

Universal Salvation, Damnation, and the Task of Theology

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The science of theology is rightly concerned with questions of the ultimate salvation and damnation of intellectual creatures, both angelic and human.¹ Here I shall touch on the orthodoxy and theological correctness of two opposed views, which are current in Christian theology today, about the ultimate fate of human beings in the order God has created. One is universalism, the idea that all human beings definitely will or may be finally united with God in heaven.² According to stronger or weaker versions of universalism, hell will or may be empty. The other is sometimes known as “infernalism,” by which I mean the view that there will be some human beings forever separated from God, even if we do not know who they will be. According to infernalism, thus defined, hell will definitely not be empty.

Hans Urs von Balthasar is among those theologians who is counted as a universalist. However, he distanced himself from the idea that universal salvation is something we can believe by faith or know for certain. Balthasar supposed that an empty hell is something we can instead hope for, and so

¹ For the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on some of these issues, see Simon Francis Gainé, O.P., “Resurrection and Eschatology,” in Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 361–80.

² For an overall historical perspective, see Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil’s Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

embraced a weaker version of universalism.³ Three short works by him have been gathered in English translation under the title *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?*⁴ Among them is Balthasar's main defense of his position, *Was dürfen wir hoffen?*, which was first published in German in 1986.⁵ Though he acknowledges that we do not know for definite that universal salvation will take place, he treats it as something really possible. However, for "infernalists," as Balthasar dubs them, though we can certainly hope that any given individual will be admitted to heaven, we cannot hope for the salvation of the human race as a whole, because we are bound to believe that some will be lost, even though we may not know who they will be. This is because, on the infernalist account, the actual inhabitation of hell has been divinely revealed, such that universalism is outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, and so can hardly be true. From the first reactions to Balthasar's proposal, even before the publication of *Was dürfen wir hoffen?*, the revelation that some will be forever in hell has been presented as a refutation of Balthasar's hope, intimating that his universalism is heretical.⁶ Some critics have suggested that, while Balthasar was not setting out to oppose Church teaching, it is not possible to "accede to Balthasar's way of conceiving the possibility of eternal salvation and remain orthodox."⁷

It seems to me, however, that both infernalism and a hope for universal salvation arguably lie within the current bounds of Catholic orthodoxy. I do not mean to say that both are correct. Evidently they cannot both be true. Either it is possible that hell will in fact be empty or it is not. Nevertheless, it seems to me that both views can be recognized as falling within the current bounds of orthodoxy. Consider how the claims of the classic Thomist and Molinist positions on the relationship between divine grace and human freedom cannot both be true in all their details, yet each falls within the

³ For a stronger version of universalism by an Eastern Orthodox theologian, see David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), and my review in *New Blackfriars* 101 (2020): 628–30.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"? with a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lauther Krauch, 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014). For Balthasar's views in the context of his wider theological project, see McClymond, *Devil's Redemption*, 2:892–926.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Was dürfen wir hoffen?* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1986).

⁶ E.g., Gerhard Hermes, "Hoffnung auf des Heil aller? Bei H. U. von Balthasar nichts Neues," *Der Fels*, November 1984, 318, cited in English translation at Balthasar, *Dare We Hope?*, 10.

⁷ Kevin Flannery, S.J., "How to Think about Hell," *New Blackfriars* 72 (1991): 469–81, at 476. See also 479.

bounds of current Catholic orthodoxy and neither position can licitly call the other heretical, without prejudice to a future magisterial determination of the question.⁸ I suggest that, likewise, infernalism and universalism as understood by Balthasar both fall within the bounds of current Catholic orthodoxy, even if both cannot be correct. However, while the Catholic orthodoxy of infernalism, having been held within Catholicism over the centuries, is surely uncontested, that of universalism is strongly contested, especially on the alleged ground that infernalist teaching is revealed doctrine.

Though universalism is certainly not a modern invention, it has become increasingly prominent in modern times. Since the Second Vatican Council, it has been embraced by a number of Catholic theologians.⁹ The extent of its contemporary support gives reason to ask whether it has become more or less positively recognized by the magisterium as an arguable theological option, just as Thomism and Molinism are recognized as arguable theological options for explaining the relationship between grace and freedom. Pope St. John Paul II seems to have come to hold it, as indicated by the initial report in *Osservatore Romano* of his words during a general audience on July 28, 1999, that, in the absence of a special divine revelation, we do not have knowledge of “whether or which” humans are damned. In other words, it is not merely a question of not knowing which human beings are in hell, but a question also of not knowing whether any are in hell at all. The implication would be that universal human salvation is a real possibility, as is a populated hell, and so both lie within the bounds of orthodoxy. However, it should be noted that a later official version of the Pope’s catechetical teaching was missing the crucial word “whether,” leaving the text to say more cautiously only that we do not know which humans are in hell, with no explicit suggestion of the possibility of an empty hell.¹⁰

We must then distinguish two claims here: first, the claim that we do not know *which* human beings will be in hell, and secondly, the more radical claim that we do not know *whether* there will be human beings in hell at all. I am concerned in this article with the orthodoxy of the second of the two claims. However, we cannot entertain the possibility of its orthodoxy without supposing that the first falls within the bounds of current orthodoxy. This is because, should we know for certain that hell is populated by some designated individual or individuals, such as Judas Iscariot, then we can hardly ask whether it might be empty. There are several passages in Scripture

⁸ Denzinger-Hünemann [DH] no. 1997.

⁹ See McClymond, *Devil’s Redemption*, 2:873–935.

¹⁰ *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. 12/2 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 82.

that easily read along the lines of some designated individual going to hell. For example, there is Jesus's saying of Judas in Matt 26:24 that it would have been better for him had he never been born. Should it be certain that this means that Judas's soul is in hell, we could not legitimately ask whether hell may be empty.¹¹

I am not concerned here with the correct interpretation of this or any comparable passage of Scripture, but with the question of whether current Catholic orthodoxy allows such passages to be interpreted in a non-infernalist or infernalist way. In favor of the orthodoxy of a non-infernalist reading of this dominical saying is the fact that St. John Paul elsewhere said that these words "do not allude for certain to eternal damnation."¹² It seems to me that the Pope could not have proposed this view, which would seem to be applicable to any comparable Scripture text, without holding that non-infernalist attempts to interpret such passages fall in principle within the bounds of orthodoxy. This is why John Paul could teach in that 1999 general audience that we do not have knowledge of which human beings are damned. With the orthodoxy of this claim in mind, I am going to enquire into the further, more disputable claim that we do not have knowledge of whether human beings will be in hell at all.

The question is how the kind of universalism proposed by Balthasar and others can be counted orthodox, when infernalism seems to have Scripture on its side, if not with regard to any designated individuals, then with regard to some individuals whom we cannot identify. I have in mind such passages as Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats.¹³ Anyone who supports the orthodoxy of Balthasar's position surely needs to argue that such passages are compatible with an empty hell. One suggestion is that biblical teachings of this sort may be merely warnings, rather than revelatory of actual infernal punishment in the future.¹⁴ It is not my intention here to solve the debate on which theological position is correct. Rather, I shall say something favorable

¹¹ When I presented this lecture at the second annual Pinckaers Conference at the Angelicum, I was not able to present the entire text on account of time constraints, and this part of the text was omitted. Ed Feser rightly responded on his blog to a recording of the lecture that passages of this kind need to be taken into consideration (edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2023/05/hell-and-conditional-prophecy.html). Feser brings forward arguments to interpret this and comparable texts as revealing that there are designated individuals in hell. For my own argument, I only need to show that it falls within the bounds of current orthodoxy to attempt to argue otherwise.

¹² Vittorio Messori, ed., *Crossing the Threshold of Hope by His Holiness John Paul II* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), 186.

¹³ Matt 25:31–46. See also Matt 13:42, 50; 24:51; Luke 13:23–30.

¹⁴ Avery Dulles, S.J., "The Population of Hell," *First Things* 133 (2003): 36–41. Aquinas

about universalism's orthodoxy, and in that context offer something in favor of the truth of infernalism. My purpose is not to resolve the issue, but to articulate a cautious attempt to reframe the debate. I will do this through a Thomistic Christological lens, focusing on our Lord's employment of the biblical charism of prophecy. Should my attempt at reframing be successful, we should in turn be able to see more clearly how the theological debate can move forward.

St. Thomas is certain that the earthly Jesus, who was fully graced in his humanity from its origin, always enjoyed the gift of prophecy.¹⁵ He was, in fulfillment of Jewish expectation, a prophet, and spoke of himself as a prophet, and others were able to identify him correctly as a prophet, as is clear from the Gospels.¹⁶ While, according to St. Thomas, he always enjoyed the heavenly destination of the vision of God, he had not already arrived, so to speak, in every respect, but was also someone on the way toward the full extent of heavenly glory, a fullness that extends to the body and the emotions as well to the mind. And so, since Jesus shared our state in this way during his earthly lifetime, being able to suffer and die, he was a pilgrim through this life in some same respect as we are, sharing in our state of being on the way.¹⁷ Thus, through this solidarity with us, together with the sharing of divine knowledge with his human mind, he was able by God's gift of prophecy to proclaim what lay beyond the ordinary knowledge of his fellow earthly pilgrims. He was then truly a prophet, no less than the prophets of the Old Testament who proclaimed what was yet to come.

The work of the prophets in the Bible ranged widely, including the inspired interpretation of past and present events, but it also involved foretelling the future. Before treating of Christ's gift of prophecy in the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas had already taken up this position regarding the future when looking more generally into the nature of prophecy in the *secunda pars*. Prophecy, he holds, relates to what is far from our normal range of knowledge, and extends to future contingents, whose truth is not yet determined.¹⁸ St. Thomas thinks, however, that prophecy of the future can work in different ways. This becomes evident when he considers in one article whether things known or proclaimed through prophecy can

speaks of a "prophecy of warning" in regard to a hypothetical private revelation of one's own damnation in *De veritate*, q. 13, a. 10, ad 7.

¹⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 7, a. 8.

¹⁶ E.g., Deut 18:15; Matt 13: 57; John 4:44.

¹⁷ Aquinas, ST III, q. 15, a. 10.

¹⁸ Aquinas, ST II-II, q. 171, a. 3.

be false.¹⁹ St. Thomas knows the traditional answer, and in the *sed contra* cites Cassiodorus's *Exposition of the Psalms* as saying that prophecy is a divine revelation which proclaims events with "unchanging truth," drawing the conclusion that, if prophecy were subject to falsehood, its truth could not be unchanging. Prophetic knowledge, therefore, can never be false.

However, St. Thomas was also familiar with the fact that some outcomes prophesied in the Bible did not come to pass. This was of course already a standard puzzle for interpreters of Scripture,²⁰ and St. Thomas was aware of arguments based on the authority of Scripture that could be mounted against the view that prophetic knowledge was always true. And so, in the second objection of the article, he quotes some texts from the Old Testament regarding prophesied outcomes that did not in fact come to pass. His first example is King Hezekiah of Judah, who was at one point sick to the point of death. Isaiah prophesied to the king the word of the Lord that he would die and not recover, telling him that he must therefore set his house in order. But after Hezekiah had prayed and wept, the word of the Lord came again to the prophet, instructing him to inform the king that, as a result of his prayer and tears, fifteen years would be added to his life.²¹ In this case the outcome of the original prophecy was not fulfilled, suggesting for the objector that what is known by prophecy can be false.²²

The objector's second example comes from Jer 18:7–8. The word of the Lord to Jeremiah goes as follows: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up or break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do it." This principle St. Thomas's objector takes to be exemplified in the third text, which is from Jonah 3:10. When the Ninevites repent, following Jonah's prophecy of the destruction of their city, the text says: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it." So, again, the outcome originally prophesied by Jonah at

¹⁹ Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 171, a. 6. Cf. *De ver.*, q. 12, a. 10, ad 7. See the introduction and notes by Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., in Thomas Aquinas, *Questions disputées sur la vérité: Question XII; La Prophétie (De prophetia)*, trans. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P. (Paris: Vrin, 2006).

²⁰ See Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Théorie de la prophétie et philosophie de la connaissance aux environs de 1230: La contribution d'Hugues de Saint-Cher (Ms. Douai 434, Question 481)* (Leuven: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1977).

²¹ Isa 38:1–6; 2 Kgs 20:1–6.

²² Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 171, a. 6, obj. 2.

God's command—"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown"—did not come to pass.

While St. Thomas was of course concerned for God's immutability and held that God's repentance or change of mind was spoken of metaphorically, his immediate purpose in answering the objection was to show that, even though outcomes originally prophesied did not come to pass, those prophecies were nevertheless true. According to him, truth involves a conformity of intellect and reality.²³ While in these cases prophetic knowledge and the actual outcomes did not conform, St. Thomas explores another way in which the knowledge of the prophet conformed with the knowledge of God from which it derived. He takes the view that, since God knows all things, this must include what are future contingents for us, which are all present eternally to him. Since God and his knowledge are strictly eternal, nothing is future to him, including what is future to us. Since prophetic knowledge is a similitude of divine knowledge impressed by God onto the prophet's mind, say of some particular outcome, the prophet as such will have certain knowledge of the outcome as it known in its presentness to God, even though the event remains future in time to the prophet himself and those among whom he lives.

However, God not only knows these outcomes but also has knowledge of things in their causes, as St. Thomas puts it. As a human analogy for this, we can take the conjectural knowledge we human beings often have. What I mean is that contingents can also be known in their futurity by way of conjecture from their present causes, where they are known as undetermined as yet to one particular effect.²⁴ An example of such "conjectural knowledge" would be a medical prognosis: a doctor knows the causes of death present in his patient, from which he can conjecture that the patient will die within a certain timeframe. Not that this is absolutely certain knowledge of the future on the part of the doctor: the matter is still undetermined such that a different outcome is still technically possible, we may suppose through the timely arrival of a new drug or a miracle cure. Presumably a doctor in the time of Hezekiah might have had such human conjectural knowledge of the king's future death through certain knowledge of his present symptoms.

The eternally omniscient God does not of course make conjectures about the future. But, given that he knows all things, it cannot be denied that God knows things in their causes as well as in themselves. Indeed, when St. Thomas treats God's knowledge of contingents, he argues that God has

²³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 16, a. 1.

²⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 16, a. 1, ad 2.

knowledge of contingents both as yet undetermined in their causes and as determined in themselves.²⁵ So, taking the example of the sick patient, God would have certain knowledge of the contingent outcome both in its causes and in itself, knowing both that certain symptoms are really leading to the patient's as-yet undetermined death and the determinate outcome of the patient's death in itself. This would mean that it would be open to God not only to reveal to a prophet the death of the patient as a determinate outcome, but also to reveal it by way of its causes where it is as such still undetermined. Thus equipped with both kinds of knowledge, God is able not only to reveal an outcome such as someone's death, but also to reveal that certain physical symptoms were really ordering a patient toward death.

Sometimes then, prophets may receive an impression of God's knowledge of some contingent as it is determined in itself in its presentness to him. At other times, however, God may imprint on their minds a similitude of his knowledge by way of causes, and this is what we have, according to St. Thomas, in the biblical cases of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah. What is reproduced here from divine knowledge is not knowledge of outcomes *per se*, but knowledge of the order of causes to effects, where events can still unfold in a different way from what is prophesied on the basis of causes. In the example of Isaiah and Hezekiah, God knows by way of causes that Hezekiah's illness is leading to his death (such as not to exclude the possibility of another outcome), and this God initially impresses on the prophet's mind. As St. Thomas explains it, Isaiah informs Hezekiah that the "disposition of your body is ordered to death."²⁶ Likewise with Jonah, God knows by way of causes that Nineveh's sins call for its destruction, a knowledge which does not exclude the possibility of a different outcome, and he infuses knowledge by way of causes into Jonah's mind. While St. Thomas's purpose is to show that a prophecy of this kind is still true, because it conforms to God's knowledge of things in their causes, my purpose is to observe that St. Thomas recognizes two ways in which prophecy can work. Either God reveals knowledge of an outcome, or he reveals knowledge of something in its causes, where the prophesied outcome may not come to pass. St. Thomas supposes that, while both kinds of knowledge exist eternally in the simplicity of the infinite divine mind, an individual instance of prophecy as a finite impression made by God on the prophetic mind cannot match up to the whole of God's power, and hence does not encompass both kinds knowledge at once: an instance of prophetic knowledge is of either one kind or the other.

²⁵ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 14, a. 13.

²⁶ Aquinas *ST* II-II, q. 171, a. 6, ad 2.

St. Thomas's account of two kinds of prophecy is confirmed by recent historical-critical biblical scholarship. The co-authors of *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, who include Christopher M. Hayes and Richard Joseph Ounsworth, O.P., distinguish between what they characterize as Mosaic prophecy and Jeremican prophecy.²⁷ Mosaic prophecy corresponds to St. Thomas's prophecy of outcomes in themselves. It is named from Deuteronomy 18:22, which comes immediately after Moses's recalling of God's promise that he would raise up a prophet like Moses: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken." In contrast, a Jeremican prophecy corresponds to St. Thomas's prophecy of things in their causes. They term it Jeremican on the basis of the principle found in Jeremiah, which was the second of the three texts St. Thomas used. The authors present this kind of prophecy as basically conditional: the prophesied outcome will take place only if some condition is fulfilled. For example, destruction will take place if people do not repent, but conversely will be averted, if people do repent. They argue that this form of prophecy was widespread in the Old Testament, marshal evidence to show that it was more typical of the phenomenon of prophecy as found in various cultures of the ancient Near East, and conclude that this understanding of prophecy was present in Second Temple Judaism and the New Testament.²⁸ This furnishes us with a historical argument to suppose that Jesus, as a first-century Jewish prophet, would have been likely to have exercised Jeremican as well as the Mosaic species of prophecy.²⁹

Jesus himself seems definitely to have exercised Mosaic prophecy on some occasions. There is a very clear example of this in his prophecy at the Last Supper that, before the cock crew, Peter would deny him.³⁰ Jesus prophesied a definite outcome, which subsequently came to pass, proving in Mosaic terms that his prophecy was true. There is no reason to suppose that Jesus prophesied Peter's denial according to some condition or merely in its causes. What we have is the simple prophecy of an outcome and its fulfillment. That Jesus made use of Mosaic prophecy makes sense for one who fulfilled the Deuteronomic hope for a prophet like Moses.

Another question is whether Jesus, who was recognized by people to

²⁷ Christopher M. Hayes, Brandon Gallagher, Julia S. Konstantinovskiy, Richard J. Ounsworth, O.P., and C. A. Strine, *When the Son of Man Didn't Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 39–45.

²⁸ Hayes et al., *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, 44–51, 87–99.

²⁹ Hayes et al., *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, 82–84.

³⁰ Matt 26:34, 69–75; Mark 14:30, 68–72; Luke 22:34, 57–61; John 13:38, 18:25–27.

be a prophet like Jeremiah,³¹ also made use of Jeremianic prophecy. Hayes and company argue on exegetical grounds that Jesus prophesied that his Second Coming would take place soon—within a chronological generation—on a condition that was not in fact fulfilled.³² On their view, the fact that the prophesied outcome evidently did not take place and their biblical faith that Christ was a true prophet demonstrate that this prophecy was Jeremianic and not Mosaic. Their theory is controversial, and I have written about it elsewhere.³³ Here I want to bring these questions about Mosaic and Jeremianic prophecy to bear on Jesus's teaching as it touches on the question of universalism and infernalism.

The question is whether such parables and teaching, taken as prophecy, are to be accounted Mosaic or Jeremianic. If at least one of them is Mosaic, then we can take Jesus to have prophesied the habitation of hell as an outcome, and the infernalist position is confirmed. But if Jesus's prophecies of infernal inhabitation were knowledge by way of causes, and a populated hell is conditional on an as-yet undetermined condition regarding repentance, then there is from our point of view at least a possibility that hell will not be populated. Given that there is the possibility that everyone will repent, at least in the secrets of their hearts at the moment of death, then the outcome prophesied of a populated hell will not take place, just as Hezekiah did not die immediately and Nineveh was not destroyed. Jesus's words would have been true prophecy of things in their causes, where unrepented sin is leading towards a populated hell, but the outcome might not ultimately come to pass, if there is universal repentance.

However, while only one of Jesus's prophecies of infernal habitation being Mosaic would serve to make the infernalist position right, nothing I have said so far about the possibility of Jesus's prophecies being Jeremianic would guarantee universal salvation. On the Jeremianic view, universal salvation must depend on universal repentance taking place, and we would still not know whether that will happen. But, if these prophecies are Jeremianic, there is at least the possibility that the condition of finally unrepented sin will not be fulfilled, and this would be the basis of a legitimate hope that everyone will be saved. It seems to me that this would be sufficient to guarantee the orthodoxy of this kind of universalism, though not that it is theologically correct.

Despite all this, it is hardly clear to me from the texts themselves whether the prophecy exercised by Jesus was Mosaic or Jeremianic. It has been

³¹ Matt 16:14.

³² Hayes et al., *When the Son of Man Didn't Come*, 82–85.

³³ Simon Francis Gaine, O.P., "The Veracity of Prophecy and Christ's Knowledge," *New Blackfriars* 98 (2017): 44–62.

pointed out that the parable of the sheep and the goats gives conditions for damnation, such as not having fed the hungry, and so might be understood along the lines of Jonah's conditional prophecy.³⁴ However, the key condition of lack of repentance is not explicitly mentioned in the parable. Nevertheless, even where no such condition for the outcome coming to pass is explicitly stated, such an explicit statement can hardly be required for a prophecy to count as Jeremicanic. After all, in the cases of Isaiah's prophecy of the death of Hezekiah and Jonah's prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh, the Jeremicanic conditions were not explicitly stated. However, if the meaning of Scripture in itself does not appear clear to us, we might suppose as Catholics, who read Scripture in the light of Tradition and with the guidance of the Church's magisterium, that the Fathers and Councils of the Church and so on may help us read it aright.

However, when we turn to the Fathers of the Church, they do not, as far as I know, address this question of which of two kinds of prophecy Jesus was exercising,³⁵ and even if any of them did, that can hardly add up to any patristic consensus on the matter. Among the Fathers, there were both infernalists in the majority, such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine of Hippo, and a minority of universalists of different kinds, such as St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazianzen, and St. Isaac of Nineveh.³⁶ Without a firmer patristic consensus, I do not think a Catholic can be absolutely bound by the Fathers to interpret Jesus's teaching on this point one way or another. And when we turn to the magisterium, though it is clearly taught that those who die in mortal sin are detained in hell forever, it is not so clear that the Church has defined that there certainly *are* some such who die in mortal sin without repentance.

The chief condemnations in Christian history connected with this are those of the third-century Christian writer Origen of Alexandria and his later disciples. Origen had entertained the idea that hell might be temporary and that all intellectual creatures, angelic as well as human, would enjoy a "restoration" (*apokatastasis*) to the divine contemplation from which angels and pre-existent human souls had fallen.³⁷ While Scripture itself speaks in Acts 3:21 of "restoration," a particular conception of *apokatastasis* as found in Origenism features more than once in condemnations by the magisterium. Taking up a set of anathemas drawn up by Emperor Justinian, a local council meeting at Constantinople in 543 condemned the restoration of "demons

³⁴ See Flannery, "How to Think about Hell," 469–70.

³⁵ See, for example, St Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei* 21.24.

³⁶ On universalism in the Fathers, see McClymond, *Devil's Redemption*, 1:231–374.

³⁷ See McClymond, *Devil's Redemption*, 1:254–78.

and godless human beings” by way of their infernal punishment having a temporal end.³⁸ In other words, what is rejected in any condemnation of an Origenist *apokatastasis* is the idea of hell as merely temporary, allowing all intellectual creatures in hell to be ultimately saved from it. This local council and other magisterial interventions make it clear that it is at least the ordinary teaching of the Church that hell is eternal in the sense that it is without end.³⁹ Our question, however, is whether it may be hoped that no human being is ultimately unrepentant and so condemned to perpetual damnation in the first place.

A further condemnation that appears in Heinrich Denzinger’s *Enchiridion* is of Zaninus of Solacia, a canon of Bergamo, condemned by Pope Pius II in 1459. Like many of the ancient Origenists, who held that an *apokatastasis* followed by a certain necessity, this medieval priest also held to a necessitarian system, in his case of an astrological variety. One of the things he was condemned for by Pius II was teaching that Christ died not out of love for humanity, but by the “necessity of the stars.”⁴⁰ Among the collection of somewhat bizarre propositions is also condemned: “All Christians are to be saved.”⁴¹ Perhaps one might deduce from its condemnation that not all Christians are to be saved, and so conclude that hell must not be empty. However, Catholic theologians have not made a habit of appealing to this bull, which is regarded as largely of a disciplinary character. Understandably, it would have been thought by the Pope to be a most imprudent notion for anyone to communicate to Christians, who may have concluded from it that their salvation was necessarily assured. Moreover, Pius II definitely did not condemn any of the propositions as heretical, but spoke only of Zaninus’s “most pernicious errors.”

The magisterium certainly proclaims the teaching of Christ on hell found in the New Testament, and those other New Testament texts connected to this teaching.⁴² However, we have no reason to conclude that the Church has considered and clarified the question of whether his prophecies are Mosaic or Jeremianic. Given that an act of magisterial teaching need not be clarificatory, to that extent the Church can, in these cases, only have repeated the teaching she has received without further clarifying the point at issue.

³⁸ DH no 411.

³⁹ See, for example, DH no. 1002, where Pope Benedict XII in *Benedictus Deus* (1336) implied by parallel with what is said of the eternity of heaven in the previous paragraph that hell is also without end.

⁴⁰ DH no. 1364.

⁴¹ DH no. 1362.

⁴² E.g., 2 Thess 1:9.

This confirms to me that either position falls within the bounds of current orthodoxy, whether Jesus's prophecy is Mosaic and infernalism is true, or his prophecy is Jeremianic and both the damnation of some and the salvation of all are possible.

Since neither Tradition nor the magisterium has resolved the question for us, it seems to me to be a task for exegetes and theologians to explore whether they can illumine the character of these prophecies by their own methods, just as the conclusion of the *Congregatio De Auxiliis* did not exclude further theological work on the relationship between divine grace and human freedom or the possibility of a future decision on the issue by the magisterium. In what follows, without intending to do any more than contribute to an ongoing theological debate, I shall give an indication of the sort of arguments that the debate might employ.

First, it seems to me that an exegete might argue on literary grounds that a single prophetic declaration is more likely to be of a single kind of prophecy. When we look, for example, at the parable of the sheep and goats, we find one element that is surely Mosaic: the identity of the judge as the Son of Man, with whom Jesus identifies himself in the Gospels. That the judge is Jesus is surely not something that depends on a condition yet to be satisfied. Rather, God wills Jesus to be the judge without any such conditions. But if that aspect of the parable is clearly Mosaic, one could argue that the whole parable as a single prophetic declaration is Mosaic, such that the outcome prophesied includes the populating of hell as certain.

A second argument might be based dogmatically on our Savior's perfection. It could be urged that a prophecy of actual outcomes as well as of the sentences God imposes on sin is a more perfect form of prophecy than a form which merely prophesies a sentence that may not actually be instantiated. If Mosaic prophecy is thus more extensive and complete, more perfect than Jeremianic prophecy, and Jesus is the most perfect of prophets as Head of his Body, then it might be urged that Jesus's perfection means that he will only ever prophecy in a more perfect manner, meaning that what we have in the parable of the sheep and goats is a prophecy of an outcome, and so includes the human habitation of hell.

I am not suggesting that either of these arguments is demonstrative. Rather, if the Catholic debate can be reframed in the way I have suggested, where both infernalism and universalism of the type advanced by Balthasar fall within the bounds of orthodoxy, because it is not immediately clear whether Christ's prophecies of hell are Mosaic or Jeremianic, then the reframed debate must go forward, in part, by theological attempts to

interpret more precisely what is going on in these prophecies and what kind of prophecies they are.

In conclusion, I want to suggest what kinds of dogmatic theology are best equipped to contribute to this exercise. Since this framing of the debate supposes, for the moment, the possibility of universal salvation but also the real possibility of hell, it cannot ignore the fact that everlasting damnation must somehow be compatible with divine goodness. Without that admission, someone might all too easily slip into treating universal salvation as necessarily assured. At the same time, any theology that wishes to take part in the debate framed in this way needs in principle to be able to handle the possibility of universal salvation as well the damnation of some. It seems to me that many theologies are not so well equipped to do this. On the one hand, there is classical Calvinism, to which predestination to hell is essential, together with any form of Thomism that is insufficiently distinguished from it on this point.⁴³ On the other hand, there are various forms of Pelagianism, where salvation relies ultimately on the vagaries of the human will rather than on divine grace, and Molinism, which, though distinct from Pelagianism, seems to apportion too crucial a role in salvation to the human will. In contrast, it seems to me that a more mainstream Thomism and the congruism at times favored in the Jesuit tradition, whatever the weaknesses of each in themselves, are better placed to articulate in their own ways both infernalism and universalism as real possibilities, thereby clearing the way for genuine theological progress on this question to be made in the future.

N.V

⁴³ For differences among the commentators, see Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *Predestination: The Meaning of Predestination in Scripture and the Church* (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1998), 175–77.