

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 44
Hallucination Hypothesis

We have been thinking about the explanation offered by the myth and legend hypothesis of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances of Jesus, and the origin of the Christian faith. We saw last time that this explanation fails to offer a plausible account of the origin of the disciples' belief that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

I wanted to push the discussion a notch further, however. Suppose that the disciples were not simply left to themselves after the crucifixion of Jesus so that the belief in the resurrection would not have any sort of impetus from either Christian, pagan, or Jewish sources to originate. Suppose instead that someone else stole the body of Jesus out of the tomb and that the disciples upon finding the tomb empty were so shocked that this caused them to hallucinate visions of Jesus. Would that have led them to proclaim that God had raised him from the dead?

You might object at this point that those hypotheses like the theft of the body or hallucinatory visions have all sorts of other problems that would disqualify them. I admit the point but we are being generous here to the skeptic, and we are supposing just for the sake of argument that that is what happened. Would the disciples have then concluded that God had raised Jesus from the dead?

Again, the answer would seem to be "no." You see, hallucinations as projections of the mind cannot contain anything that is not already in the mind. Therefore, given current Jewish beliefs about the afterlife, the disciples (if they were to project hallucinations of Jesus) would have had visions of Jesus in heaven – in paradise – where Jews believed the souls of the righteous dead went until the resurrection at the end of the world. These sorts of visions would not have caused belief in Jesus' resurrection. At the very most, it would only have led the disciples to believe that Jesus had been assumed into heaven or translated into heaven whence he appeared to them.

In the Old Testament certain figures like Enoch and Elijah were portrayed as not having died but rather as being translated directly into heaven out of this earthly life. You might say they didn't die whereas in Jesus' case he did die by crucifixion and so couldn't have been assumed into heaven. But, in fact, assumption into heaven could apply to a person who has died as well. In a non-canonical Jewish book called *The Testament of Job* chapter 40 the story is told of the translation of two children who were killed in the collapse of a house. The children are killed when the house collapses on them. But when the rescuers finally clear away the rubble their bodies are not to be found. The bodies of the children are missing. Meanwhile, the children's mother sees a vision of the children glorified in heaven where they have been translated by God. God assumed them out of

this world into heaven. It needs to be emphasized that for a Jew an assumption into heaven is not the same thing as a resurrection. Translation is the bodily assumption of someone out of this world and into heaven. Resurrection, by contrast, is the raising up of the dead man in the space-time universe. They are just different categories in Jewish thinking.¹ So given typical Jewish beliefs concerning translation and resurrection, the disciples (had they projected heavenly visions of Jesus) would not have preached that God had raised Jesus from the dead. At the very most the empty tomb and hallucinations of Jesus would have caused them to believe that Jesus had been assumed into glory by God because that was consistent with Jewish belief. It would have fit in with the Jewish frame of thought. But they would not have come to think that God had raised Jesus from the dead because this contradicted Jewish belief in at least two fundamental respects as we saw last week. The resurrection always occurred, you will recall, after the end of the world, and it was never of an isolated individual apart from the general resurrection of the people.

So the origin of Christianity owes itself to the belief in the earliest disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead. That belief cannot be plausibly accounted for in terms of either Christian influences, pagan influences, for Jewish influences on the disciples. Even if we grant for the sake of argument the implausible hypotheses that the body was stolen and the disciples had hallucinations of Jesus, the origin of the belief in Jesus' resurrection still cannot be plausibly explained. Such events would have led the disciples, at most, to say that Jesus had been translated into heaven where they saw him but not resurrected from the dead. So the origin of the Christian faith remains inexplicable on this myth and legend hypothesis.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I wondered if you have seen the popular Netflix show recently *A.D. Kingdom and Empire* which depicts the post-Resurrection events. Watching it I thought it was interesting that two things that I find somewhat questionable. They show Jesus ascending into heaven with his disciples as sort of an isolated event as opposed to having a crowd of five hundred people. Then the Pentecost event itself is kind of more something that happens amongst the disciples. I was wondering if you had seen that.

Dr. Craig: I haven't seen it. I shouldn't be asked about things in popular culture because I am so out of touch with some of these things. No, I haven't seen it. With respect to the ascension, it is portrayed in the book of Acts as a mass event. We don't know how many were present there but there were one hundred twenty in the upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus was meeting with all of these apostles, not just to twelve, prior to his ascension. So it would have been, as you say, a collective event. Pentecost also is portrayed in the book

¹ 5:00

of Acts as having visual accompaniments like the tongues of fire that rested on the disciples. It was more than a mere psychological event.

Student: I don't want to discourage that series too much because I think that it was produced by Christians and, of course, it is an impossible task to actually portray everything. I would say it is an encouraging series and I encourage people to check it out. But there were some things that I was thinking, "Oh."

Dr. Craig: I think you are right not to be too hard or to be overly critical of these efforts. But nevertheless I am very encouraged that you are listening and watching critically based on what you've learned because very often you will see these sorts of mistakes by these writers who may not have a real firm handle on these events.

Student: I was wondering about what the Jews at the time would have thought about the raising of Lazarus, if that could have affected their idea of whether it is possible for raising of the dead.

Dr. Craig: Certainly the idea of what I call revivifications, that is to say the return to the earthly life of a dead person, was known in Judaism. There are examples of it in the Old Testament where these kind of miracles happen. And Jesus performed miracles, or at least is reputed to have performed miracles of this sort, not only of Lazarus but also of the widow of Nain's son, for example.² That would certainly be something that Jewish beliefs could accommodate – that someone would be miraculously brought back to life, to the mortal life. Lazarus and these other persons would eventually die again. What is extraordinary would be the belief that the resurrection in the proper sense of the term has occurred within history prior to the end of the world and the general resurrection where we are talking about a resurrection to glory such as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15.

Student: Just to clarify for me, what you are saying is Christ died, was put in the grave with the Shroud of Turin over it, descended into hell, preached the Gospel, proclaimed victory, then was translated, was put to a glorified body under the Shroud of Turin to do the imprint, folded the linen clothes (the shroud), the tomb was opened, he walks out, and then he doesn't go to heaven but he appears among the disciples within walls. He doesn't go to the Father. Maybe he goes to the Father before he appears to the group because he told her not to touch him. Maybe that was "don't cling to me." Do you think when he got the glorified body at the resurrection and made the imprint on the Shroud of Turin that he had not ascended to the Father but then did later and then came back later in the midst with the disciples? Then finally he does a final ascension where he remains now.

Dr. Craig: If I understand you correctly, yes, that is what I would affirm if you believe in the authenticity of the Shroud. Jesus rises physically and bodily from the tomb in a

glorified body, a transformed body that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15 as powerful, glorious, immortal, and spiritual (or supernatural). That is the kind of body that Jesus rises from the dead with. But then his assumption into heaven doesn't take place, as you say, until later on in Acts 1.

Student: Are there any public records of the Lazarus account or the widow's son being resurrected? Anything from that time?

Dr. Craig: You mean other than the New Testament? No.

Student: I missed the past two weeks so you might have already brought this up. What about the point that N. T. Wright makes that part of what makes the resurrection account so unique and radical is that in the first century and prior there were other messianic movements where the leader dies, he was killed off, and the followers of that leader didn't concoct these stories about he was resurrected or raised to new life. They just disbanded and they found a new leader.

Dr. Craig: Your introductory comment was correct. I did talk about that last week, and even quoted N. T. Wright to that effect. He has some very good things to say about this. Remember the quotation where he says right across the century before Jesus and the century after Jesus we find no messianic movement claiming that their crucified Messiah was, in fact, Messiah after all. There is just no connection between being risen from the dead and being Messiah.

END DISCUSSION

Let's go on then to the hallucination hypothesis which is the next one on our list. You will remember I said that for Strauss the postmortem appearances of Jesus were hallucinatory experiences on the part of the disciples. The most prominent proponent of the hallucination hypothesis today is the German New Testament critic Gerd Lüdemann. How does this hypothesis fare when we assess it by McCullagh's six criteria?

First, explanatory scope. The hallucination hypothesis obviously suffers from narrow explanatory scope. It attempts to give an explanation of the postmortem appearances. But it says nothing to explain the empty tomb. Therefore, proponents of the hallucination hypothesis must either deny the fact of the empty tomb, including the burial of Jesus in the tomb, or else they have to conjoin some independent hypothesis to the hallucination hypothesis to account for the empty tomb which makes their theory less simple.³ It has narrow explanatory scope.

Again, the hallucination hypothesis says nothing to explain the origin of the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. As we've just seen, in a Jewish context other more appropriate interpretations of the disciples' experiences than resurrection was at

³ 15:17

hand. James D. G. Dunn, who is a very prominent New Testament scholar and historical Jesus scholar, has said,

Why did they conclude that it was Jesus risen from the dead?—Why not simply a vision of the dead man?—Why not visions ‘fleshed out’ with the apparatus of apocalyptic expectation, coming on the clouds of glory and the like . . .? Why draw the astonishing conclusion that the eschatological resurrection [that is, the end-time resurrection] had already taken place in the case of a single individual separate from and prior to the general resurrection?⁴

As Dunn’s last question indicates, the inference *he has been raised from the dead* (which sounds so natural to our Christian ears) would have been wholly unnatural to a first-century Jew. In Jewish thinking there was already a category which was perfectly suitable to describe the disciples’ supposed experience, namely Jesus had been assumed into heaven. But that isn’t what they proclaim. They proclaimed instead his resurrection from the dead.

I think the best attempt to account for the disciples’ hallucinatory experiences has been examined by Dale Allison, a prominent historical Jesus researcher. Allison compares the resurrection appearance stories with very fascinating stories of visions of a deceased loved one which the bereaved sometimes experience. A husband may see a vision of his wife in the kitchen after her funeral. Or the mother may see a vision of her daughter who has died walking into the apartment. These visions of the deceased can be extremely real, very palpable and physical in their appearance. Allison speculates could it be in the case of the disciples that they experienced these sort of bereavement visions and so proclaimed Jesus is risen from the dead?

As fascinating as these stories are, however, I think that the overriding lesson of these bereavement experiences is that the bereaved do not (as a result of such experiences) come to believe that the deceased person has physically returned to life. Rather the deceased person is seen in the afterlife. N. T. Wright observes that for somebody in the ancient world visions of the deceased would not be evidence that he is alive; it would be evidence that he is dead! I think that that is very well said. Allison himself admits in the end, and I quote,

If there was no reason to believe that his solid body had returned to life, no one would have thought him, against expectation, resurrected from the dead. Certainly visions of or perceived encounters with a postmortem Jesus would not by themselves, have supplied such reason.⁵

⁴ J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975), p. 132.

⁵ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005). pp. 324-5.

So even given such visionary experiences belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead remains unexplained.

What about the explanatory power of the [hallucination] hypothesis? It doesn't explain the empty tomb or the origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection, but what about the postmortem appearances itself?⁶ I think arguably the hallucination hypothesis has weak explanatory power even when it comes to the postmortem appearances. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that Peter was one of those individuals who experiences a vision of a deceased loved one. Would this suffice to explain the resurrection appearance narratives in the Gospels? Not really. For the diversity of the resurrection appearances bursts the bounds of anything that is found in the psychological case books. Think about it. Jesus appeared not just one time but many times. Not at just one locale and circumstance but in a variety of places and under different circumstances. Not just to one individual like Peter but to different persons. Not just to individuals but to various groups of people. And not just to believers but to unbelievers like James and even enemies like Saul of Tarsus. Postulating a chain reaction among the disciples won't solve the problem because people like James and Saul don't stand in the chain. Those who would explain the postmortem appearances via psychological hallucinations are compelled to construct a composite picture by cobbling together different psychological cases of hallucinations. And that only goes to underline the fact that there is nothing like the resurrection appearances in the psychological case books.

The fourth criterion was the hypothesis needs to be more plausible than rival hypotheses. Lüdemann attempts to make the hallucination hypothesis plausible by a psychoanalysis of Peter and Paul. According to Lüdemann, both Peter and Paul labored under guilt complexes – Peter because he had denied Jesus three times and Paul because as a Pharisee and Jew he couldn't live up to the demands of the Jewish law. So both of them, in order to deal with these guilt complexes under which they suffered, sought release in having hallucinations of Jesus. But is Lüdemann's psychoanalysis really plausible? I think there is good reason to doubt. First of all, Lüdemann's use of depth psychology is based upon certain theories of Jung and Freud which are highly disputed. Any account that is based on so controversial a foundation as the theories of Freud and Jung I think is bound to be implausible. Second, there is insufficient data to conduct a psychoanalysis of either Peter or Saul. Psychoanalysis is difficult enough to carry out with a patient on the psychoanalyst's couch, so to speak, but it is next to impossible with historical figures who cannot be personally interrogated. It is for that reason that the genre of psychobiography is rejected by historians today.

Finally, number three, what evidence we do have suggests that Paul (or Saul, the Pharisee) did not, in fact, struggle with a guilt complex under the Jewish law as Lüdemann supposes. Fifty years ago, the Swedish scholar Krister Stendahl pointed out that Western readers have tended to read Paul through the lenses of Martin Luther's struggle with guilt and sin and to project this onto Paul. But Paul, or Saul, the Pharisee, experienced no such struggle. Stendahl writes, and I quote⁷,

Constrast Paul, a very happy and successful Jew, one who can say "As to righteousness under the Law [I was] blameless" (Phil. 3.6). That *is* what he says. He experiences no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience. He is a star pupil, the student to get the thousand dollar graduate scholarship in Gamaliel's Seminary. . . . Nowhere in Paul's writings is there any indication . . . that psychologically Paul had some problem of conscience.⁸

In order to justify his portrait of the guilttridden Saul, Lüdemann is forced to interpret Romans 7 in terms of Paul's pre-Christian experience. Remember in Roman 7 Paul exclaims, *Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of sin?* Lüdemann has to interpret this autobiographically as Paul's pre-Christian experience. But as Hans Kessler, who is a German New Testament scholar, observes, this interpretation of Romans 7 has been rejected by "almost all expositors" since the late 1920's⁹. So Lüdemann's psychoanalysis is positively implausible.

But that is not all. There is a second respect in which the hallucination hypothesis is implausible, namely in its construal of the resurrection appearances as visionary experiences. Lüdemann recognizes that his hallucination hypothesis depends upon the presupposition that the postmortem appearances to the disciples were just like the appearance to Saul on the road to Damascus, namely a visionary experience. He says, and I quote, "Anyone who does not share [this] presupposition will not be able to make any sense" out of what he has to say. But this presupposition is groundless. You see, many of Paul's opponents in Corinth denied that he was a true apostle. So Paul is very anxious to include himself along with the other apostles as a witness to a resurrection appearance of Jesus. So as John Dominic Crossan explains:

Paul *needs* in I Cor 15 to equate his own experience with that of the preceding apostles. To equate, that is, its *validity* and *legitimacy*, but not necessarily its mode or manner. . . . Paul's own entranced revelation should not be presumed to be the model for all others.¹⁰

⁷ 24:50

⁸ Krister Stendahl, "Paul among Jews and Gentiles," in *Paul among Jesus and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 12-13.

⁹ Hans Kessler, *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten*, new ed. (Würzburg: Echter, 1995), p. 423.

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Bibliography* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 169.

Paul, in including himself in the list of witnesses, is trying to bring his experience up to the objectivity and the reality of the disciples' experience. He is not trying to drag their experiences down to the level of a merely visionary appearance.

Thus the hallucination hypothesis is implausible because of its tendency to try to reduce all of the postmortem appearances to mere visions.

So both with respect to its psychoanalysis of Peter and Paul as well as its reduction of the appearances to merely visionary experiences, the hallucination hypothesis, I think, suffers from implausibility.

The next criterion to be assessed or weighed is that the hypothesis must be less *ad hoc* than other hypotheses. I think that Lüdemann's version of the hallucination hypothesis is *ad hoc* in a number of ways. For example, he just assumes that the disciples fled back to Galilee immediately after Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wants to get rid of the disciples' presence in Jerusalem so that they don't go and check out the empty tomb. Instead he has them flee back to Galilee immediately after the arrest. He also assumes that the other disciples were prone to hallucinations so that there would be a chain reaction among them.¹¹ And he assumes, without any evidence, that Paul had a struggle with the Jewish law and a secret subconscious attraction to Christianity, for which there is no evidence.

Next, the hypothesis should be disconfirmed by fewer accepted beliefs than rival hypotheses. Again, some of the accepted beliefs of New Testament scholars tend to disconfirm the hallucination hypothesis, at least as Lüdemann defends it. For example, it is widely believed that Jesus received a proper burial from Joseph of Arimathea, which Lüdemann has to deny. It is widely believed that Jesus' tomb was discovered empty by a group of his women followers on the first day of the week, which Lüdemann has to deny. It is widely accepted that psychoanalysis of historical figures is not feasible. It is widely accepted that Paul was basically content with his life under the Jewish law as a Pharisee. And, again, it is widely accepted that the New Testament makes a conceptual distinction between a vision of Jesus and a resurrection appearance of Jesus. So Lüdemann's hypothesis, being inconsistent with all of these, tends to be disconfirmed by accepted beliefs among New Testament Scholars.

Finally, does the hypothesis significantly exceed its rivals in fulfilling those first five conditions? I think we have to say that insofar as the hallucination hypothesis remains a live option today, it does exceed most of its previous rivals which are now defunct and no longer defended. And so in that sense it has outstripped its rivals in terms of meeting these criteria. But the question which remains is whether it outstrips the resurrection

¹¹ 30:01

hypothesis in meeting those criteria, and that is the question to which we will turn next week.¹²