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Dogma and Mysticism in Early Christianity: Epiphanius of Cyprus and the Legacy of Origen

Jon F. Dechow

North American Patristic Society, Patristic Monograph Series, Vol. 13

Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988

X + 584 pages. U.S. \$25.00

Jon Dechow has produced a detailed and significant study of Origenism and its history through an analysis of Epiphanius of Cyprus' anti-origenistic polemic primarily in the sixty-fourth chapter of his *Panarion*. What makes this study illuminating both of Origen's own theology and of later Origenism is Dechow's careful comparison of Epiphanius' polemics with Origen's own thought—an exercise which leads, on not a few occasions, to a clear distinction between the Origenism of the disciples and the teaching of their master and, on numerous others, to an equally clear distinction between Origen himself and the portrait of a heretic painted by Epiphanius. Thus, Epiphanius' claim that Origen held a partial resurrection of the flesh is shown to be both a misreading of Origen's eschatology and a somewhat naive view of the material continuity of pre-resurrection and post-resurrection bodies on Epiphanius' part. Dechow is able to show that Epiphanius typically misses the fine nuances of Origen's thought (350–355).

The reader is left, at the conclusion of Dechow's study, with a clearer sense of the importance of Origen for later theology and of the importance of Origenism as an ongoing trajectory of patristic thought despite the polemics and eventual condemnations. What is lacking is complete fulfillment of the broader promise of the book—namely a clarification of the beginnings of dogma and Christian mysticism in and through an examination of Epiphanius' thoughts on Origen. While Dechow does show quite clearly that Epiphanius associated Origen and Origenism both with persistent elements of classical philosophy and gnosticism in Christianity and with the development of Arianism and a false view of the resurrection, he devotes little effort to the way in which these negatives, together with what might be called the positive results of Origen's theological speculation and exegesis, belong to the larger picture of heresy, orthodoxy, and developing Christian thought drawn out in classic histories of dogma and in developmental studies like Werner's *Formation of Christian Dogma*. This is, however, a slight critique, and the virtues of the book—its detail and precision in analyzing both Origen and Epiphanius in their respective contexts—far outweigh the debits.

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