

“Closing the Door on Reincarnation in Early Christianity: Limiting the Options”

Jeffrey A. Trumbower, Ph.D.

Professor of Religious Studies, Saint Michael's College, Colchester, Vermont, U.S.A.

jtrumbower@smcvt.edu

Prepared for the Philo of Alexandria Seminar, Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, San Antonio, Texas, November, 2016

Reincarnation, the notion that some aspect of a deceased human being returns to life embodied in a different form (normally human or animal, but also possibly encompassing other types of beings), is associated with numerous religious and philosophical currents the world over, and has often been claimed to be present in the thought of Philo of Alexandria.¹ But it is not normally associated with other Jews contemporary with Philo, or with that famous religious tradition that arose in Philo's day within Judaism, early Christianity. There is good reason for this: many Christian writers of the formative second and third centuries C.E. specifically condemned reincarnation and rejected it as outside the pale of Christian orthodoxy, but the fact that they were so vehement about it shows that it was a live option for some Christians of that period. Thanks to the testimony of those Christians who combatted what they considered to be heresy, and also thanks to the discovery of the texts at Nag Hammadi, we can trace in broad outline the process by which reincarnation was discussed and ultimately rejected, and we can better understand what was at stake for those on both sides of the issue. Tracing the Christian trajectory in the early formative centuries may help illuminate what was at stake for Philo in his own historical context, and may also help us understand how Philo was perceived by his earliest Christian admirers.

¹ See Sami Yli-Karjanmaa, *Reincarnation in Philo of Alexandria* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2015), 1-29, for a rehearsal of the history of this interpretation.

I. Reincarnation in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures

Reincarnation was not characteristic of the religions of Ancient Israel, the Hebrew Bible or Second Temple Judaism, and it was Philo's attempt to reconcile Platonic ideas with his ancestral Judaism that led him to espouse, or at least appear to espouse, reincarnation in some contexts. In the Hebrew Bible, the only dead person who reappears on earth is the prophet Samuel, only for a short time, and in a decidedly non-bodily form (1 Sam. 28). Two people are taken bodily to heaven, Enoch (Gen. 5.24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2.11), and in Second Temple Judaism the idea was current that the latter would return to earth as part of the end-times scenario (Mal. 4.5-6; Sirach 48.10). But Elijah is a special case, and in any event, such a return would not necessarily be reincarnation, but the return of a living body that had never died.

The Synoptic Gospels reflect this notion of the return of Elijah and other prophets, in passages which some later Christians understood as pointing to the possibility of reincarnation. One key text is Mark 8:27-28, in which Jesus and the disciples discuss the identity of Jesus: "On the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'" (See the parallels in Matt. 16.13-14 and Luke 9.18-21). Related is the statement of Jesus in Mark 9.13, paralleled in Matt. 11.14 and 17.12, about John the Baptist, "But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him." This idea is negated in the Gospel of John, where John the Baptist responds to the question "Are you Elijah?" with an emphatic "I am not" (John 1.21). As these late first-century authors muse on the speculations of people living at the time of Jesus, for Jesus to be John the Baptist, the idea would have to be either that Jesus was a freshly resurrected John (speculation by people who had no experience of Jesus prior to John's death), or else somehow the spirit of John had come to inhabit Jesus after John's death. For John to be Elijah, the idea would have to be either that somehow Elijah's spirit or soul came to inhabit John, or else the physical body of Elijah that had been taken to heaven almost 900 years earlier had now

returned, calling himself John. If these synoptic traditions reflect the speculation swirling around during the lifetime of the historical Jesus, it is likely that both physical return and spirit possession could have been in view. The latter is a type of reincarnation, though not one that necessarily begins at the birth of the new individual.

Luke's versions of these passages betray an attempt to clarify some of the issues. Luke does not repeat Jesus' equation of John with Elijah found in his source Mark 9.13. Rather, Luke has an angel of the Lord announce to John's father Zechariah that "With the spirit and power of Elijah he [John] will go before him [antecedent unclear], to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1.17, with clear reference to Mal. 4.6). Luke here is saying that John will have the spirit and power of Elijah, and he will accomplish the functions of the eschatological Elijah, but he will not literally be the old Elijah returned from heaven. Obviously not, since Luke begins his gospel with a story of John's extraordinary, but still relatively normal birth. Luke also seems to want to preclude any sort of reincarnation interpretation in the way he treats his Markan source. For instance, Luke modifies the speculation placed on the lips of the crowds in Mark 8.28 by adding the word ἀνέστη (has risen) after "one of the prophets" (Luke 9:19). The absence of this word, as in Mark and Matthew, leaves open the possibility that Jesus is a reincarnation of one of the prophets either through recent spirit possession or from the moment of Jesus' birth. Luke's speculators are clearer in that they speculate about the bodily resurrection of one of the prophets, whom people were seeing as Jesus. A similar view is placed on the lips of Herod Antipas in Luke, in a scene unique to the third gospel: "Now Herod the Tetrarch heard of all that was done [by Jesus], and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the old prophets had risen" (Luke 9.7-8). In Luke's version it is clear that neither reincarnation nor even spirit possession is being considered among those speculating about who Jesus is. Rather, if John the Baptist or Jesus is to be identified with a dead

hero, be it Elijah, John himself, or some other prophet, the speculation in which Luke's characters indulge is that the new person walking around is identical with the old person who has been raised bodily or who has reappeared after centuries. It may well be that Luke, aware of the potential reincarnation interpretation of the Markan passages he inherited, deliberately wanted to avoid any such interpretation, so his characters stress resurrection and bodily return. In addition, the story of the birth of John the Baptist, found only in Luke, takes away the possibility that John had literally been Elijah returned from heaven. Only the vague "spirit and power of Elijah" are confirmed by the author to have rested in John.

There is a very early exposition on this collection of gospel passages about John the Baptist in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 49. Trypho says, "This statement also seems to me paradoxical; namely, that the prophetic spirit of God, who was in Elijah, was also in John." Justin replies with an analogy of Moses and Joshua from the book of Numbers, where, in Justin's interpretation, God promises that he will take the spirit which is in Moses and transfer it to Joshua through the laying on of hands. Justin conflates two episodes here: Num. 11.17, where God takes some of the spirit which is in Moses and transfers it to the 70 elders, and Num. 27.18, where Moses lays hands on Joshua, "a man in whom there is the spirit." Even though the scripture never actually says the spirit of Moses is in Joshua, Justin reads it this way as an analogy to what has occurred between Elijah and John the Baptist. John was not literally Elijah returned or reincarnated, just as Joshua was not literally Moses, but each pair shared the same prophetic spirit.

Tertullian provides a much more elaborate exposition on these scripture passages, refuting the idea of reincarnation espoused by other Christians whom he considers to be heretics, Simon Magus and Carpocrates in particular. Each one had different reasons for positing reincarnation: Simon purportedly to justify his claim that the prostitute Helen was a spiritual principle trapped in a lengthy cycle of incarnations whom he (Simon) would liberate; Carpocrates purportedly to reinforce his teaching that

each soul must be purified by experiencing a wide variety of sins in various incarnations. According to Irenaeus, followed by Tertullian, this teaching was based on Carpocrates' interpretation of Matt.

5.26/Luke 12.59: one could not be released from the prison (of the body) until one had paid the last penny, necessitating a series of incarnations. Tertullian claims that Carpocrates used the example of Elijah and John the Baptist to promote his "Pythagorean" doctrine of widespread reincarnation for everyone, but Tertullian counters by citing Luke 1.17 to the effect that John only possessed the spirit and strength of Elijah, not his soul and flesh (*De Anima* 34.1-35.4). In addition to scriptural exegesis, Tertullian also provides philosophical reasons why reincarnation is to be rejected, arguments that will be detailed later in this paper.

Another famous passage from the New Testament lends itself to a reincarnation interpretation: the story of the man born blind in John 9. "As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (John 9.2-3). In other words, this man has spent all these years blind just so that Jesus could eventually come along and heal him! Notice, however, that Jesus in this passage does not negate the premise of the disciples' question. It might well be that in cases of others born blind, the person him- or herself or the parents might have sinned, causing the blindness. The major question, of course, is how could this man have sinned before birth? In a previous incarnated life? As a disembodied soul or spirit? Irenaeus and Tertullian both discuss this passage, but they do not raise or discuss the implications for reincarnation or pre-existence of the soul (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.15.2, 4; Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 22.7).

Origen, in one of his homilies on Genesis, uses the passage obliquely to bolster his belief in the sins of pre-existent souls. When preaching on the birth of Jacob and Esau, speculating about why each twin was born to a different destiny, Origen invokes the story of the man born blind to say that he would

like to press the question further, but he wants to avoid giving fodder to the “Philistines” who attack him when he endeavors to go down such speculative theological paths:

But what those prerogatives of birth are, why either the one "supplanted his brother" and was born smooth and simple, although certainly, as the Apostle says, both sons were conceived "from our one father, Isaac," or why the other was born "hairy all over" and shaggy and, so to speak, enwrapped in the squalor of sin and vileness is not mine to discuss. For if I shall wish to dig deeply and open the hidden veins "of living water," immediately the Philistines will be present and will strive with me. They will stir up disputes and malicious charges against me and will begin to refill my wells with their earth and mud. For certainly if those Philistines would permit and I wished to approach my Lord, my most patient Lord, who says: "I do not reject him who comes to me," if I wished to approach and, as the disciples said to him: "Lord, who has sinned, this man or his parents that he should be born blind?" and I wished to ask him and say: "Lord, who has sinned," this Esau or his parents, that he should be born thus "hairy all over" and shaggy, that he should be supplanted by his brother in the womb? But if I shall wish to ask the word of God of these things and inquire, immediately the Philistines stir up quarrels and malicious charges against me. And for this reason, leaving this well and calling it "enmity," let us dig another.²

For Origen, neither the story of Jacob and Esau nor the disciples' question about the man born blind points to reincarnation, but these passages do point to the pre-existence of souls that are somehow responsible for the fate they receive in their one incarnation on earth.

As one can see from this brief survey, there are a number of scriptural passages which, viewed in isolation, could serve to bolster reincarnation ideas among some early Christians, people we only know about through the writings of their opponents. Irenaeus complained that people who read the scriptures in this way were treating biblical passages like mosaic tiles which rightly pieced together form one coherent image (that of a king), but pulled out of context can be used illegitimately to form a different image (that of a fox; *Adv. Haer.* 1.9.4).³ While Irenaeus himself often read scriptures out of context on a number of other issues, he was on to something in this case in the sense that none of the biblical texts was explicit in arguing for or even presupposing a widespread theory of reincarnation. In

²Trans. Ronald F. Heine, *Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*. The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation 71 (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 180-81.

³ For more on the use of scriptures to bolster ideas of reincarnation, see M. Maritano, "Metempsychosis," in A. Di Berardino, ed., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, (Downers Grover, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 2:782-790.

fact, only one text surviving from early Christianity espouses an explicit teaching of reincarnation, and it is to that text that we now turn.

II. The *Apocryphon of John*

The Apocryphon of John was an originally Greek work, now surviving in Coptic translations in short and long versions, each represented by two manuscripts (four total), three of which were found at Nag Hammadi and one in the Berlin Gnostic Papyrus 8502. Many of the teachings from this text are attested also in Irenaeus, so the earliest form of the text is commonly attributed to the mid-second century.⁴

Bentley Layton has shown that this text contains “one of the most classic narrations of the gnostic myth,”⁵ though interestingly, the text’s assertions about reincarnation are not taken up in other surviving gnostic or gnostic-like texts. The heresiologists, however, do associate reincarnation with a number of Christian teachers who also appear to have accepted aspects of the classic gnostic myth.

The *Apocryphon of John* is presented as a dialogue between the risen Savior and the apostle John, and there is a section that speaks of the potential for posthumous salvation among various types of souls.

The first type discussed, the souls of the immovable race, will achieve salvation immediately upon death (NHC II.25.16-26.7). Then there are others who understand their true origin, but who must struggle with the counterfeit spirit. John asks:

Lord, where will the souls of these go when they have come out of their flesh?" And he smiled and said to me, "The soul in which the power will become stronger than the counterfeit spirit, is strong and it flees from evil and, through the intervention of the incorruptible one, it is saved and it is taken up to the rest of the aeons (NHC II.26.22-32).⁶

⁴ Frederick Wisse, “The Apocryphon of John,” James Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 104.

⁵ Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 23.

⁶ Trans. Wisse, “Apocryphon of John,” 120.

It appears that part of this struggle may take place after death, as the disembodied soul struggles with the counterfeit spirit, but that ultimately salvation is achieved.

Next, John asks about yet another category of souls:

Lord, those, however, who have not known to whom they belong, where will their souls be?" And he said to me, "In those the despicable spirit has gained strength when they went astray. And he burdens the soul and draws it to the works of evil, and he casts it down into forgetfulness. And after it comes out of (the body), it is handed over to the authorities, who came into being through the archon, and they bind it with chains and cast it into prison and consort with it until it is liberated from the forgetfulness and acquires knowledge. And if thus it becomes perfect, it is saved." And I said, "Lord, how can the soul become smaller and return into the nature of its mother or into man?" Then he rejoiced when I asked him this, and he said to me, "Truly you are blessed, for you have understood! That soul is made to follow another one, since the Spirit of life is in it. It is saved through him. It is not again cast into another flesh" (NHC II. 26.32-27.21).⁷

Both Bentley Layton and Michael Allen Williams interpret this passage as professing a belief in reincarnation for some souls. They must be reborn in human form until liberation from forgetfulness is accomplished.⁸ Their reading is confirmed by two other surviving versions of text, which make even clearer the reincarnation aspect of this passage: "[the archons] again [put] them into (bodily) parts" (NHC III.35.4), and "they again cast them into fetters" (BG 69.4).⁹

Finally, there are some souls in the *Apocryphon of John* who are beyond hope: those "who have turned away" (NHC II.27.23). The Savior says that "they will be taken to the place where there is no repentance. And they will be kept for the day on which those who have blasphemed the spirit will be tortured, and they will be punished with eternal punishment" (NHC II.27.26-30). It is significant that the only souls without hope appear to be those of apostates. Leaving the elect group is the only unforgivable sin, quite an effective strategy to maintain group identity, cohesiveness, and control. For

⁷ Trans. Wisse, "Apocryphon of John," 120.

⁸ Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 48, n. 27c; Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 197.

⁹ Michael Waldstein and Frederick Wisse, eds., *The Apocryphon of John: Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2*. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 154.

everyone except apostates, however, the *Apocryphon of John* envisions opportunities for salvation even beyond death, through a series of rebirths if necessary. For the author of the *Apocryphon of John*, some human beings, the ones in whom the despicable spirit has gained strength, undergo reincarnation as a punishment. In the background here is the Platonic notion of reincarnation as the fate for souls who love the earth and the body (*Phaedo* 81 B-E, *Phaedrus* 248 D-E, 249 B-D; *Laws* 10; *Republic* 10; *Timaeus* 42 B-C, 91 A), echoed in Philo *De Somn.* 1.138-42 and *Cher.* 114, as Yli-Karjanmaa has shown.¹⁰

III. Reports about Christian belief in Reincarnation from the Pens of their Opponents

While the *Apocryphon of John* is the only surviving early Christian text that explicitly endorses a theory of reincarnation, many authors attest to the belief among their Christian opponents. Of course, we cannot know whether in each case they have portrayed their opponents accurately, and in some cases we have strong indications that they did not, but the cumulative weight of the evidence shows that for a number of early Christian thinkers and groups, reincarnation was a way to solve vexing theological, anthropological, and soteriological issues. The strong reactions of their opponents indicate that a great deal was at stake. The proto-orthodox opponents of reincarnation managed to stigmatize and problematize the doctrine for all later Christian generations, and this has had a bearing on the way later scholars read a figure like Philo, who lived long before these controversies erupted, in a religious context that he could scarcely have conceived. This section of the paper will focus on four early opponents of reincarnation and the figures they associated with the doctrine: Irenaeus (opposing Simon Magus and Carpocrates), Clement of Alexandria (opposing Basilides), Tertullian (opposing Simon Magus, Carpocrates, and objecting to reincarnation more generally), and an unknown bishop from early third century Rome who wrote a *Refutation of All Heresies* (once identified as Hippolytus, but now shown not

¹⁰ Yli-Karjanmaa, chapter 3.

to be; opposing the Doketai, Carpocrates, the Elchasites, and Alcibiades).¹¹ Both Tertullian and the unknown Roman bishop used Irenaeus extensively, so it is best to begin with the Bishop of Lyons.

Reincarnation arises in two contexts in Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses*. Book I, chapter 23, describes the elaborate mythology surrounding Simon Magus, the earliest of all the heretics and wellspring of many to follow, according to Irenaeus. Starting with the sparse account in Acts 8.9-24, Irenaeus fills in elaborate details about Simon's claim to be the highest God, and how the first conception of his mind came to be embodied in the person of Helena, a slave from Tyre who traveled with Simon. She had descended to the lower regions and created the angels and powers, but then they enslaved her out of jealousy and forced her to inhabit a series of female human bodies throughout the ages, including the famous Helen of Troy. Simon came to earth to liberate Helena and all other human beings by teaching about himself and how the creation came to be. The prophets were deluded by the angels and powers, so they may safely be ignored. In Irenaeus's account of Simon's teaching, only Helena has experienced continual reincarnation; the doctrine is not presented as a general theory for everyone.

After describing the doctrines of Saturninus and Basilides in I.24, in which reincarnation plays no role (*contra* Clement of Alexandria with respect to Basilides, see below), Irenaeus moves to Carpocrates, who he claims does have a more general theory of reincarnation. *Adv. Haer.* I.25 describes the sojourn of the soul toward liberation, in which it is necessary that the soul experience all possible conditions of life and action. Some people, he says, are able "once for all, and with equal completeness, [to do] all those things which we must dare not either speak or hear of," within a single incarnation, eliminating the need for subsequent incarnations. Most people, however, will only experience "every kind of life and every kind of action" through multiple incarnations, ultimately achieving liberation so that the soul might "soar upwards to that God who is above the angels, the makers of the world." As stated above,

¹¹ For an introduction to this text, along with a new critical edition of the Greek and a fresh translation, see M. David Litwa, *Refutation of all Heresies* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016)

Irenaeus claims that Carpocrates used Matt. 5.26/Luke 12.59 to justify his ideas on reincarnation: one could not be released from the prison (of the body) until one had paid the last penny. Michael Allen Williams points out numerous problems with Irenaeus' depiction of the Carpocratians: Irenaeus has based his account on their writings, not firsthand knowledge (*Adv. Haer* I.25.5), thereby subject to misinterpretation; there is a contradiction between Carpocrates' depiction of the sober life of Jesus and the supposedly licentious deeds of his followers; and in a Nag Hammadi text where Matt. 5.26/Luke 12.59 is quoted (*Testimony of Truth* 30, 2-18), the passages are used not to justify licentiousness or reincarnation, but rather to bolster a teaching of renunciation of sexual intercourse.¹² The question remains: even if Irenaeus has imported an interpretation of licentiousness into his account of the Carpocratians, did they nonetheless hold some sort of reincarnation idea, or was that, too, a product of Irenaeus' misreading? If they did profess reincarnation, was it similar to what one finds in the *Apocryphon of John*, where the soul might experience many incarnations as a punishment for not achieving knowledge? Tertullian's account of Carpocrates is of little help here: in *De Anima* 35 he repeats what Irenaeus had said, but then adds "I apprehend (spero) that heretics of this school seize with special avidity the example of Elias, whom they assume to have been so reproduced in John (the Baptist) as to make our Lord's statement sponsor for their theory of transmigration."¹³ This information was not in Irenaeus, but notice how Tertullian couches it with the word "spero": he *expects* them to have interpreted these New Testament passages in this way, but he doesn't have it on certain authority. The anonymous Roman bishop of the third century gives the barest mention of the Carpocratians' reincarnation idea, also clearly based on Irenaeus (*Against All Heresies* VII.32-7-8). Clement of Alexandria mentions Carpocrates as the father and teacher of Epiphanes, an author who died at age 17 leaving behind a book that Clement had read. Clement has more to say about the son than the father,

¹² Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 167-69.

¹³ Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3 (New York: Scribners, 1926), 216.

but he charges both with uninhibited sexual intercourse and advocating wives as common property (*Strom.* III.2.5-10).¹⁴ But nowhere does Clement mention reincarnation among their doctrines, nor does he share Irenaeus' understanding of Carpocratian ethics, that human beings need to experience every kind of life and action, either in one life or many. Thus we are left with the possibility that Carpocrates and his followers believed in reincarnation, but nothing more than that. Perhaps more interesting is the vehemence with which Irenaeus and Tertullian denounce the idea. They associate it with licentiousness and absurdity, taking it beyond the pale of what any Christian should think.

Clement of Alexandria speaks of the doctrine of transmigration in Book 3 of the *Stromateis*, where he associates it with the companion doctrine of the pre-existence of souls:

The philosophers whom we have mentioned, from whom Marcion's followers derived their blasphemous doctrine that birth is evil, although they prance about as if it were their own, do not, in fact, hold that it is naturally evil, but evil only to the soul which has discerned the truth. They regard the soul as divine, and dragged down here onto earth as to a place of punishment. In their view, souls that have become embodied need to be purified. This doctrine does not belong to Marcion's followers, but to those who hold that souls are placed in bodies, change their integument and transmigrate. There will be another opportunity to respond to them when we discourse on the soul (*Strom.* 3.13).¹⁵

As Maritano points out, there is no evidence that Clement ever followed through with his promise to discuss these ideas at length,¹⁶ but from this passage we can see that Clement viewed transmigration as a companion and corollary to the pre-existence of souls. Therefore, when he mentions it again in Book 4, in connection with his Christian opponent Basilides, we may assume that both ideas are in view. Here is the key passage: "But the hypothesis of Basilides says that the soul, having sinned before in another life, endures punishment in this -- the elect soul with honor by martyrdom, the other purged by

¹⁴ See the discussion in Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism,"* 184-87. Epiphanes based his free love ideas on the goodness of the created order, and appears not to have shared his father's "Gnostic" notion of the world as the creation of inferior beings.

¹⁵ Trans. John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria: Stromateis Books 1-3.* Fathers of the Church 85 (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1991), 264.

¹⁶ Maritano, "Metempsychosis," 783.

appropriate punishment” (*Strom.* 4.12).¹⁷ The context is a discussion of God’s Providence and Justice, and pre-existence/reincarnation in this context is reported as Basilides’ attempt to understand and justify the suffering of seemingly innocent and righteous persons. It must be punishment for sins in a past life, or else God would be unjust to inflict it. Even the suffering of martyrdom is a punishment of sorts, albeit one “with honor.” Clement objects that suffering is not always a punishment for sin: look at the example of the person who renounces God rather than suffer martyrdom. This person commits a terrible sin, yet does not suffer, while the person who does not sin (the confessor) suffers horribly. Look at God’s enemies who condemn Christians to death: they commit terrible sin, yet they do not suffer. Look at the example of Jesus: he was innocent, yet he suffered. Clement’s solution is to say that God does not cause suffering, but he allows it for a higher purpose: “It remains to say that such things happen without the prevention of God; for this alone saves both the providence and the goodness of God. We must not therefore think that He actively produces afflictions (far be it that we should think this!); but we must be persuaded that He does not prevent those that cause them, but overrules for good the crimes of His enemies” (*Strom.* 4.12).¹⁸ For Clement, this solution solves the problem for which Basilides had resorted to reincarnation. Clement also says a bit before this, “But with reference to these dogmas, whether the soul is changed to another body, also of the devil, at the proper time mention will be made.” Unfortunately for us, the proper time never came, and Clement did not treat the topics of pre-existence or transmigration in a systematic way in any extant work.

Such a philosophical refutation of reincarnation does appear, however, in the first great Christian thinker to write in Latin, Tertullian. As we have seen above, he repeats and enhances Irenaeus’ charges against Simon Magus and Carpocrates, but just before adducing these negative examples he produced in the same treatise a more philosophical refutation of the doctrine of reincarnation, among the most

¹⁷ Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2 (New York: Scribners, 1926), 424.

¹⁸ Trans. Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 2.424

extensive that survives from an early Christian author, *De Anima* 28-33. He attributes the doctrine to Plato, with nods to Pythagoras and the “Egyptian Mercury” as possible antecedents and sources for Plato. But his trump card for refutation is that the doctrine is not found in Moses’ writings, the most ancient and trustworthy of all sources for religious doctrines. After a discussion of Pythagoras’ untrustworthiness and trickery, Tertullian launches into an exercise in logic (*De Anima* 29): we all know that dead people were once living people, but it does not follow that living people were once dead people. If living people derive from the dead, how did the cycle begin? If at the beginning each individual was fresh and new, why should we suppose that such a process stopped in favor of cosmic recycling? Similar to the notion that vision cannot proceed from blindness, or youth from old age, Tertullian avers that life cannot proceed from death.

De Anima 30 introduces an additional problem: “if the living come from the dead, just as the dead proceed from the living, then there must remain unchanged one and the selfsame number of mankind, even the number which originally introduced human life.”¹⁹ Yet, in a remarkably modern-sounding passage, Tertullian notes that the population of the earth has gradually been growing since ancient times, such that our teeming numbers are now putting a strain on the resources that nature can provide. He cannot square these facts with a notion of reincarnation for all souls. In chapter 31, Tertullian wonders how the soul of an old man becomes an infant soul when it returns, and he contrasts the vastly different ways of life between Pythagoras and the person from whom he was supposedly reincarnated, Euphorbus, a soldier in the Trojan War. Tertullian points out that Pythagoras was the very opposite of a warrior, living a reclusive life of study and contemplation. If the same soul has such different proclivities in its different incarnations, why bother to posit that it is the same soul? Why,

¹⁹ Trans. Roberts and Donaldson, eds., *ANF* 3. 210.

Tertullian complains, don't all these philosophical proponents of transmigration remember aspects of their former lives?

Chapters 32 and 33 rail against the additional absurdity that a human soul might inhabit an animal, and vice versa. After a number of mocking examples where Tertullian shows how inadequate a punishment or reward it would be for a human soul to go into an animal, he sums up with the following statement, "Accordingly, God's judgment will be more full and complete, because it will be pronounced at the very last, in an eternal irrevocable sentence, both of punishment and of consolation, on men whose souls are not to transmigrate into beasts, but are to return into their own proper bodies" (*De Anima* 33).²⁰ Here Tertullian makes an important point against the idea of reincarnation and distinguishes it from the idea of resurrection: in this life body and soul were virtuous or vicious together, and likewise the judgment must be on both together, not separated. The general resurrection of the dead, so important to Tertullian and many other Christians, is to happen only once, and it cannot function if each soul had inhabited a variety of different bodies.²¹

We end this survey of late second and early third centuries with an anonymous work titled *Refutation of All Heresies*, often attributed to Hippolytus, but recently shown to be by an anonymous Roman bishop of the third century. Emanuelle Castelli summarized the emerging scholarly consensus in 2008:

In recent years, scholarly investigation of Rome at the beginning of the third century has attained an important result. Research has shown that behind the traditional figure "Hippolytus of Rome" lie at least two authors: the biblical exegete Hippolytus, who was active in the late second and early third century and probably resided in the eastern Mediterranean, and the anonymous author of the *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, a versatile writer, a schismatic, and the rival of the bishop of Rome Callistus (217-222).²²

²⁰ Trans. Roberts and Donaldson, eds., *ANF* 3. 215.

²¹ See the discussion in J. H. Waszink, *De Anima: Edited with Introduction and Commentary* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1947), 364.

²² Emanuelle Castelli, "The author of the *Refutatio omnium haeresium* and the attribution of the *De universo* to Flavius Josephus," Eds. Gabriella Aragone and Enrico Norelli, *Des évêques, des écoles et des hérétiques: Actes du*

This scholarly consensus is affirmed and strengthened in M. David Litwa's important new critical edition and translation of the *Refutation of all Heresies*.²³ This anonymous bishop was clearly dependent on Irenaeus, but he also mentions reincarnation in three contexts that the Bishop of Lyons does not have, each with an interesting new twist on the idea.

Like Irenaeus, the anonymous bishop in Rome charges Carpocrates with teaching transmigration, for the purpose of committing every possible sin to achieve liberation (*Ref.* 7.32.7-8). Unlike Irenaeus, he also charges a group called the Doketai with teaching reincarnation, but these reincarnations occurred only until Jesus came into the world:

The forms are called "souls" since they grew cold and fell from the realities above. Now they complete their lives in darkness, tossed from body to body, kept imprisoned by the artificer. One can recognize this state of affairs from the verse in the book of Job [2.9d LXX]: "I am a wanderer and a hired handmaid, changing from place to place and from house to house." Transmigration is also signified by what the savior says: "and if you want to accept it, he [John the Baptist] is Elijah who was to come. Let the one who has ears hear" the savior. Transmigration comes to an end with the advent of the savior. And faith is preached for the forgiveness of sins (*Ref.* 8.10-1-2).²⁴

For the Doketai, according to this Roman bishop who opposed them, Jesus' activity ends the cycle of reincarnation and liberates the souls of those who accept him. The bishop does not provide reasons why this doctrine is false; as is often his method, he thinks that exposing their views to the light of day and connecting them to Greek sophists is enough to refute them:

To those of sound mind, I think that this material is sufficient to recognize the tangled and shifting heresy of the Doketai. These self-named Doketai contrived arguments about impenetrable and incomprehensible subject matter. They are a group who, in my view, not only seem [τῷ δοκεῖν] to speak drivel. Quite the contrary: I have exposed them as carrying round a log [δοκόν] in their eye derived from their great forest of subject matter! I expose them so that they might somehow see clearly—but if not, at least that they not blind other people! Most of their teachings the Greek sophists pronounced long ago in their sophistical doctrines—as those

colloque international sur la "Refutation de toutes les hérésies" Genève, 13-14 juin 2008 (Prahins, Switzerland: Éditions du Zèbre, 2011) 219-231.

²³ M. David Litwa, *Refutation of all Heresies*. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016)

²⁴ Translation Litwa, *Refutation*, 591.

who read the Doketai can ascertain (*Ref.* 8.11.1-2).²⁵

The anonymous bishop describes two groups, the followers of Alcibiades and the Elchasites, who believe not in reincarnation for everyone, but for the Christ only. He has transmigrated in and out of various bodies throughout history, most recently in Jesus (*Ref.* 9.14.1 and 10.29.2). This assertion is similar to the claims made about Helen by Simon Magus, according to Irenaeus and Tertullian. For these Christians, if their opponents are accurately portraying them, the idea of reincarnation was a way of explaining the presence of some sort of eternal principle in the world at different stages of history, but was not applicable to human beings in general.

Finally, this same anonymous bishop also composed a lengthy work titled *Against Plato, On the Origin of the Universe*, only fragments of which survive.²⁶ The longest fragment is a description of the afterlife, with a graphic depiction of Hades as a storehouse for both good and bad souls awaiting judgment. In a key passage about the resurrection, the author states:

So much for the discourse concerning Hades, in which the souls of everyone are stored until the time which God has determined, when he will accomplish the resurrection of all, not reincarnating souls into new bodies, but raising the same bodies they had before. . . . And to each body its own proper soul is restored, and having this tunic laid over it, the soul will not be grieved, but will rejoice in purity with an enduring purity. Just as now in this world body and soul journey together righteously, not plotting against each other, so the soul will receive the body again with great joy. But the unrighteous will receive bodies that have not been changed from misfortune or sickness, nor will they have been glorified, but with whatever illnesses they died, with such will they be covered when they rise up. Whatever they became in unfaith, in such manner will they be judged faithfully (lines 47-77, translation mine).

²⁵ Trans. Litwa, *Refutation*, 595.

²⁶ The Greek text is found in Karl Holl, ed., *Fragmente vornicänischer Kirchenväter aus den Sacra Parallela* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899), 137-143, with variants published by Harold Cherniss, "The So-Called Fragment of Hippolytus peri hadou," *Classical Philology* 24 (1929), 346-350, and new fragments published by W. J. Malley, "Four Unedited Fragments of the *De Universo* of the Pseudo-Josephus found in the *Chronicon* of George Hamartolus (Coislin 305)," *JTS* 16 (1965) 13-25.

The author is keen to replace the Platonic notion of reincarnation with the Christian notion of the one-time resurrection, where a new body continuous with the old one will be reconstituted by God as a fitting vehicle for the soul to face judgment and spend eternity. For the unrighteous, this continuity even applies to the disease and disfigurement with which they died! Any notion of reincarnation into a new body in this life, before the final judgment, would be unthinkable for this author, as it would for most other proto-orthodox writers of the third century, with one possible exception, which is where we turn next.

IV. The Special Case of Origen

Any study of reincarnation in early Christianity must examine the special case of Origen, since in later centuries he was charged with having espoused the doctrine, one of the factors leading to his condemnation at the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. Origen clearly adopted the Platonic notion that the life of the soul on this earth is simply one stage in its life; each person's soul existed long before coming into the body, and it will continue to exist long after it leaves. The rational souls in their pre-cosmic state chose to fall away from God, rebelling against him in varying degrees, with the result that angels, human beings, and demons were created by God as vehicles for the education and gradual restoration of the fallen rational souls.²⁷ For the present study, the important aspect to consider is whether Origen ever extended that idea of a single incarnation for the pre-existent souls into a notion of *re-incarnation* into angelic and/or human and/or animal bodies.

The controversial passage is *De Principiis* 1.8.4. Gregory of Nyssa attributes to “his predecessor,” certainly Origen, a doctrine of transmigration in which souls can move up and down the chain of beings from angelic to human to beast and even to plants (*De Anima et Res*. P.G. 44, 112C – 113D; *De Hom.*

²⁷ See the summary by Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 108-20.

Opificio 28). Due to verbal connection, these passages would appear to have been in or around what we call *De Principiis* 1.8.4. Jerome, at the height of the Origenist controversy in the year 410, some 150 years after Origen's death, states that Origen maintained human souls could transmigrate into the bodies of beasts and fishes (*Ep. ad Avitum* 4).²⁸ Jerome did allow, however, that Origen expressed these ideas tentatively, not to be taken as dogmas, but as "inquiries and conjectures."²⁹ The Emperor Justinian, writing in the sixth century, also claimed that Origen taught transmigration of souls (*Ep. ad Mennam*). In Rufinus' Latin translation of *De Principiis* 1.8.4, however, he has Origen say precisely the opposite, that transmigration is a "perverse doctrine." This would seem to cohere with Origen's statement in *De Principiis* 2.9.3, where he dismisses beasts and fish as relatively unimportant in the scheme of salvation, but this other passage also is only known from Rufinus' translation. In later works, Origen explicitly rejects the doctrine of reincarnation into human bodies. When discussing Elijah's return in his *Commentary on Matthew*, from a portion of that work which is extant in Greek, Origen says:

In this place it does not appear to me that by Elijah the soul is spoken of, lest I should fall into the dogma of transmigration, which is foreign to the church of God, and not handed down by the Apostles, nor anywhere set forth in the Scriptures; for it is also in opposition to the saying that "things seen are temporal" (2 Cor. 4:18), and that "this age shall have a consummation," and also to the fulfillment of the saying, "Heaven and earth shall pass away," (Matt. 24:35). (*Comm. Matt.* 13.1)³⁰

Comm. Matt. 11.17 expresses similar sentiments, also surviving in Greek. Other commentaries that survive through Rufinus' translations express rejections of reincarnation: in his *Commentary on Romans*, Origen, like Clement, associates reincarnation with Basilides, claiming that Basilides interpreted Rom. 7.9 ("I once was alive apart from the Law") as referring to the time when the human being was in an

²⁸ See Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 145-46.

²⁹ See the discussion in G. W. Butterworth, *Origen, On First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis Translated into English, Together with an Introduction and Notes* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 72, n.8 and 74, n.2.

³⁰ Trans. John Patrick, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 9, 474-75.

animal body. Origen refutes this interpretation (*Comm. Rom.* 5.1). In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2.5, Origen uses the short life-span of this world to argue against reincarnation:

And there is the further question whether the soul puts on a body only once and, having laid it down, seeks for it no more; . . . But if, as the Scriptures lead us to think, the consummation of the world is near and this present state of corruption will be changed into one of incorruption, there seems no doubt that the soul cannot come into the body a second or third time under the conditions of this present life. For, if this other view were accepted, then the world would know no end of such successive re-assumptions.³¹

Thus, regardless of what Origen may have originally written in *De Principiis* 1.8.4, in later works he decided to deny any approval of the doctrine of reincarnation, and Rufinus would make sure this denial found its way into his translation of the *De Principiis*. Rejecting reincarnation did not, however, cancel out Origen's belief in the pre-existence of the soul prior to its one incarnation, nor did it cancel out Origen's hope for the posthumous improvement of the soul, on a path toward salvation, perhaps even universal salvation as expressed tentatively in some of his writings.³² Origen was condemned for these doctrines as well; the charge of having taught reincarnation in the *De Principiis* was an added bonus for his critics.

V. Conclusion: Relation to Studies of Philo

There is no clear evidence that Clement, Origen or other ancient Christian writers ever read Philo in a reincarnational way, either to praise or refute him for it. David Runia's survey *Philo in Early Christian Literature* does not include the topic of reincarnation or cognate terms in its index.³³ It seems reasonable that Clement especially, had he perceived Philo's teachings to be similar to his Christian opponent Basilides, might have criticized the Jewish Alexandrian on this score. In a 1995 article, Runia

³¹ Trans. R. P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (New York, NY and Ramsey, NJ: Newman, 1957), 135. See the discussion in Trigg, *Origen*, 209.

³² For more on these aspects of Origen's thought, see Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 113-119.

³³ David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

analyzed the two occasions where Clement calls Philo “the Pythagorean” (*Strom.* I.15 and II.19), both with a positive connotation.³⁴ As we saw above, Tertullian (along with many others in the ancient world) clearly associated reincarnation with Pythagoras, so it is possible that Clement was thinking of reincarnation in Philo when he labeled him “the Pythagorean.” This seems unlikely, however, given Clement’s distaste for reincarnation elsewhere and his positive assessment of Philo in these and other passages. As Runia points out, there were a number of possible reasons why Clement could have chosen the epithet “Pythagorean” for Philo. In the *Contra Celsum* 6.21, Origen praised Philo’s exegesis of the ladder in Jacob’s dream, a reference to *De Somnis* 1.133-45, hinting at “truths” and “more profound doctrines,” but there is no clear indication that Origen was referring to reincarnation in the Philo passage; the pre-existence and posthumous progress of the soul are more likely, given the context in *Contra Celsum*.³⁵ The later critics of Origen like Jerome might have had occasion to associate Philo with reincarnation since the doctrine was on their radar, but they did not. None of this proves anything about Philo himself, but it is interesting to note that, as far as we can tell, he was not perceived by his later Christian admirers to have been a proponent of reincarnation.

What this survey of early Christian attitudes may help illuminate for the Philo scholar is Philo’s context, about which so little is known. If Philo had a notion of reincarnation, it was expressed vaguely enough that reasonable readers many centuries later can disagree on the interpretation. Perhaps Philo was deliberately vague on reincarnation because he faced critics within his religious community similar to the critics faced by those Christians who later advocated the same doctrine. Perhaps, like Origen, he had to worry about his own “Philistines” who set upon him whenever he dared to venture into a

³⁴ David T. Runia, “Why does Clement of Alexandria call Philo ‘the Pythagorean?’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 (1995) 1-22.

³⁵ Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature*, 160. See *Contra Celsum* 8.72 for Origen’s affirmation of posthumous progress and the ultimate salvation of every soul, discussed in Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 118.

speculative “research theology,” as Henri Crouzel described Origen’s project.³⁶ Or perhaps the situations are not analogous. Perhaps the topic of reincarnation was relatively non-controversial for Philo and his Jewish contemporaries. Whatever the case, reincarnation was excluded from the realm of Christian possibilities more decisively and earlier than many other ideas. Building on the foundation laid by the thinkers covered here, many later theologians provided extensive refutations of both pre-existence of the soul and reincarnation into human and animal bodies: the Cappadocians, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, and John of Damascus in the East; Lactantius, Ambrose, and Augustine in the West.³⁷ While useful for solving some problems of theodicy, both doctrines were found to be non-scriptural, “absurd,” associated with sophists, and antithetical to the developing notion that each individual had one chance—this life with each soul in its unique body—to establish the right relationship with God through his son Jesus.

³⁶ Henri Crouzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, Trans. A. S. Worall (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 163-79 and 264-66.

³⁷ For a thorough survey, see Maritano, “Metempsychosis,” 786-790.