

Did Jesus Allow for Reincarnation?

Assessing the Syntax of John 9:3-4

1. Introduction

In a 2003 article in the scholarly journal *Filologia Neotestamentaria* entitled, “The True Meaning of Jn 9:3-4,” J. D. M. Derrett raised the possibility that John 9:3-4 could plausibly be construed as evidence that Jesus was not opposed to the idea of reincarnation (2003, 103-106). The passage in context reads as follows (NA27):

1 Καὶ παράγων εἶδεν ἄνθρωπον τυφλὸν ἐκ γενετῆς. 2 καὶ ἠρώτησαν αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ λέγοντες· ῥαββί, τίς ἥμαρτεν, οὗτος ἢ οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, ἵνα τυφλὸς γεννηθῆ; 3 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς· οὔτε οὗτος ἥμαρτεν οὔτε οἱ γονεῖς αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἵνα φανερωθῆ τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ. 4 ἡμᾶς δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με ἕως ἡμέρας· ἐστὶν ἔρχεται νύξ ὅτε οὐδεὶς δύναται ἐργάζεσθαι.

1 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him (he was born

blind). 4 We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day;
night is coming when no one can work.

Derrett claimed that the disciples' question points to an assumption on their part that someone had sinned to bring about the man's condition and that the disciples were "prepared to accept that the Man Born Blind sinned in the womb or *in a previous life*" (Derrett, 2003, 104; emphasis his). Based on a specific syntactic construction found in John 9:3, the author concluded that Jesus' reply did not amount to an explicit rejection of the idea that one could sin in a previous life and be judged for that sin. This study seeks to examine Derrett's understanding of the syntax of John 9:3 and evaluate the strength of his conclusion.

2. The Specific Syntactical Argument

The syntactic construction in question is referred to by Derrett as the "relative negative, the οὐ/μή [or any negative particle] . . . ἀλλά construction" (2003, 103). A. T. Robertson refers to the construction as the "disjunctive negative," and notes that the construction is used to convey antithesis (1919, 1165). The construction has two simple components: (1) a proposition that is denied or negated; and (2) a proposition that is established by virtue of its juxtaposition to the negated proposition by means of the conjunction ἀλλά. The construction may also have ἀλλά followed by ἵνα, which in turn is preceded by an

ellipsis. The latter is the precise construction in John 9:3, but Derrett also draws conclusions from the less specific structure which lacks ἵνα.

In answer to the disciples' question about who bore the responsibility for the man being born blind, Jesus responds, "Neither (οὐτε) this man nor (οὐτε) his parents sinned, but in order (ἀλλ' ἵνα) that the works of God might be made manifest in him." This contrast, it is asserted, does not require the exegete or the reader to see a firm denial that the man's unfortunate condition might be due to sin on the part of the man's parents or by the man himself in a previous life. Derrett states: "It is not so much the case that either this man sinned or his parents, but rather that (he is so) in order that the works of God shall be manifested in (i.e., through) him."

It is important for the reader to realize that the argument being put forth by Derrett is that *the syntactical construction itself* reveals what he calls the "true meaning" of John 9:3-4. For Derrett, this syntactical combination compels us to conclude that "Jesus in our passage was not prepared to deny absolutely that sin figured in that scenario on the part of the parents or the man himself before his (present) birth. . . ." (2003, 105).

Derrett's article notes just over a dozen instances of the οὐ/μή . . . ἀλλά construction in the New Testament and one reference from *The Shepherd of Hermas* (*Sim.* VIII, vi, 1), all apparently gleaned from reference grammars he cites in his article: W. F. Moulton's edition of G. B. Winer (1882, III:55:8a, 8b); Blass, DeBrunner, and Funk (1961, 232, Par

448:1); and A. T. Robertson (1919, 1165). Current syntactical database technology for searching syntactical structures in the Greek New Testament allows for a much more thorough sampling (Porter, et al., 2006).

Beginning with the more general structural parameters described by Derrett (a clause containing a negative particle or negative adverb following immediately by another clause headed by ἀλλά), a search in the Gospel of John yields fifty-three occurrences of the construction, far more than appear in Derrett's study. When the same search is run across the entire Greek New Testament (NA27), 277 occurrences are found (Porter, et al., 2006)

If one applies the more restrictive parameters for the precise construction in John 9:3 (a negative particle followed by ἀλλά where ἀλλά is in turn followed by ἵνα), one finds six occurrences in the Gospel of John and nine additional occurrences in the rest of the Greek New Testament.

The results of these searches raises a serious concern with Derrett's study, namely that it raises the possibility that his conclusions were drawn on the basis of an insufficient sampling of the data. It is the contention of this author that the insufficient sampling did not prompt Derrett to nuance his conclusions in appropriate ways.

3. Analyzing the Data

The reader will recall that the relative negative construction has two components: (1) a proposition that is denied through negation; and (2) a proposition that is established by virtue of its juxtaposition to that which is negated. As Robertson, quoting Thayer, summarizes, “one thing is denied that another may be established” (1919, 1165). There is thus a relationship between the thing denied and the thing established, but this prompts several questions: What is the nature of that relationship? Is there only one kind of relationship established? Can that relationship ever constitute an explicit, categorical denial of the proposition denied through negation? What role do context and sound logic play in determining a relationship?

In what follows the reader will note that the relative negative construction conveys a range of interpretive relationships between the elements being contrasted. These relationships will be overviewed and illustrated outside the Gospel of John and then within the Gospel of John. Lastly, these relationships will be applied to the brief number of instances in the Gospel of John that are identical to the construction in John 9:3, where the οὐ/μή . . . ἀλλά construction has ἵνα following ἀλλά. The results will allow the reader to judge the strength of Derrett’s conclusion about the “true meaning” of John 9:3. For the purposes of the discussion, the negated proposition is denoted as “X” and the affirmed proposition “Y.”

3.1. Expressions of Intention

A common use of the relative negative construction is for expressing a speaker's intention. The construction allows the speaker to clarify an intention (Y) by means of denying another intention (X) that might be presumed by other characters in the narrative. The point of the construction in this case is to convey the speaker's own understanding of his or her motivation, irrespective of any response to the statement.

In Matt 10:34 Jesus states, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon earth. I have not (οὐκ) come to bring peace, but (ἀλλὰ) a sword." One intention is denied and another is affirmed. In Matt 20:28 Jesus clarifies, "... just as the Son of Man came not (οὐκ) to be served but (ἀλλὰ) to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Looking at John's gospel, one finds several examples of this nuanced category. Jesus informs the Jewish leaders in John 5:30, "I cannot do anything on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is righteous, because I seek not (οὐ) my own will but (ἀλλὰ) the will of him who sent me." Jesus clarifies the intention of God the Father in John 12:30, "This voice has not (οὐ) come for my sake, but (ἀλλὰ) for your sake."

3.2. Expressions of Potentiality

At other times, the relative negative construction is used by the writer to convey a wish, command, or prediction. The juxtaposition of alternatives indicates some wish, command, or prediction that is negated (X) in favor of another wish, command, or

prediction (Y). There is no necessary statement of reality as yet, only a reality that is desired or predicted to be the case.

Outside the Gospel of John, Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not (οὐχ) as I will, but (ἀλλ’) as you [will]” (Matt 26:39). One of the beatitudes in Matt 6:13 reads, “And do not (μὴ) lead us into temptation, but (ἀλλὰ) deliver us from evil.” Moving to the Gospel of John Jesus announces in John 5:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, that whoever hears my word and believes the one who sent me has eternal life. He will not (οὐκ) come into judgment, but (ἀλλὰ) has passed from death to life.” Jesus commands his listeners elsewhere in John 7:23, “Do not (μὴ) judge by what is seen, but (ἀλλὰ) judge with righteous judgment.”

3.3. Specification

The relative negative can also specify a particular individual or group. The construction accomplishes this by contrasting one individual or group with another individual or group. In this instance, X and Y are two different individuals or groups. Specification can also occur, though, by creating a contrast between a group and a subset of the same group (not every X, but some particular X; not all of X, but some part of X).

An example of the former type of specification is found in Matt 9:12, where Jesus taught, “Those who are well do not (οὐ) have need of a physician, but (ἀλλ’) those who are ill.”

John 4:2 also sets a clear contrast in terms of specification: “Although Jesus himself did not (οὐκ) baptize, but (ἀλλὰ) his disciples.” In John 18:40 the crowd cried out in answer to Pilate’s question, “Not (μὴ) this man, but (ἀλλὰ) Barabbas!”

The subset variety of specification is well illustrated by Matt 7:21, where Jesus warns, “Not (οὐ) everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but (ἀλλ’) the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” Here the negated proposition or group is introduced (“everyone who says to me...”) and a subset of that group (“the one who does the will of my Father...”) is further specified. The same is true of Matt 19:11 where Jesus tells his disciples: “Not (οὐ) everyone can grasp this saying, but (ἀλλ’) only those to whom it is given.”

3.4. Statements Concerning Reality

For the purposes of this study, the most important interpretive relationship conveyed by the relative negative construction is when the construction is intended to express statements about reality where X (the negated proposition) is not the case, but Y (the affirmed proposition) is indeed the case. For example, in Mark 3:26 the text reads: “And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot (οὐ δύναται) stand, but (ἀλλὰ) he is coming to an end.” The proposition or idea that Satan’s kingdom could still stand if it were divided (X) is denied through negation, while the alternative proposition that the end of Satan’s kingdom has begun (Y), is put forth as the reality. Mark 3:29

provides another instance: “but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness (οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα), but (ἀλλὰ) he is guilty of an eternal sin.” The proposition that someone could blaspheme the Holy Spirit and be forgiven (X) is denied through negation, the reality (Y) being that such a sin is eternal.

It is important to note that these examples do not allow for the kind of interpretive flexibility for which Derrett argued with respect to John 9:3. The propositions that are denied are in fact denied explicitly—there is no hint that the denial might, in other instances, be overturned. Satan’s kingdom, when divided, is not going to stand in some other circumstance. The basis of the denial is that, with the inauguration of Jesus’ kingdom, Satan’s kingdom has begun to crumble (cf. Luke 10:18; John 12:31; cf. Evans, 2005). There is a stated cause and effect, and since the cause is secure (Jesus’ kingdom has indeed begun), the effect is secure. To insist otherwise would be to suggest some sort of inefficacy on the part of Jesus’ kingdom or that, on occasion, the kingdom of Satan can withstand the kingdom of Christ, an incoherent proposition for the New Testament authors (cp. Matt 16:18). In like manner, the denied proposition of Mark 3:29 allows no exceptions. The sin is eternal (αἰωνίου), and so forgiveness (the proposition which is denied) is also eternal (οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα).

Additional examples may be found in the Gospel of John. It is not difficult to discern instances where the writer puts forth a statement of reality where the negated proposition is in fact denied explicitly. In John 3:28 John the Baptist says, “You yourselves bear me

witness, that I said, ‘I am not (οὐκ) the Christ, but (ἀλλ’) I have been sent before him.’”

In the context of the unanimous New Testament testimony to Jesus of Nazareth being the Christ, this denial is explicit. The interpretive door is not left open that, given some other circumstance, John the Baptist might be the Christ. In John 8:49 Jesus states, “I do not (οὐκ) have a demon, but (ἀλλὰ) I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.” The denial is very obviously explicit, else it be presumed that John might allow that, on some other occasion, Jesus might have been demon possessed. Other equally telling examples could be offered, but these are sufficient for the present analysis.

The question remains, however, whether the negated proposition in John 9:3 is denied in such explicit terms. The point made above demonstrates clearly that explicit denials are *not* out of the question with respect to the relative negative construction. This alone undermines Derrett’s assertion that the mere presence of this syntactic construction requires the interpreter to admit that the negated proposition might still be true in some other instance.

4. The Relative Negative Construction in John 9:3

The precise form of the relative negative construction in John 9:3 is the negative particle followed by ἀλλά, which is immediately followed by ἵνα. As noted above, this exact construction occurs six times in the Gospel of John, including the occurrence in John 9:3,

and nine additional instances elsewhere in the New Testament. The remainder of this study will focus on the occurrences in John.

Aside from John 9:3, the relative negative construction with ἵνα occurs in the following verses:

John 1:8 – “That one was not (οὐκ) the light, but (ἀλλ’) he came in order (ἵνα) to bear witness to the light.”

John 1:31 – “I myself did not (οὐκ) know him, but (ἀλλ’) so that (ἵνα) this one might be manifested to Israel I came baptizing with water.

John 11:51 “He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not (οὐχ) for the nation only, but (ἀλλ’) that (ἵνα) he might gather together the children of God who are scattered abroad.

John 12:9 – “When the large crowd of the Jews learned that he [Jesus] was there, they came, not (οὐ) only on account of him but (ἀλλ’) also in order (ἵνα) to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.”

John 14:30 “I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no (οὐκ) claim on me, ³¹ but (ἀλλ’) so that (ἵνα) the world may know that I love the Father, thus I do as the Father has commanded me. Rise, let us go from here.”

Of the five instances of the syntactic structure found in John, it appears clear that four fit well in the last interpretive category of making a statement about reality, and that the statements made are categorical denials. In John 1:8 John denies that John the Baptist was the light that had come into the world. The denial is explicit, since there are no other circumstances in the context of New Testament theology that allow John the Baptist to be that messianic light. John 1:31 apparently describes the first moment that John the Baptist understood that Jesus was the Lamb of God (cf. John 1:29). If the denial is not emphatic, we would have to assume John is not being truthful here, and that he indeed knew the identity of the Messiah prior to this time. It would also be necessary to speculate on some event in the Baptizer’s past at which time he obtained this information. It is hardly sound methodology to base one’s exegesis on speculation. In John 11:52, the prophetic statement of Caiaphas that Jesus did not only die for the nation of Israel but for other “children of God” must also be a categorical denial. Anything less would suggest that there could have been some other circumstance where Jesus’ death would have exclusively been for Jews while designed to exclude Gentiles, an idea completely foreign to the New Testament and, for that matter, the Old Testament. The very Old Testament passage upon which John’s language is based makes it abundantly clear that the

messianic Servant would be a light to all nations (Isa 49:6). Lastly, John 14:30-31 has Jesus denying that the “ruler of this world” (identified as Satan; John 12:31 [cp. Luke 10:18]; 16:11) has any authority or legal claim to him.¹ If the denial is not explicit, then the contrary is potentially true—that Satan might have a claim on Jesus. One would therefore be forced to speculate on why Jesus was concealing that information here, or whether he was ignorant of that fact. Both speculations run contrary to the portrait of the Christ in the New Testament.

The final instance of the full relative negative construction in John’s gospel, John 12:9, is an excellent example of the relative negative used to express intention. The large crowd came not only to see Jesus, but also Lazarus. The construction clarifies the intention.

To this point, the data compel us to conclude that the relative negative syntactical structure can indeed point to a categorical denial, and there are no instances of the precise structure found in John 9:3 elsewhere in John’s writings that move the exegete to the conclusion offered by Derrett. But perhaps John 9:3 is an exception. Perhaps it is the lone example in John where the construction does not result in a categorical denial or some other clear function, so that the interpreter should see it as making a statement

¹ On “he has no claim to me” used in John 14:30, Beasley-Murray notes that the phrase “reflects the Hebrew *אין לו עלי* . . . commonly used in a legal sense. The devil has no claim over Jesus, for Jesus is not of this world (8:23), he has ceaselessly resisted the devil, and has never played into his hand (cf. 8:46)” (George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* [Word Biblical Commentary 36; Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002], p. 263.

about reality where the denied proposition is left in the realm of the possible. Such an alternative conclusion would have to have the support of the religious milieu of John 9:3.

5. The Religio-Cultural Background Data

The only way to test the coherence of this final hypothesis is to determine whether the initial question asked by the disciples presumes an acceptance of the notion of a previous life *lived out in another human body*. This qualification is important in that the notion of the soul's pre-existence and the reincarnation doctrine of transmigration of souls are two different ideas. The latter requires the former, but the converse is not the case.

Derrett recognizes the distinction between pre-existence and transmigration of souls, but his wording suggests he nevertheless overlaps the ideas: "Traces exist of a belief amongst contemporaries of Jesus that persons could be *reborn* as other identifiable people. . . . We need not attribute to Jews the doctrine that at death souls migrate to other bodies, though the replenishing and expending of the treasury of souls is a Jewish idea" (2003, 105; emphasis added). Saying that persons could be *reborn* requires transmigration. This is not the same concept as the pre-existence of souls destined to inhabit human bodies. The focus of pre-existence is to provide a theological answer to the question of whence the human soul comes. It says nothing about the soul departing and migrating to subsequent human bodies.

Derrett offers several passages from the New Testament in support for his argument that first century Jews affirmed that a person could be reborn after death: (Matt 14:2; 16:14; Mark 6:14-16; 8:27; Luke 9:7-8:19). Derrett does not take the space to analyze any of these texts in detail, but a closer look reveals that none of them say anything about the rebirth of the soul. The passages are reproduced below (ESV):

Matt 14: 1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, 2 and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.”

Matt 16:13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Mark 6:14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.” 15 But others said, “He is Elijah.” And others said, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

Mark 8:27 And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” 28 And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.”

Luke 9:7 Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. 9 Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

Luke 9:18 Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” 19 And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.”

All of these texts mention John the Baptist as a popular explanation for the fame of Jesus and his miraculous works. None of them, however, have John being reincarnated in Jesus, as though John’s life ended and he was reborn in a new human body, that of Jesus of Nazareth. This obviously could not have been the case, since John and Jesus were born six months apart (Luke 1:8-36), and the man Jesus already had a soul during his contemporaneous life with John the Baptist. Rather, the presumption was something akin

to spirit possession, in which the spirit of John the Baptist had someone returned and taken up residence in Jesus. This denotes neither reincarnation nor pre-existence of souls.

It is equally fallacious to see the references to Elijah in these passages as evincing a belief in the migration or rebirth of the soul into another human body distinct from that which the soul had previously inhabited. In terms of the biblical narrative, reincarnation is ruled out for Elijah for the obvious reason that the Hebrew Bible has Elijah avoiding death altogether (2 Kings 2:1-14). One cannot have reincarnation if there is no death, since death marks the separation of the body and its soul in the biblical mind (Phil 1:21-24). It is much more coherent to see these references to Elijah as either the notion that the living Elijah, who had been taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot, had returned under the identity (or guise) of Jesus of Nazareth, or that some Jews had interpreted the prophecy of Mal 4:5 as the coming of Elijah as the messiah, not the forerunner of the Messiah.

The expected prophetic return of Elijah also apparently spawned a belief in Second Temple Period Judaism that other prophets would return in conjunction with a messianic era. Most of the verses cited by Derrett include a popular view that Jesus was one of the prophets, and specifically, in one passage, Jeremiah. On the surface this might be construed as the migration of the soul of a prophet into the body of Jesus of Nazareth, but this analysis is imprecise. 2 Macc 15:13-16 speaks to the Jewish belief of an eschatological reappearance of Jeremiah, and 2 Esd 2:18 pairs Jeremiah with Isaiah in the

eschaton. Other Second Temple Jewish texts, especially from Qumran, have Enoch and Melchizedek returning at the day of the Lord. Enoch returns—with Elijah—in several Pseudepigrapha (*Apoc. El. [H]* 4:7; 5:32; *Apoc. Pet. [Eth]* 2.).

It is interesting that what binds these figures together is the fact that, in the canonical Jewish texts at least, they were either specifically said to have never died, or their deaths are never described. 4 Ezra 6:25-26 informs us that there was a belief that those prophets who had never died would return at the eschaton: “25 And it shall be whosoever shall have survived all these things that I have foretold unto thee, he shall be saved and shall see my salvation and the end of my world. 26 And the men who have been taken up, who have not tasted death from their birth, shall appear.”² As a result, the first century Jewish view that Jesus was Jeremiah or one of the prophets need not be construed as evincing a belief in the migration of souls. It can coherently be argued that the language of the verses cited by Derrett points to the belief in the return of prophets believed to have never suffered death. At best, the data is inconclusive.

Derrett does not cite other Second Temple Jewish texts that have been offered as evidence for a belief in the rebirth of souls. The work of Head and Cranston on reincarnation in the ancient and modern world cites the following texts in their discussion of Judaism and reincarnation (1961, 26-27).

² The translation is that of R. H. Charles, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), 2:576.

Josephus, *A.J.* 18.1.5:

The doctrine of the Essenes is this: That all things are best ascribed to God. They teach the immortality of souls, and esteem that the rewards of righteousness are to be earnestly striven for (Whiston, 1996).

Josephus, *J.W.* 2.8.11

For their doctrine is this—That bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of it not permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue forever; and that they come out of the most subtle air, and are united to their bodies as in prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural enticement; but that when they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward. And this is like the opinion of the Greeks, that good souls have their habitations beyond the ocean, in a region that is neither oppressed with storms of rain, or snow, or with intense heat, but that this place is such as is refreshed by the gentle breathing of a west wind, that is perpetually blowing from the ocean; while they allot to bad souls a dark and tempestuous den, full of never-ceasing punishments. And indeed the Greeks seem to me to have followed the same notion, when they allot the

islands of the blessed to their brave men, whom they call heroes and demigods; and to the souls of the wicked, the region of the ungodly, in Hades, where their fables relate that certain persons, such as Sisyphus, and Tantalus, and Ixion, and Tityus, are punished; which is built on this first supposition, that souls are immortal; and thence are those exhortations to virtue, and exhortations from wickedness collected; whereby good men are bettered in the conduct of their life, by the hope they have of reward after their death, and whereby the vehement inclinations of bad men to vice are restrained, by the fear and expectation they are in, that although they should lie concealed in this life, they should suffer immortal (ἀθάνατον)³ punishment after their death. These are the divine doctrines of the Essenes about the soul, which lay an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste of their philosophy (Whiston, 1996).

A close reading of these two passages concerning the Essenes reveals that the idea of the migration of souls upon death to another body is *not* found in Josephus' description of Essene doctrine. It is very clear that the Essenes believe the soul to be eternal, and that

³ The Greek lemma ἀθάνατος does not inherently speak of eternality (without beginning or end), but may refer to unending life (“deathlessness”). See the entry for ἀθάνατος in Liddell-Scott, 1940, 30. For example, heroic fame is spoken of in such terms, which by definition had a genesis in history and is not immortal, but unending.

they embraced the idea of an afterlife—blissful for the good, terrible for the wicked. These beliefs put them at odds with Jewish groups like the Sadducees, but they have nothing to do with reincarnation, or even the pre-existence of the soul.

Elsewhere Josephus says of the Pharisees (*A.J.* 18.1.3):

They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again; on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction; insomuch that the cities gave great attestations to them on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also (Whiston, 1996).

There is no migration of the soul in this passage, though it is often construed. The belief that “souls have an immortal vigor in them” speaks of the immortality of the soul, not its departure from one body and its entrance into another. The latter idea must be brought to the text. Like the Essenes, the wicked (those who were “vicious in this life”) go to an eternal condemnation, but the righteous “shall have power to revive and live again.” Does

this phrase mean live again in a subsequent earthly body different from that which the soul had just inhabited, as reincarnation postulates, or some sort of resurrection (spiritual or otherwise) of the same person to eternal reward? The latter seems to clearly be in view since there is no reference to the soul moving to another body. The translation “power to revive and live again” is a bit misleading as well. “Power to revive” (ἀναβιώω) is clear enough, meaning “come to life again” (Liddell-Scott, 99). The rendering “live again” (ῥᾶστώνην) is curious, since the term refers to rest, tranquility, or escape from anything unpleasant (Liddell-Scott, 1565). The phrasing—juxtaposed as it is with eternal condemnation—speaks of eternal rest or deliverance from the harsh realities of life, not the prospect of enduring another earthly existence and all its trials.

In an address to some Jewish soldiers contemplating suicide rather surrender to the Romans Josephus says (*J.W.* 3.8.5; emphasis added):

The bodies of all men are indeed mortal, and are created out of corruptible matter; but the soul is ever immortal (ἀθάνατος), and is a portion of the Divinity that inhabits our bodies. Besides, if anyone destroys or abuses a depositum he hath received from a mere man, he is esteemed a wicked and perfidious person; but then if anyone cast out of his body this divine depositum, can we imagine that he who is there affronted does not know of it. Moreover, our law justly ordains, that slaves who run away from their masters shall be punished, though the masters they ran away from

may have been wicked masters to them. And shall we endeavor to run away from God, who is the best of all masters, and not think ourselves highly guilty of impiety? Do not you know that those who depart out of this life, according to the law of nature, and pay that debt which was received from God, when he that lent it us is pleased to require it back, enjoy eternal fame? That their houses and their posterity are sure, that their souls are pure and obedient, and obtain a most holy place in heaven, from whence, in the revolution of ages, *they are again sent into pure bodies*; while the souls of those whose hands have acted madly against themselves, are received by the darkest place in Hades, and while God, who is their father, punishes those that offend against either of them in their posterity? For which reason God hates such doings, and the crime is punished by our most wise legislator (Whiston, 1996).

The italicized phrase “they are sent again into pure bodies” certainly sounds as though Josephus has the transmigration of souls in mind. However, such a conclusion would be reading a very eastern view of the afterlife into this Hellenistic writer’s words. Three considerations must be brought to bear. First, in the passage under consideration, the pure souls take residence in heaven, after which they receive new, pure bodies. This raises the possibility (even the likelihood) that the bodies in question are not earthly but are instead celestial. Second, one must ask whether any sect of ancient Judaism held that a human body was inherently pure. The evidence suggests otherwise, which would disqualify a

new earthly body as being the referent of the “pure bodies” in the statement of Josephus.

As Neusner points out:

Judaic thinking about sin grows out of the Hebrew Scriptures’ comprehension that human beings are by nature morally flawed . . . The rabbis concur with the inherited scriptural view that people have an inclination to engage in wrong actions. This inclination, which they term the *yetser ha-ra* (sic), is recognized as an aspect of the human condition, a temptation to which all people are subject. The idea of the existence of such an inclination is suggested by the specific wording of Gen. 8:21, where God speaks following the conclusion of the flood, after Noah emerges from the ark and offers sacrifices: “And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the inclination (*yetser*) of man’s heart is evil (*ra*) (sic) from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done (2000, 3:1324).

Third, many Josephus scholars have suggested that Josephus writes about the afterlife from a Pharisaic perspective. The Pharisees maintained that the soul of the wicked did not receive a new heavenly body, since they were consigned to an afterlife in Hades. The good souls passed into a new “heavenly body” after death, and idea that scholars have deemed is likely behind Paul’s language about a mortal body being brought down in weakness and a “spiritual body” raised in power (1 Cor 15:43; cf. Segal, 1998). The result of these considerations is that, while the possibility exists that Josephus may have

been speaking about transmigration, that conclusion is very unlikely. It is more coherent, given the general context of Jewish theology that the “pure bodies” in this Josephus passage are some sort of glorified celestial body, not another earthly body subject to the sinful impulse and the struggles of mundane life on earth.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the possibility of a child sinning before birth was discussed by the rabbis, not in respect of a pre-existent life (Wis 8:19–20 reflects Alexandrian, not Palestinian Judaism), but of life *in the womb*. Genesis 25:22, telling of the twins Jacob and Esau struggling in Rebecca’s womb, provoked some interesting explanations:

Rabbi Laqish said, “This one ran round to kill that one, and the other ran round to kill him.” R. Bekehja said in the name of R. Levi: “When she [Rebecca] walked past synagogues and houses of instruction, Jacob struggled to get out, in accordance with Jer.1:5: ‘Before I formed you in your mother’s womb I knew you.’ And when she passed idol temples Esau ran and struggled to get out (*Gen. Rab.* 63:[39c]), in accordance with Ps 58:4, ‘The godless go astray from the womb’” (Beasley-Murray, 2002, 155).

6. Conclusion

This study sought to examine the claim put forth by J. D. M. Derrett, that the syntax of John 9:3-4 informs the exegete that the “true meaning” of John 9:3-4 is that Jesus did not absolutely deny the possibility that the man born blind may have sinned in a previous life. Derrett’s position cannot be sustained from an examination of the syntactical structure he offers in support of his claim, as there are clear examples where the construction requires an absolute denial. Derrett’s position is also suspect with respect to the background data brought to the discussion.

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