

A Window on the Biblical World:
Science and the Resurrection Appearances

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After the conclusion of a presentation to a Christian community on the Resurrection appearances of Jesus, a member of the audience replied: "I'm a psychiatrist. I treat people who hear voices and see things that aren't there." His comment was sincere and serious. It was also puzzling. Did he think these reports were mere literary creations? Were they simply symbols of something but nothing more than that? Or to use the psychiatric jargon, were they nothing but hallucinations? (In psychiatry, this word carries a pejorative meaning).

The puzzlement arises because contemporary cognitive neuroscience has researched and described in considerable detail the function of the brain and nervous system in human consciousness in its many variations. The average human person changes levels of consciousness many times a day: sleep, waking time, day dreaming, road trance, and so forth. Human beings are capable of experiencing at least twenty different levels of consciousness. Further, ethnographic evidence indicates that perhaps as many as ninety percent of cultures on this planet experience many of these different levels of awareness on a routine basis. The technical term for this human experience is altered states of consciousness or awareness. The Resurrection appearances are just one example of altered state of awareness that are reported throughout the Bible. Beginning with the "heavy, [divinely induced] sleep" in the first creature (Gen 2:21; compare Is 29:10; 1 Sam 26:12) and ending with the book of Revelation which records the seer's "trance" experiences (Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10: "in spirit" = in trance), it is clear that altered states of consciousness are a select moment during which God reveals self and important information for human beings (see 1 Sam 3:1; Gen 15:12; Job 4:13).

Resurrection Appearances

Drawing on her extensive cross-cultural research, the anthropologist Dr. Felicitas Goodman identifies four elements in an ecstatic trance experience. (1) The visionary is usually frightened by the experience and (2) doesn't initially recognize the person who is appearing or what is being seen. (3) The person in the vision offers calming assurance followed by self-identification: "Don't be afraid. It is I." If it is an object, the visionary seeks to identify the object: is it a flying saucer? a saint? the face of Jesus? and so on. (4) Finally, the visionary receives (a) some useful information such as an answer to a concern, a solution to a problem, an insight for a new direction in life and the like or (b) a commission.

In the Resurrection appearances, the women are frightened by their experience (Mark 16:8; Matt 28:8; Luke 24:5). The person appearing in the vision offers calming assurance to dispel the fright: "Do not be afraid!" (Matt 28:5, 10; see also Mark 16:6; Luke 24:37). At first, those who see him often don't recognize the Risen Jesus, someone they knew when he lived and walked among them. Mary Magdalene mistook him for a gardener (John 20:15). The disciples on the road to Emmaus thought he was a stranger (Luke 24:16). The disciples in Jerusalem thought they saw a ghost (Luke 24:37). The disciples on the Sea of Galilee saw a stranger on the shore who gave them advice about where to cast their nets (John 21:4).

Sometimes, however, the visionary does recognize the person appearing in the vision (Mark 16:5, a young man in white robe; Matt 28:5, the angel of the Lord; Luke 24:4, two men in dazzling garments, i.e., angels; John 20:20, 28; 21:7, Jesus). Finally, the experience offers new information (Mark 16:6; Matt 28:6 Luke 24:6 - Jesus has been raised [by God]; Luke 24:13-35, all that the Scriptures said must happen to Jesus; John

20:17 - I am going to my Father). Sometimes it offers instruction (Mark 16:7; Matt 28:7-10; go meet the Risen Jesus in Galilee; Luke 24:44-49 - Jesus opens his travel companions' minds to understand the scriptures). In other instances of seeing the risen Jesus, the visionaries receive a commission (Matthew 28:16-20.go preach to the lost sheep of the house of Israel dispersed among all the nations; Luke 24:48, you are witnesses; John 20:21-23, bring new members into the community; 21:15-19, Peter, feed my sheep). Thus characteristics of vision experiences identified by Dr. Goodman as existing in all cultures are quite evidently present in the New Testament accounts of those who saw the Risen Jesus.

Cognitive Neuroscience

Relative to the Resurrection appearances, cognitive neuroscience offers a helpful insight. Many scientists have performed electroencephalograms on people who signal when they have entered a different level of consciousness. For instance, two neuroscientists have studied Franciscan religious women at prayer and Tibetan monks in meditation and analyzed the electroencephalographic tracings carefully. The subjects in such studies describe their experiences with the scientists who correlate their report with the tracings.. Among the many things they learned about the function of brain in these experiences, the colors seen characterize different levels of consciousness or awareness.

The anthropologist, Dr. Goodman, has developed this same insight and has taught it at her Institute in Sante Fe, New Mexico. This is the significance of the colors one might see in trance. The sequence reflects neurological changes. To see white is a sign of being in trance, in a different level of awareness. Orange means the trance is weakening. Naturalistic colors indicate a still weaker level of trance. To see actual

figures means the trance is over. The visionary has resumed waking (so called “normal”) consciousness.

In the Israelite tradition, light (white) is the manifestation of God’s honor or glory (Isa 60:1; 62:1; Luke 2:9), that is, God’s very self. The light sometimes takes the form of a cloud (Exod 24:15ff) or fire (Deut 5:24) flashing brightly (Ezek 1:4, 27-28; 10:4). The bright light from heaven (Acts 9:3; 22:6) even brighter than the sun (26:13) that Paul saw on the road to Damascus is typical of stage one of an ecstatic trance. (Anthropologists identify three stages in a typical trance experience.) Paul the Pharisee familiar with light in the Israelite tradition would be aware that he was entering a different level of awareness, a different “stage” of consciousness, or that some being from the realm of God might be initiating communication with him.

In the Resurrection reports, the young man clothed in the white robe is plausibly a being from the realm of God (Mark 16:5). In Matthew, the angel of the Lord has an appearance “like lightening and his clothing was white as snow” (28:4). Similarly in Luke (24:4), the two men in dazzling garments are angels, as they are also explicitly identified in John (20:12). In the Resurrection reports, Jesus is never associated with the color white. (He is described in this way only in the Transfiguration - Matt 17:1-18 and par.) He is, however, frequently not recognized. From a neurological perspective, the white color signals that the visionaries are indeed in an altered state of awareness. They are experiencing visitors from the realm of God and the spirits. The fact that they often don’t recognize “the distinct face or figure” of Jesus also indicates this is an experience in an altered state of awareness.

Location of the appearances

Where did the trance experiences of the Risen Jesus take place? Six occurred near the tomb in which Jesus was buried. Two were experiences of Jesus himself (Matt 28:8-9; John 20:14-18) while four were experiences of other beings (Mark 16:5-7; Matt 28:1-7; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:11-13). Eight appearances were away from the tomb (Galilee; Emmaus: Matt 28:8-10, 16-20; Luke 24:13-35, 36-53; John 20:19-23, 24-29; 21). Regarding the appearances near the tomb, a study of Moroccan Jews forcibly “repatriated” to Israel in the 1950's is enlightening. In Morocco, these Jews used to venerate a murabit (Arabic for Holy Man) with an annual pilgrimage to his tomb. There they picnicked, prayed, and sought healing in a ritual reminiscent of the Asclepeian ritual. When they were moved to Israel they transferred their devotional practices to the tomb of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (2nd century A.D.) at Meron near Zefat. Here they experienced their Holy Man (Saint) in vision as they did in Morocco and obtained favors from him. The important discovery of this study is that many cultures expect to experience a Holy Man in some altered form of consciousness at his tomb. In Mark's gospel, the very first title applied to Jesus is “Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24). Jesus was recognized as and lived and behaved according to all the criteria of a holy man identified and described by anthropologists in their cross cultural studies. The major gift of a Holy Man to his people is to broker healing from God to those who need it. The firm expectation about a Holy Man in Israelite culture is that he would be raised to life in the world to come.

As for the experiences of the Risen Jesus away from the tomb, modern psychiatric research contributes additional insight to anthropological information. Many cultures including that of ancient Israel view death as a process rather than a punctiliar event as does the West. Death certificates in the West record a specific time of death. In contrast,

death as a process usually entails the transition from this world to the next, a transition from one mode of existence to another. Sometimes a journey is involved. In nearly all instances, a metamorphosis is key. “We shall not all fall asleep, but we shall all be changed” (1 Cor 15:51). Viewing death as a process allows the survivors to continue to relate to a departed loved one for a significant time after the moment of expiration. Psychiatric research has documented that survivors of loved departed continue to experience that person for many years, but most commonly within the first ten years after a loss. Thus, the fact that Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all the accounts as have an altered state of consciousness experience of Jesus and of other beings from the realm in which Jesus is now with God suggests that her relationship to Jesus may have had stronger emotional roots than that of all the others except perhaps the eleven.

Significance of the Experiences

Peter’s speeches in Acts present a reliable summary of the experiences of Jesus’ followers. In his life time, Jesus of Nazareth was commended by God with mighty deeds, wonders and signs which God worked through him. Some accepted Jesus, while others doubted and rejected him. Jesus’ shameful death on the cross, a punishment reserved for criminals, caused his followers to wonder whether they had been deceived. If God was truly with Jesus, how could God allow this to happen?

But shortly after Jesus’ death, his friends began to experience him transformed and alive in altered states of consciousness experiences. Since only God can raise a person from the dead, God must have been pleased with Jesus. God rewarded Jesus with resurrection which the Israelite tradition recognized as the reward of the righteous. “God

raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses... Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:32, 36).

Why did non believers, even Jesus’ enemies not see him after his Resurrection? Actually, a major skeptic and enemy of Jesus, Paul of Tarsus, did experience the Risen Jesus (Acts 9; 22; 26). In another speech, Peter explains what anthropologists also know from their field work. “This man God raised [on] the third day and granted that he be visible, not to all the people but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:40-41). While human beings are neurologically “hardwired” for experiences of God and other beings in the realm of God,

as neuroscientists describe this pan human capability, the spirits determine if and when to interact with human beings.

Conclusion

The psychiatrist who observed that he treats people who hear voices and see things that aren’t there is representative of some other scientists. One difference between DSM-III and DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a basic resource book) is that many religious experiences that were labeled as pathological in the former were omitted or recognized as ‘normal’ in the latter edition. Good science can help understand and appreciate the marvelous gifts to human beings from the Creator God so long as the creature doesn’t reject or spurn them. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:17).

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