

The Jerome Conspiracy - Excerpt

On Friday evening, Jonathon anxiously dialed into the conference call and waited for the other two to arrive. “Frank Wright here.”

“I’m here too,” said Dr. Richmond.

After Jonathon introduced the two men, he smiled. The moment had finally arrived. “Gentlemen, thank you both for agreeing to this conference call. I’m hoping I’ll learn a lot from your dialogue.”

Dr. Richmond began the debate. “Frank, are you intimately familiar with the history of universal salvation—the doctrine that every soul eventually returns to God?”

Frank answered. “I teach my students the history of all the major heresies, including universal salvation.”

“Well, I’m glad you teach your students about it,” Dr. Richmond replied. “Given that virtually all the original Christians believed it.”

“That’s quite an oversimplification, I must say,” Frank rebutted.

“If I’m oversimplifying, please, why don’t you enlighten me?”

Frank didn’t even hesitate for a moment. “The original founders of Christianity taught that sinners get what they deserve—to rot in hell for all eternity. The heresy that every soul unites with God was not introduced to Christianity until the third century. It was first taught by Origen, the head of the Christian theological school at Alexandria.”

Dr. Richmond sounded incredulous. “So you teach your seminary students that before the third century, Christians exclusively taught the doctrine of eternal punishment?”

“Of course,” Frank replied.

Dr. Richmond continued. “But Frank, the earliest records of any definitive church teachings regarding the length of punishment are from the second century, right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And aren’t there second century¹ Christian documents

¹ “the prophecies were actually the work of certain Jewish and Christian writers *from about 150 BC*”

that teach universal salvation, documents such as the Alexandrian Christian homilies, the *Sibylline Oracles*?²

“Uh, well ... yes, I’ve heard of them,” Frank admitted.

Dr. Richmond pressed on. “So if the teaching of universal salvation dates back to the second century, how can you teach your students it was introduced to Christianity by Origen in the third century? How can you say that Origen started the idea of universal salvation in the third century when it was already being taught before he was even born?”

Frank countered. “All right, maybe Origen didn’t start universal salvation per se. But he did introduce a heretical way of interpreting the scriptures. He taught that the scriptures shouldn’t be interpreted literally. Instead, he taught a non-literal, allegorical method of scripture interpretation. And it was this non-literal way of interpreting scripture that led many churches in the East astray.”

Dr. Richmond paused. “So you’re saying the only reason the early Christians in the East believed in universal salvation was because they took an allegorical, non-literal approach to interpreting the Bible? An approach they learned from Origen?”

“Well, of course,” Frank confidently responded. “If the scriptures are taken literally, at face value, then anyone would have to accept the reality of hell’s eternal existence.”

“Then how do you explain the Eastern theological school of Antioch?”

“What do you mean?” Frank asked rather dismissively.

Dr. Richmond answered with a slightly sarcastic tone, “Well, Frank, wasn’t the Antioch school known for its insistence on a very strict literal interpretation of the scriptures? Wasn’t it even founded in opposition to Origen and his allegorical school?”³

to about AD 180—“Sibylline Oracles,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007), <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9067614>. Emphasis added.

2 “To these pious ones the imperishable God, the universal ruler, will also give another thing. *Whenever they ask the imperishable God to save men from the raging fire and deathless gnashing he will grant it, and he will do this. For he will pick them out again from the undying fire and set them elsewhere ...*”—*Sibylline Oracle* 2:330–338. Emphasis added.

3 “Christian theological institution in Syria, traditionally founded in about AD 200, that stressed the literal interpretation of the Bible and the completeness of Christ’s humanity, in opposition to the School of Alexandria (see Alexandria, School of), which emphasized the allegorical interpretation of the Bible

“Yes,” Frank mumbled weakly.

“So then why don’t *you* tell Jonathon what the Antioch school, the one dedicated to a literal interpretation of the scriptures, taught regarding the fate of sinners?” Dr. Richmond insisted.

There was total silence for about twenty seconds.

“Okay,” Frank finally said. “The theological school in Antioch taught that the souls of sinners will receive eternal life after being purified in the fires of hell.”^{4, 5}

“So now we agree on two things,” Dr. Richmond proudly declared. “We agree that the doctrine of universal salvation is found in the earliest Christian literature, and it was taught by allegorical and literal theological schools alike.”

Frank balked. “Doc, your little summary is only true of the theological schools of the East. The reality of eternal damnation in hell was always maintained in the West.”

“What?” Dr. Richmond asked. “Are you not familiar with an early second-century book entitled *The Apocalypse of Peter*?”

“A little,” Frank responded.

“Well, another second century document, called the Muratorian Fragment, records that *The Apocalypse of Peter* was widely read in the churches of the West,”⁶ Dr. Richmond explained.

“And your point is?” Frank asked.

“My point is simple,” Dr. Richmond replied. “In *The Apocalypse of Peter*, God releases the souls from hell at the request of the Christians.^{7, 8} The book taught universal salvation—showing many

and stressed Christ’s divinity.”—“Antioch, School of,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007), <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9007857>. Emphasis added.

4 Theodore of Mopsuestia [was a] Syrian theologian and spiritual head of the school of Antioch. ... He is said to have introduced into the Nestorian church the doctrine of universal salvation.—“Theodore of Mopsuestia,” *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007), <http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9380569>.

5 “*That in the world to come, those who have done evil all their life long, will be made worthy of the sweetness of the Divine bounty.* For never would Christ have said ‘Until thou hast paid the uttermost farthing,’ unless it were possible for us to be cleansed when we have paid our debts.”—Theodore of Mopsuestia, Head of the School of Antioch, Fragment iv. Emphasis added.

6 “Biblical literature,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2007), <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-73390>.

7 Then I shall give unto my called and my chosen whomsoever they shall ask me for, out of torment, and will give them a fair baptism unto salvation—*Apocalypse of Peter*, 14.

8 “This much is certain: The earlier versions of the text [of *The Apocalypse of Peter*], originating in

Western churches must have also embraced universal salvation from the very beginning of Christianity.”

Frank winced. “I guess it’s possible that *some* of the first Western Christians were misled. But you have to admit that *most* Christians in the West never believed it.”

“Frank, what history books do you read?” Dr. Richmond asked. “In the early fifth century, didn’t Saint Augustine lament in *Enchiridion* that ‘indeed *most persons* deplore the eternal punishment, and perpetual, unintermitted torments of the lost, and say they do not believe it shall be so?’⁹ Didn’t he write that the *majority* of Christians in Rome, the very heart of Western Christianity, believed that the punishment of sinners will be temporary?”

“Uh ... yes. He did write that,” Frank conceded.

Dr. Richmond asserted, “So archaeology has revealed the *Sibylline Oracles* were very popular in the second century churches of the East and *The Apocalypse of Peter* was very popular in the second century churches of the West, documenting that the teaching of universal salvation was widespread in the earliest churches of both the East and the West. And Saint Augustine’s *Enchiridion* documents that the teaching of universal salvation remained the mainstream Christian belief up into the beginning of the fifth century—despite the official teachings of the Roman theological school. In other words, it’s just as I said at the very beginning of this conversation, *virtually all the original orthodox Christians embraced the doctrine of universal salvation.*”

The line remained totally silent for almost a minute. Finally, Frank broke the silence. “I simply cannot agree to characterize it that way,” he said. “Jonathon, it’s very clear that Dr. Richmond knows how to use a lot of doubletalk to box me into a corner. And it’s also obvious that he and I are operating from different sets of assumptions. I don’t see how it would be useful to continue this conversation.”

Jonathon was totally confused, but he responded the only way

the second century, envisioned the posthumous salvation of at least some wicked sinners at the last judgment,”—Jeffery Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 51.

⁹ “It is in vain, then, that some, indeed *most [persons]*, make moan over the eternal punishment, and perpetual, unintermitted torments of the lost, and say they do not believe it shall be so”—Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, Chapter 112, first sentence, Emphasis added.

he could. “Okay. Well, thanks for your time. Both of you.”

With that, Frank hung up the phone, leaving Jonathon and Dr. Richmond on the line.

Dr. Richmond started speaking. “Jonathon, don’t hold anything against Frank. He’s simply regurgitating something he likely learned when he was in seminary. In fact, the idea of setting up Origen as the straw man of universal salvation dates all the way back to the fifth century to a man named Jerome.”¹⁰ Dr. Richmond hesitated for a moment. His voice took on a very serious tone as he said, “And, Jonathon, there is something very important I need to tell you about Jerome. Jerome—”

Jonathon cut the professor off. “Professor, I apologize, but my head is more than full right now. I really appreciate your time. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Jonathon. I hope this was helpful.”

“It was. And it was generous of you to agree to it.”

“My pleasure. Take care, Jonathon.”

The two men hung up the phone.

Jonathon’s mind was numb. The debate had played out very differently than he expected.

¹⁰ “[Origen] also allowed that in the end all might be saved, a view that particularly shocked St Jerome: ‘Origen teaches that after many ages and one restoration of all things, Gabriel will be in the same state as the devil, Paul as Caiaphas, and virgins as prostitutes.’”—“Origen,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Emphasis added.

NOTE: Notice how Jerome ascribes the teaching of Universal Salvation to Origen (even though the teaching predates Origen’s birth).

