

Altered States of Consciousness and New Testament Interpretation of Post-Resurrection Appearances

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The New Testament (NT) has traditionally been interpreted as alleging paranormal experiences and phenomena. Included in this broad category are accounts of apparitions of the dead, visions of another world, glossolalia, prophetic revelations, exorcism, and so on. Biblical criticism of the last 150 years or so has challenged the traditional interpretation. The genre and historical sources of the NT have been closely examined in an effort to determine whether such accounts should be demythologized or given some other interpretation, perhaps a non-reporting one, such as a liturgical interpretation. But the approach that treats them as reports of experiences of one kind or another remains the default position against which others compete.

The accounts of the alleged post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus are a case in point. Many interpretations of these texts have been proposed, but the traditional view that these describe events in which a being taken to be Jesus was encountered after his death remains the default view. Very few commentators consider none of these accounts as having a descriptive function, and in this paper I will assume that some or all of them purport to describe.

Understanding Appearances and Visions

Various concepts have been introduced to try to understand the post-Resurrection appearances and other similar phenomena generally described as visions or apparitions of Jesus. The concepts of appearances and visions are one pair. Tradition holds that the resurrected Jesus was initially seen and touched as any person might be, and that these appearances were physical and objective, at least until either the Ascension or Paul's Damascus-road experience. Tradition also holds that the experiences thereafter were ephemeral, subjective visions, and rather unlike the original appearances. The supposedly sharp distinction between appearances and visions is widely adopted today, e.g., in the common practice among biblical critics of ignoring accounts of visions of Jesus — to Ananias, Stephen, John the Revelator, and several more to Paul — in discussing the post-Resurrection appearances.

Augustine contributed to the conceptual tools for approaching these experiences by classifying visions as intellectual, imaginative, and corporeal (1982: vol. 12, sec. 6, chap. 15). Most critical discussions of the experiences of well known and articulate visionaries, such as Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, adopt Augustine's classification, even though he offered no clear criterion, as far as I can tell, for distinguishing corporeal visions, that is, visions that employ the outer senses (including the eyes) from imaginative ones, which do not. Other conceptual tools include the distinction that J. Lindblom drew (Carnley 1987:234) between "Christophanies" (seeing Jesus in heaven) and "Christepiphanies" (seeing Jesus on earth), and the distinction that Wolfhart Pannenberg made between objective visions and subjective visions (1968:93f).

Other concepts have been employed to illuminate the phenomena in question. Visions are often considered hallucinations, and this term used widely in psychological and psychiatric research (cf. Hartmann 1975; Horowitz 1975) to describe aberrant perceptual experience might be thought helpful here. But its value is limited by the many kinds of aberrant perception thus described. K. Fulford distinguishes ten different kinds in *Moral Theory and Medical Practice*, cautiously including religious visions without further remarks in this list (1991:230-31).

A more recent way of approaching the appearance phenomena in which Jesus was supposed to have been encountered is to see them as one kind of altered state of consciousness. This is the approach recently recommended by John Pilch of Georgetown University, and will be the topic of my attention in this paper. Altered states of consciousness are an important new conceptual tool for examining experiences having religious import, because they can sometimes be induced in laboratory conditions and be carefully studied. Spontaneous experiences in public settings, which religious experiences often are, do not readily admit of such a study.

Pilch claims that because the appearances of Jesus described in the NT occurred in a Mediterranean culture and took place near his tomb, they are most plausibly interpreted as similar to experiences in those cultures (1998). He observes that holy men in such cultures have been venerated at or near their tombs for the last 4000 years, and then argues that because these experiences are best understood as "altered states of consciousness" (ASCs), the NT appearances are most plausibly interpreted as ASCs. Pilch's claim challenges the traditional view of them, but it plausibly maintains that the results of psychological anthropology have some bearing on the interpretation of the appearances.

I will argue that contemporary experiences in which Jesus is thought to be encountered — generally described as visions of Jesus — also have relevance to determining whether "aberrant experiences" that are primarily visual should be construed as ASCs. I will refer to these contemporary experiences as "visual encounters," in an effort to adopt terminology that avoids the meanings widely associated with the terms 'appearance' and 'vision'. I will make reference to a few of the more than thirty experiences reported to me and discussed elsewhere (1997).

Appearances as Altered States of Consciousness

Pilch explains in his recent paper, "Appearances of the Risen Jesus in Cultural Context," that an ASC is:

"...a human condition of experience in which sensations, perception, cognition, and emotions are altered. The result is changes in sensing, perceiving, thinking, and feeling. Further, these states modify the relation of the individual to the self and the body, to one's sense of identity, and to the environment of time, space, and other people" (1998:53).

He speaks elsewhere of ASCs as trances or waking dreams, as seen from the etic (outsider) perspective in Western culture (1995:51). Pilch acknowledges the imprecision of the term 'trance', but suggests that a key defining characteristic is "intensely focused attention which reduces awareness of the experience-context, namely, objects, stimuli or environment outside the specific focus" (1995:53). The practices said to bring it on include fasting, silence, and lack of sleep.

In a third article Pilch describes ordinary states of waking consciousness as a culturally conditioned concept, with varying cultures evaluating specific experiences in different ways (1993). He follows Erika Bourguignon in construing ASCs to include a wide range of states including various kinds of sleep (REM and non-REM), alcohol intoxication, creative states, dance and music trances, religious experiences at revival meetings, fervent prayer, day dreaming, glossolalia, and many other states of consciousness (1993:236). Pilch says that these states are distinguished from experiences in waking awareness "called ordinary or normal consciousness," (1993:234), but he does not offer criteria to distinguish the two kinds of consciousness.

Pilch frequently makes reference to alternate or alternative realities, in addition to altered states of consciousness. He thereby suggests that another kind of reality might be experienced in states of consciousness different than the ones we normally have. He allows for supranaturalistic explanations in non-Western cultures, and considers them roughly equivalent to explanations in Western culture given by psychiatric, psychological, and biological sciences (1993:241). Pilch thus makes reference to two kinds of consciousness, and two kinds of reality. The question that Pilch's approach invites about appearances of the Risen Jesus is whether they are best approached as (a) experiences in an ASC of alternate reality (b) experiences in an ordinary state of consciousness (OSC) of alternate reality (c) experiences in an ASC of conventional reality or (d) experiences in an OSC of conventional reality. It is tempting to think that if an experience is in an ASC then it must be of an alternate reality, and vice versa, but I think we do well to approach this question with an open mind.

The appearances have traditionally been approached in Christian thought as having involved conventional perceptual powers, not ASCs. The object of such perception — the resurrected body of Jesus — has certainly not been considered ordinary, and so might be thought to belong to an alternate reality. But traditional Christianity has also been quite insistent that its reality is not identical to that of spirits as these have been conventionally understood. Luke (24:42-43) offers an intriguing account of an appearance of Jesus to his disciples, who wonder if they are seeing a spirit. Jesus assures them that he is different, and invites them to touch him and watch him eat food. He remarks: "A spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (24:39). Jesus says "see" here, but evidently means "tactilely feel," for the tactile sense, not the visual one, is the one that is capable of detecting the existence of bones. Pilch discusses this incident, and contends that Jesus ate the food in an alternate reality (1998:53), but he somehow misses the question of whether the disciples observed this in altered or ordinary states of consciousness. The biblical text, although incomplete for settling questions on this point, *suggests* that the perceptions were simultaneous, which satisfies an important requirement for OSCs. The question that needs to be addressed is what visionary experiences should count as occurring in ASCs. To explore this I will consider some of the visual encounters said to be of Jesus that I uncovered in recent research, and try to demonstrate their relevance to understanding the phenomena described in the NT.

Criteria for Ordinary States of Consciousness

Ordinary states of consciousness are so well known that we hardly ever consider the conditions that must be met for experiences to be considered as such. In order to think critically upon both ordinary and altered states of consciousness I will offer ten conditions that are regularly met by OSCs. These conditions are not exhaustive, but they do provide a basis for the discussion of altered states. I will advance them along with brief accounts of Christic encounters described to me.

In OSCs objects "disappear" when we close our eyes.

Case 1: Marian Hathaway of Swansea, Wales, described a visual encounter consisting of an image of Jesus that was superimposed upon the large pipe organ that nearly covered the front of the church in which she was seated. The experience began when she saw shimmering blue and gold colors in front of her — shimmering colors that reminded her of the jumpy pictures of the earliest silent movies. The colors gradually became clearer until she found herself looking at a face and torso she took to be Jesus that filled the front of the church — a figure perhaps twenty feet high. She saw him look lovingly at the congregation, and then saw him move his arms in an embrace of several rows at once. Marian did not know if this experience was real or imaginary, and in order to test its character she closed her eyes and found that she could still see him. When she opened her eyes moments later he was still there.

This experience seems to be a case of an ASC for a number of reasons. The peculiar way in which the experience began — blue and gold shimmering lights that produced the figure of a man in three dimensions — suggests this on its own, as does the fact that the figure was much larger than life. But Marian's capacity to "see" him whether her eyes were open or shut clinches it. An important condition for an OSC has not been met, inclining us to assess it as an experience in an ASC. Pilch speaks about visions as similar to

waking dreams, in keeping with a prominent view among psychiatric researchers (cf. West 1962, 1975; Freud 1952: lect. 7, pt. B), and this experience seems to fit the description.

In OSCs we see solid objects that are incapable of occupying the space occupied by other solid objects.

Case 2: Eve Zelle of New York tells about being desperate about her situation. She had not worked for some time, and her oldest daughter was giving her a hard time. She wondered if God cared about her, or was even real. She remembers extending her hand in a moment of despair and saying to God, "If I could only touch you, if I could only touch your hand." She opened her eyes and was startled to see Jesus kneeling in front of her, holding her hands with the most compassionate eyes she had ever seen. The look on his face convinced her that he was real and that he cared. But what was peculiar was that he was kneeling before her in the place that her bed was located, as though he somehow occupied the same space as her bed. She was a complete loss to explain how this could happen.

This experience satisfies some of the conditions for OSCs, for the figure was normal in size for a human being and was capable of being touched. These characteristics perhaps account for the fact that Eve considered the object real. But the spatial irregularity reported suggests that it occurred in an ASC. This case allows another condition of experiences in OSC to be formulated:

In OSCs our senses mesh in appropriate ways, e.g., if the hands of another person are both seen and touched, percipients see what they feel.

I asked percipients about their visual, tactile, and auditory sensations, to determine whether these meshed well when more than one kind of perception was involved. The one peculiarity sometimes mentioned was that they could hear a voice speak to them, but the lips of the figure that appeared to be speaking did not move. There were exceptions to this, however, for several reported seeing a mouth move that seemed to "spell out" what they heard. Perceptions in several sensory modalities that are combined in ways resembling ordinary perception seem to give percipients the sense that the object supposedly sensed is real.

In OSCs we generally see solid, complete, moving, colored objects.

Case 3: Ethel Chilvers of Toronto, Ontario, had a visual encounter when she was ninety-one years of age, making her the oldest of the thirty percipients I interviewed. She was washing dishes in the kitchen of her small apartment one day, and when she looked in the direction of her kitchen table some six to eight feet away she saw the figure of Jesus in profile above the table. He seemed to be in mid-stride, facing the direction of the city center, and standing there motionless. He appeared much as he does in pictures, wearing a cape or cloak similar to that which she had seen worn by a man from Afghanistan who lived in her apartment block. He looked as though he had power to execute judgment on the whole world, but was restrained from doing so because of his love for humanity. Ethel could only see him from above the waist, but the portion that appeared was well proportioned, normal in size, and positioned appropriately for someone standing on the floor.

This was the only case in which Jesus appeared motionless, but looked completely lifelike. Perhaps this should not count as a perceptual anomaly, but the incomplete figure seems an aberration. Other perceptual anomalies were reported to me, e.g., sometimes the figure was semi-transparent. I have formulated this principle in general terms because some of the objects we see in ordinary states of consciousness are not solid, e.g., rainbows, and others neither move, e.g., mountains, nor are colored, e.g., air seen to shimmer as a result of intense heat.

In OSCs we find objects capable of being repeatedly seen as we turn away and look back to the place where we first saw them.

Case 4: Helen Bezanson of Black Creek, British Columbia, said her first experience began in a church service with a tactile sensation on her hand, as though someone had touched her. Her eyes were closed in prayer at the time, so she opened them to see if someone had touched her, but no one was even near enough to do so. She closed them again, and again felt the same touch. When she opened her eyes a second time she saw a figure standing about nine feet away on a pedestal, which she knew was not a feature of the building. She immediately identified this figure as Jesus. He was surrounded by radiance, not simply in a halo around his head, as he is conventionally portrayed, but in an oval shape around his entire body. Helen looked around the room at the other people who were present, to see if any of them gave any indication that they saw the same thing, but none did. She was able to look away and back again several times. The figure looked directly at Helen, and used his hands to communicate the sense that she was accepted and loved. Helen came to believe that Jesus was a living reality as a result of this experience.

This case is interesting because Helen's experience conforms to a feature of those in OSC, where we regularly turn away from observed objects and then turn back to find they are in the same place in which we first saw them. This reality-check understandably gave Helen the sense that the object in her visual field was real. But the perceptual anomalies in this case include the curious tactile sensation she first experienced, the visual sensation of the pedestal and radiance, and the fact that she seemed to be the only one who could see the figure. These might induce one to think that it occurred in an ASC, and the last of these allows us to formulate a very important principle about OSCs.

In OSCs we find that others report observing pretty much what we observe (The Inter-subjective Observability Principle).

A frequent feature of visual encounters with Jesus that occur in public is that only a select percipient is able to see the figure. For that reason we might be inclined to classify them as experiences in ASCs. I did encounter a few cases, however, in which percipients claimed that sizable groups simultaneously saw Jesus. Two such reports came out of a small church in Oakland, California. Such phenomena satisfy an important condition for OSCs, and indicate that simple views about the character of visual encounters with a being taken to be Jesus are not borne out by empirical investigation.

In OSCs we find that the visual domain that is before us remains the same, i.e., does not inexplicably change.

Case 5: Jim Link of Newmarket, Ontario, said that as he sat down to watch television one evening, as was his habit, the screen became invisible and the sound inaudible. He momentarily wondered if he had gone blind, so he looked in the direction of the window beside him to see if he could see his front yard, but he could see neither the window nor the walls of his living room. He said he felt as though he was enveloped in a curtain, but he could not see one. Then a figure in regal robes that Jim immediately identified as Jesus appeared at the end of the room, and beckoned to Jim. Although Jim had the sense that his whole perceptual domain had been altered, he had no sense of having lost consciousness or of having left his body.

This case sounds like a clear instance of an experience in an ASC, for at one moment Jim was looking at the television set at the end of the room, and in the next he saw nothing familiar. This does not seem to be a case of an out-of-the-body experience, for such percipients report both altered visual domains as well as a sense of moving. The conjecture that some visions are waking dreams again seems appropriate to apply to this case.

In OSCs we experience the causal effects appropriate for the events that precede them.

This important principle is difficult to state clearly, but I refer to such familiar facts as that when a person drinks an aromatic liquid, she or he gives off the aroma of that liquid.

Case 6: Joy Kinsey of Oakland, California, tells of an experience that occurred in response to prayer. As soon as the minister touched her head in a gesture of blessing, she lost consciousness, and her dreamlike experience began. She had the sense of being in a temple having three adjoining parts, each beautiful beyond description. She passed through the first two, and was about to enter the third when she was stopped by Jesus, who sat behind a lattice and held up his hand. She was instructed to go to a window, from which she looked out onto a pastoral scene and was told about its meaning. When Joy left the window she returned to the area near the lattice. She fell to her knees (still in the dream) and saw a goblet filled with wine before her. She was instructed to drink it, and as she did so she saw Jesus smiling at her, expressing pleasure at her obedience. Then Joy woke up. She found that about three hours had elapsed since the experience began, and that the people around were distressed because they smelled a strong aroma of sweet wine coming from her mouth. The smell filled the church, and she felt so drunk that she was unable to stand on her own.

This experience is an obvious candidate for an ASC, but the one difficulty in asserting this unequivocally is the smell of wine that came from Joy's mouth. This is the kind of causal effect we would associate with actually drinking wine, but the peculiarity is that the drinking is said to have occurred in the context of the vision. The appearance account from Luke discussed above, where Jesus is said to have eaten food, conforms to this condition for experiences in OSCs.

Like the other experiences I investigated, Joy's experience does not appear to have been deliberately induced. I focused my attention on experiences that (a) occurred when percipients were awake (Joy Kinsey's experience was the one exception), (b) occurred when their eyes were open, (c) percipients identified as being of Jesus, (d) were not part of near-death experiences, and (e) were apparently not deliberately induced by fasting, sleep deprivation, ingesting hallucinogens, focused meditation, etc. These suggest another condition for OSCs:

Experiences in OSCs are not induced by attempts to manipulate the senses, e.g., by fasting, sleep deprivation, ingesting hallucinogens, focused meditation, etc.

Trance experiences, at least as this phenomenon is informally understood, generally render those who undergo it incapable of interacting with others who happen to be present. Other ASCs, e.g., dreaming, also exhibit this characteristic, whereas still others, e.g., glossolalia and alcohol intoxication, might not. The last condition I will mention seeks to express the relevant difference:¹

Those who have experiences in OSC are generally capable of describing them to others or commenting on them while they occur; but some of the experiences in ASC render those who undergo them incapable of interacting with observers.

Case 7: Maureen Hason of Calgary, Alberta, reported that one of the visual encounters she experienced took place in a restaurant while she was having lunch with a friend. They were seated directly across from each other at a table with four seats, and Jesus suddenly appeared in the chair diagonally opposite to Maureen. He obscured the back of the chair and seemed as real as any ordinary person sitting there would. Maureen's friend was unable to see him, but Maureen was able to report what she saw as the encounter occurred, and they talked about it then.

Maureen's experience does not appear to have taken place in an ASC, for she was capable of conversing as one would normally be able to when undergoing an experience in an OSC. Her experience, in this respect, was obviously very different from Joy Kinsey's, and probably also Jim Link's. Some other experiences, e.g., Helen Bezanson's, are difficult to assess with respect to the condition under discussion.

Most of the experiences reported to me did not conform to all the conditions for OSCs itemized above, and so had features that suggested that they might have occurred in ASCs. But those experiences that seemed to satisfy most of the conditions for OSCs understandably gave percipients a sense that they were virtually indistinguishable from ordinary experiences. This fact also induced them to regard the object that appeared

to them as real. The sharpness of the distinction between ASCs and OSCs, and perhaps also the distinction between ordinary reality and alternate reality, is called into question by the strange features apparently exhibited by these encounters.

NT Appearances as ASCs

We are now in a position to evaluate the claim that the NT appearance events occurred in ASCs. The information about the appearances described in the NT is frequently too limited to say much about what precisely happened, but many of them have no obvious anomalies corresponding to the conditions for OSCs just outlined. The first of just two appearance accounts in Matthew, for example, says only that as the women left the tomb Jesus met them, and they "came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him" (28:9). Jesus then spoke to them, saying that they should tell the disciples that they would see him in Galilee. Pilch might be right to think that this experience took place in an altered, rather than an ordinary perceptual state, but he has no substantial basis for saying so. The phenomenological detail presented here is so modest that we cannot readily compare it with that available in experiences such as ones I briefly described from my own research. One noteworthy element in the account from Matthew is the reference to the women taking hold of Jesus's feet. This has been widely interpreted as a detail that was added in an attempt to combat the influence of docetism in the early Church, but it might describe a reality-check that the women attempted in their effort to respond to what appeared to them as an aberrant visual object. Even if it was a reality-check, we cannot tell from the account whether tactile and visual perceptions were combined in ways suggesting an ordinary state of consciousness.

The appearance account in Luke of the eleven (or more) disciples who touched Jesus with their hands and watched him eat food involves explicit reality-checks. Pilch argues that this account is a case of someone eating in an alternate reality, in keeping with explicit rabbinic traditions that state that the righteous enjoy meals in heaven (1998:54-55). We might concede to Pilch that Jesus ate the fish in an alternate reality, but the question that remains is whether the eleven disciples observed this in ASCs. Luke appears to describe an inter-subjectively observable event, which is implausibly interpreted for that reason as one occurring in an ASC.

If eleven disciples simultaneously saw and touched Jesus, their experience would seem to satisfy a condition for normal perception. Although such simultaneous experiences are just conceivably an instance of mass hallucination, as this is conventionally understood, showing that this is what occurred is very difficult. We can only satisfy criteria for mass hallucination by having precise information about the simultaneous perceptual experiences of different percipients. Luke, for all his exactness in descriptions compared to other NT writers, does not satisfy our demands for detail concerning what might have been in the visual fields of the disciples. For example, we do not know if each of the disciples experienced an inappropriate visual perception for their spatial position relative to one another and to the figure that appeared. If they formed a complete circle, say, and the figure appeared in its center but each simultaneously saw its face, we could plausibly conjecture that this was a mass hallucination. The reference to group appearances in the NT accounts strongly suggests that they occurred in ordinary, rather than altered states of consciousness, although the accounts are not detailed enough to be sure about this point.

The reference to Jesus's eating fish in Luke implies that some inter-subjectively observable change to the ordinary world took place — it seems that at one moment a piece of fish was visibly present, and a moment later the fish was ingested, and presumably incapable of being seen in just the way that food ordinarily "disappears" when it is eaten. We cannot be sure, of course, of what the eleven disciples actually saw, for again Luke does not provide us with detail. But the collective nature of the observation appears to put the "disappearing" of the fish in the ordinary perceptual domain.

Our evaluation of the situation might be different if the observations were not collective, although accompanied by an some inter-subjectively observable change to the ordinary world. In the experiences I investigated, for example, I came across a case in which a young man who had broken three neck vertebrae in a skiing accident claimed that Jesus healed him in a visual encounter. Eight days after being hospitalized in Bellingham, Washington state, Barry Dyck woke up to find Jesus standing at the foot of his bed. Barry

sat up in spite of orders from the doctors not to move, grasped the arms of the radiant figure who stood before him, and begged to die. Barry was informed that this request could not be met, and that he would be fine. Barry reports that when he awoke the next morning he was perfectly well. The alleged healing is an inter-subjectively observable causal effect (or concomitant) of the visual encounter, but we cannot determine whether that encounter occurred in an altered, rather than ordinary, state of consciousness. The private nature of the encounter prevents one from claiming that it took place in an OSC. Collective visual encounters, combined with inter-subjectively observable effects, are strong candidates for occurring in OSCs, however.

Luke gives a second appearance account in his Gospel, viz., of two disciples who walked to Emmaus with a stranger who evinced knowledge of the Crucifixion and reports of the Resurrection (24:13-31). Luke describes how these three men walked a distance of up to seven miles and conversed as people would normally do. Nothing about this sounds like an experience in an ASC, although the stranger's alleged "instantaneous disappearance" as they sat down to eat is certainly remarkable. Two accounts in John (20:19-24) describe similar acts of "instantaneous appearance," strongly suggesting that the body of the Risen Jesus was considered to be out-of-the-ordinary in some way or other. These three events are consistently presented as having been inter-subjectively observed, and for that reason seem to be OSCs. We are given the impression that an alternate form of reality was experienced in OSCs. Insisting that these perceptual experience occurred in ASCs is not explicitly supported by anything in the text.

Conclusion

I have argued that the perceptual anomalies in the visual encounters I investigated makes it difficult to arrive at definitive judgments about the occurrence of altered, rather than ordinary, states of consciousness. *Contemporary* cases, which allow us to obtain so much more information than we can get from the NT accounts, do not lend themselves to definitive judgments about the presence or absence of ASCs, so how can we make definitive judgments about the NT accounts? Pilch's contention that the NT accounts all constitute experiences in ASCs is without specific support, and is undermined by the little evidence that is available.

Early in "Appearances of the Risen Jesus in Cultural Context" (1998) Pilch remarks that many interpretations of the appearances have been offered in the literature of biblical theology. He considers them inadequate, and consequently offers his own. I suggest that the incompleteness of the appearance accounts has allowed so many competing interpretations to have been offered as possible conjectures for explaining the appearance (and vision) phenomena. Contemporary experiences suggest that attempts to provide definitive interpretations of the appearance (and vision) accounts might always be inadequate. Perhaps a moratorium should be placed on further speculation about the appearance accounts until the amount of information about contemporary visual encounters with Jesus begins to approach the amount acquired in the last three decades or so about near-death experiences. This information has revolutionized our understanding of the hitherto mysterious reports of "otherworldly journeys" from antiquity and the medieval world (cf. Carol Zaleski 1987).

Pilch places considerable stress upon understanding the appearances of Jesus within their cultural context, and so looks for comparisons among visions of holy men in Mediterranean culture. No objection can be leveled at trying to understand experiences in their cultural context. I have argued, however, that another kind of evidence needs to be considered when evaluating the visual encounters with Jesus. Traditional Christian thought has claimed that Jesus, despite his humble Judean origins, has worldwide significance through a unique Resurrection. The evidence for it includes not only visual encounters, but also an empty tomb (more precisely, an apparently irretrievable corpse). Neither the appearances nor the empty tomb on their own provide significant evidential force for a unique Resurrection, but their combined force is considerable. This is another issue, of course, and I will not discuss it here. But contemporary experiences interpreted as visual encounters with Jesus cast doubt on the claim that the original appearances were uniform and were obviously all ASCs.

Perhaps ASCs illuminate other kinds of experience mentioned in the NT, but they do not provide the Rosetta stone for understanding the NT appearance accounts. The interpretation of these accounts and the events that seem to be indicated by them remain a mystery.

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