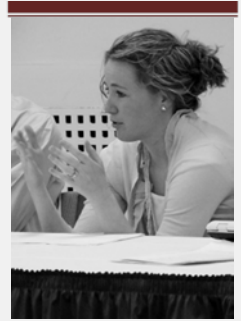


# The Argument over Reincarnation in Early Christianity

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## Abstract

During the first several hundred years C.E. there existed a heated debate over the reality of reincarnation within Christianity. This paper contains the main evidence provided by those arguing for and against the idea of reincarnation. Both sides were represented by Christian theologians living at the time. In the end, the idea of reincarnation was rejected as a Christian doctrine and the reasons for this rejection are also discussed.



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It is believed that in 553 A.D. during the Second Council of Constantinople the idea of reincarnation was found to have no place in the Christian Church. Although reincarnation was not officially rejected at this council, those early Church Fathers who were accused of teaching the idea of reincarnation had their works banned. 553 A.D. did mark the end of the debate on reincarnation within the Christian community. Observing the fact that reincarnation is not a doctrine typically taught within Christianity today one might assume that this council was called to settle an argument about reincarnation and its supplemental ideas between Christians and non-Christians. This was not the case.

Although the idea of reincarnation was rejected by the Christian Church as a doctrine because it was believed to contradict the doctrine of corporeal resurrection and undermine the need for Christ's redemptive sacrifices, it was a belief held by many early Christian theologians such as Valentinus and Basilides of Alexandria. However, many Christian theologians in the first several centuries of Christianity, such as Saint Justin Martyr, did not believe in, or teach about reincarnation. There were also those early Church Fathers, like Origen of Alexandria, who were conflicted by the idea, and this internal conflict has been observed throughout their writings. To better understand how some of the early Church Fathers could teach reincarnation and still consider themselves Christian, it is imperative to understand where their belief in reincarnation came from.

Many of the early Christian theologians who believed in the idea of reincarnation were taught their religious beliefs at, or near Alexandria, Egypt; these are theologians including Basilides, Valentinus and Origen. Christian and non-Christians alike that were living in or near Alexandria were still greatly influenced by the ideas of Plato. Plato is well-known for his writings in science and philosophy. Plato also saw himself as a spiritual man and had many ideas on religion and theology.<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, Plato believed in reincarnation. He taught that human souls had previously existed in a perfect world and there enjoyed the presence of God. Somehow these souls committed some sin and fell from God's presence and were placed into physical bodies on Earth as a punishment. The purpose of life is to correct the soul's initial mistake and to return to

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<sup>1</sup> Head, Joseph and Cranston, S.L., *Reincarnation in World Thought: A Living Study of Reincarnation in All Ages; Including Selections from the World's Religions, Philosophies and Science, and Great Thinkers of the Past and Present.* (New York: Julian Press, 1967) 195-198.

God. This could only be done through the attainment of knowledge, and since God is omnipotent Plato believed it ridiculous to assume that one's soul could gain enough knowledge to return to God in one lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Based upon Plato's belief that the human body was a prison of punishment and that souls were on earth to gain a level of knowledge that would take more than one lifetime to learn, we can see why he believed in reincarnation. Plato's writings are dated between 430-347 B.C., well before Christ's ministry, so Plato had no known opinions on the mission or reality of Jesus Christ. Theologians who lived after Plato and studied from his teachings would run into conflict as they tried to align their newly acquired Christian beliefs with the Platonic ideas that they had already come to accept. These men would eventually be referred to today as Christian Platonists.

Basilides was one such Christian Platonist, educated and taught in Alexandria during the years 130-160 A.D. Those living in Alexandria during Basilide's time who considered themselves 'intellectuals' who still studied and taught heavily from the writings of Plato.<sup>3</sup> Basilides was no exception, and many of his religious beliefs are based upon Platonistic thoughts, including that of reincarnation. Like Plato, Basilides also believed that physical bodies were prisons and that death allowed the spirit to be freed from the body and made available for spiritual resurrection. Having the soul imprisoned in a body was not just for gaining knowledge and experience, but also provided punishment for lives previously lived. He used this belief to explain to his followers why Christians who were not committing sins in this life still suffered from diseases and other afflictions.<sup>4</sup> He understood this to occur because these individuals, although pious in this life, had sinned in their previous lives and were being punished presently.

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<sup>2</sup> Cranston and Head, *World Thought*, 198-201.

<sup>3</sup> Layton, Bentley. "The Significance of Basilides in Ancient Christian Thought." *Representations* 28 (1989) 144.

<sup>4</sup> Layton, "Basilides in Ancient Christian Thought," 138.

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Basilides, who considered himself a Christian, had to explain how his belief in reincarnation and his belief in Jesus Christ's teachings could coincide. Although most of Basilide's writings have been destroyed or edited later by his opponents<sup>5</sup> two theories have been inferred from his surviving works: the first being that Christ was sent to save the gentiles from Jewish domination, and the second, that Christ was sent to save all people, both Jew and Gentile, from human religion.<sup>6</sup> Neither of these ideas involves Christ making redemptive sacrifices for all mankind, and both describe Christ merely providing earthly redemption. We can see from these beliefs why Basilides was able to believe in reincarnation and still consider himself a Christian believing in some aspect of Christ's Godly mission on earth. To Basilides, Christ offered no way for repentance to occur in this life, so punishment and repentance for sins must occur in the next life through reincarnation cycles. Basilides was not the only early Christian who blended the beliefs of Jesus Christ and Plato. He had many followers and it is believed that Basilides himself may have taught a man name Valentinus.<sup>7</sup>

Valentinus was also a Christian educated in Alexandria who taught from 100-175 A.D. According to Tertullian of Carthage, another early Christian theologian, Valentinus was at one time was a candidate for Bishop for the Christian Church but was not selected.<sup>8</sup> Valentinus was responsible for one of the major Gnostic movements, having a widespread following throughout the Roman Empire and provoking many writings by fellow Christian opponents in response to his teachings.<sup>9</sup> Similar to those previously discussed, Valentinus believed all souls lived in a perfect state with God, fell, were imprisoned in bodies, and will be imprisoned until enough knowledge and experience is gained for spiritual resurrection and return to God's presence.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the mission of Christ, he believed that Christ did not come among men to provide any kind of salvation but to provide an example for how to live and motivation for all that can be done. Christ was crucified to simply end

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<sup>5</sup> Segal, Alan F., *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*. (New York: Random House Incorporated, 2004), 546-549.

<sup>6</sup> Layton, "Basilides in Ancient Christian Thought," 144-46

<sup>7</sup> Lampe, Peter. *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 200.

<sup>8</sup> Osborne, Eric Frances. *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 187.

<sup>9</sup>Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 201-03.

<sup>10</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 550-51.

his ministry and for no higher purpose.<sup>11</sup> From this we can see why Valentinus's belief in reincarnation does not limit Christ's redemptive powers like it did to other Christians. That is not to say that Valentinus and his followers did not believe that Christ's mission was sacred, but that it provided a sacred example and not a sacrifice.

Basilides and Valentinus and their beliefs are typical examples of those early Christians who used their Platonistic roots to interpret Christ's mission and life's purpose. The idea that spiritual progression is not related to the physical body explains their disbelief in corporeal resurrection and their argument that Christ came for sacred reasons other than as sacrifice for sins explains why they did not feel that a belief in reincarnation undermined Christ's mission.

Not all Christians at the time who were influenced by Plato's teachings used his teachings to form beliefs on the resurrection and Christ's mission that led to a belief in reincarnation. The other side of the argument on reincarnation must be considered; which is the opinion of those early Christians who did not believe in reincarnation. We know from the results of the Second Council of Constantinople that those who did not believe in reincarnation would eventually find success from their arguments, but what we cannot learn from simply reading The Council's conclusion how complex that conflict really was, even within the individuals arguing against the idea of reincarnation themselves.

One such Christian individual is Origen of Alexandria, who lived during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Origen is an interesting character in the history of Christianity based upon his beliefs. Like Basilides and Valentinus he believed that souls had descended from a pre-existing perfect state to a life of punishment in physical bodies. He also believed that the redemptive sacrifices of Christ were the saving forces in a person's life and the only way to gain an eternal life in the presence of God.<sup>12</sup> There is much debate and confusion still in existence today over whether or not Origen believed in reincarnation. At places within his writings Origen seems to confirm reincarnation, at other times he avoids the issue, and in some cases he flat out denies it.<sup>13</sup> Origen's *On First*

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<sup>11</sup> Howe, Quincy. *Reincarnation for the Christian*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) 70-75.

<sup>12</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 572-74.

<sup>13</sup> Prophet, Elizabeth and Prophet, Erin, *Reincarnation: The Missing Link in Christianity*. (Gardiner: Summit University Press, 1997) 179.

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*Principles* explains that souls are assigned to their “place, region or condition” based on their actions “before the present life.” He states that “God gave souls bodies according to the sin of each.”<sup>14</sup> Based upon this particular writing the contemporary author Elizabeth Prophet concluded, “There is no denying that here Origen is implying his belief in reincarnation by God assigning bodies based upon previous sins.”<sup>15</sup>

However, when writing to those who believed that John the Baptist was the reincarnate of Elijah, 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 for in the scriptures.*<sup>16</sup>

Based upon this text, another author, Mark Edwards, states, “It is obvious that Origen cannot be considered an ‘early Christian adherent of reincarnation’.”<sup>17</sup> It should be mentioned that Origen’s comments on John the Baptist and Elijah were written towards the end of his life. One can either assume that he changed his opinion on reincarnation over time due to further studying and learning, or he had simply learned later in life to refute his belief in reincarnation to avoid arguments and to keep his standing within the Christian community. Due to the conflicting ideas contained within Origen’s surviving works we may never know for certain his final opinion of the reality of reincarnation. What we can learn from these sources is that although Origen believed in Christ’s redemptive sacrifices and corporeal resurrection and considered himself a faithful Christian, at least at one point in his life was contemplating the reality of the idea of reincarnation.

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<sup>14</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*. I.8.I., 67.

<sup>15</sup> Prophet and Prophet, *Reincarnation: Missing Link*. 179-80.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, Mark Julian. *Origen against Plato*. (Burlington: Ashgate publishing Limited, 2002) 97-101.

<sup>17</sup> Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*. 132.

Origen was born into a Christian household and was taught Christian beliefs from birth.<sup>18</sup> He was influenced by the ideas of Plato because of where he grew up. Despite being raised in Alexandria, his spiritual education was Christian in nature from the beginning and not completely based upon Greek philosophy. Yet he still struggled to decide for himself whether or not the idea of reincarnation was true. Origen's internal conflict shows how relevant the argument of reincarnation was during early Christianity despite its lack of prevalence in today's Christian churches.

Reincarnation was rejected by the Christian Church despite the several arguments for it, and there were more Christians that did not believe in reincarnation at this time than Christians those who did. The works of those early Christian theologians who did not believe in reincarnation have survived much better over the years than the works of Christians who did believe in reincarnation.

One such Christian individual who lived during the time of early Christianity and did not believe in reincarnation is Saint Justin Martyr, who was born just north of Jerusalem and lived from 103-165 A.D. He was taught in Greek philosophy during his youth and converted to Christianity later in his life.<sup>19</sup> Justin is the first post-apostolic author that still has a considerable amount of work available to study, therefore the doctrines and ideas found within his writings are of extreme importance in understanding the Christian Church's beliefs during the first few centuries.<sup>20</sup> When he became a Christian Justin's beliefs moved for the most part away from Platonism and he did not hesitate to criticize Plato's ideas in his writings. Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* is the record of a debate, or conversation, between Justin Martyr and a Jewish man named Trypho and contains several instances of Justin expressing negative opinions on Plato's ideas:

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<sup>18</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, 572-74.

<sup>19</sup> Barnard, L.W. *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 33.

<sup>20</sup> Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 34-35.

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*Plato teaches the punishment of the wicked for only a limited period of time and in bodies other than their own, while Christians teach the eternal punishment of the wicked in the same bodies as they now possess.*<sup>21</sup>

Justin says a lot in this single short sentence. He refutes the idea of reincarnation and at the same time solidifies his belief in corporeal resurrection. At this point in the dialogue Justin explains his belief that Christians are judged and punished once, and not several times through several lives. He also explains that the wicked who are being punished are suffering for their mistakes in the same bodies that they have always had. It is easy to see that Justin Martyr was an early Christian theologian that did not believe in reincarnation, and when his beliefs regarding Christ's mission are considered it can be understood why he did not hold this belief.

Justin explains to Trypho later in their dialogue that a Christian seeking repentance for sins in this life can only do so “by faith through the blood of Christ, and through his death, who died for this very reason.”<sup>22</sup> It is in this teaching that we can see the main difference between those early Christians who believed in reincarnation and those who did not: their beliefs in Jesus Christ and what role his earthly ministry has on all Christians. Unlike some of the Christian theologians mentioned earlier, Justin believed and taught that Christ suffered and died so that men could repent for their sins and avoid eternal punishment. This difference highlights the reasoning behind the Christian Church's decision to reject reincarnation as a doctrine, because the idea of reincarnation leaves to room for Jesus Christ's redemptive powers.

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<sup>21</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*. Translated by Thomas B. Falls. (Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press) 152-3.

<sup>22</sup> Justin Martyr. *Dialogue with Trypho*. 14-15.



The extent of the conflict over reincarnation between early Christians can be seen within one man. Origen's writings not only show several opposing opinions on the subject written himself, but many of the writings are so vague that authors today have come to completely different conclusions after reading the same passages of his work. Contemporary author Jefferey Trumbower points out that Origen had a "research theology" and often attempted to answer difficult questions while remaining faithful to scriptures and orthodox doctrines, which at times resulted in a speculative theology.<sup>23</sup> Based on this idea we can assume that Origen was trying to come to a conclusion on the reality of the reincarnation while trying to implement orthodox doctrines. We know from the differing opinions discussed so far that orthodox Christian doctrines cannot be taught harmoniously with the idea of reincarnation despite that so many early Christian tried. This could be why Origen was so conflicted while trying to find an answer. As each early Christian theologian's ideas are studied we can see that their beliefs on Christ were the deciding factor on their belief in reincarnation. That is not to say that those who believed in reincarnation were not Christian, but that similar to today's religious societies, being a Christian means something different to each person claiming the title.

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<sup>23</sup> Trumbower, Jefferey, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation for non-Christians in Early Christianity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 114.

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