

May a Christian Believe in Reincarnation?

By Abbot George Burke



No serious Christian wishes to be “carried about with divers and strange doctrines,”¹ but rather to be established in “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”² Therefore our purpose in this brief study will be to determine if, in good conscience, a Christian may believe in reincarnation.

Reincarnation-also known as the transmigration of souls-is not some exotic idea of non-Christian mysticism. In ancient orthodox Jewish and Christian writings, as well as the Holy Scriptures, we can find reincarnation as a fully developed belief, although today it is commonly ignored.

A Catholic Cardinal Speaks

Just what do we mean by reincarnation? Cardinal Mercier (1851-1926) of the Roman Catholic Church, an eminent scholar and theologian of the conservative Christian Tradition, in his book *Psychologie* gives this definition of three views of reincarnation: “Under the term *Wiedermenschwerdung*, metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, a great variety of ideas may be understood: either a series of repetitions of existence under the twofold condition that the soul maintains consciousness of its personality and that there is a final unit in the series of transmigrations; or a series of repetitions of existence without any final unit, and yet with the presupposition that the soul maintains consciousness of its personality; or, finally, an endless series of repetitions of existence with the loss of consciousness of personal identity....*So far as concerns the first assumption, we do not see that reason, if left to itself, would declare this to be impossible or certainly false.*”

Three Views Of Reincarnation

Perhaps that heavy nineteenth century prose should be restated, though I did want to give you the Cardinal's exact words so you would know I was not putting a forced interpretation on them. What the Cardinal indicates is this: there are three possible beliefs about reincarnation: (1) that there is an immortal soul which goes from birth to birth until it attains salvation, which ends the rebirth process, (2) that the immortal soul is reborn eternally with no ending of rebirth, and (3) that there is no immortal soul, but only a kind of force or energy which keeps creating a chain of rebirths. In *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*, Cardinal Mercier again enumerates the three views on reincarnation and this time states that the first view “*cannot be shown either to be impossible or even to be false*” (I, 326).

A Public Teaching?

But what about reincarnation as a public teaching? Being a persecuted religion for three centuries, the Church barely salvaged the Holy Scriptures from the ravages of her persecutors. Many books referred to by early writers as being widely used by the Church have vanished. Even the book of Enoch, quoted by Saint Jude in his epistle (v. 14), is no more; nor is the book of Jasher, mentioned in Joshua (10:13) and Second Samuel (1:18).

A Jewish Belief

Reincarnation is commonly represented in the West as being an exclusively Hindu or Buddhist belief, but it is not. **Reincarnation is a tenet of Orthodox Judaism**, wherein it is called *gilgul* or *ha'atakah*, and was so at the time of Christ, and automatically passed over into Christian theology.

Philo Judaeus

The Jewish philosopher, Philo Judaeus, whose lifespan included that of Christ, wrote in detail about reincarnation as a normal belief, but a brief quote should suffice: “The air is full of souls; those who are nearest to earth descending to be tied to mortal bodies return to other bodies, desiring to live in them.”³ These words, which speak of souls returning to many earthly births from their desire to do so, are reminiscent of Solomon’s words about his own ancient, cosmic past: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old....from the beginning, or ever the earth was....Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men.”⁴

Josephus

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, nearly a contemporary of Christ, recorded that both the Essenes and the Pharisees believed in rebirth (not in the resurrection of the physical body as is presently thought). The Pharisees, he tells us, “say that all the souls are incorruptible, but the souls of good men only, are removed into other bodies, but the souls of bad men are subject to punishments lasting for ages.” That is, the good quickly reincarnate to work out their destined return to God, whereas the wicked undergo great sufferings in the other world, only getting the chance to return to the earth for further spiritual hope after the lapse of ages. He himself in a speech to some Jewish soldiers, said: “Do ye not remember that all pure spirits when they depart out of this life obtain a most holy place in heaven, from whence in the revolution of ages, they are again sent into pure bodies?”⁵ Note that he says: “Do ye not *remember*?” indicating that they had been taught reincarnation previously.

Solomon and Job Speak

The above words of Josephus regarding the righteous spirits being sent into pure bodies after periods in heaven are an echo of further words of Solomon: “For I was a witty [wise] child, and had a good spirit. Yea rather, being good, I came into a body undefiled.”[6](#)

And Job had said: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked *shall I return thither*.”[7](#) Later on, Job expressed his conviction that he would be reborn on earth to behold the days of the Messiah. “For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin, worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.”[8](#) Although these words are commonly interpreted as referring to the end of the world and the resurrection of the physical body, an examination of the context of these words will show otherwise.

Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai

Rabbi Simeon ben Jochai, a contemporary of the Apostles, wrote: “All souls are subject to the trials of transmigrations; and men do not know the designs of the Most High with regard to them;...They do not know how many transformations and mysterious trials they must undergo; how many souls and spirits come to this world without returning to the palace of the divine king.” These words, especially the reference about reincarnating souls not returning to “the palace of the divine king” are echoed in the Revelation of Saint John wherein the Lord Jesus says: “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and *he shall go no more out*.”[9](#) But Rabbi Simeon continues: “The souls must reenter the absolute substance whence they have emerged. But to accomplish this end they must develop all the perfections, the germ of which is planted in them; and if they have not fulfilled this condition during one life, they must commence another, a third, and so forth, until they have acquired the condition which fits them for reunion with God.”[10](#) Once again, these words regarding a series of successive births for the purpose of attaining spiritual perfection are not just his own, but tie in with the inspired words of the book of Job: “”Lo, all these things worketh God *oftentimes* with man, *to bring back his soul from the pit*, to be enlightened with the light of the living.”[11](#)

“Fathers” And “Sons”

Also in keeping with the above are the symbolic words spoken by God Himself—words which, when misunderstood, have caused many to call them unjust: “The Lord is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.*”¹²

In the most basic meaning, a “father” is a physical body which engenders other bodies. Thus, according to the mystical interpretation, “fathers” means our previous lives and bodies, the failures of which necessitate our being reborn in further bodies, which thereby are the “children” of those prior bodies. For they are engendered by the necessity for the workings of divine justice, which visits on these subsequent body “children” the iniquities of the original, “father” bodies. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of this phenomenon in this way: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”¹³ We will consider the “how” of this later on in the explanation which Saint Paul gives in the New Testament.

This verse also gives a right perspective on karma and rebirth. *They are never intended as punishment.* We are plainly told that “the Lord is longsuffering, and of great mercy, *forgiving* iniquity and transgression.” Therefore there can be no question of God being angry or holding a grudge against us for any actions, however negative. Rather, as a loving and merciful Father He “forgives” us without our even asking for it. But there is a law whose execution is necessary for our spiritual development: the law of karma and rebirth. And we are not exempted (cleared) from its fulfillment, for that would not be mercy or forgiveness but harmful indulgence. The abrogation of a law that benefits us would be detrimental to us. God loves us too much for that.

Rabbi Manaseh ben Israel

Our final witness to the stand of Orthodox Judaism is the great Rabbi Manaseh ben Israel, who in the seventeenth century single-handedly obtained the repeal of the banning of Jews from England. In his book, *Nishmath Hayem*, he writes:

“The belief of the doctrine of the transmigration of souls is a firm and infallible dogma accepted by the whole assemblage of our church with one accord, so that there is none to be found who would dare to deny it....Indeed, there are a great number of sages in Israel who hold firm to this doctrine so that they made it a dogma, a fundamental point of our religion. We are therefore in duty bound to obey and accept this dogma with acclamation...as the truth of it has been demonstrated by the *Zohar*, and all books of the Kabalists.”

A Jewish Prayer

Today, after a private recitation of the Song of Songs, an orthodox Jew recites the following in a prayer: “...May we attain to that place from which all spirits and souls have come forth, and may we be credited with having fulfilled all that we have been charged to accomplish, *whether in this incarnation or in another incarnation*, and to be among those who ascend and merit the world to come together with the other saints and righteous....”[14](#)

Elijah...Reincarnated!

Right away, in the New Testament, we encounter the subject of reincarnation. The Apostles believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they had one doubt. In the book of Malachi there was the prophecy: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”[15](#) If Jesus was the Messiah, Elijah should have preceded Him. So “his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias [Elijah] must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them,...I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed....Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist.”[16](#) Previously, speaking to a crowd about John the Baptist, Jesus told them: “This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee....And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.”[17](#) Words could hardly be clearer, yet how many Christians today “are willing to receive it”? And they are the words of Christ Himself, in Whom we place all our hope. As the modern philosopher-writer Robert Graves has commented about this passage: “No honest theologian can therefore deny that his acceptance of Jesus as Christ [Messiah] logically binds every Christian to a belief in reincarnation-in Elijah’s case, at least.”

The Common Belief Of The People

That the Jewish people believed in reincarnation is shown by the following interchange of Jesus and the disciples. “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.”¹⁸ Some believed that John the Baptist had secretly escaped from prison and was preaching under an alias. But many more believed that one of the ancient prophets had been reborn as Jesus. This was because belief in reincarnation was the norm at that time. And nowhere in the Scriptures is it said that the Jews were in doctrinal error at the time of Christ, or that He came to free them from false beliefs-He Himself saying that He had only come to *fulfil*.¹⁹

Belief Of The Apostles

The Apostles also believed in reincarnation, for: “As Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.”²⁰ Jesus, the Light of the World, would certainly have rebuked the Apostles for wrong belief if reincarnation was not true. Although the man’s blindness was for the glory of God, the Lord said, “neither this man nor his parents sinned,” implying that the man had certainly existed-and been capable of sinning-before his birth in which he was blind.

Non-Belief in Reincarnation Rebuked By Jesus

When the Pharisee, Nicodemus, expressed his doubts as to a man being able to enter the womb and be born again, physically, saying: “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” the Lord Jesus reproved him, saying: “Art thou a master [teacher] of Israel, and knowest not these things?...If I have told you earthly things [about physical rebirth], and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things [about the spiritual rebirth]?”²¹ especially when every educated Jew was familiar with the already-cited words of Job: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked *shall I return thither*.”²²

Moreover, every Jew had heard these words of Moses scores of times: “Even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God. *Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men....*Thou carriest them away like a flood; they are as a sleep: *in the morning they are like grass* which groweth up [again]....in the evening it is [again] cut down.”[23](#)

This same idea was also to be found in the prayer of Tobit: “Blessed be God that liveth for ever, and blessed be his kingdom. For he doth scourge, and hath mercy: *he leadeth down to hell* [Hades], *and bringeth up again*: neither is there any that can avoid his hand.”[24](#)

Also familiar would have been the direct reference to reincarnation in Ecclesiasticus: “Woe be unto you, ungodly men, which have forsaken the law of the most high God! *For when you are born, you shall be born to a curse*: and when you die, a curse shall be your portion. All that are of the earth shall return to the earth again: so the ungodly shall go from a curse to destruction.”[25](#)

God’s Law Behind Reincarnation

But why? Saint Paul tells us: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for *whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap*.”[26](#)In other words, if we lie, we shall be lied to; if we steal, we shall be stolen from; if we cheat, we shall be cheated; if we injure, we shall be injured; if we kill, we shall be killed. Is this law inexorable? In the verse from Numbers, previously quoted, it is flatly stated that the Lord by no means clears the guilty. This supports Saint Paul’s contention that “God is not mocked.”

This principle is not new to either of the Testaments, for when Noah had come forth from the Ark, God enunciated the law: “Surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast I will require it, and at the hand of man....Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”[27](#) Notice that this is not a social law, such as those given to Moses. Noah is not being instructed to take the life of murderers; the Lord says, “*I will require it*.” Yet, how many murderers go undetected and unpunished? Think of the murderers that die natural deaths-even in prisons. Yet God, Who “is not mocked” has said that their life shall be taken by man.

And this is in keeping with the next verse in Saint Paul's Galatians exposition: "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap"-that is, we shall reap *in our bodies* exactly what we sow in our bodies. And if we die before so doing? *Rebirth is the law*.

What about the objection that Saint Paul also wrote: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27)? Nothing, except Saint Paul's meaning: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men" (Romans 5:12). Adam's transgression pronounced the death sentence upon all humanity. And, indeed, after each death we are judged to determine where we shall go in the astral world and when and where we shall return to earth in our next birth. It is interesting that the twentieth-century stigmatic, Teresa Neuman, saw that after death the departed soul was judged by Christ right here, some passing onward with Christ and others remaining in the earth's astral atmosphere, obviously to await rebirth.

Jewish Writings From The Time Of Jesus And The Apostles

Here are some quotations from Jewish writings that would have been studied by Saint Paul^{[28](#)} and known to Jesus and the Twelve.

"Most souls being at present in the state of transmigrations, God requites a man now for what his soul merited in a by past time in another body, by having broken some of the 613 precepts....He who neglects to observe any of the 613 precepts, such as were possible for him to observe, is doomed to undergo transmigration once or more than once till he has actually observed all he had neglected to do in a former state of being."^{[29](#)}

"The sages of truth remark that Adam contains the initial letters of Adam, David, and Messiah; for after Adam sinned his soul passed into David, and the latter having also sinned, it passed into the Messiah."^{[30](#)}

Regarding this, Gershom Scholem says in his book, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*: "The consonants in Adam's name are read as an acronym for the names of the three bearers of this one soul: Adam, David, Messiah. Kabbalistic literature is filled with discussions of this transmigration chain. At times this chain also includes Moses, the redeemer of Israel from its first Exile."

This latter statement is most significant in view of the fact that for many centuries on Good Friday during the exposition of Christ Crucified the choir sings a hymn beginning: “My people, what have I done to you? In what have I offended you, answer me?” in which Jesus speaks to the people most explicitly of His life as Moses, contrasting it with His crucifixion. “Because I led thee through the desert forty years: and fed thee with manna, and brought thee into a land exceedingly good, thou hast prepared a cross for thy Savior....I opened the sea before thee: and thou with a spear hast opened My side...I gave thee the water of salvation from the rock to drink: and thou hast given Me gall and vinegar....”

Scholem further says: “The Kabbalists focus quite intensely on Adam’s fall. Adam’s transgression at the beginning of Creation is repaired by Moses, the lawgiver, by David, who established a throne for the Shekhinah, and will ultimately be perfected by the Messiah. The complementary relationship between the Fall and the Redemption, a notion first expressed by St. Paul and which also occupied the talmudic aggadah, is now given a Kabbalistic formulation in the doctrine of the transmigration of the Messiah’s soul: the man who missed humanity’s great chance in Paradise is the same one who will ultimately bring about its realization. The situation of Adam, Eve, and the serpent reappears in various guises throughout these transmigrations, each time needing to be overcome. An important Kabbalist of the late Middle Ages offered a highly dramatic retelling of the story of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah from this perspective. Paradoxically, David comes off a great deal better in this esoteric explanation than one might expect from the biblical tale: King David, of blessed memory, was a great sage and recognized transmigrations. When he saw Uriah the Hittite, he knew that he was the Serpent who had seduced Eve, and when he saw Bathsheba he knew that she was Eve, and he knew that he himself was Adam. Thus, he wished to take Bathsheba from Uriah, because she was [destined to be] David’s mate....And the reason Nathan the prophet chastised him was because he hastened, and did not wait....For his haste caused him to go to her without performing tikkun (restoration), for he first needed to remove from her the contamination of the Serpent, and thereafter to go to her, and he did not do so. Therefore, his first son from Bathsheba died, for he was from the impurity of the Serpent, but from there on there was no Satan and no bad effect.

In Tikkunei ha-Zohar (end of 361), Adam's reincarnation in Moses is clearly alluded to, albeit in the context of transferring Abel's sin onto Adam, and without any relation to the transmigrations of the Redeemer and of the Messiah: "'And Moses hid his face'-for he remembered what had happened to him before; he remembered his sin and covered himself in shame' similar to Adam's behavior after the sin."

In the book of Ezekiel we have proof that the Messiah was to be the reincarnation of David, for there we read: "And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, *even my servant David*; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. And *David my servant* shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd."³¹ Since Ezekiel lived four hundred years after David, his prophecy could only mean that David was going to reappear on the earth later as the Christ. And he did.

But there are further ancient authorities for us to consider.

"Know thou that Cain's essential soul passed into Jethro, ... Samson the hero was possessed by the soul of Japhet, and Job by that of Terah."³²

"Cain had stolen the twin sister of Abel, and thereafter his soul passed into Jethro. Moses was possessed by the soul of Abel, and therefore Jethro gave his daughter to Moses."³³

"If a man be niggardly either in a financial or a spiritual regard, giving nothing of his money to the poor or not imparting of his knowledge to the ignorant, he shall be punished by transmigration into a woman." At the time this was written, women were prohibited to own property or to receive an education. Thus a man who did not use his possessions or knowledge to benefit others would be born in a body wherein he would be prevented from having them himself. And experiencing the bitterness of this deprivation, he would be sure to share his benefits in a future life, impelled by the subconscious memory of his soul.

Returning to the quotation: "Know thou that Sarah, Hannah, the Shunammite,³⁴ and the widow of Zarepta were each in turn possessed by the soul of Eve.... The soul of Rahab transmigrated into Heber the Kenite, and afterwards into Hannah; and this is the mystery of her words,

‘I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit,’³⁵ for there still lingered in her soul a sorrowful sense of inherited defilement....Eli possessed the soul of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite....Sometimes the souls of pious Jews pass by metempsychosis into Gentiles, in order that they may plead on behalf of Israel and treat them kindly.”³⁶

Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, having been mentioned as a reincarnation of Eve, it is appropriate to recall here her words spoken in prophetic inspiration when she brought her son to live in the tabernacle in fulfillment of the vow made when she prayed to have a child. In her canticle, under prophetic inspiration, she sang: “The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.”³⁷ That is, God causes man to die and then to live again; to go into the grave and then be born once more. Again we can recall the parallel words of Job already cited: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither.”

A Dramatic Example

Certainly from the above we get the idea! Yet I cannot resist giving one more Biblical instance-bridging both the Old and the New Testaments-of how the human drama can be played out over the “acts” of several births on the stage of this world. (This example, by the way, was pointed out to me by Bess Hibarger, a Presbyterian Sunday School teacher of long standing and great popularity, who at least once a year devoted one Sunday to the subject of reincarnation.)

Ahab, the king of Israel, married Jezebel, who was a Gentile and an idolater. For these reasons, Elijah the prophet came to Ahab and challenged him, demanding that he rid himself of Jezebel. As could be expected, Jezebel decided that either Elijah or she had to go-and she preferred that it be Elijah. Though she had squadrons of soldiers searching for the prophet to kill him, he managed to elude them, and departed from this world still in hiding. Later, Jezebel died, but with the desire for the death of Elijah burning in her heart. Thus was the sowing; then came the reaping.

As the Lord Jesus said, Elijah was born again as John the Baptist. Ahab was reborn as Herod, and Jezebel as Herodias, the wife of Herod's brother. Herod broke the Law by marrying Herodias illegally, thus committing the double crime of adultery and incest. Just as in the previous lifetime, John came to Herod and demanded that he get rid of Herodias. Herod had respect for John, and so tried to simply ignore him. Finally, at the insistence of Herodias he imprisoned John, and ultimately Herodias got John's head on a platter, fulfilling her desire of centuries.

Sowing And Reaping In Gethsemane

In the closing hours of His life, Jesus also propounded the law of sowing and reaping. "One of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: *for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*"³⁸ Multitudes of people have lived by violence and themselves died quiet deaths-most of them unrepentant. Yet the Lord said they also would die by the sword. Has God then been "mocked"? Have they somehow escaped His law? Yes, they have, if there is no rebirth. But according to the foregoing Jewish authorities there indeed is rebirth, which is God's way of ensuring that "the wheels of divine justice may grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine."

Jesus Reveals Past Lives

A further reference by our Lord to rebirth is found in His words to the great multitude shortly after He had miraculously fed them. Some of the crowd asked Him: "What sign showest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily verily, I say unto you, *Moses gave you not that bread from heaven*; but My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven."³⁹ Notice that the Lord does not say "Moses gave *your fathers* not that bread from heaven," but instead: "Moses gave *you* not that bread from heaven," thereby indicating that those very persons who were challenging Him had been with Moses in the desert. There, too, they had constantly challenged Moses and been unbelieving, and here with Jesus they continued the pattern.

They were in fact the very persons to whom Moses had said: “The Lord your God will raise up for *you* a Prophet like me from *your* midst, from *your* brethren. Him *you* shall hear.”⁴⁰ Again, see how Moses does not say “*your* children,” but instead says “*you*,” indicating that it would be those very ones to whom he was speaking that should see and hear the Messiah.

Reincarnation Means Responsibility

From all the foregoing we can draw the incontrovertible understanding that the individual soul, being endowed with free, creative will according to the divine image, must also shoulder the responsibility for that will—the responsibility being in the form of the irrevocable law: “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” The law is that we must receive back *whatever* we sow, not just a “suitable” punishment. This is reinforced by God’s own words already cited when He told Noah, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed.” Retribution must be in the form of experiencing exactly what we have done to others—no substitute. For the Lord Jesus was not just putting forth a social directive when He said, “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”⁴¹ He was simply restating the Law that whatever you do to others will in turn be done to you. And since “he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap,” rebirth is an absolute necessity, to provide us the flesh in which to reap what we have sown.

Solomon’s Testimony

This is why Solomon said: “The thing that hath been, *it is that which shall be*; and that which is done *is that which shall be done*: and there is *no new thing under the sun*. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? *it hath been already of old time, which was before us*.”⁴² Solomon does not say “the same *type* of thing that hath been,” but “*the thing*” itself is to reappear on the earth. From these words we learn several things: (1) It is the things and people of the past that will reappear on earth again as the *future* things and people. (2) It is the past actions which determine what the future actions will be, through the momentum of the law of sowing and reaping, or, more accurately, the past actions are *continued* as the future deeds.

That is, the theft of today is the continuation of the theft committed in the past. Today's murder is the "reaping" of a murder "sown" long ago. (3) *Nothing*, including the people, are here for the first time and "new" on the earth. None of us can claim that the earth life is something "new" for us. Rather, in the ages before this life it has already been known to us.

Rabbi Hillel Speaks

Looking back momentarily to point (2), we find a most graphic stating of that principle in the *Daily Prayer Book*, edited by Philip Birnbaum.⁴³ In the second chapter of the section entitled: *Ethics of the Fathers*, the seventh section gives an incident from the life of Hillel, perhaps the greatest Rabbi in Jewish history, and a contemporary of Jesus: "He [Hillel] saw a skull floating on the surface of the water. He said to it: Because you drowned others, others have drowned you; and those who have drowned you shall themselves be drowned."

Is There An End To Reincarnation?

Will there ever be an end to this? Yes, for "he that soweth to the *Spirit* shall of the *Spirit* reap life everlasting"⁴⁴ in those "everlasting habitations,"⁴⁵ the "place for you" prepared by Christ Himself,⁴⁶ regarding which He promised: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out,"⁴⁷ "neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection,"⁴⁸ for "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death,"⁴⁹ "for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"⁵⁰

"Resurrection"-The End of Reincarnation

A careful study of the relevant scriptures will reveal that the term "resurrection" indicates the state of freedom from rebirth and its corollary, death, and the ascension to Paradise from which Adam and Eve originally fell. In the Creed, we find the expression: "the resurrection *of the dead*," the "dead" being those subject to the law of sowing and reaping, of birth and death, who were helplessly caught in the wheels of that relentless Law until Christ opened the way to freedom, to

“resurrection” from the state of continual rebirth, and the return and restoration to Paradise. “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”[51](#)

From Genesis To Revelation: Reincarnation

In the Holy Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, the theme of reincarnation runs like a thread, binding together the two Testaments, and announcing the new Law of Grace and Freedom.

Early Christian Writers

Now let us turn to early Christian writers-some of them Saints and Fathers of the Church-and see their testimony on the subject of rebirth. I will give the dates of their lives, so you can see in what era of the Church they lived.

Saint Clement of Alexandria (150-220)

“We were in being long before the foundation of the world; we existed in the eye of God, for it is our destiny to live in Him....Not for the first time does He pity us in our wanderings, He pitied us from the very beginning....Philolaus, the Pythagorean, taught that the soul was flung into the body as a punishment for the misdeeds it had committed, *and his opinion was confirmed by the most ancient of the prophets.*”[52](#)>

Origen (185-254)

“Is it not more in conformity with reason that every soul for certain mysterious reasons (I speak now according to the opinion of Pythagoras and Plato and Empedicles, whom Celsus frequently names) is introduced into a body, and introduced according to its deserts and former actions?...

“Is it not rational that souls should be introduced into bodies, in accordance with their merits and previous deeds, and that those who have used their bodies in doing the utmost possible good should have a right to bodies endowed with qualities superior to the bodies of others?...

“The soul, which is immaterial and invisible in its nature, exists in no material place without having a body suited to the nature of that place. Accordingly, it at one time puts off one body, which was necessary before, but which is no longer adequate in its changed state, and it exchanges it for a second” (*Contra Celsum*).

“The soul has neither beginning nor end....Every soul comes into this world strengthened by the victories or weakened by the defeats of its previous life. Its place in this world as a vessel appointed to honor or dishonor is determined by its previous merits or demerits. Its work in this world determines its place in the world which is to follow this....

“The hope of freedom is entertained by the whole of creation-of being liberated from the corruption of slavery-when the sons of God, who either fell away or were scattered abroad, shall be gathered into one, and when they shall have fulfilled their duties in this world” (*De Principiis*).

Origen is a controversial figure. The Emperor Justinian wanted him declared a heretic three hundred years after his death, and even had the acts of the Fifth Ecumenical Council falsified to accomplish this. Therefore, those who dislike Origen’s theology bring forth the objection that he was not “orthodox.” To refute this contention we need only turn to Saint Rufinus (345-410), whose holiness is recognized by both Eastern and Western churches. Not only did he insist that Origen was orthodox, he even made translations of Origen’s works into Latin. In the preface to his translation of the just-quoted *De Principiis*, Saint Rufinus remarks that he has omitted anything that might at all be controversial. In other words, everything in his translation was acceptable to any Christian reader of his day, without exception. So let us look at three passages from this translation of Saint Rufinus which bears his attestation of orthodoxy:

- (1) In Malachi and Romans are found the words: “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated,” which were spoken by God before their births; and also the ruling in Genesis that Esau should have to serve Jacob, though Jacob was younger. Like the words in Genesis about the visitation of the fathers’ iniquities on the children, these words seem greatly unjust. But in the light of reincarnation they are seen differently.

(2) And here is what Origen had to say about it (please keep in mind that this and other quotations that follow are from the Latin translation of Saint Rufinus and therefore contain nothing that was offensive to the Christians of that day):

“As, therefore, when the scriptures are examined with much diligence in regard to Esau and Jacob, it is found that there is ‘no unrighteousness with God’ [53](#) in its being said of them, before they were born or had done anything, in this life of course, that ‘the elder should serve the younger,’ so also it is found that there is no unrighteousness in the fact that Jacob supplanted his brother even in the womb, provided we believe that *by reason of his merits in some previous life* Jacob had deserved to be loved by God to such an extent as to be worthy of being preferred to his brother.”[54](#)

(2) “For perhaps, just as those who depart from this world by the common death of all, are distributed according to their deeds and merits, as a result of the judgment, some going to a place which is called the ‘lower world,’ others to ‘Abraham’s bosom’ and to the various positions and dwelling-places in it; so the inhabitants of the region above, when they ‘die’ there, if one may so speak, descend from those upper places to this lower world.

“For the other lower world, to which are conveyed the souls of those who die on earth, is called by scripture, I believe on account of this distinction, ‘the lower Hades,’ as it says in the Psalms, ‘And Thou hast delivered my soul from the lower Hades.’ Each of those, therefore, who descend into the earth, is destined in accordance with his merits or with the position which he had held above to be born in a particular place or nation, or in a particular walk of life, or with particular infirmities, or to be the offspring of religious parents or the reverse, so that it happens occasionally that an Israelite falls among the Scythians and a poor Egyptian is conveyed to Judea....For in that case souls that are born on this earth of ours would either come from the lower world again to a higher place and assume a human body, in consequence of their desire for better things, or else would descend to us from better places. And so, too, those places which are above in the firmament may be occupied by some souls who have advanced from our seats to better things,....”[55](#)

(3) “The third order of rational creatures is composed of those spirits who are judged fit by God to replenish the human race. These are the souls of men, some of whom, in consequence of their progress, we see taken up into the order of angels, those, namely, who have been made ‘sons of God’ or ‘sons of the resurrection;’⁵⁶ or those who forsaking the darkness have loved the light and have been made ‘sons of the light;’⁵⁷ or those who, after winning every fight and being changed into ‘men of peace,’ become ‘sons of peace’⁵⁸ and ‘sons of God;’⁵⁹ or those who, by mortifying their members which are upon the earth⁶⁰ and rising superior not only to their bodily nature but even to the wavering and fragile movements of the soul itself, have ‘joined themselves to the Lord,’⁶¹ being made wholly spiritual, so as to be always ‘one spirit’ with Him, judging each individual thing in company with Him, until they reach the point when they become perfect ‘spiritual men’ and ‘judge all things,’ because their mind is illuminated in all holiness through the word and wisdom of God, while they themselves are utterly incapable of being judged by any man.”⁶²

Saint Gregory of Nyssa (257-332)

“It is absolutely necessary that the soul should be healed and purified, and if this does not take place during its life on earth it must be accomplished in future lives” (*Great Catechism*).

In Saint Gregory’s *Life* of his sister, Saint Macrina, whom he always referred to as “the teacher,” he recorded that before her birth their mother, Saint Emmelia, “fell asleep and seemed to be carrying in her hands that which was still in her womb. And some one in form and raiment more splendid than a human being appeared and addressed the child she was carrying by the name of Thecla, that Thecla, I mean, who is so famous among the virgins. After doing this and testifying to it three times, he departed from her sight.” Thus it was understood by her family that Saint Macrina was the reincarnation of the martyr, Saint Thecla, the greatest of Saint Paul’s disciples. Because of this, all the family privately called her Thecla, though her public name was Macrina.

Arnobius (290)

“We die many times, and often do we rise from the dead” (*Adversus Gentes*).

Chalcidius (Third Century)

“Souls who have failed to unite themselves with God, are compelled by the law of destiny to begin a new kind of life, entirely different from their former, until they repent of their sins.”

Nemesius, Bishop of Emesa (Fourth Century)

“Moses does not say that the soul was created at that moment at which it was put into the body, nor would it be reasonable to suppose it....That the soul is not thus mortal and that man’s destiny is not bounded by his present life is shown by the fact that the wisest of the Greeks believe in the transmigration of souls and that souls attain different grades according to the life they have lived” (*De Natura Hominis*).

Saint Jerome (340-420)

“The doctrine of transmigration has been secretly taught from ancient times to small numbers of people, as a traditional truth which was not to be divulged” (*Epistola ad Demetriadem*).

Saint Sulpitius Severus (363-420)[63](#)

“As to Nero,...it was he who first began a persecution [of Christians]; and I am not sure but he will be the last also to carry it on, if, indeed, we admit, as many are inclined to believe, that he will yet appear immediately before the coming of Antichrist.”[64](#)

“[Nero is] to be sent forth again near the end of the world, in order that he may practice the mystery of iniquity.”[65](#)>

This is most interesting. The thirteenth chapter of the book of Revelation is devoted to the subject of the Antichrist, or “Beast.” The eighteenth verse says: “Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.”

The ancient commentaries on the book of Revelation are unanimous in saying that Nero is the “man of sin,” the “beast.” Students of those texts naturally assume that the early writers were wrong since Nero is long dead.

But in the light of these words of Saint Sulpitius it is evident that they had a future incarnation of Nero in mind. So those commentaries are indirect evidence that the first Christians believed quite definitely in reincarnation.

Saint Augustine (354-430)

“The message of Plato, the purest and most luminous of all in philosophy, has at last scattered the darkness of error, and now shines forth mainly in Plotinus, a Platonist so like his master that one would think they lived together, or rather—since so long a period of time separates them—that Plato is born again in Plotinus” (*Contra Academicos*).

“Say, Lord, to me...say, did my infancy succeed another age of mine that died before it? Was it that which I spent within my mother’s womb?...and what before that life again, O God my joy, was I anywhere or in any body?” (*Confessions*).

Synesius, Bishop of Ptolemais (370-430)

“Philosophy speaks of souls being prepared by a course of transmigrations....When first it comes down to earth, it [the soul] embarks on this animal spirit as on a boat, and through it is brought into contact with matter....The soul which did not quickly return to the heavenly region from which it was sent down to earth had to go through many lives of wandering” (*Treatise On Dreams*).

Saint Brigid of Kildare (525)

In his book *Round Ireland in Low Gear*, Eric Newby records that at this present day among the Catholics of Ireland there is a tradition that Saint Brigid in her previous life was the one who led the Virgin Mary to the place where she was purified at Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus.

Reincarnation A Common Belief

From these examples we can see that in the Apostolic Age and later, until Christianity was reshaped to suit the religio-political ideas of the Byzantine Emperors (who on occasion called themselves Vicars of Christ) and their political appointees whose “conversion” to Christianity was anything but sincere, reincarnation was so common as to be a truism among Christians.

Further Evidence

In our inquiry it is the testimony of orthodox Judaism, ancient Christianity, and the Bible that is sufficient to answer our question: May a Christian believe in reincarnation?

Those who are interested in the witness of later Christian theologians and thinkers will find it most rewarding to look into the three books by Head and Cranston: *Reincarnation: An East-West Anthology*; *Reincarnation in World Thought*; and *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Fire Mystery*. There will be found statements of belief by such eminent Christians as Jacob Boehme, William Law, Henry Ward Beecher, Philips Brooks, Nicolas Berdyaev, Paul Tillich, Leslie Weatherhead, and Albert Schweitzer-plus many more.

Our Conclusion

In summation: considering all of the foregoing material, we can positively conclude that Christians indeed ***have*** believed and ***may*** believe in reincarnation.

Perhaps even ***must*** believe.



- 1) Hebrews 13:9
- 2) Jude 3
- 3) *De Somniis* I:22
- 4) Proverbs 8:22,23,30,31
- 5) *Jewish War*, Book 3, chapter 8, no. 5
- 6) Wisdom 8:19,20
- 7) Job 1:21
- 8) Job 19:25-27
- 9) Revelation 3:12

- 10) *Zohar*, vol. II, fol. 99, *et seq.*
- 11) Job 33:29,30
- 12) Numbers 14:18
- 13) Ezekiel 18:2
- 14) *Siddur Tikun Meir*, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1935
- 15) Malachi 4:5
- 16) Matthew 17:10,12,13
- 17) Matthew 11:10,14
- 18) Matthew 16:13,14
- 19) Matthew 5:17
- 20) John 9:1-3
- 21) John 3:4,10,12
- 22) Job 1:21
- 23) Psalm 90:2,3,5,6
- 24) Tobit 13:1,2
- 25) Ecclesiasticus 41:9,10
- 26) Galatians 6:7
- 27) Genesis 9:5,6
- 28) See Acts 22:3; and 26:4,5
- 29) *Kitzur Sh 'lu*, p. 6, col. I and II
- 30) *Nishmath Chaim*, fol. 152, col. 2
- 31) Ezekiel 34:23,24

- 32) *Yalkut Reubeni*, Nos. 9:24
- 33) *Yalkut Chadash*, fol. 127, col. 3
- 34) II Kings 4:8
- 35) I Samuel 1:15
- 36) *Yalkut Reubeni*, Nos. 1,8,61,63
- 37) I Samuel 2:6
- 38) Matthew 26:51,52
- 39) John 6:30-32
- 40) Deuteronomy 18:15
- 41) Matthew 7:12
- 42) Ecclesiastes 1:9,10
- 43) Hebrew Publishing Company, New York
- 44) Galatians 6:8
- 45) Luke 16:9
- 46) John 14:2,3
- 47) Revelation 3:12
- 48) Luke 20:36
- 49) I Corinthians 15:26
- 50) I Corinthians 15:53-55
- 51) Revelation 2:7
- 52) *Stromata*, vol. 3, p. 433
- 53) Romans 9:14

54) *De Principiis*, II,9,7

55) *De Principiis*, book 4, chapter 3

56) Luke 20:36; Rom. 8:14

57) Luke 16:8

58) Matthew 5:9; Luke 10:6

59) John 1:12

60) Colossians 3:5

61) II Corinthians 6:17

62) II Corinthians 11:15. *De Principiis*, I,8,4

63) Saint Sulpitius Severus was the chief disciple of Saint Martin of Tours, the first person to be canonized that was not a martyr.

64) *Sacred History*, Chapter 28

65) *Sacred History*, Chapter 29]