

The Lost Christian Doctrine of Reincarnation

by Marvin Vining

In April 2008, Inner Traditions, Bear & Company published a book I was fourteen years in the making called *Jesus the Wicked Priest: How Christianity Was Born of an Essene Schism*. As the title suggests, I argue Jesus was raised an Essene¹ but broke from them at the outset of his ministry due to sharp theological differences.

This is my first chance to comment on *JTWP* since its release. It is fitting that my first comments on *JTWP* appears in an Australian magazine, for Australian scholar Barbara Thiering first proposed the idea that the Dead Sea Scrolls refer to Jesus as a “Wicked Priest who was called by the name of Truth when he first arose” (1QpHab VIII, 8-9).² Many of our conclusions differ, but I think scholars may find my methodology more persuasive than Thiering’s and hopefully that will help bring about

¹ The Essenes were a first-century Jewish sect who most scholars believe wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls found in 1947 near a small Judean village known as Qumran.

² All Dead Sea Scrolls quotes in this commentary are from *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* by Geza Vermes. Copyright © 2004 by Geza Vermes. All Bible quotes are from the Revised Standard Version. Used by permission.

the major paradigm shift in Dead Sea Scrolls and historical Jesus studies she has long advocated. Namely, *JTWP* substantiates Thiering's basic Jesus as Wicked Priest theory by internal criticism of the work of Otto Betz, one of Thiering's harshest critics. Also, my reading of the Gospel narratives is generally more literal than Thiering's, therefore conservative textual critics shouldn't have as big a problem with the way I correlate the Gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Most of the *New Dawn* readers, however, are probably unaware of the academic politics of Dead Sea Scrolls research and will be more interested in my exploration of Essene/early Christian doctrine of reincarnation. Though Jesus broke from the Essenes, some of their doctrines are still recognizable in his teachings, and reincarnation is one of those doctrines.

Chapter 4 of *JTWP*, "The Lost Christian Doctrine of Reincarnation," actually began as a personal letter written to Buddhist scholar David Kalupahana. I met Kalupahana at an international Buddhist conference at the University of Hawaii, where we discussed reincarnation similarities and dissimilarities between our two faiths over his wife's fine cooking. Kalupahana said he'd never encountered a serious student of Christian reincarnation before and encouraged me to publish my research. The year was 1993. The reason it took me so long to publish is because I first had to establish that Jesus began with the Essenes, and that was not an easy task.

Some of the early reviews of *JTWP* have suggested that my version of the Jesus as Wicked Priest theory might be more credible had I not based so much of my work on reincarnation. I disagree. Reincarnation was necessary to see the bigger picture. In fact, my exegesis of reincarnation passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls strengthens considerably

the mainstream hypothesis that the Essenes wrote the scrolls. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus records the Essenes held beliefs similar to the Platonists (*War* 2.154–158) and Pythagoreans (*Ant* 15.371), and reincarnation is central to those beliefs. Before *JTWP*, most advocates of the Essene hypothesis have argued that Josephus was in error on this point.

Josephus had it right all along. The irony of orthodox Christianity's rejection of reincarnation at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 CE, is that the early church fathers believed the doctrine was wrongly imported from the Greeks and had no historical foundation in Judaism. But most philosophers and historians believe Pythagoras himself first introduced reincarnation to the Greeks. And according to the second-century church father Origen, "It was from the Jewish people that Pythagoras derived the philosophy which he introduced among the Greeks" (*Against Celsus* 1.15). My research suggests that Pythagoras learned reincarnation from the Essenes in fifth-century BCE Persia, along with many other characteristic Essene doctrines, like asceticism, vegetarianism and misogyny. Many Jews were exiled in Persia during this time, and this is when the Essenes were emerging as a recognizable sect.

Many readers may not realize that reincarnation is still a widespread Jewish belief. Hasidic Jews today believe in reincarnation (*gilgul*) and maintain that references to it are found in the Bible from Genesis onward. The serpent in the Garden of Eden story, for example, is understood as a graphic symbol of reincarnation: the serpent sheds its skin, which is symbolic of the death-and-rebirth cycle; had Adam and Eve not sinned, they would not have fallen into the cycle of death and rebirth like their tempter. Contrary to popular belief, reincarnation doesn't conflict with the orthodox resurrection

of the dead. Hasidic Jews today generally believe that reincarnation occurs until the resurrection takes place at the End of Days, and according to my research the early Christians held the same belief. Say goodbye to that silly doctrine of purgatory. Upon death one goes immediately to heaven or hell (cf. Lk 16:22–23; 23:43; Acts 7:59).

Mainstream Jewish and Christian scholars contend that reincarnation is the product of syncretism, that it wasn't explicitly mentioned in any Jewish literature until medieval times, when the doctrine was supposedly borrowed from the Greeks and began to appear in the Kabbalah. At one time, most scholars believed astrological references weren't found in Jewish literature prior to medieval times, either. Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls showed different: numerous astrological references were found in the scrolls that date back two thousand years or more. Likewise, I now show that the scrolls refer to reincarnation.

To the trained eye, the Dead Sea Scrolls are overflowing with references to reincarnation. In 1QS, 1QH, 1QM, and the Enoch literature, a cosmological battle is described wherein the angels and all humanity are divided into the forces of Light and Darkness, with the angels commanding the way. The Essenes believed that this cosmological battle was not a distant event; it was playing out around them, and the angels were walking among them in human form. Similar references are found in the New Testament, though mainstream Christians have lacked the context to understand them until now: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb 13:2).

In Jewish texts known as Pseudepigrapha, many of which were found at Qumran, we find that biblical patriarchs are explicitly identified as angels. *Pseudepigrapha*

is a scholarly term taken from the Greek words *pseudos*, “false,” and *epigrapha*, “inscriptions.” Texts are classified as Pseudepigrapha if the claimed authors could not possibly have written them. The Testament of Abraham, for example, dates to the first or second century CE, but we know that the patriarch Abraham died nearly two thousand years earlier. Personally, I believe the authorship of Pseudepigrapha should be rethought, given that many of these texts were found at Qumran and the Essenes believed in reincarnation. The authors likely believed themselves the reincarnations of the ascribed patriarchs.

Some scholars will counter that the return of ancient patriarchs and angels mentioned in the scrolls shouldn’t be read literally, that these figures were only intended to serve the “office” of the individual named. A few prooftexts will clear up this argument. The clearest and most unmistakable references to reincarnation in the Dead Sea Scrolls are found in fragments known as the Physiognomic Horoscopes (4Q186):

Fragment 1

II . . . and his thighs are long and lean, and his toes are thin and long. He is of the second Column. His spirit consists of six³ in the House of Light and three in the Pit of Darkness. And this is his birthday in which he is to be born in the foot of the Bull. He will be meek. And his animal is the bull.

³ Translator Géza Vermes inserted the word “parts” at this point in the texts in an attempt to make sense of these passages: “His spirit consists of six (parts) in the House of Light.” I think it is more responsible scholarship to pull the interpretive comment altogether and let the reader draw his or her own conclusions based on the surrounding context.

III . . . and his head . . . [and his cheeks are] fat. His teeth are of uneven length. His fingers are thick, and his thighs are thick and very hairy, each one. His toes are thick and short. His spirit consists of eight in the House of Darkness and one from the House of Light . . .

Fragment 2

I . . . order. His eyes are black and glowing. His beard is . . . and it is . . . His voice is gentle. His teeth are fine and well aligned. He is neither tall, nor short. And he . . . And his fingers are thin and long. And his thighs are smooth. And the soles of his feet . . . [And his toes] are well aligned. His spirit consists of eight [in the House of Light, of] the second Column, and one [in the House of Darkness. And this is] his birthday on which he is to be born: . . . And his animal is . . .

Notice that the sun sign is given for each man's birth. For example, "his animal is the bull" meant this man would be born under the sign of Taurus. This is why scrolls scholars rightly classified these texts as astrological. But look more closely: notice that the physical characteristics of each man correspond to his spirit's migration history. Characteristics that reflect wickedness (like shortness, fatness, and teeth of uneven length) correspond to the number of times his spirit was imprisoned in the House of Darkness. Characteristics that reflect virtue (like glowing black eyes and well-aligned teeth) correspond to the number of times his spirit was perfected in the House of Light. These texts refer to reincarnation beyond a reasonable doubt. The idea that one's physical characteristics reflect prenatal sin is a very common reincarnation belief, found

the world over. Jesus even encountered this belief among his disciples when they asked him whether a man was born blind because of his prenatal sin (Jn 9:2).

Some scholars may object that the Physiognomic Horoscopes mention nothing of migration of the soul. The Hebrew word is *ru'ach*, "spirit"; not *nephish*, "soul." True enough. This is exactly why the Essene/early Christian belief in reincarnation has been so hard to identify. In *JTWP* I coin the word *metempneumosis* to describe the belief in migration of the spirit (Hebrew *ru'ach* = Greek *pneuma*, cf. Ec 12:6–7; Wis 8:19–20; Lk 1:17; Jn 3:8). The ancient Greeks taught that the soul migrated from life to life, but the spirit dissipated upon death. In ancient Hebrew thought it was exactly the opposite. The spirit migrates, not the soul.

Thus, when Luke's Gospel reported that John the Baptist would go before Christ in the "spirit and power of Elijah" (1:17a), this is all the information we need to ascertain that John was Elijah reincarnated, just as Jesus so identified him (Mt 11:14; 17:1–13). To ask whether John bore the soul of Elijah is not a properly formed question in biblical anthropology. The spirit of Elijah *is* Elijah; it is all of him that remains.

Christian advocates of reincarnation have long argued that Jesus identified John the Baptist as Elijah incarnate. And well we should, for here is where official Christian doctrine and apologetics directly conflict. At Jewish Passover tables down to this day, an empty place is set for the "expected guest," Elijah. Most Jewish families still pay homage to Malachi's prophecy that the literal, bodily return of Elijah is expected before the Messiah can come (Mal 4:5). Jesus's disciples knew this too, which is why they asked of him, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must first come?" (Mk 9:11). Jesus answered that the expected guest had already come in the person of John the Baptist: "For all the

prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt 11:13–15). Little do most Christians realize the belief in reincarnation is essential for believing Jesus the Messiah. If John the Baptist were not the incarnation of Elijah, Malachi's prophecy has yet to be fulfilled.

In *JTWP* I explore the reincarnation of another important messianic forerunner known to the Essenes as the "Teacher of Righteousness." The Righteous Teacher was the leader of the Essenes and the enemy of Jesus/the Wicked Priest. My candidate for the Righteous Teacher is former high priest Simeon (Lk 2:25–35). Simeon did not die after Jesus's circumcision as commonly supposed; "let thy servant depart in peace" (Lk 2:29) means he went into exile. According to the extracanonical Gospel of Nicodemus, Simeon died shortly before Jesus's trial (Nic 12:16). My arguments in favor of Simeon as the Righteous Teacher are complex, based inextricably on theology and best deferred to the book for now. But I can summarize the high points.

The Essene belief in reincarnation answers some troublesome anomalies that have long vexed proponents of the Jesus as Wicked Priest theory. Most importantly, the Damascus Document reports the covenanters of Qumran originated "390 years" after the fall of Jerusalem which historians date in the year 586 BCE (CD 1.5-6). It also reports that "twenty years" transpired before "the Righteous Teacher" appeared (CD 1.9-11). Thus the Damascus Document apparently places the Righteous Teacher at least 150 years before Jesus was born, which seems to rule out the Jesus as Wicked Priest theory. But what if the Righteous Teacher was an office held by a series of persons, as many scholars have suggested? What if the Righteous Teacher was believed to be the same

person through a series of reincarnations, just as followers of the Dalai Lama believe of their leader?

So what else has reincarnation to do with identifying the Teacher of Righteousness? As I said it's complex: it has to do with the fact that the Essenes awaited the same messianic figures at the turn of the era later recognized by the early Christians. However the Essenes believed the Davidic Messiah would defer all scriptural authority to the Teacher of Righteousness, so in effect the Teacher would be running the show. Had the Teacher not tried to assert this authority over Jesus, and had Jesus maintained continuity with the Essenes, the Teacher would've been remembered as a second forerunner to Jesus in addition to John the Baptist/Elijah. Instead, Jesus and the early Christians cut all ties with the Teacher and his prophetic role was forgotten. The church father Origen noted in his commentary on the Gospel of John that when the Pharisees asked John the Baptist if he was the Christ, Elijah or "the prophet" (Jn 1:25), they were inquiring about three separate figures. Origen, with his characteristic sharp eye for scripture, noted a key reference to the anonymous prophet in the Book of Deuteronomy, a reference found in Moses's final address to Israel: "[And the Lord said to me], I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak all that I command him. And whosoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require a reckoning of him" (Dt 18:18-19). This same passage is quoted in the Messianic Anthology from Cave 4 at Qumran as the first of three prooftexts that apply to the Righteous Teacher. In my view, this passage is an esoteric reference to Moses incarnate. This explains why the Essenes held their Teacher in such awe: the Teacher was believed

to be a new and better Moses—*literally* a new and better Moses.

This logical thread is how I'm able to identify former high priest Simeon as the Righteous Teacher. A lot of scholars won't like the way I get there. *JTWP* will probably be best understood as a "mixed" work of faith and science. Parts of the book are relatively straightforward secular scholarship, yet there are parts where I start with traditional Christian faith claims and use those claims as working hypotheses to make greater sense of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For instance, Christians believe Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew prophecies concerning the long awaited Davidic Messiah. In *JTWP*, I point out that Malachi prophesied there would be two forerunners to the Davidic Messiah: Elijah in verse 4:5 and the "messenger of the covenant" in verse 3:1, the latter of whom I believe was the Teacher of Righteousness. To my knowledge, there is little direct evidence that Malachi heavily influenced the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But if one accepts my Essenes/scribes identification, the New Testament records that the scribes were very much influenced by Malachi (Mk 9:1; cf. Mal 4:5). My point is this: whether Jesus in fact fulfilled Malachi's prophecies is, for Christians, a matter of faith, but if Jesus and the Righteous Teacher were initially believed by the Dead Sea Scrolls authors to fulfill those same prophecies there is a valid scientific basis for studying them.

In closing, I strongly encourage other scholars to follow in my work. The recovery and development of the lost Christian doctrine of reincarnation is of enormous theological importance. An estimated three-fourths of the world's population believes in reincarnation and struggles with the issue of karma, but officially orthodox Christianity has nothing whatsoever to offer them. This is a mistake whose correction is long overdue. Instead of defining Christianity as incommensurable with

Buddhism, Hinduism and other reincarnation faiths (saying “we’re right and they’re wrong”), Christians can now join the dialogue. Moreover, when they’re ready to accept it, traditional evangelical Christians now have a stronger argument that Jesus is really the Christ, and not a lesser teacher who is only partially true and subject to error. If one is to take seriously universal truth claims made of Jesus in the Gospels, that he is “the true light that enlightens every man” (Jn 1:9), then whatever true teachings there are to be found in comparative religion must also be found in Jesus’s teachings. Imagine that: New Age Christians and evangelical Christians finally talking to one another! The idea of the Christ just became a whole lot bigger.