

The Biblical Reincarnation

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Introduction

Proponents of Biblical reincarnation quote from the Indian hermit Swami Paramahansa ¹ and the Austrian philosopher Rudolph Steiner ², both of them having interpreted a few of the biblical passages mainly pertaining to John the Baptist so as to aid to accommodate the idea of reincarnation in Christian thinking. Many oriental theologians view their ideas sympathetically. The late professor Ian Stevenson's classic book titled 'Reincarnation and Biology' in particular has rekindled an interest in Biblical reincarnation. ³ As these ideas are becoming very popular with the recent publication of a number of scientific studies on children remembering previous lives and through the proliferation of cybernetic journalism, even Christian theologians cannot shy away from the reincarnationistic view of John the Baptist. Reincarnation of advanced spiritual personalities with a special purpose may be designated as higher reincarnation or controlled reincarnation. In Hindu philosophy, the distinction between higher reincarnation and High Incarnation (Avatar) has been vague.

High Incarnation is God's search for human beings. Higher reincarnations are meant to assist the human search for the Sacred. Generic reincarnation may be considered as a repeated human search for God. Higher reincarnation does not necessarily substantiate generic reincarnation but probably indicates how difficult it is for the latter to happen. The scientific evidences for generic reincarnation have also brought the concept of higher reincarnation and the Divine Incarnation into the realm of biologist's imagination. For the technically minded and adherents of bottom up approach seeking out for a 'grain of faith', a belief in generic reincarnation might serve as a stepping stone to take in the higher reincarnations and the Divine Incarnation.

The present author holds the view that all the biblical passages often cited as supporting the idea of reincarnation are open to other interpretations and they are not necessarily allusions to reincarnation, and one should not be forcing preconceived views of reincarnation on scripture. Scientific search into previous life memories prompts the eastern philosophers to re-evaluate the age old doctrines of rebirth. Those who are opposed to Biblical reincarnation argue that reincarnationistic views are a too simplistic reading of the New Testament which did not take account of the layers in its origination – that is, which made no attempt at distinguishing between what may have been the original words of Jesus, what were the interpretative words of the various evangelist's, and what were the concerns of the communities from which the evangelists came. Now there are enough scientific evidences to suspend the disbelief in reincarnation and the spiritistic influences on human behaviour. Unfortunately, the newer evidences for spirit attachment theories have made the idea of reincarnation more complex for interpretation even though both the conditions can co-exist. ^{4,5,6,7} In the light of the recent scientific developments, both the spiritistic and reincarnationistic views of the birth and life of John the

Baptist remain appealing. According to the former view, Elijah acted as a 'spirit guide' for John and according to the latter view, he is Elijah reincarnated. The traditional theological view is that John functioned like Prophet Elijah and had Elijah-like personality. A belief in some form of reincarnation was prevalent among the Jews of Christ's days. The following statement in the Bible favours such a view. *'Now when Jesus came into the parts of Casarea, Phillipi, he asked his disciples, saying, who do men say that the son of man is? And they said, some say, John the Baptist, some say Elijah: and others, Jeremiah, or one of prophets'*. (Matthew 16:13) It is even possible that the Jews believed only in 'higher reincarnation' and not necessarily in generic reincarnation.

The scientific concept of reincarnation differs from the traditional views in the sense that it does not include transmigration to and from the animal kingdom and the doctrine of retributive karma. Investigators even use the term 'accidental reincarnation' to free the idea from the doctrinal traps. Research into previous life memories runs the risk of stripping off the Hindu philosophy of its moral code revolving around the law of karma. In fact the idea of reincarnation becomes a malicious idea once it is deprived of its philosophical flavour. For example, a belief in reincarnation could even allow for abortion and euthanasia, because some people would think that if souls reincarnate, it is perfectly right to discard an 'imperfect' incarnation, awaiting the next and hopefully 'more perfect one', or to hurry the death process, hoping for a better quality of life the next time around.⁸ Such a situation warrants the search of the possibility of binding this idea with some form of apposite moral and ethical ideology.

Prophet Elijah and John the Baptist

Is John the Baptist the Reincarnation of Prophet Elijah? Jews held a belief that Elijah would come back to earth before the birth of the Saviour. In the gospel, there are two occasions when Christ appeared to be referring to John the Baptist as Elijah himself. When John was imprisoned, he sent his disciples to Jesus, hearing about the latter's preaching and miracles.

Art thou he that cometh or look we for another? Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist. Yet he that is but little in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, this is Elijah, which is to come

(Matthew 11:3-15)

All four gospels describe the transfiguration Jesus Christ had experienced on the mount Tabor in presence of Peter, John and James. Those disciples saw Christ transfigured before them, and his face 'did shine as the sun, and his garments became white as the light'. There appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with Christ. From the gospel, it may be understood that

transfiguration on the mountain occurred after the death of John the Baptist. The conversation between Christ and those disciples as they were coming down from the mountain apparently give a probable solution to the enigma of John the Baptist.

....And his disciples asked him, saying, why then say the Scribes that Elijah indeed cometh, and shall restore all things; but I say unto you that Elijah is come already, and they knew him not, but did unto him whatsoever they listed. Even so shall the son of man also suffer of them. Then understood the disciples that he spoke unto them of John the Baptist.

(Matthew 17:10-13)

These statements have created dispute among the theologians. But, for the reincarnationist, there is no confusion at all; these statements clearly reveal a higher reincarnation. That is to say, John the Baptist is the reincarnation of Prophet Elijah. Jesus Christ apparently recognised the Elijah personality in John? One may say that it was quite appropriate that a mighty prophet reincarnated to prepare the path of the Divine Incarnation.

In the days of Herod, king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharia, lived with his wife Elisabeth who was barren. One day while Zacharia was praying in the temple of Lord, an angel appeared to him and announced the birth of John the Baptist. The final words of the angels are again affirmative to the reincarnationistic view of the fore-runner.

...And many of the children of Israel shall be turned into the Lord, their God. And he shall go before his face in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children...

(Luke 1:17)

The angel says that John will go in the spirit and power of Elijah. For the reincarnationist it may simply mean that John is the reincarnation of Elijah. The official Christianity has different views about these biblical verses. The angel's announcement that John will go in the spirit and power of Elijah is figuratively explained by the same bible scholars. They say, the angel's words only mean that John will go in the mightily line of great prophets like Elijah and not directly stating that he will be Elijah redivivus and simply exhibit Elijah's spirit and power. If one cannot accept the idea of reincarnation and no body is bound to accept the idea of reincarnation at this stage of scientific research, the possible explanation for such a passage will be the same. It may be noted that the controversy about Elijah is very ancient and the idea of reincarnation can offer another solution. Justin Martyr speaks of a Jewish belief that Elijah would announce the Messiah. Matthew expresses the Christian doctrine that John is Elijah. But the non-reincarnationistic Bible interpreters argue that Matthew and other gospel writers do not necessarily mean that John is identical with the earlier prophet. They add to this argument that John simply exercises his functions and fulfils the prophecies regarding him. So the messenger of the covenant is only explicitly identified with Elijah.

There is no doubt that Jews believed in the return of Elijah as forerunner of the messianic age (Mal 4:5 Luke 1:17). There was a debate in the early church around the question: If Jesus is Messiah why has Elijah not come? These verses echo that strife. The non-reincarnationistic theologians believe that Jesus is here represented as saying that Elijah has come, not in reincarnation, but in striking likeness of the flesh and in verity of the spirit. To this belief they add that John dressed like Elijah lived in the desert as Elijah had lived, and defied Herod and Herodias as Elijah had defied Ahab and Jezebel (CF 11:14). According to them, John's behaviour is only a blind imitation of the earlier prophet. In that case one can reasonably argue why John the Baptist was not described as a prophet.

Jesus has commented about John: *'Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist..'* (Matthew 11:11). This description aptly goes only to a 'Prophet reincarnated'. Can there be any man who is greater than a prophet reincarnated? Granted that John came as Elijah, those bible scholars put another question to be answered by the reincarnationist. Why did Elijah not restore all things according to promise? Why had the golden age not come?

These confusions may be attributed to the fact that the pre-Christian prophets did not distinguish between the first coming of Christ and His second coming. It will be more correct to say that they were not aware of the second coming. Jesus had assured the golden age for the righteous after His second coming. This explains well that it was not at all the mission of Elijah as John to restore all things according to promise. The nature of John the Baptist was full of impetuosity and fire, a very Elijah. His life was characterised by the grace of self-denial, humility and courage. His abstinence was so great and so some thought him possessed. For his courage in speaking the truth, he went a willing victim to prison and to death. The reincarnationist may observe the striking similarities of Elijah's and John's personalities.

John's Denial of a Previous Life

It is not necessary that all people who come back to the terrestrial existence, to remember their previous lives. Dr. Ian Stevenson who has analysed the maximum number of reincarnation type cases, has put forward such an assumption.³ He says that some persons reincarnated, may have no imaged memories of their previous lives but nevertheless may carry over from such lives important residues of behaviour learned and practised during them.

Dr. Stevenson has two important types of observations in favour of his assumption. In the first place, the experiments on posthypnotic suggestion have given us the knowledge that a person may carry out instructions to perform a certain action while at the same time having complete amnesia for the fact that he has been given such instructions. The subject in the post-hypnotic state is not aware of the real cause of his behaviour. Similarly, we know how to walk but only few people remember the days of infancy when they learned to walk. In the second place, the subjects of cases of the

reincarnation type vary greatly in the number of imaged memories of the previous lives, they claim to remember. While some subjects remember a few details only, others are capable of almost total recall. So also, there is a wide variation in the amount of unusual behaviour related to the remembered previous lives. These related behaviours persist many years after the subject has forgotten the imaged memories of the previous life. With these two types of observation, Dr. Stevenson assumes that some persons may have had previous lives of which they have no imaged memories, but from which nevertheless they may have derived important ingredients of their characters. John the Baptist apparently did not have any memory of his life as Elijah. The following biblical verse reveals this curious fact.

And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent unto him from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, who art thou? And he confessed and denied not, and he confessed, I am not Christ. And they asked him, what then? Art thou Elijah? And he said, 'I am not'. 'Art thou the prophet?' And he answered, 'No'. They said therefore unto him, who are thou? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said Isaiah Prophet.

(John 1:19-24)

Three titles are disowned by the Baptist. He was not Christ, the Messiah, though his baptism was an eschatological sacrament sealing men for the coming kingdom of God. John said that he was not the Elijah foretold. He was not the prophet whose coming was expected. The Jewish expectation was that Elijah would return in bodily form. There is some difficulty to determine what was understood by the 'Prophet'. The allusion no doubt, is to the Deuteronomic words ascribed to Moses. But by some special revelation, John understood only, he is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. It follows from these statements of John that he did not have any memory about a previous life. He did not have that paranormal insight because of his human limitations. But Jesus Christ had recognised the former personality of John with His Divine power. This, I think, is a very important point of diversification between the human personality of John and the superhuman personality of Christ. I am of the opinion that reincarnation should not be ascribed to a person who denies it. But, in John's case, are we not bound to believe the words of the Divine Psychiatrist?

The idea of reincarnation poses unending questions and answers. Retributive karma will have to be modified and expanded into developmental, collective and redemptive karma to harmonise with Christian thinking. 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was blind?' (John 9:2) Christ's answer to this question rebukes universal retributive karma and if at all it exists, Jesus reassures that it can be reversed through unconditioned love. Jesus replies, 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the work of God might be made manifest in him' (John 9:3). Reincarnationists argue that the man in question even chose to reincarnate as congenitally blind so that he could be a

witness and instrument to Christ's miracle, thereby participating in the Divine redemptive works for his own spiritual advancement and to liberate himself from the trap of reincarnations. Overenthusiastic reincarnationists even think that Christ, through his redemptive karma liberated the humanity from the wheel of rebirth.

Revelation and the Two Witnesses

It was always part of Jewish belief that God would send his special messenger to men before the coming of the Day of the Lord. *'And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and three score days, clothed in sack cloth'*. (Revelation 11.3) But it may be repeated that Jews did not distinguish between the first coming and the second coming of the lord. In Malachi, we hear God say. 'Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me (Malachi 3:1). Malachi actually identified the messenger as Elijah.

Scholars differ widely in the interpretation of two witnesses. One school of thought believes that they are the witness of the two comings of Christ.⁹ The two witnesses have been taken to be Enoch and Elijah, by these scholars. According to the old stories, neither Enoch nor, Elijah was said to die. *'Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him* (Genesis 5.24). Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind and in a chariot of fire to heaven (2 Kings 2.11). According to the advocates of this belief, Elijah is the witness of the first coming of Christ, Elijah reincarnated as John the Baptist and Enoch is the witness of the second coming, that is to say Enoch would return as a higher reincarnation (controlled reincarnation) before the second coming of Christ. The concept of 'higher reincarnation' tallies with the Christian folk belief that towards the second coming of Christ, many holy souls would return to terrestrial existence so as to put in order the humanity that would be going through a crisis of faith. The pontiff guiding the world in such an anticipated crisis of faith (Possibly the Pope referred in the third secret of Fatima revelation) could be such an important personality that he may as well be a higher reincarnation.

Although the book of revelation continues to be an enigma for the interpreters of Bible, yet still when pilgrims asked the Marian visionary Mirjana of Medjugorje what she could tell about the secrets that all the six visionaries there are eventually receiving from Our Lady, Mirjana said; 'All you need to know about the secrets is to be found in the Book of Revelation.' Mother Mary has been manifested on a daily basis in the little village of Medjugorje (Bosnia), nearly for the last 28 years, the longest Marian apparitional occurrences in history which is described as the event of events by believers.^{10,11,12,13} The world-wide call for conversion, that Mary has achieved over the last 28 years by way of Medjugorje, was already emphasised well when her apparitions there began on the day of St. John the Baptist (24th June 1981). Like the Marian apparitional experiences, the idea of reincarnation also links science with spirituality.

Concluding remarks

In the light of the biblical evidence of other forms of discarnate survival, Christian theologians recognise a spiritual risk in returning to earthly life because reincarnation runs the risk of deteriorating as an earth bound state and a desire for rebirth promotes such a phenomenon. Research into previous life memories warrant an intellectual health warning because they are highly vulnerable to the invasion of pseudo scientific theories and false doctrines.⁸ The apprehension among theologians that belief in reincarnation would be exploited by anti-Christian scientists in the later years of the world is to be given due attention.¹⁴

Theologians wonder how the idea of reincarnation would fit in with the concept of the final resurrection, in the sense that if a person has reincarnated several times, which of the several bodies would be resurrected. Probably, chimera phenomena, where two fertilised eggs or early embryos fused together, could give some hints to the answer several resurrected bodies of different incarnations might painfully integrate together. The biblical passages relating to John the Baptist only favour a concept of reincarnation that would be designated as 'higher reincarnation or controlled reincarnation'. None of the Biblical passages support the idea of universal reincarnation.

The celebrated Origen, the disciple of Clement of Alexandria whose teacher was St Peter, seems to have promoted a belief in the pre-existence of soul before physical birth and such a concept has been misinterpreted to support a view that the early Christian church accepted the doctrine of reincarnation, and that it was expounded by the Gnostics and by numerous church fathers. Pre-existence of soul does not at all mean that generic reincarnation is true but reincarnation warrants pre-existence of a soul.¹⁵ The doctrine of reincarnation was first declared a heresy in A.D. 553 by the second Council of Constantinople. Pope Vigilius was a reluctant attendee of the Synod and did not put his signature on the Synod's decisions. There has never been a papal encyclical opposing the idea of reincarnation. The reader is free to reach his or her own conclusion about the Biblical passages quoted in the preceding paragraphs. From a strictly scientific point of view, I contend that as the spiritistic hypothesis of reincarnation is not satisfactorily challenged, the view that John the Baptist merely imitated Elijah is also to be respected. It is immature to assume that all truths are to be found in the Bible and no extra Biblical truths exist. Truths are revealed to human community according to the prevailing spiritual and intellectual maturity. The sagacious approach would be to make rigorous scientific research into all the evidences relating to the idea of reincarnation, leaving no stones unturned. A sympathetic attitude towards the scientific concept of reincarnation might help to bring out more authentic cases to the forefront for scientific scrutiny in the Christian cultures, as most often such cases are suppressed because of fear of ridicule. In a way, acknowledging the possibility of higher-biblical reincarnation is opening the gate to the minority who think they had a previous terrestrial existence to Christian ideology, and avoiding senseless embarrassments and moral conflicts also for the Christians tormented with possible past life memories. Dr. Stevenson apparently preferred to avoid linking his still rudimentary research

on reincarnation with religion. ¹⁶ After 40 years of research into children's past life memories, he wrote, 'Let no one think that I know the answer. I am still seeking'. ¹⁷

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