

Hallucinations cannot explain the disciples' claims that Jesus rose from the dead.

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Introduction

The apostle Paul taught that the Christian faith stands or falls on whether the supernatural phenomenon of Christ's resurrection from the dead occurred: "if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile."¹ Since early Christian creeds state that Christ "rose again the third day according to the Scriptures"², it is evident that the first Christians believed in the reality of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Skeptics have attempted to undermine the historicity of Christ's physical resurrection by promoting several naturalistic explanations in order to weaken Christianity's central supernatural truth claim. One is that the disciples' based their testimonies on hallucinations and not real physical encounters. Richard Carrier states, "I believe the best explanation, consistent with both scientific findings and the surviving evidence ... is that the first Christians experienced hallucinations of the risen Christ."³ If these claims are true then they would undermine Christianity and all hope of life after death. However, the skeptics' claims are ill-founded. In this paper, I will argue that hallucinations cannot explain the disciples' testimonies of having seen Jesus alive again after his crucifixion.

Hallucinations are subjective experiences that cannot be shared

By definition, hallucinations cannot explain a real event as they "are where someone sees, hears, smells, tastes or feels things that don't exist outside their mind."⁴ It follows that groups of people cannot share such personal experiences. Clinical psychologist Gary Collins concludes that it is not "possible that one person could somehow induce a hallucination in somebody else" and that "since a hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense,

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:17.

² 1 Corinthians 15:4.

³ Richard C. Carrier, "The Spiritual Body of Christ" in Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, "The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave" (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005), 184 as quoted in Clay Jones, "Prepared Defense: Fast Answers to Tough Questions", v. 2.2, 2014.

⁴ National Health Service of the United Kingdom, "Hallucinations and Hearing Voices", NHS UK, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hallucinations>.

it is obvious that others cannot witness it.”⁵ Given these attributes, if hallucinations were all that were involved in the post-resurrection sightings of Christ, the disciples could not have collectively shared in the same inner psychological experiences.

Conversely, skeptic Keith Parsons argues that people in groups can get carried away into collective delusory experiences, citing a work published in 1852.⁶ He uses “The Angels of Mons” and the “Salem witch trials” as examples to illustrate that “people in crowds are often more susceptible to visual or auditory delusions than they are individually.”⁷ In the former event, angelic warriors allegedly aided British soldiers retreating from the battle of Mons in 1914. In the latter, women in Salem, Massachusetts, were accused and convicted of witchcraft by a group of young girls who claimed to be demon-possessed. Parsons claims that “mass hallucinations are extremely well documented phenomena ... and may be directly witnessed as they occur”⁸ thereby implying that such imaginings can spread by contagion resulting in collective group-think or mass hysteria that could account for the resurrection experiences.

However, Parsons only cites three conjectural examples and does not reference supporting scientific work. Moreover, there is evidence that other factors may have been involved. Aside from the possibility that “The Angels of Mons” could have been real angelic visitations, the story could have been invented to boost morale and was inspired by competing legends ranging from Joan of Arc to ‘The Bowmen’ of Arthur Machen. There is evidence that the “Salem witch trials” were motivated by personal jealousy and rivalry. Parsons fails to demonstrate the equivalence of these examples and their subsequent impact

⁵ Gary Collins, quoted in “What is Hallucination Theory?”, Gotquestions.org, <https://www.gotquestions.org/hallucination-theory.html>.

⁶ Charles Mackey. *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (London, Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852).

⁷ Keith Parsons, “Why I am not a Christian”, Internet Infidels, accessed 17 September 2019, https://infidels.org/library/modern/keith_parsons/whynotchristian.html#hallucination.

⁸ Ibid.

to the magnitude of the resurrection and what followed. Moreover, the post-resurrection events have strong prior historical reference points in prophecy and the life and teachings of Christ that they fulfilled. Whilst the disciples had not understood Jesus' teaching on the matter, his resurrection was something that they "*could* have and *should* have known ... was coming"⁹ in contrast to these more recent, isolated, unanticipated appearances which have no such foundations.

Leaving aside the possibility that the resurrection claims were the result of a sophisticated conspiracy, for the skeptics' claim to be true, the various witnesses would have had to share almost identical inner mental experiences. Otherwise, their accounts would have differed or later diverged. However, there is no evidence that this occurred. It is worth remembering that the disciples had thought that they had experienced a ghostly sighting of Christ before, as recorded in Mark 6:49. They would not have made the same mistake but would have made certain that it really was Jesus in the flesh, as Thomas insisted¹⁰.

Multiple varied eyewitness accounts

Whilst hallucinations are individual subjective experiences, Christianity is not based on an isolated resurrection appearance around which early Christians rallied. Many witnesses were involved over a sustained period. The witnesses were variously: "weeping ...afraid and astonished ...full of remorse ... and ... incredulity ... distracted by the events of the week."¹¹ The number and diversity of the people involved bolsters the veracity of their accounts and provides "an insurmountable barrier for hallucinations. The odds that each person would be precisely in the proper and same frame of mind to experience a hallucination, even

⁹ Henry M. Morris, "Prophecies of the Resurrection", icr.org, accessed 1 October 2019, <https://www.icr.org/article/prophecies-resurrection/>.

¹⁰ John 20:24-29.

¹¹ John Stott. *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971) 57.

individually, decrease exponentially.”¹² The consistency of recorded experiences points to some common set of real events to which they all related in unison despite their geographical separation. We know this from creeds which are later included in the New Testament that Habermas says “pre date Paul and extend back to the earliest church, which completely complement Jesus' own self claims.”¹³ All of this casts doubt on the claim that this was the result of disparate multiple hallucinations.

Skeptic Chris Hallquist argues that these multiple encounters are comparable to people claiming to being “abducted by space aliens.”¹⁴ The basis of Hallquist’s claim is that “hallucinations, false memories, and so on seem to be an important source of religious and paranormal beliefs.”¹⁵ However, just because some religions may be the result of ill-founded beliefs and that the same *might* be true of the resurrection does not make this claim probable. Habermas concludes that in trying to equate the two there “is clearly an over-reliance on a hypothesis apart from the data” making it “a theory not anchored in reality.”¹⁶

Moreover, evidence suggests that science-fiction literature and media create expectations and shape alleged alien abduction experiences. In contrast to this, many people did not accept that Jesus was the Messiah; much less that he would soon die and rise again. Moreover, the brutality and finality of the public execution of Christ that the disciples witnessed extinguished any hope that they would ever see him alive again despite his teachings. The notion that Christ would rise physically “was out of their paradigm.”¹⁷

¹² Gary Habermas, *Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: Hallucination The Recent Revival of Theories* (Charlotte, NC: Christian Research Institute, 2001), 5.

¹³ Gary Habermas, “The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ”, (College Press Publishing Company, 1996), chapter 4, <http://www.garyhabermas.com/books/historicaljesus/historicaljesus.htm>.

¹⁴ Chris Hallquist, “Jesus’ resurrection: was Paul hallucinating?”, Patheos.com, as referred to in Lisa Quintana, “Jesus Resurrection was NOT a Mass Hallucination,” ThinkDivinely.com, accessed 17 September 2019, <https://thinkdivinely.com/jesus-resurrection-was-not-a-mass-hallucination>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Habermas, *Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection*, 4.

¹⁷ Lisa Quintana, “Jesus Resurrection was NOT a Mass Hallucination,” ThinkDivinely.com, accessed 16 September 2019, <https://thinkdivinely.com/jesus-resurrection-was-not-a-mass-hallucination>.

Furthermore, hallucinations tend to occur within a short time period and people usually recover from them¹⁸. The sightings of Jesus after his death spanned a period of forty days and were so real that they endured in the minds of the witnesses. Since hallucinations are rare events, by using the mass hallucinations hypothesis to account for and discredit the resurrection, skeptics are left with the challenge of explaining why so many of these suddenly took place and then stopped within six weeks if a real resurrection was not involved. If hallucinations formed the basis of the disciples' faith then a tension would have emerged that is missing from the New Testament. On the one hand, it would have been in their interests to prolong these hallucinations in order to gain momentum and draw new people in to their beliefs, particularly in the very hostile society they lived in. On the other hand, it would have become increasingly difficult to hold the movement together as different personal experiences would have diverged giving rise to factions. Instead, the New Testament reveals great unity among believers.

Hallucinations would have been simple to disprove

If the resurrection was a hoax, the disciples took a great risk in how they declared it to their local culture as it would have been simple to disprove. Jewish leaders who had engineered Christ's execution could have accused the disciples of having stolen the body, or located the body and brought it to public attention, or rounded-up all of the so-called witnesses and cross-examined them under pressure until they confessed to lying. Alternatively, they could have either discredited the notion of an empty tomb or removed all evidence of its existence. However, these possibilities have to be measured against the known facts. Quintana writes, "The fact that history remains silent on this speaks volumes"¹⁹ and legal scholar John W. Montgomery states, "It passes the bounds of credibility that the early

¹⁸ Habermas, *Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection*, 5.

¹⁹ Quintana, "Jesus Resurrection was NOT a Mass Hallucination".

Christians could have manufactured such a tale and then preached it among those who might easily have refuted it simply by producing the body of Jesus.”²⁰ Moreover, the disciples would not have used the word “resurrected” if they were not certain because, even if the body could not have been produced immediately, Jewish culture would have allowed opponents to produce an ossuary with Christ’s bones within a year in order to quash the speculation.²¹

Skeptic Keith Parsons counter-argues that there were at least two reasons preventing the Jews from producing Christ’s body to quash the disciples’ claims. Firstly, as a criminal, Jesus’ body would probably have been buried in a mass grave comprising a lime pit designed to make the corpses rot quickly and “cut the stench.”²² Secondly, there was such turmoil surrounding the crucifixion that they would not have known where the Romans had taken Christ’s body. However, Christ’s crucifixion was no ordinary execution so the location of the body would have been a matter of great interest. Only a few days earlier Christ had entered Jerusalem as a triumphant hero²³. Moreover, Joseph of Arimathea was a well-known official who could have been challenged publically if he had conspired to divert the corpse, even for a short period. Scripture records that the claims were made very soon after Christ’s death and not many months afterwards, as some skeptics claim. Therefore, even if it was buried elsewhere, it would have been possible to dig up the body before it decomposed. It would certainly be impossible to prove that delay and rapid decay prevented the evidence being produced so the claim, at best, remains conjecture. Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell

²⁰ John Warwick Montgomery. *History and Christianity*, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1971) as quoted in Lisa Quintana, “Jesus Resurrection was NOT a Mass Hallucination”, ThinkDivinely.com.

²¹ N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*, (New York City, NY: Harper Collins, 2008) as referred to in Lisa Quintana. “Jesus Resurrection was NOT a Mass Hallucination”, ThinkDivinely.com.

²² Marianne Sawicki. *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Church Practices*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1960), 180, 257 as quoted in John D. Crossan et al. *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 18.

²³ Luke 19:37-38.

conclude that, “the high priests must have investigated and found the body to be missing and knew that claiming the disciples had hallucinated would not have fit the facts.”²⁴

Parsons also likens the resurrection to sightings of “real ET’s” and UFO’s claiming that “just about everything ... said about the ‘appearances’ of Jesus could be said about ‘close encounters’ with ET’s.”²⁵ He seeks to justify the comparison with the disciples’ resurrection accounts by saying that most “contactees” of UFO’s were once skeptics and are “usually simple, honest, moral (and sane) persons who have nothing to gain by reporting these phenomena.”²⁶ The inference here is that resurrection appearances were nothing abnormal and therefore people would not have bothered trying to refute their claims. However, Parsons’ analysis lacks sufficient comparison since it fails to equate speculative modern-day individual alleged experiences, which have resulted in very little societal impact, with well-attested accounts from people who changed the known world.

The disciples’ lives were transformed

Early Christians were united in their faith, shared their possessions, gave to the poor, were prepared to die for their beliefs and were highly effective in converting others; such was the transformative impact of the resurrection on their lives. Their actions were consistent with having genuinely seen Jesus alive again indicating that they rationally held their resurrection beliefs. In contrast, people can help those who experience hallucinations to understand and “often disavow the experiences when others present have not seen the same thing.”²⁷

²⁴ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Sceptical World*. (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media Ltd, 2017), 292.

²⁵ Parsons, “Why I am not a Christian.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Habermas. *Explaining Away Jesus’ Resurrection*, 5.

However, there is no historical evidence of such disavowal amongst the disciples, despite records of alienation, torture, imprisonment and execution²⁸.

Skeptic Jack Kent argues that Paul and James merely experienced some form of “conversion disorder” resulting from intense feelings of guilt and doubt arising from their previous attitudes and actions.²⁹ However, they do not fit the profile of those susceptible to such a disorder that is much more common among women and people of low IQ and socio-economic status.³⁰ Moreover, there is no indication that they experienced such emotions either before or after their experiences, thus making them “extremely poor candidates for this disorder.”³¹ If their conversions were a mental disorder skeptics would have to demonstrate why Paul went against his prestigious education and traditions and why James relinquished years of scepticism leading and dying for the Jerusalem church. Moreover, the other disciples were not in the right mindset to make them susceptible to hallucinations, which is typically one of euphoria or aroused expectations. Instead, their hopes were shattered.

Some skeptics argue that the early Christians did not undergo genuine transformation resulting from the resurrection but deliberately chose to die in a suicidal bid to earn eternal rewards³², even comparing them to Kamikaze pilots or Nazi fanatics. However, whilst people may be willing to die for a falsehood that they believe to be true, “they do not ... die for what they know is a lie.”³³ Moreover, terrorists usually train from a young age in a culture steeped in self-sacrifice whereas the early believers were working adults, integrated with

²⁸ Pliny the Younger. *Epistles 10.96*, as quoted in Peter J Williams. *Can we trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 24-25.

²⁹ Jack Kent. *The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth*, (London: Open Gate, 1999) as quoted in Habermas. *Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection*, 2.

³⁰ Harold Kaplan et al. *Synopsis of Psychiatry*, (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1994), 621, as quoted in Habermas. *Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection*, 4.

³¹ Habermas. *Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection*, 4.

³² Candida Moss. *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

³³ Paul Little. *Know why you believe*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968), 64.

society and who followed Jesus openly.³⁴ Terrorists seek to kill whereas the gospel's spread was both rapid and peaceful; it did not become a violent religious crusade or political attack. The disciples did not die for a person they had heard about second-hand so the notion of "intentional deception by the disciples is ... implausible."³⁵

Finally, skeptics argue that resurrection appearances were "legendary accretions" (or, at best, "visions")³⁶ that are not supported by the majority of "non-canonical sources"³⁷ and question whether they are supported by any "piece of evidence ... that the disciples died for their belief in the resurrection."³⁸ Lane Craig cautions that undermining the New Testament could call in to question many other contemporaneous events that scholars agree upon, emphasizing that "the empty tomb and appearances of Jesus are far better attested than many other events in ancient history which are commonly accepted as historical."³⁹ Moreover, since the disciples proclaimed Christ's resurrection openly within days of the first appearances, if this was a hoax then it is inconceivable that contemporary historians would not have recorded this. Given the intense hostility felt towards Christianity, opponents would have circulated these writings "within the lifetimes of men and women alive at the time of the resurrectionwho could certainly have ... denied the accuracy of such accounts."⁴⁰

Conclusion

The naturalistic perspective that a supernatural physical resurrection would be impossible because it would violate the laws of nature is what drives the sceptical view that

³⁴ Quintana, "Jesus Resurrection was NOT a Mass Hallucination".

³⁵ Craig Keener. *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 342.

³⁶ Parsons, "Why I am not a Christian".

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ William Lane Craig and Bart Ehrman, "Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?", physics.smu.edu, accessed 30 September 2019, <https://www.physics.smu.edu/~pseudo/ScienceReligion/Ehrman-v-Craig.html>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Josh McDowell, "Evidence for the Resurrection", Josh.org, accessed 30 September 2019, <https://www.josh.org/wp-content/uploads/Evidence-For-The-Resurrection.pdf>.

the accounts of the resurrection were the result of hallucinations by a small, distant group of largely uneducated people. This worldview also holds that Jesus might not have actually died on the cross but only appeared to die or that his dead body could have been stolen and concealed. The contention that the disciples' hallucinated Christ's resurrection runs counter to the medical evidence that hallucinations are private, subjective experiences that people can recover from and be talked out of and is undermined by the number and diversity of the people who met Christ after he was raised. Moreover, this claim would have been simple to disprove if made public at the time of the events and cannot explain the transformation that took place in the disciples' lives and the personal sacrifice that many made. However, the inadequacies in the hallucination theory to account for Christ's resurrection offer useful insights in to the evaluation needed of the various competing naturalistic explanations. Given that Christianity teaches that it succeeds or fails based on whether the resurrection is true, adherents to the opposing naturalistic worldview should be prepared to admit the same.

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