Jerome of Stridon stated his thoughts on apocatastasis not in chronological sequence, and we did not see that in the early works he supported it, and in the later works he rejected it. The chronological dependence of Jerome of Stridon’s views on apocatastasis has not been revealed by us. We do not think Jerome was trying to answer this question at all, as we will justify further on. However, the Millennial Kingdom controversy was rumbling on at the time, and Jerome simply could not remain silent on the subject. In his opinion, the Lord Jesus Christ will not come twice at the end of time, as the chiliasts taught, but only once [4].

So, what did Blessed Jerome think about the duration of the torment of sinners? To make sense of this, it is necessary to cover a little about his personality and the time in which he lived, because the characteristics of his character and the challenges he faced play a crucial role in the issue we are exploring.

Jerome was born in 331 AD, apparently to a wealthy and noble family in the Eastern Italian town of Stridon. His parents were Christians. Having received an elementary education, Jerome at the age of thirteen was sent to study in Rome, where he began to study grammar, poetics and rhetoric, and read Latin poets and prose writers. This training lasted six years, during which Jerome, according to the custom of the students, indulged in revelry. However, it was at that time that he was baptized.

Upon graduation in 368, Jerome undertook a journey to the Gallic city of Treveri, the seat of Emperor Valentinian I, apparently to begin a secular career. But here he began to study Christian literature and became imbued with the ideas of asceticism to such an extent that he decided to become a monk. For this purpose, young Jerome moved to Aquileia, where the local bishop Valerian gathered a group of educated Christians who had an ascetic outlook. It was there that Jerome met his future friend and adversary Rufinus as well as Evagrius. However, disputes within this community soon forced Jerome to undertake a pilgrimage to the homeland of Christian asceticism – the East – in order to search for the truth.

Having Jerusalem as his final goal, he stayed for some time in Antioch with Evagrius, where he was visited by a vision in which angels before the throne of God scourged him for his infatuation with pagan writers. After Antioch he performed ascetic feats for about 2 years in the Chalcedonian desert among the anchorite monks and surpassed them by the austerity of his life. It was there that he deepened his knowledge of Greek and began the study of Hebrew. His first work, a Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Obadiah, was also written there. But dogmatic disputes with the monks forced him to leave the desert and return to Antioch. There he was ordained a presbyter, but on the condition that he would not be restricted in his movements.

Around 381, Jerome arrived to Constantinople, where he met Gregory the Theologian, who became his mentor and introduced him to the writings of Origen. Apparently Jerome took an active part in the 2nd Ecumenical Council. And after its completion he was invited to Rome by Epiphanius of Cyprus as secretary to prepare for the Council of Rome, which was to resolve the controversy between the West and the East. There he gained the trust of Pope Damasus, who appointed him secretary in correspondence with the Eastern churches. Jerome was soon commissioned to make a new translation of the Bible into Latin. His knowledge, ascetic life and wisdom won him universal respect in Rome, and he became a welcomed guest in noble houses, where he taught the gospel truths. He was even considered to be the pontiff's successor. But soon an event happened that changed everything. A girl from a noble family died who, under the influence of Jerome, practiced severe asceticism. He was blamed for that death. And after the death of Pope Damasus, Jerome had to leave Rome.

In the summer of 386, after traveling through the East, Jerome finally settled in Bethlehem, founding a monastery there with the help of his wealthy followers. Beginning in 393, he took part in the Origenist disputes, taking an opposing position, although he had previously admired Origen. Soon Jerome also quarreled with Rufinus over his translation of "On the First Principles". Their polemic continued for many years. During this time Jerome wrote most of his works, mostly commentaries on the books of the Old Testament and some New Testament books. Jerome of Stridon is thought to have died (exact date unknown) in 420 AD at the very advanced age of 91.

It follows from this that Jerome had a very good education in the sciences of language for those times, but we have no information that he studied philosophy or history in depth, which determined the specific character of his work, when he discovered Christianity and found a source of income to devote himself without interference to his favorite work.

It should also be said of the era in which Jerome lived. In 410 AD, the Goths captured and destroyed Rome. This is just one of the characteristics of a time of transition, and at that time the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages was underway. Which, as is usually the case, was reflected in the decline of culture, in our case, the western part of the former Roman Empire. If we talk about science and art, we can characterize this era as degradation. Of all the arts, the theater was the most popular, but even here no outstanding works were created. A mass fascination with astrology and Eastern cults reigned. Luxury and extravagance began to be regarded as virtues even among Christians (which gave Pelagius an excuse for his heresy).

All these phenomena characterized the decline of a once great civilization. Apparently, the trends of the era were reflected in Jerome. He cannot be described as a profound theologian who built sophisticated and complex theological schemes. Moreover, he disliked such things, while remaining a consummate exegete with a superb command of the language. At the same time, people who knew him, characterised his character as irascible, even feisty, he was prone to get into arguments, in which he sometimes lost his sense of proportion. All of these traits of his character will affect the final conclusion of our study, although one could argue against this reasoning by citing the personalities of Augustine, Rufinus, and even Pelagius. We are inclined, however, to regard them as exceptions to the general rule, whose genius set the direction of the new development for a whole millennium, and more, but Jerome of Stridon rather represents the general tendency of the time.

However, we should proceed to investigate the question we have posed - whether or not Jerome of Stridon practiced universal salvation. For this purpose, we analyzed his works in order to identify eschatological representations.

In the first place, it should be pointed out that this question had no special significance for Jerome, since he did not write a single work specifically devoted to the question of apocatastasis. His main emphasis in eschatology was to prove that the narrative of the Apocalypse concerning the Millennial Kingdom should not be taken literally: "those who accept the fable of a thousand years and, following the delusion of the Jews, acknowledge the earthly kingdom of the Saviour,

do not understand that the Apocalypse of John encloses beneath the surface of the letter the innermost mysteries of the Church" [5. p. 126].

Let us cite affirmations in defence of apocatastasis. The "Commentary on Jeremiah" contains more than 10 places speaking in favour of apocatastasis, we will cite only one (another was given at the beginning): "Or, better, we believe that it will be fulfilled at the second coming when the Lord "shall appear in his glory and the fullness of the Gentiles shall enter in", so that all Israel will be saved, and not in part and in individuals, but God will be all in all (Rom. ch. 11 and 1 Cor. ch. 15)" [2. p. 500]. In his "Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians", Jerome further elaborates his understanding of universal salvation by considering God's present presence in individuals as separate virtues. But at the end of things all things shall have been subjected to him voluntarily or forcibly. And then in all men without exception God will be present in His fullness, as He is now present in part in the saints: "For at the present God is in individuals in part. It is difficult for all the virtues to be present equally even in holy and perfect men. But at the end of things and in the consummation of the world, when all things shall have been subjected to him, all things will be filled in all so that, as God is filled with all virtues, all things are filled in all, and all will have all things which they previously possessed singly as individuals" [2. p. 460].

If we are to speak of Jerome's statements against apocatastasis, they too can be found. There is, however, one extremely difficult work for the researcher, where he is both in favour of universal salvation and against it at the same time, and one can even find there a certain "middle" position. This is the "Commentaries on Ephesians", which suggests that salvation for some Christians will be found after being "purified by fire" in the afterlife". We may therefore assume that Jerome was the originator of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. At the same time, Jerome, like the Catholic Church, does not believe that the devil, demons and those who worshipped them will find salvation: "You should rather have said (to reject the idea of the devil's salvation): "thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt thou be any more" (Ez.28:19), and on behalf of the Lord speaking to Job: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make many supplications unto thee? Will he speak soft words unto thee? Will he make a covenant with thee? Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever? But in this he may be excused as a man of simplicity, and since this is not avoided by scholars either, the semblance of innocence is preferable in the non-scientist [2. p. 620].

But let us cite Jerome's utterances against apocatastasis. Thus, in the "To Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem" he writes: "... and their fire shall not be extinguished, and they shall be beheld by all flesh (Isaiah 66:24)" [2. p. 680]. Or in the "Paula and Eustochium to Marcella": "adjure him by our faith in the coming kingdom, by the assurance of the resurrection of the dead, by the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels even as he trusts that he shall not possess as his eternal inheritance that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Math. 8,18)" [2. p. 690].

Habakkuk letter to Chromatius: "By which it is shown that from fear of judgement and eternal punishment they will always be in a state of dread, and from daily terror they will endure those torments which they, according to their own consciousness, or inner feeling, deserve" [2. p. 701].

To Minervius and Alexander: For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. (1Cor. 15:52-53), that it may live forever in either case, in torment, or in the kingdom of heaven [2. p. 32]. Ibid: "But if the dead be incorruptible, how shall they not change, when already incorruption itself is change? But the change by which Paul and the saints will be changed must be understood here in the sense of glorification; and incorruption will be the inheritance of all, because through it sinners also will be more miserable, to be tormented for ever, and not destroyed by a mortal and corruptible body" [2. p. 633].

Discussion and conclusion. Thus we have considered most of the places in which Blessed Jerome speaks in one way or another about the idea of universal salvation. What is the conclusion to be drawn from this? It might be assumed that Jerome initially held to the idea of apocatastasis under the influence of Origen, but changed his views with the onset of the Origen controversy. Against this view, however, is the fact that he also expressed the idea that all men would be saved in later works.

The most likely assumption would be that Jerome of Stridon had no formed opinion on the matter, not considering it important, or perhaps because of its theological complexity. For he had a dislike for developed theological schemes, which was quite in keeping with the general spirit of the time. This led him, especially in polemical fervor, to express different views on minor issues in different works. He was concerned with entirely different matters. The time for controversy over the afterlife of sinners was yet to come.

If we make a general conclusion, we can say that for Jerome of Stridon the question of apocatastasis did not play any significant role, and therefore, commenting on the texts of the Bible, he quite unintentionally wrote contradictory things on this issue. Polemical letters also show a similar tendency. His polemics were on a different plane, and he touched this subject only incidentally, for the main emphasis in the soteriological disputes of that era was on the Millennial Kingdom.

However, we do not insist that we have fully grasped the great man's way of thinking, and it is quite possible that Jerome of Stridon deliberately avoided the topic of apocatastasis altogether, not wishing to enter into a new polemic (the old ones were enough). After all, Augustine had already engaged in a fierce struggle with Origen and his understanding of the fate of sinners (see "On the City of God", where he ironizes about "vessels of mercy" of various kinds). Jerome had enough topics to argue with both Augustine and Rufinus, and with many others as well. He simply may not have had the time and energy to consider in detail a topic important to later generations, but of secondary importance to him.

In either case, we draw two equally likely conclusions that Jerome either did not see the question of apocatastasis as a topic worthy of application or deliberately avoided addressing it. However, it is not possible to attribute any position to him unequivocally in this matter. Therefore, it is not appropriate to transfer the way of thinking of later times to the eras of older times. In history this is called anachronism, and it would not be at all unreasonable to apply this principle to theological inquiry as well. "The eschatological doctrine of Blessed Jerome is neither perfectly clear and transparent nor completely consistent" [2. p. 200].

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