

Dominic Keech, *The Anti-Pelagian Christology of Augustine of Hippo, 396-430*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xix + 258pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-966223-4. £65 hbk.

Standing in the margins of narratives of the development of the doctrine of Christ between Nicaea and Chalcedon, Augustine's Christology has received relatively little scholarly attention compared with other areas of his thought. This book devotes sustained attention to this neglected topic with a thesis that has much wider ramifications for our assessment of Augustine's theology. It does so by making the case for Augustine as a part of a network of Western readers of Origen, just when his theology was coming under censure.

Keech shows that Augustine's reading of the Origen's Commentary on Romans informed his interpretation of what it means to say Christ took on the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom 8.3) from before the beginning of the Pelagian controversy. Augustine took from Origen the notion that, in virtue of Christ's virginal conception, the divine Word took on mortal human flesh without his soul becoming tainted by the corruption of human willing, so that he could be the sinless mediator between God and mortal humanity. Augustine could therefore argue, against the Pelagians, that our humanity must be radically fallen if Christ had to assume its mortal condition to save us.

That controversy, however, erupted in the aftermath of fierce controversies over the theology of Origen, in the course of which, Keech maintains, it had been suggested (ultimately by Jerome) that Augustine's doctrine of original sin was derived from Origen's account of the pre-mundane fall of souls. The danger of this charge led Augustine to suppress the Origenian traits in his thought and construct the hybrid heresy of Pelagianism to divert attention from them. In consequence he was unable to offer a clear account of the origin of souls, and so unable to make sense of the transmission of original sin.

In distancing himself from the Origenian idea of the possibility of the saints attaining sinlessness (which Pelagius also took up), Augustine pushed to extremes another Origenian trait— the blurring of instinctual responses which may become willed passions, and the passions themselves— to maintain that sinful concupiscence pre-empts rational control even in the saints. Hence Christ's sinless soul must not encounter concupiscence, but therefore cannot remedy it either. Behind this problem, however, lay another: Keech speculates that the clue to the coherence of Augustine's insistence on Christ's sinlessness lay in Origen's account of the Christ's pre-existent soul, shades of which appear from time to time in the former's writings, but which had to be thoroughly suppressed, thus leaving his Christology 'permanently disjointed' (p. 235).

This is a complex, intricate case, involving a mixture of carefully marshalled textual evidence for reception with conjectures of varying strength (though all plausible). The presentation of the argument partakes of that complexity, but repays careful attention for an incisive depiction of the theological tensions and hidden dynamics of a thinker conditioned by the constraints of the construction of orthodoxy in which he partook.