On the Pythagorean Doctrine of the Transmigration of Souls

Tertullian

Chapter 28. The Pythagorean Doctrine of Transmigration Sketched and Censured

What, then, by this time means that ancient saying, mentioned by Plato, concerning the reciprocal migration of souls; how they remove hence and go there, and then return hither and pass through life, and then again depart from this life, and afterwards become alive from the dead? Some will have it that this is a saying of Pythagoras; Albinus supposes it to be a divine announcement, perhaps of the Egyptian Mercury. But there is no divine saying, except of the one true God, by whom the prophets, and the apostles, and Christ Himself declared their grand message. More ancient than Saturn a good deal (by some nine hundred years or so), and even than his grandchildren, is Moses; and he is certainly much more divine, recounting and tracing out, as he does, the course of the human race from the very beginning of the world, indicating the several births (of the fathers of mankind) according to their names and their epochs; giving thus plain proof of the divine character of his work, from its divine authority and word. If, indeed, the sophist of Samos is Plato's authority for the eternally revolving migration of souls out of a constant alternation of the dead and the living states, then no doubt did the famous Pythagoras, however excellent in other respects, for the purpose of fabricating such an opinion as this, rely on a falsehood, which was not only shameful, but also hazardous. Consider it, you that are ignorant of it, and believe with us. He feigns death, he conceals himself underground, he condemns himself to that endurance for some seven years, during which he learns from his mother, who was his sole accomplice and attendant, what he was to relate for the belief of the world concerning those who had died since his seclusion; and when he thought that he had succeeded in reducing the frame of his body to the horrid appearance of a dead old man, he comes forth from the place of his concealment and deceit, and pretends to have returned from the dead. Who would hesitate about believing that the man, whom he had supposed to have died, had come back again to life? Especially after hearing from him facts about the recently dead, which he evidently could only have discovered in Hades itself! Thus, that men are made alive after death, is rather an old statement. But what if it be rather a recent one also? The truth does not desire antiquity, nor does falsehood shun novelty. This notable saying I hold to be plainly false, though ennobled by antiquity. How should that not be false, which depends for its evidence on a falsehood?—How can I help believing Pythagoras to be a deceiver, who practises deceit to win my belief? How will he convince me that, before he was Pythagoras, he had been Æthalides, and Euphorbus, and the fisherman Pyrrhus, and Hermotimus, to make us believe that men live again after they have died, when he actually perjured himself afterwards as Pythagoras. In proportion as it would be easier for me to believe that he had returned once to life in his own person, than so often in the person of this man and that, in the same degree has he deceived me in things which are too hard to be credited, because he has played the impostor in matters which might be readily believed. Well, but he recognised the shield of Euphorbus, which had been formerly consecrated at Delphi, and claimed it as his own, and proved his claim by signs which were generally unknown. Now, look again at his subterranean lurking-place,

and believe his story, if you can. For, as to the man who devised such a tricksty scheme, to the injury of his health, fraudulently wasting his life, and torturing it for seven years underground, amidst hunger, idleness, and darkness—with a profound disgust for the mighty sky— what reckless effort would he not make, what curious contrivance would he not attempt, to arrive at the discovery of this famous shield? Suppose now, that he found it in some of those hidden researches; suppose that he recovered some slight breath of report which survived the now obsolete tradition; suppose him to have come to the knowledge of it by an inspection which he had bribed the beadle to let him have—we know very well what are the resources of magic skill for exploring hidden secrets: there are the catabolic spirits, which floor their victims; and the paredral spirits, which are ever at their side to haunt them; and the pythonic spirits, which entrance them by their divination and ventriloquistic arts. For was it not likely that Pherecydes also, the master of our Pythagoras, used to divine, or I would rather say rave and dream, by such arts and contrivances as these? Might not the self-same demon have been in him, who, while in Euphorbus, transacted deeds of blood? But lastly, why is it that the man, who proved himself to have been Euphorbus by the evidence of the shield, did not also recognise any of his former Trojan comrades? For they, too, must by this time have recovered life, since men were rising again from the dead.

Chapter 29. The Pythagorean Doctrine Refuted by Its Own First Principle, that Living Men are Formed from the Dead

It is indeed, manifest that dead men are formed from living ones; but it does not follow from that, that living men are formed from dead ones. For from the beginning the living came first in the order of things, and therefore also from the beginning the dead came afterwards in order. But these proceeded from no other source except from the living. The living had their origin in any other source (you please) than in the dead; while the dead had no source whence to derive their beginning, except from the living. If, then, from the very first the living came not from the dead, why should they afterwards (be said to) come from the dead? Had that original source, whatever it was, come to an end? Was the form or law thereof a matter for regret? Then why was it preserved in the case of the dead? Does it not follow that, because the dead came from the living at the first, therefore they always came from the living? For either the law which obtained at the beginning must have continued in both of its relations, or else it must have changed in both; so that, if it had become necessary for the living afterwards to proceed from the dead, it would be necessary, in like manner, for the dead also not to proceed from the living. For if a faithful adherence to the institution was not meant to be perpetuated in each respect, then contraries cannot in due alternation continue to be re-formed from contraries. We, too, will on our side adduce against you certain contraries, of the born and the unborn, of vision and blindness, of youth and old age, of wisdom and folly. Now it does not follow that the unborn proceeds from the born, on the ground that a contrary issues from a contrary; nor, again, that vision proceeds from blindness, because blindness happens to vision; nor, again, that youth revives from old age, because after youth comes the decrepitude of senility; nor that folly is born with its obtuseness from wisdom, because wisdom may possibly be sometimes sharpened out of folly. Albinus has some fears for his (master and friend) Plato in these points, and labours with much ingenuity to distinguish different kinds of contraries; as if these instances did not as absolutely partake of the nature of contrariety as those which are expounded by him to illustrate his great master's principle— I mean, life and death. Nor is it, for the matter of that, true that life is restored out of death, because it happens that death succeeds life.

Chapter 30. Further Refutation of the Pythagorean Theory. The State of Contemporary Civilization

But what must we say in reply to what follows? For, in the first place, if the living come from the dead, just as the dead proceed from the living, then there must always remain unchanged one

and the selfsame number of mankind, even the number which originally introduced (human) life. The living preceded the dead, afterwards the dead issued from the living, and then again the living from the dead. Now, since this process was evermore going on with the same persons, therefore they, issuing from the same, must always have remained in number the same. For they who emerged (into life) could never have become more nor fewer than they who disappeared (in death). We find, however, in the records of the Antiquities of Man, that the human race has progressed with a gradual growth of population, either occupying different portions of the earth as aborigines, or as nomad tribes, or as exiles, or as conquerors— as the Scythians in Parthia, the Temenidæ in Peloponnesus, the Athenians in Asia, the Phrygians in Italy, and the Phœnicians in Africa; or by the more ordinary methods of migration, which they call ἀποικίαι or colonies, for the purpose of throwing off redundant population, disgorging into other abodes their overcrowded masses. The aborigines remain still in their old settlements, and have also enriched other districts with loans of even larger populations. Surely it is obvious enough, if one looks at the whole world, that it is becoming daily better cultivated and more fully peopled than anciently. All places are now accessible, all are well known, all open to commerce; most pleasant farms have obliterated all traces of what were once dreary and dangerous wastes; cultivated fields have subdued forests; flocks and herds have expelled wild beasts; sandy deserts are sown; rocks are planted; marshes are drained; and where once were hardly solitary cottages, there are now large cities. No longer are (savage) islands dreaded, nor their rocky shores feared; everywhere are houses, and inhabitants, and settled government, and civilized life. What most frequently meets our view (and occasions complaint), is our teeming population: our numbers are burdensome to the world, which can hardly supply us from its natural elements; our wants grow more and more keen, and our complaints more bitter in all mouths, while Nature fails in affording us her usual sustenance. In very deed, pestilence, and famine, and wars, and earthquakes have to be regarded as a remedy for nations, as the means of pruning the luxuriance of the human race; and yet, when the hatchet has once felled large masses of men, the world has hitherto never once been alarmed at the sight of a restitution of its dead coming back to life after their millennial exile. But such a spectacle would have become quite obvious by the balance of mortal loss and vital recovery, if it were true that the dead came back again to life. Why, however, is it after a thousand years, and not at the moment, that this return from death is to take place, when, supposing that the loss is not at once supplied, there must be a risk of an utter extinction, as the failure precedes the compensation? Indeed, this furlough of our present life would be quite disproportioned to the period of a thousand years; so much briefer is it, and on that account so much more easily is its torch extinguished than rekindled. Inasmuch, then, as the period which, on the hypothesis we have discussed, ought to intervene, if the living are to be formed from the dead, has not actually occurred, it will follow that we must not believe that men come back to life from the dead (in the way surmised in this philosophy).

Chapter 31. Further Exposure of Transmigration, Its Inextricable Embarrassment

Again, if this recovery of life from the dead take place at all, individuals must of course resume their own individuality. Therefore the souls which animated each several body must needs have returned separately to their several bodies. Now, whenever two, or three, or five souls are re-enclosed (as they constantly are) in one womb, it will not amount in such cases to life from the dead, because there is not the separate restitution which individuals ought to have; although at this rate, (no doubt,) the law of the primeval creation is signally kept, by the production still of several souls out of only one! Then, again, if souls depart at different ages of human life, how is it that they come back again at one uniform age? For all men are imbued with an infant soul at their birth. But how happens it that a man who dies in old age returns to life as an infant? If the soul, while disembodied, decreases thus by retrogression of its age, how much more reasonable would it be, that it should resume its life with a richer progress in all attainments of life after the lapse of a thousand years! At all events, it should return with the age it had attained at its death, that it might resume the precise life which it had relinquished. But even if, at this rate,

they should reappear the same evermore in their revolving cycles, it would be proper for them to bring back with them, if not the selfsame forms of body, at least their original peculiarities of character, taste, and disposition, because it would be hardly possible for them to be regarded as the same, if they were deficient in those characteristics by means of which their identity should be proved. (You, however, meet me with this question): How can you possibly know, you ask, whether all is not a secret process? May not the work of a thousand years take from you the power of recognition, since they return unknown to you? But I am quite certain that such is not the case, for you yourself present Pythagoras to me as (the restored) Euphorbus. Now look at Euphorbus: he was evidently possessed of a military and warlike soul, as is proved by the very renown of the sacred shields. As for Pythagoras, however, he was such a recluse, and so unwarlike, that he shrank from the military exploits of which Greece was then so full, and preferred to devote himself, in the quiet retreat of Italy, to the study of geometry, and astrology, and music— the very opposite to Euphorbus in taste and disposition. Then, again, the Pyrrhus (whom he represented) spent his time in catching fish; but Pythagoras, on the contrary, would never touch fish, abstaining from even the taste of them as from animal food. Moreover, Æthalides and Hermotimus had included the bean among the common esculents at meals, while Pythagoras taught his disciples not even to pass through a plot which was cultivated with beans. I ask, then, how the same souls are resumed, which can offer no proof of their identity, either by their disposition, or habits, or living? And now, after all, (we find that) only four souls are mentioned as recovering life out of all the multitudes of Greece. But limiting ourselves merely to Greece, as if no transmigrations of souls and resumptions of bodies occurred, and that every day, in every nation, and among all ages, ranks, and sexes, how is it that Pythagoras alone experiences these changes into one personality and another? Why should not I too undergo them? Or if it be a privilege monopolized by philosophers— and Greek philosophers only, as if Scythians and Indians had no philosophers—how is it that Epicurus had no recollection that he had been once another man, nor Chrysippus, nor Zeno, nor indeed Plato himself, whom we might perhaps have supposed to have been Nestor, from his honeyed eloquence?

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