

Transmigration of Souls

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Origen has often been accused of teaching that after death human souls may transmigrate to animals, as a consequence of their wickedness. This accusation is mentioned in the early fourth century in Pamphilus's *Apology for Origen* 87 (PG 17.579B), in the early fifth century in Jerome's *Epistolae* 124.4, in the mid-sixth century in Justinian's *Letter to Mennas*, and in the ninth century in Photius's *Bibliotheca* 117. The allegation originates from Origen's investigation of the theme of metempsychosis (or the transmission of souls from one body to another) in *Peri Archon* I.8.4. The original Greek of this section is lost, meaning that we depend on Rufinus's abridged Latin translation, on Jerome's Latin version, and on Justinian's brief (and probably distorted) quotations in Greek. Transmigration of human souls to animals was debated by contemporary Pythagorean and Platonic philosophers, and Origen seems to know Christians who shared this opinion and referred to animals speaking with a human voice, such as Balaam's ass (Num. 22:28-30). According to Rufinus's version of *Peri Archon* I.8.4 Origen explicitly rejects this idea of transmigration as contrary to the Christian faith. Other texts in his corpus show that Rufinus's version of the story is correct. From *Peri Archon* II.9.3 and his earlier book *On the Resurrection* (see Pamphilus's *Apology* 134 [PG 17, 596C]) it may be proved that Origen considers animals as dumb and secondary creatures and that he excludes the possibility that a sinner will ever receive an animal body. Even the hostile Jerome (*Epistolae* 124.4) admits that Origen only intended to "investigate" the topic and not to establish a doctrine. Also in his later works Origen explicitly rejects the idea that the souls of humans were previously in beasts or birds or fish or will ever reincarnate in irrational animals (*ComRm* VI.6.8; *ComMt* XI.17; *CCels* III.75; IV.83; V.49; VIII.30; cf. *Ibid.* I.20).

It is the more unthinkable that Origen ever considered transmigration of human souls to animals as a serious possibility, as he also rejects the belief in transmigration of human souls to other human beings. Whenever he deals with the relationship between Elijah and John the Baptist, whom Jesus suggested were one and the same (Matt. 11:14; 17:10-13), he refutes the interpretation given by others (probably gnostics) who said that Elijah's soul had reincarnated in John. One of Origen's opposing arguments is that Gabriel had announced that John would be endowed with Elijah's spirit and power, not with his soul (Luke 1:17). Furthermore he argues that, in case transmigration occurs because of sin, it would never end, since a soul would always have to dwell in a new body because of its former sins, so that it would be impossible that "heaven and earth will pass away" (Matt. 24:35). As a consequence, for Origen it is clear that "the doctrine of transmigration is foreign to the church of God" (*ComJn* VI.62-76; cf. VI.85-86; Pamphilus, *Apology* 178 [PG 17.608B-609A]; *ComMt* XIII.1-2). The same refusal occurs time and again in his *Contra Celsum* (*CCels* I.13; IV.17; V.29; cf. the references mentioned above; also *ComCt* II.5.24).

However, two reasons may be given why Origen was accused of teaching the transmigration of souls, in spite of his definite and repeated disapproval of this concept. First, the suspicion may sometimes have been inspired by a misunderstanding of his view of the pre-existence of rational creatures and their subsequent incarnation as souls in human bodies. Yet

Origen emphasizes that one should carefully distinguish between the incarnation of the soul and its transmigration (or reincarnation) (*ComJn* VI.85-86). This distinction is also underscored by the Neo-platonic philosopher Plotinus, who says that the first incarnation from an invisible body cannot be called transmigration (*Enneads* IV.3.9).

The second reason is weightier and shows that there is some truth in the ongoing suspicion that Origen taught the transmigration of souls. In his interpretation of Scripture, he often and extensively argues that God created all rational creatures with a free will (*PArch* III.1; *Philoc* 23; 25-27). Thus he refutes his gnostic adversaries who held (as Origen understands them) that God predestined human beings either for salvation or for perdition. In Origen's view, the free will of rational creatures brought about that they deliberately chose to fall away from their original and spiritual state of bliss. Subsequently, according to the gravity of their respective fall, God created for the descending souls the different bodies of angels, stars, planets, human beings, and demons (*PArch* I.5.3; I.7.2-5; II.9.1-6). But since Origen is convinced that rational creatures will keep their free will when they will eventually be saved, and the age of this world will be restored to its original spiritual state, the theoretical possibility of a new fall will remain. For if a new fall were impossible, God's creatures would have lost their freedom. Origen presumed that in case rational creatures would again fall away from God, God will create a new material world and new bodies for the falling souls. So, in some respect at least, he seems to accept the Greek, mainly Stoic, concept of a cycle of worlds (*cf.* *CCels* IV.11-12; IV.67-68; V.20-21). The implication of his argument is that souls that had fallen once and were saved and restored might fall again and receive another body, not in the age of the present world (for Origen definitely excludes transmigration in this world order) but perhaps in the next age of a following world. There might even be an third and a fourth fall, and as many ages, but finally, Origen believes, God's love will overcome all inclination of his creatures to fall away from him and call all back in a universal *apokatasasis* (*PArch* I.3.8; II.3.1-5; *PEuch* 27.15; 29.14; *ComRm* V.10.13-16; VIII.13.10; Jerome, *Epistolae* 124.3-14; *Apologia adv. Rufinum* II.12).

Although Origen presents this reasoning not as a doctrine but as a theoretical speculation, one may conclude that in an unusual way he let in the possibility of transmigration. However, critical readers, such as Jerome, did not or would not understand the theoretical and experimental aspect of his arguments and indignantly accused him of teaching heresies, such as the transmigration of souls. Whereas Origen in the third century was concerned with exploring the "boundaries" of the Christian faith with respect to contemporary Hellenistic metaphysics, most of his later readers could not appreciate his intentions and considered him as being led astray too often by pagan philosophy.

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