

COLUMBIA EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
Longview, WA

Reincarnation in Light of Scripture

The New Age Movement, AP-710

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March 2005

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## INTRODUCTION

Today approximately 25 percent of Americans believe in reincarnation according to Douglas Groothuis, a leading cult expert.<sup>1</sup> This figure of 25 percent resembles a 1982 Gallup poll that found 23 percent of Americans claiming to believe in reincarnation.<sup>2</sup> Together, these figures show that nearly one in four Americans since 1982 believe in reincarnation. Walter Martin, another cult specialist, wrote in 1989 that more than 58 percent of Americans either believed in reincarnation or believed in the conceivability of reincarnation.<sup>3</sup>

This popularity of belief in reincarnationism is remarkable given the fact that nearly 54 percent of Americans identify themselves as Protestant and 25 percent as Catholic, representing nearly 80 percent of Americans identifying with Christianity (excluding Orthodox Christians) as their religious preference.<sup>4</sup> What is more, according to

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas Groothuis, "Reincarnation, Karma and Life after Death," p. 1, June 2001 [article on-line]; available from <http://everystudent.com/wires/reincarnation.html>; Internet; accessed 12 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup>1982 Gallup Poll cited in Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Martin, *The New Age Cult* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>American Religion Data Archive (ARDA), "Religion from the General Social Survey, 1998," p. 1 [survey on-line]; available from <http://www.thearda.com/cgi-bin/univariate.exe>; Internet; accessed 12 February 2005.

a national survey conducted in 1991 regarding belief in reincarnation among individuals affiliated with a Protestant congregation, almost 21 percent were unsure about the belief in reincarnation and nearly 10 percent believed in reincarnation or in the possibility of this belief.<sup>5</sup> If this survey had included Catholics, then the percentage would most likely exceed 10 percent of individuals that believe in the possibility of reincarnation. These figures undoubtedly show that many individuals attending American churches today believe in reincarnation, at least admit to the possibility of reincarnation, or find themselves unsure what to believe about the afterlife.

Not only are there professing Christians who accept as true the doctrine of reincarnation, but also many of them believe that the Bible supports, or at least allows for, the concept of reincarnation. Could it be that biblical evidence exists to support the concept of reincarnation? The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to discuss the meaning of reincarnation, the human soul, and the doctrine of karma; and second, to examine the Scriptures and arguments used by reincarnationists to support the belief in reincarnation. Then an evangelical response in light of Scripture follows that disproves their assertions. The order of analyzing reincarnationists' arguments begins by examining selected passages in the Old Testament before turning to the New Testament.

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<sup>5</sup>American Religion Data Archive (ARDA), "Reincarn from Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations, 1991 - Core Component," pp. 1-2 [survey on-line]; available from <http://www.thearda.com/cgi-bin/univariate.exe>; Internet; accessed 12 February 2005.

## REINCARNATION IN LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

Before examining Bible passages that some reincarnation proponents use to show that the Bible supports the doctrine of rebirth, it is important to examine the meaning of reincarnation, the human soul, and karma. Defining these terms clears the way to investigate the theory of reincarnation in light of God's Word.

### **Reincarnation, the Human Soul, and Karma**

The word *reincarnation* is made up of three Latin words: *re*, which means *again*; *in*, which means *in*; and *caro*, which means *flesh*.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the word literally means *to come again in the flesh*.<sup>7</sup> Reincarnation is also known as metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, reincarnation refers to the continual cycle of death and rebirth whereby the individual human soul inhabits a new body after death. This cycle of death and rebirth continues until the soul overcomes all earthly entanglements and selfish desires and then merges back to its divine source. Although differing views exist among reincarnationists regarding man's final destiny, they generally agree that the divine source refers to the universal consciousness of all things as an impersonal oneness of ultimate reality or an

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<sup>6</sup>Gesiler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), p. 1001.

impersonal energy.<sup>9</sup> However, most reincarnationists claiming to be Christian (known as *Christian* reincarnationists) point to the God of the Bible as the divine source.<sup>10</sup>

Also, most reincarnationists believe that the goal of reincarnation aims at breaking the wheel of rebirth by achieving a state of purity in order to merge into the divine source. However, the *Christian* reincarnationist sees the goal of reincarnation as further opportunities for developing spiritual gifts and talents in multiple lives in order to better serve the church and others. *Christian* reincarnationist, William de Arteaga, comments on the goal of reincarnation by stating that “the aim of reincarnation would not be an escape from the earth, but rather the continued service to the body of Christ at a higher level of effectiveness.”<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the human soul, most reincarnationists believe in a divine, immaterial, and immortal soul that exists before uniting to a body in this life, bearing witness to the soul’s independent existence from the temporal body. General agreement exists among reincarnationists that the individual human soul fails to retain conscious memory from previous lives but instead keeps its personality and aptitudes.<sup>12</sup> *Christian* reincarnationist Quincy Howe makes this point by declaring that “although the particulars of the past are

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<sup>9</sup>Dean Halverson, ed., *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), pp. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup>William L. de Arteaga, *Past Life Visions: A Christian Exploration* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1983), p. 207.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Quincy Howe Jr., *Reincarnation for the Christian* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 46.

forgotten, special inclinations and aptitudes belong to our *samskaras*—traces from past states of being that persist long after their cause is forgotten.”<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that biblical Christianity also considers the soul immortal and immaterial as does reincarnationism. On the other hand, biblical Christianity rejects the concept of the preexistence of the soul and instead teaches that God creates the soul for each person at the time of conception in the mother’s womb (known as creationism). An alternative view within Christendom teaches that the father and mother bring into being the soul as well as the body at the time of conception (known as traducianism). Advocates of creationism point to such passages as Psalm 127:3; 139:13; Isaiah 42:5; Zechariah 12:1; and Hebrews 12:9 to support their view, whereas proponents of traducianism look to such passages as Genesis 1:24, 27; 5:3; Exodus 20:5; and Hebrews 7:10 to bolster their position.<sup>14</sup> In any case, both of these positions are acceptable within orthodox Christianity as opposed to reincarnationism.

The Eastern or more traditional version of reincarnation, which originated in northern India (1000-800 B.C.), taught that the human soul could enter into an animal, a plant, or a human body.<sup>15</sup> However, the Western version, which has modified the Eastern form as well as adapted aspects of Plato’s view of reincarnation originating in the fourth century B.C., teaches that the human soul after death passes on to another human body but

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 484-486.

<sup>15</sup>Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 1001.

never to an animal or a plant.<sup>16</sup> Martin defines reincarnation by stating: “Reincarnation refers to the cyclical evolution of a person’s soul as it repeatedly passes from one body to another at death. This process continues until the soul reaches a state of perfection.”<sup>17</sup>

Relevant to this subject of reincarnation is the term karma, which literally means *to do or act*.<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, karma refers to the principle of sowing and reaping, namely, the consequences of one’s actions in the present life carry over into the next life.

Accordingly, if a person builds up good karma by pursuing positive activities in the present life, then he will come back in a more advantageous state in the next life. On the other hand, if a person accumulates bad karma by engaging in negative activities in the present life, then he will come back in an undesirable state in the next life. Martin defines this impersonal law of karma by declaring: “Karma refers to the ‘debt’ accumulated against a soul as a result of good or bad actions committed during one’s life (or lives). If one accumulates good karma, he will supposedly be reincarnated in a desirable state. If one accumulates bad karma, he will be reincarnated in a less desirable state.”<sup>19</sup> Although variant views of reincarnationism exist,<sup>20</sup> the previous discussion identifies the most

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 133.

<sup>18</sup>Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), p. 172.

<sup>19</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 129.

<sup>20</sup>One can find an excellent study on the various forms of reincarnation beliefs of both Eastern and Western types in Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, pp. 27-36.

common characteristics inherent in most reincarnational theories pertinent to this present study.

According to most reincarnation advocates, every person must experience this karmic reincarnation process until one eventually achieves perfection or purity and then unites with its divine source. Now with this understanding in mind regarding reincarnation, the human soul, and karma, the discussion next turns to an examination of selected Old Testament passages which *Christian* reincarnationists use to offer as biblical evidence to support the concept of reincarnation.

### **Old Testament Passages**

In this section, consideration of three key Old Testament passages that some reincarnation proponents use to substantiate their views follows. It is important to note that these three Old Testament passages are not the only ones they rely on for support of their position but instead represent the most common ones.

The first passage under examination is Job 1:21 which states: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> Some reincarnationists understand the phrase referring to Job returning to his mother's womb as an indication of Job's future rebirth in another life.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>All Bible references come from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>22</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 87.

Another interpretation emerges when one considers the Old Testament understanding of the Hebrew word for *womb* (*rechem*),<sup>23</sup> which, in some contexts, figuratively relates to the dust of the ground from which man originally came (Genesis 3:19; Psalm 139:13-15; Ecclesiastes 5:15; 12:7). Scripture clearly teaches the following three principles about the human soul: first, God originally created the first human body from the dust of the earth; second, all human bodies after Adam and Eve come from their mother's womb; and finally, the state of the body after death returns to the dust of the ground from which the first human body came (Genesis 2:7; 3:19; Job 10:9; 34:15; Psalm 90:3; 103:14).<sup>24</sup> Martin makes clear this connection between the womb and the dust of the earth by declaring:

The Hebrews equated the womb with dust of the earth (Gen. 3:19). They reasoned that just as a man came from the dust of the earth in creation, so he would return to the dust in death. An illustration of this is seen clearly in Ps. 139:13-15 where "womb" and "depths of the earth" are equated. Therefore, the context of Job's statement had to do with the destiny of the body at death, its final decay and disintegration into the dust from which it had come, not with some future incarnation.<sup>25</sup>

The second passage under investigation is Proverbs 8:22-31 which reads:

The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established

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<sup>23</sup>*Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, in PC Study Bible: Discovery Reference Library CD-ROM, version 4.1a (Seattle, WA: BibleSoft, Inc., 2003).

<sup>24</sup>John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Job*, by Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), p. 720.

<sup>25</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 87.

the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.

Some reincarnationists see in this passage a reference to the preexistence of the soul long before becoming incarnated on earth. They claim that the first-person, singular pronoun (“I”) that occurs six times in this passage refers to the existence of the human soul<sup>26</sup> with God before the creation of time, that is, “before the beginning of the earth.”<sup>27</sup>

There are certain obvious objections to accepting this interpretation of this passage. In the first place, if one accepts this passage as supporting the belief in the preexistence of the soul (which this writer denies), such interpretation fails to validate the concept of reincarnation since belief in the preexistence of the soul does not equate to belief in reincarnation. In other words, a person can hold to the doctrine of the preexistence in the soul without embracing reincarnationism. For example, the early church father Origen certainly believed in the preexistence of the soul but most likely did not believe in reincarnation. Geddes MacGregor, a *Christian* reincarnationist, writes: “Origen certainly taught the pre-existence of the soul. . . . Yet though one might expect Origen to embrace reincarnation, we do not find, in the extant text, any clear statement in support of

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<sup>26</sup>Most *non-Christian* reincarnationists view the human soul as an emanation of God, whereas most *Christian* reincarnationists consider the human soul as a special creation of God as represented by the early church father Origen. See Geddes MacGregor, *Reincarnation in Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), pp. 36, 50-51.

<sup>27</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 87.

it. On the contrary, he speaks of ‘the false doctrine of the transmigration of souls into bodies.’”<sup>27</sup>

In the second place, the context of Proverbs 8 focuses on *wisdom* and not the *spirit* or *soul*. In fact, the word *wisdom* occurs four times in Proverbs 8, whereas the words *soul* and *spirit* occur nowhere in the chapter. What is more, the first verse in Proverbs 8 sets forth the theme of wisdom and understanding by posing two questions: “Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice?” Another indication affirming wisdom as the main theme stems from the divine promise that “those who seek me diligently find me” (Proverbs 8:17b). This same assurance to the seeker of wisdom appears in James 1:5-8.

The theme of wisdom appears in Proverbs 8:22-32, as it does throughout the chapter, since the word “me” in Proverbs 8:22 refers back to “I, wisdom” in Proverbs 8:12: “*I, wisdom*, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. . . . The Lord possessed *me* at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old” (emphasis added, Proverbs 8:12, 22). Proverbs 8:22-32 speaks of wisdom’s existence before creation as depicted in the following verse: “Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth” (Proverbs 8:23). The word “before” in relationship to wisdom existing before creation occurs five times in verses 22-23, 25-26. This passage also points to wisdom’s role in creation as described in the following passage: “When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman” (Proverbs 8:29-

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<sup>27</sup>MacGregor, *Reincarnation in Christianity*, p. 51.

30a). The word “when” in relationship to wisdom’s role in creation occurs seven times in verses 24, 27-29.<sup>28</sup>

In light of the above discussion, one can clearly see that Proverbs 8:22-31 refers to wisdom as the central theme rather than the human spirit or soul as reincarnationists maintain. It is important to notice that the author of this Proverb writes in a figuratively poetic style familiar to a Jewish audience in communicating wisdom.<sup>29</sup> He accomplishes this task by describing the impersonal concept of wisdom in personal terms, known as personification.<sup>30</sup> Martin correctly observes that “the writer of Proverbs is communicating (in Hebrew poetry) a personified Wisdom older than creation--something the Jewish mind clearly understood.”<sup>31</sup>

The final passage under examination is Jeremiah 1:4-5 which states: “Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’” Reincarnationists interpret this passage in light of the Hebrew word for *knew* (*yada*)<sup>32</sup> to

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<sup>28</sup>Walvoord and Zuck, eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 922.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), pp. 49-53.

<sup>31</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>32</sup>*Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon*, in PC Study Bible: Discovery Reference Library CD-ROM.

mean that God had an intellectual relationship with Jeremiah before God formed him in the womb, validating the preexistence of the soul.<sup>33</sup>

Several problems with this interpretation stand out. First, as previously mentioned, belief in the preexistence of the soul does not necessitate belief in reincarnation. This passage woefully lacks evidence to support the view that the soul repeatedly passes from one body to another after death. Second, Scripture teaches that a human being does not come into existence until the time of conception (Job 10:8-11; 139:13-16).<sup>34</sup>

Third, the word *knew* (*yada*) in this context refers to God's foreknowledge and calling of Jeremiah as a prophet before his birth. Indeed, the omniscient God knew from eternity-past his plan to make Jeremiah a prophet of the Jews at a certain time in history. What is more, the motif of God's foreknowledge appears elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments (Isaiah 46:9-10; Luke 1:15; Galatians 1:15; and Romans 4:17; 8:29).<sup>35</sup> One such example depicting God's foreknowledge comes from the writings of the Apostle Paul who links the foreknowledge of God to the doctrines of election and predestination in Romans 8. More specially, Paul writes that those whom God foreknew (knew beforehand), God predestinated (determined ahead of time) in order to form them into the likeness of Christ: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29a).

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<sup>33</sup>Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 88.

On the basis of these reflections, one can see that these three Old Testament passages which reincarnationists use to support reincarnationism actually disprove their position when considering the overall context of these passages in relationship to other passages. Moving forward, this paper will now examine selected New Testament passages that some reincarnation advocates use in support of reincarnationism.

### **New Testament Passages**

This section examines four New Testament passages most commonly used by reincarnation proponents as evidence for reincarnation. Although one could include additional passages that reincarnationists use to argue their case, the four New Testament passages discussed in this section deserve special attention since they represent passages most reincarnationists frequently use.

First, an examination of passages in Matthew follows. In Matthew 17:10-13, Jesus answers the disciples' question about the coming of Elijah by acknowledging that Elijah "has already come." Then in Matthew 11:14, Jesus clearly identifies John the Baptist with Elijah by declaring: "And if you are willing to accept it, he [John the Baptist] is Elijah who is to come." Reincarnationists interpret Matthew 11:14 to mean that Jesus clearly recognizes John the Baptist as the reincarnation of Elijah "who is to come" in fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 that predicts the coming again of Elijah.

However, another Scripture found in Luke 1:17 offers a different twist to this subject than found in Matthew 11:14. This Lucan passage describes the appearance of the angel of the Lord before Zechariah in the temple in order to inform him that he would have

a son named John who would possess the “spirit and power of Elijah.” Valuable to note in Matthew 11:14, Jesus clearly identifies John the Baptist as Elijah; but, in Luke 1:17, Jesus describes John the Baptist as one having “the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). De Arteaga reconciles Matthew 11:14 and Luke 1:17 to support a reincarnationist position by asserting that John the Baptist is both the reincarnated Elijah (Matthew 11:14) and the possessor of Elijah’s spirit and power (Luke 1:17) by stating that “The Lucan scripture could mean ‘besides John the Baptist being Elijah, he has reappeared with his spirit and power.’”<sup>36</sup>

Another interesting case involves the apparent contradiction of statements made by Jesus and John the Baptist. In Matthew 11:14, Jesus clearly identifies John as Elijah “who is to come,” whereas John denies being Elijah in John 1:21. De Arteaga handles this seeming contradiction by postulating that even though John denies being Elijah (John 1:21), such denial did not necessarily mean he was not that prophet. On the contrary, de Arteaga maintains that John only lacked the knowledge that he was the reincarnation of Elijah. De Arteaga argues his case by stating:

John had no PLV [past living visions] experiences of Elijah, and did not have a conscious understanding of his relationship with the ancient prophet. This is very significant. For one thing, it implies that because John followed the will of God he had no need for a PLV. Whatever skills, prayer power, tendencies, and talents this EJR [Elijah-John the Baptist relationship] created were channeled to John through his spirit, to his subconscious and conscious mind. John the Baptist was so spiritually attuned to God’s will for his life that knowledge of his relationship with Elijah was unnecessary. In fact such knowledge might have been a burden on his humility and ultimately to his ability to accomplish his task.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>de Arteaga, *Past Life Visions*, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

These previous arguments used to show that John the Baptist was a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah lack scriptural support for the following reasons. First, Elijah never died since God took him to heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-18). According to standard reincarnationism, one must die before passing on to a new body. Since Elijah never died, he obviously could not appear later as the reincarnated John the Baptist. Second, Geisler and Amano argue that the Jewish historian Josephus records that during the life time of Jesus many Jews believed that God was keeping Elijah in heaven until it was time for him to return to earth and accomplish God's mission. In other words, some Jews anticipated the reappearance of Elijah himself.<sup>38</sup> Third, the Apostle Matthew records, in Matthew 17:1-13, the scene where Elijah and Moses appear before Jesus and three other disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is interesting to note that John the Baptist was dead by this time (Matthew 14:1-12). If John was the reincarnation of Elijah, then John should have appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration instead of Elijah according to standard reincarnationism.<sup>39</sup>

What is more, de Arteaga's attempt to reconcile Matthew 11:14 and Luke 1:17 lacks biblical evidence. Indeed, Jesus states in one place that John is Elijah "who is to come" (Matthew 11:14), and yet in another place he declares that John has come in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). One can clarify this apparent conflict when one understands that John fulfilled both functionally and prophetically the ministry of Elijah

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<sup>38</sup>Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 139.

<sup>39</sup>Patrick Zukeran, "The Mystery of Reincarnation," p. 4 [article on-line]; available from <http://www.probe.org/docs/reincarn.html>; Internet; accessed 25 February 2005.

instead of actually becoming the reincarnation of Elijah. Support for this interpretation appears undeniably in the account of Elijah and Elisha as described in 2 Kings 2:1-12. In this passage, Elisha inherits a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings 2:9-18) without Elijah becoming reincarnated into Elisha since they both lived at the same time. Further, Elijah never died but was transported to heaven. What is more, the "sons of the prophets" commented to Elisha after he had separated the Jordan waters and traveled across to Jericho that "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha." Clearly, then, in the same manner that Elisha inherited the spirit of Elijah to carry on a common ministry to Elijah's, John the Baptist inherited the spirit and power of Elijah to fulfill a similar function as Elijah had served.<sup>40</sup>

This idea that John fulfilled the function of Elijah's ministry rather than Elijah's person finds support from Geisler and Amano who explain that the Hebrews gave more attention to function, whereas the Greeks placed more emphasis on being or nature as argued by Oscar Cullman in his book *The Christology of the New Testament*.<sup>41</sup> According to the Hebrew perspective, one could interpret Jesus' statement that John the Baptist is Elijah "who is to come" as an identification that John inherited Elijah's ministerial function rather than his reincarnated being. Geisler and Amano summarize this view when they write:

The Hebrews thought in terms of function, while the Greeks thought more in terms of nature. So, from a Greek's perspective, the affirmation—"John the Baptist *was* Elijah"—would infer that they were the same *being*, whereas the Hebrew mindset could

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<sup>40</sup>Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

very well have been thinking of an equivalency in function (cf. Matt. 17:10-13; Mark 9:11-13).<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the following two statements concerning Jesus' affirmation that John was Elijah (Matthew 11:14) and John's denial that he was Elijah (John 1:21) only appear contradictory on the surface. The proper interpretation comes to light when one understands that Jesus' affirmation about John being Elijah refers to John's fulfilling the ministerial function of Elijah as noted previously. Regarding John's denial that he was Elijah, John meant that he was not the actual person of Elijah without denying having the "spirit and power of Elijah." As mentioned earlier, many Jews expected the return of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, which John denied that he was.<sup>43</sup>

Howe presents an interesting argument on so-called recent biblical scholarship and the writings of Josephus in an attempt to support reincarnationism. He contends that Jesus and John the Baptist accepted reincarnation ideas resulting from the influence of the Essenes. To prove his point, Howe first argues that sufficient evidence exists showing that the Essenes gradually incorporated into their own traditional Jewish teachings various non-Jewish beliefs and practices resembling reincarnational teachings. For example, Howe finds support in the Jewish historian Josephus' writings that the Essenes believed in the preexistence and divinity of the soul, both key components of reincarnationism.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>44</sup>Howe, *Reincarnation for the Christian*, pp. 88-89.

Next, he argues that the Essenes influenced John the Baptist because certain aspects of his life and teaching resembled that of the Essenes. Howe provides three reasons to show the link between John the Baptist and the Essenes:

According to Luke 1:80 . . . John passed the period of his life prior to his ministry out in the desert. He preached a very harsh gospel of penitence, chastising the crowds that came to him. . . . John was also most insistent about the cleansing waters of baptism, a point of similarity with the Essenes that has become even more evident since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Lastly, John's role as the forerunner of a savior who shall usher in a new age is very reminiscent of the Essene messiah, who was also preceded by a forerunner.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, Howe makes the connection between Jesus and the Essenes through Jesus' relationship with the *Essene* John the Baptist. That is, during the early stages of Jesus' ministry, he came under the influence of John the Baptist whose teachings included reincarnational elements. One such example where John influences Jesus' ministry occurs at the time when John baptizes Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17), showing a connection between the two ministries. To sum up, Howe contends that Jesus came to accept reincarnation early in his ministry because of his early contact with John the Baptist who originally learned it from the Essenes.<sup>46</sup>

Certain objections are obvious regarding Howe's arguments contending that Jesus accepted reincarnation as a result of his relationship with the *Essene* John the Baptist for the following reasons: First, if John the Baptist accepted much of Essene beliefs and practices, as Howe postulates, then why did John fail to follow the Essene custom of self-administered baptism instead of baptism performed on the baptismal candidate by another

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., pp. 90-91.

person?<sup>47</sup> Second, if Jesus learned the alleged belief of reincarnation from John the Baptist as a result of his so-called link with the Essenes, then why did Jesus fail to accept other Essene beliefs and practices, such as asceticism and legalism through John's influence?<sup>48</sup> Equally important, Howe admits to the lack of conclusive evidence supporting the Essenes belief in reincarnation by declaring: "Whether or not they specifically believed in reincarnation cannot be claimed as a certainty. . . . Whether or not they believed specially in cycles of rebirth cannot be proven."<sup>49</sup> Also, Howe acknowledges that discrepancies exist between the writings of Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls concerning Essenes beliefs and practices by stating: "The Scrolls envision a brief and tenuous life for the soul, thus raising the question whether the Essenes either had various beliefs about the soul or whether in fact the people of Qumran described in the Scrolls may be wholly different from the Essenes of Josephus."<sup>50</sup>

Finally, Scripture nowhere records that Jesus, John the Baptist, or the apostles specifically and openly taught anything about reincarnation. If the Bible supposedly presents evidence for reincarnation, as *Christian* reincarnationists maintain, then why did Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostles fail to explicitly teach about reincarnation? Given the fact that the New Testament presents considerable, explicit material on such weighty doctrines as salvation and sanctification, then why does the New Testament omit explicit

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<sup>47</sup>Geisler and Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 141.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>Howe, *Reincarnation for the Christian*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.

statements on reincarnation, which closely relates to the doctrines of salvation and sanctification? Howe certainly makes a big leap in logic to argue that Jesus accepted reincarnationism resulting from his early contact with John the Baptist without offering significant, verifiable evidence proving that not only did the Essenes believe in reincarnationism but also passed on this knowledge to John the Baptist.

The second passage under investigation is John 3:3 which states: “Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” Reincarnation proponents claim that Jesus’ statement about being born again refers to physical rebirth as standard teaching in reincarnationism.<sup>51</sup>

However, a different interpretation emerges as one takes into account the context of John 3:1-18. In this passage, the Apostle John records Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night under the cover of darkness and acknowledging that Jesus is “a teacher come from God” (John 3:2). Jesus responds by declaring that “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Uncertain about the meaning of the phrase “born again,” Nicodemus questions how one can experience a second physical birth to enter the kingdom of God: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Jesus corrects Nicodemus’ misunderstanding by explaining that the meaning of the phrase “born again” affirms that a person must be born twice: first, physical (represented by water) and second, spiritual (represented by the Spirit) to enter the kingdom of God: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Jesus differentiates between

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<sup>51</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 89.

the two births in the next verse by explaining the necessity of two distinct births: one physical and the other spiritual: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Hence, when Jesus spoke of being “born again,” he was not referring to a second physical birth as reincarnationists claim but rather a spiritual birth.

The third passage under discussion is John 9:1-3 which states: “As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

Reincarnation advocates claim that the reason this man was born blind stems from the fact that he had sinned in a previous life, denoting the effects of the law of karma. Howe argues that the question posed by the disciples to Jesus reveals that they presumed that this blind man committed some sin that led to his blindness. According to Howe, the fact that the blind man was born blind shows that he must have committed the sin in a previous life, consistent with the doctrines of reincarnation and karma. Also, Howe points out that Jesus did not rebuke his disciples for asking a question that presupposes the belief in reincarnation.<sup>52</sup> Howe summarizes his argument by declaring:

Given the fact that the man has been blind from birth, we are confronted with a provocative question. When could he have made such transgressions as to make him blind at birth? The only conceivable answer is in some prenatal state. The question as posed by the disciples explicitly presupposes prenatal existence. It will also be noted

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<sup>52</sup>Howe, *Reincarnation for the Christian*, p. 93.

that Christ says nothing to dispel or correct the presupposition. Here is incontrovertible support for a doctrine of human preexistence.<sup>53</sup>

Howe's argument claiming that the man's blindness resulted because of some sin committed in a previous existence fails to take into consideration traditional Jewish belief that assigned birth defects to either sin committed in the womb or sin passed on by the parents.<sup>54</sup> Zukeran's words are instructive at this point. He states:

Jewish theology attributed birth defects to two factors. Prenatal sin committed by the baby after conception, but before birth, or sin committed by the parents. Genesis 25:22, the struggle of Jacob and Esau in Rachel's womb, was interpreted as a conflict that resulted from prenatal sin. Exodus 20:5 states that the parents' sin often had repercussions on their offspring. However, in the passage in John 9:1-3, Jesus refutes any connection between the man's defects and any previous sins, thus putting an end to any concept of karma.<sup>55</sup>

This is not to say that this ancient Jewish belief in prenatal sin concurs with correct biblical interpretation but rather to illustrate the motivating reason behind the question posed by the disciples to Jesus based on their belief in prenatal or parental sin and not on reincarnation.

The final New Testament passage under examination is Hebrews 7:3 which states: "He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he [Melchizedek] continues a priest forever."

Reincarnation proponents affirm that this passage bears witness to the fact that Melchizedek existed previously as the embodiment of Jesus. More specifically, they view

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Zukeran, "The Mystery of Reincarnation," p. 4.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

the phrase “resembling the Son of God” as an indication that Jesus was Melchizedek in a previous life.<sup>56</sup>

In response, this passage does not state that Melchizedek was Jesus but that he resembled Jesus; that is, he was a type or “a precursor to the future coming of the Messiah who would also be a priest.”<sup>57</sup> In fact, BAGD defines the Greek word (*aphomoioo*) that underlines the English word “resembling” found in Hebrews 7:3 as “make like or similar . . . become like”<sup>58</sup> and not make exactly the same. What is more, Hebrews 7:17 shows that Jesus is a high priest “after the order” or according to the likeness of Melchizedek rather than he was Melchizedek in a previous existence.<sup>59</sup> The context of Hebrews 7 depicts a comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek regarding their priesthoods rather than their personhoods.<sup>60</sup> The fact that the word *priest* occurs nine times throughout the chapter bears witness to the central theme of priesthood.

Based on the previous discussion, it is clear that none of the four New Testament passages discussed in this section substantiate the reincarnation view. Instead, after

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<sup>56</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 90.

<sup>57</sup>Geisler and Anamo, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 152.

<sup>58</sup>Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p 127.

<sup>59</sup>Martin, *The New Age Cult*, p. 90.

<sup>60</sup>Geisler and Anamo, *The Reincarnation Sensation*, p. 153.

considering the overall context of these passages and their relationship to other passages, the biblical evidence clearly offers no support for the reincarnation interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

In view of all the above, it is clear that none of the most commonly used passages by *Christian* reincarnationists examined in this paper offer any support within the realm of credibility for the concept of reincarnation or the law of karma. Instead, the Bible expresses opposition to the concept of reincarnation and the law of karma by teaching that a person dies once and then faces judgment: “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). As mortal creatures, the Psalmist writes poetically on the impossibility of man returning after death: “He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and *comes not again*” (emphasis added, Psalm 78:39).

The only way the reincarnationist can find scriptural support for the concept of reincarnationism stems from reading into the text of Scripture something that does not exist (*eisogesis*) instead of drawing out the meaning of the text of Scripture that is already there (*exegesis*).<sup>61</sup> The former approach rests on subjectivism, whereas the latter method relies on objectivism. *Christian* reincarnationists would do well to heed Peter’s warning:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16).

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<sup>61</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, p. 39.

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