

Does the Bible Teach Reincarnation?
A response to Joe Fisher's "The Lost Chord of Christianity"¹

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Introduction

No doubt some in our society today find the doctrine of reincarnation to be strange at best and false at worst. In Christian circles especially, reincarnation is looked upon as heretical. Many Christians, without being able to articulate the subtle differences between other faiths that embrace reincarnation and their own Christian faith, nevertheless sense a *prima facie* incompatibility. But there are those who do believe that reincarnation is true. There are even those who believe that reincarnation is compatible with Christianity. Some even suggest that reincarnation used to be taught within Christian circles and that it is tacitly in the Bible.

Joe Fisher is the author of the book *The Case for Reincarnation*. While admitting that there is a disparity between reincarnation and present day Christianity, Fisher argues that this should not be and once was not the case. In chapter seven of his book, Fisher defends the thesis that reincarnation was a doctrine of the early Christian church. In the first section of this chapter he asserts that reincarnation was accepted and taught by early church fathers and treasured by "Christian Gnostics."² He discusses Origen's beliefs and Constantine's role in sowing the "seeds of reincarnation's banishment."³

Our concern here is not so much whether reincarnation is true or false (though I believe it to be false), but whether reincarnation was originally a biblical doctrine as Fisher asserts. My

¹ Joe Fisher, *The Case for Reincarnation* (Toronto: Bantam New Age Books, 1985), 65-75. Unless otherwise noted, all page references are to Fisher's work.

² p. 66.

³ p. 67.

argument is that the Bible in no way teaches reincarnation, neither explicitly nor implicitly. Therefore it behooves us to examine Fisher's treatment of the biblical testimony to see if his arguments are sound.

A Critique of Fisher's Argument

Rebirth vs. Reincarnation

Fisher begins his argument with a fallacy of circular reasoning in the first paragraph of the section "Biblical Testimony." Consider his first two sentences.

Confirmation that reincarnation is the lost chord of Christianity . . . can be found in the pages of the Bible. While the Old and New Testaments hardly trumpet the belief from the rooftops, there are numerous references to rebirth in both books.⁴

While no Christian would argue that there are references to rebirth in the Bible, it does not follow that these references to rebirth are a confirmation of reincarnation. Fisher has not made his case that the doctrine of rebirth in the Bible and the notion of rebirth in the doctrine of reincarnation are the same. To merely assume they are the same is to beg the question. Indeed, the biblical doctrine of rebirth and the notion of rebirth in the doctrine of reincarnation most certainly are not the same thing. In reincarnation rebirth is a physical event in which one is born into a body more than once. But according to the Bible, rebirth is a spiritual event in which a lost man (i.e. one who is morally separated from God by sin) is given a new heart, a new moral nature.⁵ It is clearly contrasted with physical birth by Jesus in His dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:1-12.⁶

⁴ p. 71.

⁵ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:15.

⁶ See also Titus 3:5; John 1:12-13; Ephesians 2:4-6; 4:24.

Jesus on Reincarnation

Fisher claims that several of the most explicit statements about reincarnation are made by Jesus Christ.⁷ The first of these is Jesus' affirmation of His own pre-existence when He said, "Before Abraham was, I am."⁸ Fisher employs a non-sequitur that is common among reincarnationists. A non-sequitur is when the conclusion of an argument does not logically follow from the premises of the argument. Fisher erroneously concludes that since Jesus pre-existed, therefore He must have been reincarnated. But pre-existence does not necessitate reincarnation. Some religions, e.g., Mormonism, accept pre-existence and yet deny reincarnation.

A more thorough examination of the Bible reveals that the reason Jesus Christ was pre-existent is because He is God and therefore eternal.⁹ Indeed, His claim "I am" is a direct affirmation of Deity, and the Jews understood it as such.¹⁰ This expression was well recognized by the Jews because this was the name God gave to Himself.¹¹

Another of Fisher's "explicit statement" by Jesus involves Jesus' refusal to challenge the disciples' thinking regarding the man born blind in John 9:1-3. The verses read

Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was born blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him."

⁷ p. 72.

⁸ John 8:58.

⁹ Cf. John 1:1, 14; Micah 5:2; Philippians 2:5-8; Colossians 1:15-17; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 13:8; Revelation 1:11.

¹⁰ John 8:58.

¹¹ Exodus 3:14.

Fisher asserts that the disciples were clearly attributing prenatal existence to the blind man.¹² But why is it problematic that Jesus attributed prenatal existence to him? Is prenatal existence something that those who reject reincarnation should reject? Certainly not. 'Prenatal' only means 'before birth.' Could it be the case that humans exist before birth if the doctrine of reincarnation is not true? Definitely yes. Everyone exists prenaturally in the womb before they are born.

The disciples thought that the man was born blind either because of his own sins or the sins of his parents.¹³ Among the various views of the Jews at that time was the belief that one could sin in the womb. Genesis 25:22 was quoted to support this. Since in general sin was regarded to be a direct cause of physical maladies then it was not unusual to ask whose sin caused the man's blindness.¹⁴ This perfectly explains the text. But Fisher does not stop there. He shifts concepts in the middle of his argument. Consider these statements:

Although the disciples were clearly attributing pre-natal existence to the blind man, Christ does nothing to correct or dispel this presupposition as he goes on to prepare a salve that restores the man's sight. By refusing to challenge the disciples' thinking, Jesus acknowledges the fact of pre-existence with its undeniable implication of reincarnation.¹⁵

Notice the change. He moves from 'prenatal existence' to 'pre-existence.' The difference is critical. As I have argued, 'prenatal' means nothing more than 'before birth.' Certainly everyone has existed in the womb before birth. This fact has nothing to do with reincarnation. 'Pre-existence' means 'to exist before the conception of the body in the womb.' The shift is subtle and tragic. Fisher concludes from the fact that humans exist in the womb before birth that therefore

¹² p. 72.

¹³ Exodus 20:5.

¹⁴ See William Barclay, *The Gospel According to John*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), pp. 37-38 on the conversation between Antoninus and Rabbi Judah on this point.

¹⁵ p. 72.

we must have existed before our conception. But this does not follow. On the basis of prenatal existence we can conclude nothing about pre-existence.

Furthermore, as has already been shown, reincarnation is most certainly *not* an undeniable implication of pre-existence. For a person to exist before his body exists does not necessarily entail his existence after his body dissolves, much less does it entail reincarnation into another body.

Far from being an explicit statement, Jesus' response to the disciples actually flies in the face of reincarnation dogma. For if the man had actually been reincarnated then his "sin" would have most certainly been the cause of his blindness. According to reincarnation, what you do in one life affects your state in a subsequent life. Thus, what your state is in this life will have everything to do with what you did in a previous life. This is the Law of Karma. In the preface to Fisher's book the Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism states "It [reincarnation] is related to the theory of interdependent origination and to the *law of cause and effect*."¹⁶

Thus if it were the case that the man had been reincarnated from a previous existence then Jesus could not have argued that his blindness was not the man's own fault. But since Jesus argued that the man was not to blame for his own blindness, then it must be the case that the man was not reincarnated.

The last of Jesus' supposed statements of reincarnation involves the relationship of John the Baptist to the prophet Elijah. I will deal in more detail with the argument based on John the Baptist at the end of this paper.

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

Paul on Reincarnation

Next Fisher deals with Paul's statement in Galatians 6:7, ". . . whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Fisher says that Paul here "hints strongly at rebirth because one life is plainly insufficient for a perfect balancing of accounts."¹⁷ But the truth is that a "balancing of accounts" is not even the issue of this verse. The verse says that one will reap what one sows, not that there is some sort of balancing of accounts. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that Paul is "hinting" at anything. It is clear that Paul is quite unambiguous on this matter. He goes on to say:

For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.¹⁸

In no uncertain terms Paul declares his belief in resurrection, not reincarnation.

knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you.¹⁹

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption.²⁰

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.²¹

Surprisingly, Fisher quotes references to Jacob and Esau as examples of rebirth. The verses read:

for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, . . . As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated"²²

¹⁷ p. 72.

¹⁸ Galatians 6:8.

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:14.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:42.

²¹ Romans 8:11.

²² Romans 9:11, 13; Malachi 1:2, 3.

Is the implication here that God could not love someone before that person was born unless that person pre-existed? (Even though, as I have argued above, pre-existence is not necessarily related to reincarnation.) Whether that is true or not Fisher never defends nor even addresses. But there is no need to appeal to a doctrine of pre-existence or reincarnation to explain God's prior love for persons. If God is an eternal being, (i.e., if God transcends time and space) then it is possible for Him to act toward those things that are future. If God is beyond time then it would be possible for Him to love someone who does not yet exist in time.²³ Furthermore, far from supporting reincarnation the verses actually are quite contrary to it. How could it be said about anyone who had pre-existed and then reincarnated that he had not done any good or evil? The fact that Jacob and Esau had not done any good or evil must be because they never existed until their birth.

The Case of John the Baptist

There are several verses that are appealed to in order to prove that John the Baptist was the reincarnation of Elijah. For example:

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come.

Then Jesus answered and said unto them, ". . . But I say unto you that Elijah has come already . . ." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.²⁴

On the surface, these verses may seem to allow for the belief that John the Baptist was indeed the reincarnation of Elijah. However upon closer examination this conclusion will not stand for at least two main reasons. First, there are logical problems with the position (in light of

²³ The topic of God's relationship to time is admittedly a complex one. For an analytic defense of God's timelessness see, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 78 (August 1981): 429-458. For an examination of competing views see, Gregory E. Ganssel, ed., *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). For a defense of the Thomistic view of God's timelessness in the context of the debate over Open Theism see, Norman L. Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001), 66-99.

²⁴ Matthew 11:13-14; 17:11-13.

other things we know from the Bible about Elijah) and second, the true meaning of the verses becomes lost.

Logical Problems

It would be impossible for John the Baptist (or anyone else) to be Elijah reincarnated, for Elijah never did "disincarnate" in the first place. The fact of the matter is that Elijah could never reincarnate because he never died.

Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire, and separated the two of them [Elijah and Elisha] and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.²⁵

Whatever else might be said about reincarnation, one thing that seems certain is that death is a prerequisite for it. My argument here maintains that Elijah's soul never did leave his physical body. It is entirely consistent with the Bible's doctrine of the afterlife to maintain that what happened to Elijah was that his body was transformed into an incorruptible, albeit physical, body. Thus John the Baptist could not be the reincarnation of Elijah because Elijah still has his own original physical body.

Another logical problem for the position is found in Mark 9:2, 4 which took place after the time of John the Baptist's death.

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves and He was transfigured before them. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus.

The reincarnationist is hard pressed to explain how Elijah could have appeared on the mount of transfiguration if he beforehand had already reincarnated into John the Baptist. Are we to suppose that after reincarnating into John the Baptist he then reincarnated back into Elijah? It

²⁵ 2 Kings 2:11.

would seem that a course of least resistance exegetically would be to reject the notion that John the Baptist is the reincarnation of Elijah.

The Meaning of the Verses

How then, if John the Baptist is not Elijah reincarnated, are we to understand verses like these? There is no doubt that "he is Elijah who is to come" but this is not without qualifications. Notice Jesus said "if you are willing to receive it." In what sense was John the Baptist Elijah? Whatever the sense, it had to be a way in which the disciples needed to be "willing to receive it." The answer is revealed in scripture itself. Luke 1:17 tells us exactly in what sense John the Baptist is Elijah.

He will also go before Him *in the spirit and power of Elijah* . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.²⁶

The sense in which John the Baptist is Elijah had everything to do with the mission and ministry John the Baptist was given to fulfill. That mission was to prepare the nation Israel for the coming of her Messiah. That was why Jesus said "if you are willing to receive it." It was imperative that the disciples and the whole nation know and make ready for Him.

Conclusion

My argument in this paper has not been to show that reincarnation is a false doctrine. Rather, I have argued that the Bible does not assume nor declare the doctrine of reincarnation. Instead it offers the hope of the resurrection. Jesus himself said

For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.²⁷

²⁶ Emphasis added.

²⁷ John 5:26-29.