

A CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE OF REINCARNATION

Note: N is a short form for **Doug Norkum** Reference: <http://www.ccel.us/reincarnation.toc.html>

In contrast to the reincarnated soul, the resurrected soul does not return again to earth in a different body.

This resurrection of the body, of course, is not a body of flesh as we now it, but a spiritual body such as the apostle Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15; it is nonetheless a real body, and it retains the personality and identity of the one who died.

N: The soul at death rises from the body and takes on its spiritual body which can be identified as 'belonging' to the human person. In such a body, Christ rose from the dead and was not just ethereal, but he ate food-- yet Jesus appeared in rooms without going through doors.

The hope embodied in the biblical view of resurrection is inseparable from the Christian conviction that evil will be finally conquered and put away at the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgment.

Such optimism stands in marked contrast to the cyclic view of life held in the East, where evil and suffering are an eternal status quo.

N: Is the Second Coming of Christ coincident with the End of the Age?

In Christianity, **universal reconciliation** is the doctrine that all sinful and alienated human souls—because of divine love and mercy—will ultimately be reconciled to God. In Christianity, Universalism can refer to the beliefs that all humans either may or will be saved through Jesus Christ and eventually come to harmony in God's kingdom. This salvation is expressed as offered both to Jews and to Gentiles.

N: Universal reconciliation is not an accepted doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church.

Romans 1:16,17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Romans 9:22-26 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'my beloved.'" "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

Revelation 7:9-17 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

N: Notice that these Souls have faith in Jesus Christ and have been washed clean by His shed blood. God has not willed that any Soul be lost as all they need to do is have faith in the sacrifice on the cross of Jesus Christ for all sins and repent of their sins and then the Kingdom of God will be alive within God's children.

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Reincarnation is more closely associated with Hindu tradition and suggests a retention of an individualized soul from one life to the next, although the former life is not usually remembered.

According to classical reincarnation thought, the soul endures thousands of lives as a human being. Some of the soul's incarnations may even occur on other planets or in other solar systems. Certain schools even specify the number of years a soul must remain on earth; the well-known guru Parmhansa Yogananda cited an average of one million years.

Hinduism and Buddhism teach that final liberation from the round of rebirths can only be achieved by humans. Only through the pitfalls and travails of the human condition can a soul earn sufficient merit to warrant its release or liberation (Sanskrit *moksha* or *samadhi*). Thus a soul must evolve through various life forms to the human state, the evolutionary plateau where moral lessons are learned through multitudes of reincarnations.

Karma, the law of cause and effect, simply means that there remains nought after each personality but the causes produced by it. No "personality" — a mere bunch of material atoms and of instinctual mental characteristics — can of course continue as such, in the world of pure Spirit. The Bhagavad-Gita, one of the best known Hindu scriptures, defines it quite simply as "the name given to the creative force that brings beings into existence."

In gnostic doctrine:

1. **All is One.** This is the proposition that all existence is of one basic essence which finds its lowest common denominator in the Eastern conception of Deity, the impersonal Absolute which is called *Brahman* in Sanskrit. Brahman is the metaphysical substratum of the universe, the cosmic field from which all possibilities arise. The unity of all things is the subjective revelation most commonly encountered in mystical experience. In common parlance, it is usually called *pantheism* (*pan*, "all"; *theos*, "God") or *monism* (*mono*, "one"). Fundamentally, the unity of all things means that God is not separate from creation.
2. **Humanity is essentially divine.** This is a logical inference from the first statement. If the universe is divine and human beings are a conscious part of that universe, they must also be divine, at least at their very core.
3. Therefore, *the purpose of life is to become experientially aware of our divine nature.* Salvation thus becomes the attainment of this reality through union with the Divine Absolute.
4. *Mastery of "spiritual technology" and mystical experience*

N: "I Am That I Am" (Hebrew name of *Yahweh*) is the "All Is One." We are but children, offspring of this very personal God. Without the maintaining thought of God, the creation would vanish as wisp of smoke blown into nothingness. Sin is the tarnish we acquire on our Soul that needs to be purified by our faith in Jesus Christ whose sacrifice on the cross redeems us. It is through simplicity, humility, obedience, love, faith, service, prayer, contemplation and meditation that we can come to know our Soul as a child of God. God is infinite awareness out of which our finite awarenesses has been born. This process is extremely personal as our Creator has given the Soul free will to do ITS will in Paradise or to do its own will in Hell.

First, Christianity has taught a doctrine of resurrection: the human soul does not return to earth after death, but is resurrected as an individual personality to face judgment. Second, it has taught that God forgives and extends mercy in the face of human sin and shortcomings. There is no forgiveness and little, if any, mercy connected with the idea of reincarnation. Each soul pays the inevitable price for its own failings and misdeeds, in hundreds or thousands of existences.

Genesis 1:26, God made humanity in his own image.

God takes our sin, condemns it on the cross and gives us his righteousness in return as grace, a free and undeserved gift. Because it is accomplished and given by God, it is perfect and complete; nothing can be added to it, and human righteousness and good works cannot improve God's forgiveness.

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Who was John the Baptist? The next and most complicated passage has to do with John the Baptist and Elijah. The common Jewish belief at the time was that Elijah would return to “restore all things” before the Messiah appeared, a belief that Jesus affirmed. Jesus makes three statements about John the Baptist in the Gospels which could be understood as references to reincarnation.

The first is **Matthew 11:14**: “If you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah who is to come.”

Later in **Matthew 17:12-13**, Jesus again said, “ ‘But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they [the Jews] did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands.’ Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.”

In **Mark 9:13** the same theme is echoed. “But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

So it seems that Elijah had indeed come back, according to Jesus: “as it is written of him.” The central question then is how did he come back? Jesus’ reference to biblical prophecy in Mark 9:13 is found in the book of Malachi: “I send my messenger to prepare the way before me” (3:1) and “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (4:5). The angel who appeared to Zechariah announcing John the Baptist’s birth elaborated on these statements: “And he [John] will go before him [Jesus] in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). The angel did not tell Zechariah that his son was to be Elijah reincarnate.

After John the Baptist began his ministry, the public was confused about his identity. In an attempt to settle the matter, the Jewish religious leaders sent a delegation of priests and Levites from Jerusalem to confront John. They asked him, “ ‘Who are you? . . . Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘*I am not.* . . . I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord,” as the prophet Isaiah said’ “ (Jn 1:19-23). John’s denial is crucial; we also must note that Jesus did not say “John the Baptist is Elijah,” nor did he mention reincarnation in dealing with the issue. Rather, we are looking at a classic example of biblical typology; that is, John the Baptist was a “type” of Elijah. He fulfilled the role of Elijah, as prophesied by Malachi. John the Baptist had the same endowment of power and spiritual characteristics as Elijah. This is stated most explicitly in the quotation from Luke, that John would “go before him *in the spirit and power of Elijah*.” One other point should be noted:

In reincarnation doctrine death must precede rebirth and Elijah never died. According to 2 Kings 2:11, Elijah was taken up “by a whirlwind into heaven.” Finally, it is significant that when Elijah reappeared with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17 and Mark 9), there was no confusion among the disciples as to who he was. They immediately recognized both Moses and Elijah, and they did not confuse either of them with John the Baptist.

The “cycle of nature.” A third text found in the Bible with marginal reincarnational overtones is the reference in James 3:6 to the “cycle of nature,” which can be literally rendered “wheel of genesis,” a phrase suggestive of Buddhism. In this passage the apostle James is comparing the human tongue to a fire, a fire that touches the whole body and inflames the whole cycle of life, as rash and thoughtless language embodies the sins and passions of the human condition. Hence he is referring to the sinful state of the human race and the role of the tongue (speech) as the most obvious outworking of our fallen condition.

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Did the blind man live before? Last, there is the revealing passage in John 9:1-3 about the man born blind. As he [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” Having said that, Jesus healed him and the man then glorified God and worshiped Jesus. If reincarnation was believed and taught by Jesus, this would have been the ideal opportunity to explain the doctrines of karma and reincarnation; yet with one sentence, Jesus apparently excluded reincarnation as a possible explanation.

In Luke’s Gospel there is a similar passage which implicitly excludes karma and reincarnation as an explanation for seeming injustice in this life. Luke picks up the narrative and writes, “There were some present at that very time who told [Jesus] of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And [Jesus] answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” (Lukel3:1-5).

Jesus had said, *“I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die”* (John 11:25-26).

In summarizing this discussion of the psychic and spiritistic parallels with past-life phenomena, several things should be noted. First, the relatively few examples of apparently genuine spontaneous recall cases can hardly be taken as proof of the doctrine of reincarnation. Of the logical interpretations remaining, it would seem that these cases resemble psychism, mediumship and spirit possession more closely than they do genuine rebirth. The biblical portrayal of familiar spirits or demonic possession seems more likely than actual reincarnation. But even without a biblical or Christian bias, parapsychologists should admit that the recall phenomenon, *when it cannot be explained by natural means*, is most correctly interpreted in the context of (1) extrasensory perception and clairvoyance; or (2) mediumship, trance communications or spirit possession.

Explaining past lives:

1. Conscious or unconscious fraud.
2. Cryptoamnesia.
3. Genetic memory.
4. Spirit communication.
5. The “collective unconscious.” or Akasha records or the mind of God

Reincarnationists, however, believe that the strongest arguments for their doctrines are neither nature’s cycles nor the evidences of past-life recall. Rather, they believe that their most persuasive argument is a moral one. They contend that only through the law of karma can true justice be rendered, that only by experiencing many lifetimes is a person able to get a fair shake. They insist that one life is not enough for moral, intellectual and spiritual growth; to them the Christian view of only one life followed by judgment seems bigoted and narrow.

Sri Chinmoy, an Indian guru who conducts regular meditation sessions at the United Nations in New York, expresses similar sentiments: “Now if our aim is to enter into the Highest, the Infinite, the Eternal, the Immortal, then naturally one short span of life is not enough.”

Paul is adamant when he says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool (Isaiah 1:18).

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:7).

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Ultimately, for the Christian, it is the awareness that we can never evolve to goodness on our own; instead we choose forgiveness, redemption and Christ's life in us. As the apostle Paul says, "Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). And, for those who have made the choice, the promise rings eternal: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed in the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin" (Rom 4:7-8).

Repentance, humility, self-sacrifice and compassion are characteristics any person can develop over the period of a lifetime with the help of God.

God does not promise to cause me to grow without my growing. He promises only the conditions for success."³ Those conditions are the love, mercy and justice of God, applied to the Christian's life through the work of the Holy Spirit; but the initial step of conversion and forgiveness occurs in the span of time it takes to make a choice.

The apostle Paul also rejoiced in this hope nineteen hundred years ago, as reflected in some of his New Testament writings:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom 8:18).

No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9).

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (1 Cor 3:18).

The doctrine of final judgment . . . stresses man's accountability and the certainty that justice will finally triumph over all the wrongs which are part and parcel of life here and now . . . The Christian view of judgment means that history moves to a goal. Judgment protects the idea of the triumph of God and of good. It is unthinkable that the present conflict between good and evil should last throughout eternity. Judgment means that evil will be disposed of authoritatively, decisively, finally. Judgment means that in the end God's will will be perfectly done.

The Bible teaches that God is, among other things, perfect, changeless, absolutely good and righteous, unspeakably holy, and completely sovereign over his creation. Hence God has strong opinions and feelings about evil, suffering and unrighteousness. If he didn't, we would have grounds for questioning his moral character. God cannot let evil pass. He must deal with it, for while he is loving and merciful, he is also *just*.

Thus God could justly obliterate all sinful and ungodly people in an instant, destroying them forever or punishing them brutally with a single word of command. But this would be inconsistent with his love and mercy. What God has chosen instead is to give all of us a chance to repent. And the basis and condition for that repentance is staggering — God chose to absorb the penalty for sin himself by becoming human and offering up the very incarnation of himself as payment for the penalty of our evil. This, of course, is what the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is all about. God sealed the facts of his victorious love and forgiveness when Christ rose from the dead. This love and forgiveness is available to all who will acknowledge and receive it. "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in *him* we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:20-21).

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Yet there are many who will not respond to God's appeal in Christ. The Scriptures plainly state that these will be judged at the Great White Throne in the Final Judgment (Rev 20:11-15). Those who have spurned God's offer of mercy will be judged primarily by being banished from his presence and experience pain, suffering, and utter loneliness for eternity.

Therefore, divine judgment understood in the light of the redemption offered in Christ does not raise moral problems; it settles them. God's judgment will be totally just. No one can accuse God of living in an ivory tower and not having empathy or understanding for the human condition. He experienced the full range of problems associated with the human predicament for thirty-three years, and he even knew a slow and agonizing death at the hands of his persecutors. When God renders the final judgment, even the condemned will agree with the verdict. His justice is perfect, and all will concur that they have been justly tried and sentenced, for God knows all things, including the hidden thoughts and intentions of each person's heart (Heb 4:12). So the need for justice, in accord with the nature of God, is met in the offering of God on the cross, and judgment is based on each person's response to God's offer of mercy and forgiveness.

It's very interesting that the reincarnationist tells us we go through cyclic rebirth and we suffer in various lives to atone for our sins. But it's very puzzling that nobody remembers his past life in enough detail to profit from it! So we don't know what we're being punished for. And if we don't know what we're being punished for, we're quite likely to repeat the offense. If reincarnation is really karma, or the law of justice (as you sow, so shall you reap"), why not protect the person? Why not give him a full vision of what he had been before, with all his flaws, so that the necessary corrections could be made?

One such consequence of reincarnation teachings is moral procrastination.
"God let me live chaste, but not today."

However one may mask this callous attitude by appealing to higher consciousness or karmic law, it ultimately is manifested as *a low regard for individual life* — which often sears both conscience and compassion.

Primarily, it is generally held that God created sentient beings so they could share in his love and goodness through a personal relationship with him. Yet love involves choice and free will; if we were not free to love God, but only programmed like robots, love would not be genuine. And free will involves risk; it may be abused. Apparently it was abused. Satan, for reasons that are little understood, rebelled against God in what was probably a sin of pride and self-will. He led a rebellion and was exiled to earth with his fallen angels. When the human race was created, they were seduced by Satan and hence came the Fall. The important concept to grasp here is that evil did not originate with God; he is not the author of evil, although he has allowed it to continue for a season for reasons finally known only to him. His moral perfection is thereby preserved.

Although God could obliterate all his fallen creatures with one sharp command, he has instead chosen to prove his love by becoming incarnate as one of us, experientially sharing our suffering and personally paying the price by redeeming the stricken race. This is the true love and character of God made known. Thus the Lord told the apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."
(2 Corinthians 12:9)

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Doctrine of God. As demonstrated throughout this study, the theology of reincarnation is based on an impersonal principle which undergirds the universe and emanates forth from itself in endless cycles of expansion and contraction. In contrast, the Bible tells us that God is holy and infinite in all respects, yet personal; he is a God who stands apart from creation and loves his creatures with a self-sacrificing love.

Nature of the world. Reincarnation views the world as a state which is less than real, an illusory projection of consciousness which is inherently negative, a lamentable by-product of the creative forces of the universe. Christianity sees the world as real, though temporal and fallen. It is part of God's deliberate creation, and as such it has a definite purpose and is basically good. The finished creation is portrayed in Genesis (before the Fall) as both real and good.

Human Nature. Reincarnation regards people as transient shells that are filled with an immortal soul for a season and then extinguished forever as the soul passes on and assumes a new body and personality. This soul or spiritual essence is conceived of as being a part of God. Christianity views people as made in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26), and so human beings have both personality and moral responsibility. Nonetheless, we are not Deity in essence, and humanity is not a mode of the Divine; an infinite gulf separates creature from the Creator.

Method of salvation. Reincarnationists insist on self-salvation; the soul must save itself by working off karma in multitudinous reincarnations, finally achieving liberation by getting off the wheel of rebirth. Christianity insists that eternal salvation is a gift from God in which the personality is retained, and salvation is conferred on the recipient regardless of merit. It is only necessary to receive the gift of eternal life through faith and then to apply it through righteous living. Jesus' merit becomes our merit.

Theodicy. Reincarnation's endless cycles never solve the problem of evil; evil is eternal. The idea of evil continuing forever is unthinkable in Christianity. Evil was conquered by the death and resurrection of Christ and will be put away forever when he returns to judge the world. This is reflected in Jesus' frequent restatement of the theme "this age [the present order of things] and the age to come [where evil has been eradicated, in the kingdom of God]."

One of the most persistent challenges to orthodox Christianity is *syncretism*, the idea that all religions say the same thing "in a different language" and that all paths are equally valid in knowing God.

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Gnostic-Pantheistic World View

1. “God” is totally synonymous with creation (monism or pantheism): “All in One,” “Thou art that.”
2. God is a principle, a universal law, vibration or energy. Universal Consciousness. “It,” not “Him.” Holy Spirit is an impersonal force.
3. Humanity is good—a part or mode of God. The totality of existence is really good as it is, although we do not perceive this. Moral evil is only an illusion or imperfection, negative vibration or energy. “Evil” is simply a result of the law of cause and effect. “Good and bad” are part of karmic balance. An enlightened person transcends moral distinctions.
4. Christ’s death, resurrection and atonement for sin are unnecessary and irrelevant. No forgiveness.
5. View of history and humanity is cyclical. Problem of evil and suffering is never resolved. No redemption, only an eternal balancing of karma.
6. The physical world is illusory, a projection of consciousness: *Maya*, “the veil of ignorance.”
7. Works win righteousness. You save yourself by working off your karma, and getting off the wheel of reincarnation.
8. God inherits the imperfection of the world. He / “it” is equal to the lowest form of creation by definition. Or, alternatively, the world mirrors the imperfection of God.
9. Language, doctrine and written revelation are ultimately inadequate and meaningless. They are a barrier to the experience of enlightenment and truth.
10. An endless and confusing stream of “god-men,” gurus and avatars impart enlightenment, but are limited in power and duration.

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Biblical World View

1. God is eternally transcendent, “other” than creation (although he is immanent or omnipresent—Acts 17:28). Creatures are individual and unique (Col 1:16-17; 1 Cor 4:7; Is 55:8-9; 48:11).
2. God is a personality or Infinite Person. He is holy, to be worshiped (Rev 4:11). The Holy Spirit is a Person (John 16:13-14).
3. Humanity is fallen and sinful, although created in the image of God and therefore having great value. Moral evil is a reality. Satan is a personal, wicked entity, with his will set against God (Jer 17:5-9; Is 64:6; Rom 3:23; John 3:19; 8:44).
4. Existence of evil necessitates God’s action. Forgiveness is offered via the death of Christ to atone for sin (John 3:16; Romans 5:8).
5. View of history and individual lives is linear. Problem of evil and suffering is permanently resolved by Christ’s redemption, with the creation of a New Heaven and a New Earth (Rev 21:1-4; Heb 7:25-28; 9:12, 25-28). “Once for all.”
6. Cosmology—Physical world is real and good (although fallen); it is not to be discounted. It has ramifications for spirituality and is to be integrated with spiritual reality (Genesis 1:31).
7. Grace, atonement, and forgiveness are free (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are saved by the mercy and initiative of God.
8. God’s perfection is not affected by the imperfection of the world, although he is moved to compassion (James 1:17; John 11:35).
9. Human language is rooted in reality. The Bible is valid and adequate to transmit God’s message to humanity. Hence, we see Jesus as “the Word made flesh” (John 1:1-4).
10. Jesus of Nazareth is the unique, one-time incarnation of God (Hebrews 9:25-28). He does not have to “offer himself repeatedly.” spiritual evolution whereby we merely slide into another realm or move grudgingly on into a new body to receive a fresh allotment of karmic affliction. For if reincarnation were true, we would all be at the mercy of an imperfect and compulsive Deity for eternity, and nihilism would be the truest and most consistent philosophy.

Jesus of Nazareth came and died to stop “the wheel of birth, death and suffering,” not to keep it rolling. If this is the qualification for the Saviour of the human race, then there can be only One.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4)