

**Did Jesus Rise From the Dead or Did the Disciples Hallucinate?
By Glenn Meyer**

Introduction

Growing up, my dad used to flick the back of my head with his finger to get my attention. Whenever I felt that signature finger flick, I knew it was him because he was the only one who did that to me. I felt the same finger flick at the back of my head on the day of his funeral, but when I turned around to see who it was, there was no one there. Until this day, I cannot explain this occurrence; I was seated with my head flushed against a wall and there was no one in the vicinity except a person in front of me. This “finger flick” was either a figment of my imagination or something I really experienced.

Today, skeptics contest that even though Jesus’ disciples believed they saw him alive after he was crucified, these appearances are considered hallucinations for a variety of reasons. Skeptics like Bart Ehrman, Richard Carrier, and Gerd Lüdemann, acknowledge that early Christians claim to have seen a resurrected Jesus, yet they still assert that Jesus’ post-mortem appearances were not real but mere figments of the disciples’ imagination. The hallucination theory, however, is incapable of explaining the facts experienced by the witnesses who claim to have seen the resurrected Jesus.

History of the Hallucination Theory

Popular over a hundred years ago, the hallucination theory used to be one of the key naturalistic theories. However, it has been dismissed by scholars due to its lack of explanatory power surrounding the facts about the resurrection of Jesus. Following a comprehensive survey of the writings of New Testament scholars, Gary Habermas states, “It was similarly the case that, about 100 years ago, the hallucination hypothesis was also the most popular critical position until

it passed out of scholarly favor.”¹ Yet in recent times, this theory has been resurfaced by a number of skeptics to dismiss the resurrection of Jesus.

One of the leading proponents of this theory is Richard Carrier, who wrote: “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, of one form or another.”²

Superficially, this may sound like a possible explanation; however, further review uncovers the main reason why skeptics like Carrier reject the resurrection of Jesus: it is not because of the lack of evidence available but their prior commitment to their naturalistic worldview. According to his naturalistic worldview, all that exist in this world is nature therefore miracles are not possible. By the very nature of his worldview, there is no room to seriously consider the resurrection theory. Skeptics like Carrier form circular arguments because they vehemently reject the possibility of miracles even before analyzing and considering the evidence. Thus even if the evidence were to strongly indicate that Jesus resurrected from the dead, they will still reject it as a possible option. These skeptics’ prior commitment to their worldview informs them that the only likely explanation of the facts has to be a naturalistic one. In other words, Carrier, and skeptics like him, has put on a pair of red-tinted glasses and wonders why the world around him looks red.

While Carrier has allowed his presuppositions to affect his conclusions, this is something that everyone, including myself, is susceptible to, since we all have our own pair of “red-tinted glasses” or worldview. Hence, we should do our best to set aside our personal bias when investigating truth. Rather than preclude the fact that a miracle has or has not taken place, we

¹ Gary R. Habermas, "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: Hallucination." *Christian Research Journal*, June 9, 2009. 1.

² Robert Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005), 184.

should examine the evidence from a position of openness and weigh all the relevant hypotheses according to proper criteria.³ A useful approach that can be employed in this investigation is called abductive reasoning, or reasoning to the best inference. When faced with an event to be explained, such as the followers of Jesus claiming they saw his resurrected body, or the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Paul) and James who were skeptics, one would aim to evaluate a number of hypotheses and determine which would best explain the data surrounding the event. Taking this into consideration, we will now investigate if the disciples experienced a hallucination or if they really did see the resurrected Jesus.

Witnesses do not fit the conditions of Hallucination

As recorded in the Gospels, Book of Acts, and 1 Corinthians, shortly after the death of Jesus, various individuals and groups began to claim that Jesus appeared to them alive. The witnesses included Mary Magdalene⁴, his disciples⁵, Paul⁶, James and even a group of five hundred people at one time⁷. These independent sources collectively affirm that Jesus appeared to them alive after his death and thus meets the criteria of multiple attestation, a criteria used by historians to demonstrate high historical reliability. Regarding the multiple witnesses, Lee Strobel, a former atheist, writes:

On the face of it, this is incredibly influential testimony that Jesus did appear alive after His death. Here were names of specific individuals and groups of people who saw Him, written at a time when people could still check them out if they wanted confirmation.⁸

³ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 175.

⁴ John 20:11-18

⁵ John 21:1-2

⁶ Acts 9:1-9

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:3-7

⁸ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 247.

Despite these accounts confirming that they saw a resurrected Jesus, some skeptics will attribute every appearance to hallucinations. According to psychology professor Dr. Adrian Furnham, in order for a hallucination to occur, there must be causal factors present. The causal factors that could possibly trigger a hallucination include drugs, higher fever, sensory disabilities such as blindness or deafness, severe physical illness such as dementia or brain cancer and even psychotic disorder.⁹ At least one of these conditions have to be satisfied for the witnesses to hallucinate Jesus in the flesh. However, philosophy professor Dr. Stephen Davis claims that “none of the usual causes of hallucination were present.”¹⁰ Habermas lends further support to Davis’ assertion stating that none of the “situations, actions, and characteristics of the New Testament apostles themselves, fit typically-observed medical and psychological phenomena.”¹¹

Despite the witnesses not fitting the criteria for hallucinations, skeptics like New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann, would argue that psychological factors such as intense grief, remorse, and wishful thinking were the causes of the early disciples’ belief, particularly in the case of Peter and Paul. Peter, who denied Jesus during the trial was guilt stricken, thus he developed powerful hallucinations of the risen Jesus through his mourning process. Lüdemann writes:

Peter’s vision would be delusion or wishful thinking. Indeed his vision is an example of unsuccessful mourning, because it abruptly cuts off the very process of mourning, substituting fantasy for unromantic reality.¹²

Lüdemann goes on to add that since Peter was the new leader of his group he managed to trigger similar hallucinations in the other disciple where they succumbed to group ecstasy and

⁹ Adrian Funham, "Why We Hallucinate." *Psychology Today*, June 2, 2015,

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sideways-view/201506/why-we-hallucinate> (accessed May 5 2017).

¹⁰ Stephen, Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 184.

¹¹ Joseph, Bergeron and Gary, Habermas, "The Resurrection of Jesus: A Clinical Review of Psychiatric Hypotheses for the Biblical Story of Easter." *Faculty Publications and Presentations* Paper 402 (2015).

¹² Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History Inquiry*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), .165

experienced a “shared hallucinatory fantasy” that had both audible and visual aspects.¹³

By a bold unconscious leap Peter entered the world of his wishes. As a result he “saw” Jesus and thus made it possible for the other disciples to “see” Jesus as well.¹⁴

In the case of Paul, like Peter, he was a victim of self-deception and experienced a psychologically induced vision of Jesus. According to Lüdemann, Paul was unconsciously persuaded by a “humbled and self-sacrificing Jesus.” The tension Paul faced persecuting the early church while being a zealot by keeping the Jewish law and him realizing his own inadequacies at keeping it was the catalyst that drove him to become a follower of Jesus. Paul found Jesus’ teaching of grace and mercy to be an appealing solution for the internal conflict he was experiencing within. Therefore, according to Lüdemann, Paul’s conversion and vision of the risen Jesus could be attributed to his psychological state.¹⁵ Lüdemann states, “The guilt complex which had arisen with the persecution was resolved through the certainty of being in Christ.”¹⁶

Lüdemann’s hypothesis may sound appealing on the surface, however, they are problematic as the psychological-state of Peter and Paul cannot be verified. Based on the evidence available, there are no details to suggest that these men were delusional; these are only mere speculations on how they might have been feeling after Jesus’ death. Thus, Lüdemann’s hypothesis for both Peter and Paul is pure speculation and unprovable since he is unable to analyze their psychological state. As philosopher William Lane Craig states:

Psychoanalysis is notoriously difficult even with a patient seated in front of oneself on the couch, but it is virtually impossible with historical figures. That is why the genre of psychobiography is rejected by historians.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., p.166-176

¹⁴ Ibid., p.166

¹⁵ Gerd Lüdemann., *What Really Happened: The Resurrection of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox: 1999), 170.

¹⁶ Gerd Lüdemann. *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 109.

¹⁷ William Lane Craig, 2016. “Visions of Jesus: A Critical Assessment of Gerd Lüdemann's Hallucination Hypothesis” *Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig*. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/visions-of-jesus-a-critical->

In addition, based on what we read about Peter and Paul in the New Testament, they both appear to be reliable, thoughtful leaders of the early church who carefully penned down what they believed to be true. Peter clearly writes in his letter that he did not blindly follow devised stories; instead, he and the disciples were eyewitness to the majesty of the resurrected Jesus.¹⁸ As for Paul he was an accomplished theologian in the Jewish law and traditions under the guidance of a well-respected rabbi Gamaliel.¹⁹ In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Paul claims to pass down accurate information about an early Christian creed he received. According to New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, this creed can be dated to within the first two or three years after the resurrection.²⁰

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.²¹

Considering that Peter and Paul were thoughtful leaders of the early church who did not meet the conditions of hallucinations and since historians are unable to analyze their psychological state, the most reasonable conclusion of the facts is that Peter, Paul and the rest of the followers of Jesus did not hallucinate but truly saw the resurrected Jesus.

Hallucinations occur in individuals but not in groups

Like dreams, hallucinations are individual subjective experiences that cannot be shared especially if they involve multiple senses. Since hallucinations are cerebral events with no

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¹⁸ 2 Peter 1:16

¹⁹ See Galatians 1:14 and Acts 22:3

²⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 319.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

external referent, it is impossible to share in the hallucinations of others. Clinical psychologist Dr. Gary Collins explains:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly are not something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce a hallucination in somebody else. Since a hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.²²

Like Collins, Habermas states that modern psychology has not shown that collective hallucinations are possible.²³ Yet skeptics will still argue that various groups who witnessed the risen Jesus at the same time were hallucinating. For instance, a group of women were the first ones to witness him alive again.²⁴ Based on the early creed cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, we learn that 500 people saw the resurrected Jesus at the same time.²⁵ In John 20, we see Jesus appearing to the disciples on two separate occasions and he appears to them again on a mountain and on a beach in Galilee.²⁶ With a clear understanding about hallucinations, it is impossible that everyone witnessed the same thing at the same time in various places mentioned above. Clinical psychologist Dr. Gary Sibcy's research led him to draw the same conclusion as well:

I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucination, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory perception where there was clearly no external referent.²⁷

Another interesting point worth mentioning is that these groups of people saw, heard, and felt the risen Jesus; thus making hallucinations even more unlikely. According to psychology scholars

²² Josh McDowell and Dave Sterrett, *Did the Resurrection Happen...Really?* (Chicago: Moody, 2011), 125.

²³ Gary Habermas, "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: The Recent Revival of Hallucination Theories." *Christian Research Journal* 23.4 (2001), 30-31.

²⁴ See John 20:1-18, Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1 and Luke 24:10.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

²⁶ See John 20:19-29, Matthew 28:16-17 and John 21:1-23

²⁷ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus A New Historiographical Approach*, 484.

Andre Aleman and Frank Leroi, hallucinations most often manifest itself in one sensory mode, such as auditory or visual.²⁸ In the case of the resurrected Jesus, both elements are constantly present to various groups where the risen Jesus is seen eating, drinking and giving instructions to the disciples.

Despite scientific research strongly suggesting that group hallucinations are impossible, skeptics like Keith Parson will still maintain that given the right conditions, such hallucinations are still possible:

“If, therefore, for whatever reason, a strong expectation arose not too long after Jesus' death that he would be seen again, then it would not be surprising at all if several groups claimed to have seen him. The postmortem ‘sightings’ of Jesus are no more remarkable than the similar reports about Elvis Presley or Jimmy Hoffa.²⁹”

Parson's hypothesis quickly collapses since the narratives in the New Testament embarrassingly portray the disciples as cowards and running for their lives. They were not expecting to see Jesus after his death and they were in hiding for fear of persecution.³⁰ The fact that they were startled and frightened in Luke 24:37 when Jesus appeared to them lends further support that they were neither excited nor did they understand what was going on. Moreover, the disciples most certainly did not expect to see a resurrected Jesus since a dying and rising Messiah was not part of second temple Judaism. Wright says, “Nobody imagined that any individuals had already been raised, or would be raised in advance of the great last day.”³¹

It's also tough to imagine that Paul and James had a strong expectation to see Jesus again since both of them were antithetical to Jesus' ministry. Moreover, hallucinations happen for people when they are expecting them and grieving over the death of a loved one. Neither of these

²⁸ Andre Aleman and Frank Leroi, *Hallucinations: The Science of Idiosyncratic Perception* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2008), 25-46.

²⁹ Robert Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond The Grave*, 437

³⁰ See Mark 14:50, Matthew 26:56, John 20:19

³¹ N.T Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 205.

happened for Paul and a mere vision of Jesus would not have caused his sudden conversion. James may have been in grief for his brother, but he did not believe that Jesus was the Lord and would have never expected or even considered a physical resurrection. If Jesus did physically appear to them, it will explain their miraculous conversion.

Parson also cites the collective appearance of the Virgin Mary at Fatima in Portugal back in 1917 as evidence for group hallucinations.³² In this case Parson is confusing illusions with hallucinations. An illusion is seeing a distortion of something that is actually there, while a hallucination is seeing something that is not there. Professors of Psychology Dr. Leonard Zusne and Dr. Warren Jones explains, “Although the children reported they saw the Virgin, the crowd, at least many of them, witnessed a “color phenomenon” in which the sun in the shape of a fiery disc began to move and approach the earth.”³³ In other words, the crowd mistook an external referent for the “Virgin Mary”. Zusne and Jones conclude that the final answers to the appearance at Fatima still have not been obtained and they both maintain that a scientific explanation has yet to explain collective hallucinations.³⁴ Considering that various groups saw the risen Jesus, and that their reports about him were consistently similar, it is more reasonable to conclude that they saw a physical resurrected body, and that these groups were not hallucinating.

Hallucinations are not life transforming

Hallucinations will not have the power to significantly transform a person’s life in the manner that we witness in the life of the apostles. Peter went from denying Jesus to boldly

³² Robert M. Price, and Jeffery Jay Lowder, *The Empty Tomb* , 436.

³³ Leonard Zusne, *Anomalistic Psychology: A Study of Extraordinary Phenomena of Behavior and Experience* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984), 135

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 136

proclaiming Jesus in the public square.³⁵ James went from skeptic to becoming the pastor of the Jerusalem church.³⁶ Paul went from persecutor of the early Christians to a self-sacrificial apostle who was willing to die for the Christian faith.³⁷ Habermas stresses:

The Resurrection was undoubtedly the central proclamation of the early church from the very beginning. The earliest Christians didn't just endorse Jesus's teachings; they were convinced they had seen him alive after his crucifixion. That's what changed their lives and started the church. Certainly, since this was their centermost conviction, they would have made absolutely sure that it was true.³⁸

The early disciples were able to verify that Jesus had truly risen from the dead, thus giving them a brand new level of confidence. They went from hiding from the Jewish authorities to courageously proclaiming the risen Jesus around Jerusalem to the extent that they were willing to die for their cause. Despite their strong convictions, skeptics, like Carrier, will still insist that hallucinations could have the same effect as a physical encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

Why wouldn't hallucinations have that effect? If the percipients believed these were real experiences (and they almost certainly would have), then hallucinations would be exactly as effective as real appearances in producing changes of convictions and lifestyle.³⁹

Carrier's argument fails because people do not hallucinate things that will cause them more trouble and grief. We see the followers of the risen Jesus continuously getting persecuted in the New Testament, and the hallucination theory cannot explain why the disciples would preach a message that was humiliating to win converts in that culture. As Paul states, in 1 Corinthians 1:23, "...but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."⁴⁰ This is what was preached by Christians because this is how it happened and they

³⁵ Acts 2:14-36

³⁶ Acts 15:14-21

³⁷ Acts 21:13

³⁸ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ A Journalists Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) 254.

³⁹ Richard C. Carrier, *Stephen Davis Gets it Wrong* (2006), <http://www.richardcarrier.info/Carrier--ReplyToDavis.html> (accessed May 5 2017).

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:23

preached an embarrassing message that Jesus died and rose from the dead because it was true without recanting at any point in time. As New Testament scholar Sean McDowell says, “Not a single account exists that any of the Twelve, including Paul and James, recanted their belief that Jesus had appeared to them alive after his death.”⁴¹ If Jesus did rise from the dead, then the actions of the disciples to report his physical appearances is logical.

Conclusion

After having examined the various possibilities brought forth by various scholars regarding the hallucination theory, we now arrive at a juncture where we need to decide if the early Christians hallucinated or if they truly saw a resurrected Jesus. When investigating truth, we need to put our aside our bias and let the facts speak for themselves. As Licona says, “Bias can be a hindrance because, left unchecked, it will tend to cause one to see only what one wishes to see and miss the data that may disconfirm tightly held views.”⁴²

Following are the surmised facts: 1) The early Christians did not meet the criteria for hallucinations; 2) Hallucinations do not occur in group settings; and 3) Those who came into contact with the resurrected Jesus had a transformed life. The disciples understood what visions and spiritual experiences were, yet they never interpreted the appearances of Christ as just spiritual visions. They were firmly convinced that they witnessed a bodily appearance of Jesus, which they consistently preached from the very beginning and never recanted.

In regards to the finger flicking I felt at my father’s funeral and given the surrounding circumstances that I was grieving, I am still unsure if what I actually experienced was real as it was an individual experience. Amazingly, the resurrected Jesus was seen not by one individual,

⁴¹ Sean McDowell, *The Fate Of The Apostles Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 263.

⁴² Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus A New Historiographical Approach*, 496.

so one is left questioning the credibility of the person, but by multiple groups of people, whose lives were impacted in such a way they were moved to share what they termed as the “Good News.” The resurrected Jesus was the cornerstone of the disciple’s faith and it gave them courage to preach the Gospel despite going through persecution. Thus looking at the surrounding facts, the hallucination theory crumbles and it is more reasonable to conclude that the early Christians did see a physical resurrected Jesus.

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