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Assessing Psychological Explanations for Jesus' Post-Resurrection Appearances

A Response to Stephen H. Smith

Abstract

In a recent article published in this journal, Stephen Smith acknowledges that bereavement hallucination is an unlikely explanation for Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, and suggests supplementing it with theories concerning collective delusion, distorted memory, and cognitive dissonance. Our response contributes to the discussion by bringing our expertise in psychology and New Testament studies together to advance interdisciplinary study on this important topic. We show that Smith's discussion confounds real-life cases and laboratory experiments on memory, and mass psychogenic illness with illusions. Moreover, Smith fails to consider a number of important differences between the case concerning Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and cases of cognitive dissonance and other psychological theories, which indicate that these theories are not plausible explanations concerning Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

Keywords:

post-resurrection appearances; apparitions; collective delusions; bereavement hallucinations; distorted memory; cognitive dissonance

1. Introduction

In his recent article 'Parapsychology, Hallucinations, Collective Delusions, and Jesus' Post-Resurrection Appearances: A Response to Glenn Siniscalchi' published in this journal,¹ Stephen Smith argues that 'although collective hallucinations are impossible, collective delusions are not. Indeed, the latter are relatively commonplace. They include, in all

¹ Stephen Smith, 'Parapsychology, Hallucinations, Collective Delusions, and Jesus' Post-Resurrection Appearances: A Response to Glenn Siniscalchi,' *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 21 (2023), pp. 228–253.

probability, nearly all the recorded cases of apparitions of the Virgin Mary, weeping or moving statues, group sightings of ‘ghosts’, spirit presences at seances, and much more.’² Smith seeks to explain Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances with a combination of psychological factors: distorted memory, bereavement hallucinations, mass hysteria, and cognitive dissonance.

Smith’s intention to bring the disciplines of psychology and New Testament studies to interact with each other, concerning an important topic in historical Jesus studies, is commendable and should be encouraged. Nevertheless, in such interdisciplinary attempts there is always a risk that it fails to engage adequately with the scholarship in either discipline, resulting in unwarranted conclusions drawn. We argue this is the case here. In this article, we shall apply our expertise in psychology and New Testament studies to evaluate the arguments in Smith’s article.

1. Distorted memory

1.1. Reliability of memory

An important component of Smith’s argument is that memory research indicates scepticism about the validity of memory:

This entire enterprise has now been called into question by the work of memory theorists, and certain New Testament studies based on their results, which suggest that memory is much more fallible than was once assumed, and that, even if it were possible to trace the Gospel materials back to the original eyewitnesses who saw and heard Jesus in the flesh, it would be impossible to determine how reliable their memories were. All human memory is vulnerable to distortion and deterioration, a process that begins within a very short time of an event occurring; and if we cannot even rely on our own memories of events

² Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 243-244.

after so short a time, what hope do we have of recovering data from the memories of people who lived two thousand years ago.³

Smith's argument risks a false antithesis: either our memories are like video recordings of the past, or 'we cannot even rely on our own memories of events'. Psychologists have known for over a hundred years that our memories are fallible. However, as Chris Brewin, an expert on memory, points out:

Until recently, human memory, although limited in capacity and therefore prone to error once these limitations are exceeded, was seen as broadly reliable. Errors in memory were not regarded as compromising the integrity of the system as a whole and its ability to guide our behavior.⁴

Like many other areas of neuropsychology, studying patients who have lost the capacity for memory can provide important insights. Alan Baddeley (an influential memory researcher) points out: 'Judged by this criterion, there is no doubt that long-term memory in general is hugely important in the capacity to function independently . . . Even a brief survey of the neuropsychological literature indicates the crucial importance of our memory systems.' Clive Wearing is a moving example, various articles and documentaries have reported the devastating impact of amnesia on his life. Similarly, many have observed first-hand the heartbreaking decline in the lives of people with Alzheimer's disease. When Smith claims, 'we cannot even rely on our own memories of events' he's partially correct, our memories are fallible. But why would it matter if a patient's memory declines, if they could not rely on it in the first place?

1.2. *The 'Memory Wars'*

³ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', pp. 233–234.

⁴ Chris Brewin, 'Regaining Consensus on the Reliability of Memory,' *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 29 (2020) pp. 121–125 (121).

In the mid-1990s, led by researchers such as Elizabeth Loftus, there was great emphasis on the unreliability of memory. False memories were surprisingly easy to implant, eyewitness testimony was more open to challenge. Smith's article draws on some of this literature. For example, the idea that our memories are reconstructive and therefore unreliable:

each act of remembering involves a reconstruction, initially of the original event or chain of events, and then subsequently of the series of memory-acts, thus removing each recollection progressively further from the first impression of what actually happened.⁵

Again, there is a partial truth here. Our memories are reconstructive, 'in the sense that retrieval involves the reactivation and recombination from disparate brain areas of constituent elements, for example, from specific brain areas processing vision and audition that were engaged while the event was being perceived.'⁶ Yet, as Brewin points out, 'this neuroscientific use of "reconstructive" does not imply anything about the truth or falsity of the resulting recollections.'⁷

Since the mid-2010s, we have seen another revision of the consensus on reliability of memory. For example, Baddeley questions whether the focus on the 'sins' of memory has led researchers to downplay the 'virtues' of memory.⁸ Recent studies give support to this suggestion. For example, Nicholas Diamond and colleagues asked memory scientists to predict the results of their experiment on the recall of real-world events. Participants performed far better (93-95% accuracy) than expected (experts predicted only 40%

⁵ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances,' pp. 232.

⁶ Brewin, 'Regaining Consensus,' pp. 122.

⁷ Brewin, 'Regaining Consensus,' pp. 122.

⁸ Alan Baddeley, 'Is the study of memory unduly preoccupied with its sins?' *Memory* 30 (2022) pp. 55–59.

accuracy).⁹ Academics from other disciplines (i.e., non-experts) underestimated the results even further (30% accuracy). Debates rage on, but the consensus is shifting:

Prominently underpinning this view are claims that the confidence we have in our memory has little relation to its accuracy, that it is easy to implant false memories of events that never happened . . . We argue that these claims are exaggerated and do not challenge the traditional consensus concerning memory accuracy.¹⁰

2.3. Real Life vs Laboratory Experiments

There are several potential explanations for why researchers may have underestimated the reliability of our memories. First, many of the studies cited in favour of a sceptical view are conducted in the ‘laboratory.’ For example, ‘The simple idea that “memory decays with time” is sometimes put forward, without acknowledgment that most studies involved meaningless experimental materials and that there are numerous counter-examples.’¹¹ Smith points out that, ‘distortion and deterioration . . . begins within a very short time after the event’.¹² Yet in memory of real-world events, of greater importance to individuals, ‘initial decay in the total amount recalled typically plateaus, resulting in stable and largely accurate long-term recall of the remainder.’¹³ Similarly, laboratory experiments designed to manipulate memory, or implant false memories, may be misleading; ‘The fact that memory can be manipulated in the laboratory is important but does not by itself allow of any conclusion about how reliable memory is under normal, real life circumstances.’¹⁴

2.4. Not All Memory is Created Equal

⁹ Nicholas Diamond et al., ‘The Truth Is Out There: Accuracy in Recall of Verifiable Real-World Events.’ *Psychological Science* 31 (2020) pp. 1544–1556.

¹⁰ Brewin, ‘Regaining Consensus’, pp. 121.

¹¹ Chris Brewin, ‘Impact on the legal system of the generalizability crisis in psychology,’ *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 45 (2022), e7.

¹² Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 251.

¹³ Brewin, ‘Generalizability Crisis’, e7.

¹⁴ Brewin, ‘Generalizability Crisis’, e7.

Smith claims that the reasons for the apparent contradictions in the Gospels' portrayal of the post-resurrection appearances 'were in all likelihood theological or, as we have just seen, due to the imperfect recollections of the original witnesses, and the historical details of what actually happened would not have been of prime importance to the Evangelists, even if they were still recoverable after an interval of forty or fifty years.¹⁵

Smith's claim fails to take into consideration the following factors.

To begin, the debate over whether our memories are either reliable or unreliable is too simplistic. Researchers have identified various factors that impact the reliability of memory. Several studies have shown that events of personal or emotional significance are recalled far more accurately, and it has been argued in recent literature that the earliest Christians' remembrance of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances belongs to this category, as such events would have been regarded to be of foundational importance for the earliest Christian movement.¹⁶

For example, recall of major events such as earthquakes six to eighteen months later, is generally poor. But residents of cities where an earthquake happened, on average, have extremely good memory for these events.¹⁷ Similarly, a study conducted 63 years after the invasion of Denmark during World War II, found citizens living through these events had far better recall (including the day of the week and weather) than those from a later generation.¹⁸ In addition, the memories of resistance movement members were more accurate than those not in the resistance.¹⁹

¹⁵ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', p. 235.

¹⁶ See David Graeig, *Resurrection Remembered* (London: Routledge 2024); Andrew Loke, *Studies on the Origin and Development of Divine and Resurrection Christologies* (Eugene: Cascade books, 2023).

¹⁷ For example, Ulrich Neisser and N. Harsch, 'Phantom flashbulbs: False recollections of hearing the news about Challenger,' in *Affect and accuracy in recall: Studies of "flashbulb" memories*, edited by E. Winograd and U. Neisser, pp. 9–31 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Er, Nurhan. 'A new flashbulb memory model applied to the Marmara earthquake,' *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 17 (2003) pp. 503-517.

¹⁸ Dorthe Berntsen and Dorthe Thomsen, 'Personal Memories for Remote Historical Events: Accuracy and Clarity of Flashbulb Memories Related to World War II,' *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 134 (2005) pp. 242–257.

¹⁹ Berntsen and Thomsen, 'Flashbulb Memories', pp. 251.

Now, Allison rightly uses the metaphor ‘earth-shattering’ to describe Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances: ‘Easter faith was, in large measure, a response to appearances of the risen Jesus . . . the sources, however much they otherwise disagree, concur that something earth-shattering occurred in the days immediately after the crucifixion.’²⁰ The details of these events must have been told since the earliest days of the church as people would surely have asked about what they saw, and ‘stories as community forming as this, once told, are not easily modified. Too much depends on them.’²¹ They would have been well-remembered and preserved by the early Christian communities because the events were of foundational importance for them, just as residents of cities where an earthquake happened would have extremely good memory of the details of these events. The apparent lack of agreement of some details in different sources is what we would expect from well preserved multiple independent first-hand accounts of a shocking event given by eyewitnesses very soon after the event. As Wright argues,

The stories exhibit . . . exactly that surface tension which we associate, not with tales artfully told by people eager to sustain a fiction and therefore anxious to make everything look right, but with the hurried, puzzled accounts of those who have seen with their own eyes something which took them horribly by surprise and with which they have not yet fully come to terms.²²

Given the above considerations, it is unlikely that the reasons for the apparent contradictions in the Gospels’ portrayal of the post-resurrection appearances were due to the

²⁰ Dale Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), pp. 198–202.

²¹ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p. 611.

²² Wright, *The Resurrection*, p. 612. Smith claims that the apparent contradictions ‘are difficult to reconcile (p. 235), but he does not engage with the replies to this objection (as well as replies to similar objections by other scholars such as Bart Ehrman, Geza Vermès et al) in recent scholarship, see, for example, Michael Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Andrew Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (London: Routledge, 2020), chapter 2.

imperfect recollections of the original witnesses (or ‘in all likelihood theological’, as Smith says). Rather, it is better explained by each of the authors of the Gospels choosing from a pool of well-remembered and preserved historical material (consisting of a collection of early traditions of the accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances) those details that fitted the particular needs of his audience and told the stories according to his own style and theological emphases. Smith’s claim that ‘the historical details of what actually happened would not have been of prime importance to the Evangelists’²³ fails to consider the factors mentioned in the previous paragraphs, which indicate that the historical details would have been important to the early (first century) Christian communities to whom the Evangelists belong.

Smith questions whether the details ‘were still recoverable after an interval of forty or fifty years.’²⁴ He fails to note that (as argued in previous paragraphs) the details of the stories of the events would have been repeatedly retold and carefully remembered in the early Christian communities given their community forming and foundationally important nature, and thus were unlikely to be lost to the Evangelists who belonged to these communities. As observed above, initial memory decay in the total amount recalled is common but for key events this often plateaus, followed by accurate recall of remaining details over many decades. In fact, Smith himself agrees the claim that Jesus died, was buried, and was subsequently ‘seen’ by various disciples was well preserved and agreed by the Evangelists.²⁵ This indicates that this claim was not lost to the Evangelists after an interval of forty or fifty years, likely because it was repeatedly retold in the early Christian communities. Smith does not note that the Evangelists also agreed on some other details in their portrayals of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance, such as the detail that Jesus spoke to groups of people and that

²³ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, p. 235.

²⁴ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, p. 235.

²⁵ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, p. 235.

he was touched (e.g. Matthew 28:9, 18-20; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-29). Noting that studies on memory have indicated that people often remember the gist of events accurately, New Testament scholars have argued for the importance of observing repeated patterns across various characteristics and sources as well as focusing on the overall impression the sources give in making historical claims about Jesus.²⁶ In spite of the diversity of the details of the resurrection narratives in the Gospels, one such repeated pattern is that the post-resurrected Jesus spoke to groups of people and that he was touched, unlike (say, for example) the Marian apparition at Zeitoun which was speechless and not touched (see Section 4 below).

3. Bereavement hallucinations

3.1. Summary of prevalence

Smith, in common with many other naturalistic explanations, appeals to the bereavement hallucination literature: ‘If hallucinations can explain at least some of the apparition cases documented in the parapsychological literature, is there any reason why they should not also explain the mysterious post-resurrection appearances of Jesus?’²⁷

One of the difficulties for this explanation is that multiple Gospels attest that the disciples touched Jesus. If these were hallucinations, Smith concedes they would be “exceptions to the rule.”²⁸ For example, Rees found that 2.7% of widows claimed that their dead spouse had touched them,²⁹ similarly Grimby³⁰ found 6% of spouses experienced tactile hallucinations. For more comprehensive coverage of these data, we consulted several

²⁶ Dale Allison, *Constructing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), pp. 14–16.

²⁷ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 241.

²⁸ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 239.

²⁹ Dewi Rees. The Hallucinations of Widowhood. *BMJ* 4 (1971) 39-41.

³⁰ A. Grimby, Bereavement among elderly people: grief reactions, post-bereavement hallucinations and quality of life, *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 87 (1993) 72-80.

academic reviews³¹ of the literature, which led us to consider eighteen studies.³² Although some studies report slightly higher rates, such as Olson³³ (13%),³⁴ median estimates across studies show tactile hallucinations are far less likely than other sensory modalities (see table 1).

Study	Sample size	Visual hallucination (median: 14%)	Auditory hallucination (median: 15%)	Tactile hallucination (median: 5%)
Arcangel 2005 ³⁵	827	14% (114/827)	2% (16/827)	1% (10/827)
Barbato 1999 ³⁶	47	2% (1/47)	13% (6/47)	4% (2/47)
Byrne 1994 ³⁷	57	NR*	NR	NR
Carlson 2007 ³⁸	45	13% (6/45)	29% (13/45)	NR
Datson 1997 ³⁹	87	10% (9/87)	11% (10/87)	6% (5/87)
Grimby 1993 ⁴⁰	50	22% (11/50)	26% (13/50)	6% (3/50)

³¹ E.g. Anna Castelnovo et al., 'Post bereavement hallucinatory experiences: A critical overview of population and clinical studies,' *Journal of Affective Disorders* 186 (2015) 266–274; Karina Kamp et al., 'Sensory and Quasi-Sensory Experiences of the Deceased in Bereavement: An Interdisciplinary and Integrative Review,' *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 46 (2020), pp.1367-1381; Jenny Streit-Horn, 'A systematic review of research on after-death communication,' PhD Diss., University of North Texas, 2011.

³² To be considered in our paper, studies were required to include a minimum of forty participants, provide incidence or prevalence data on bereavement hallucinations distinct from the broader category of sense of presence, report on first-hand experience, not primarily targeting members of psychic organizations.

³³ P.R. Olson et al., 'Hallucinations of widowhood,' *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* 33 (1985), 543–547.

³⁴ Smith reports this as 21.4% (6/26) of hallucinating widows. We have chosen to keep the metric (percentage of the total sample) consistent across studies (6/46) to make comparison between studies clearer, so have used a different denominator.

³⁵ Dianne Arcangel, *Afterlife encounters: Ordinary people, extraordinary experiences* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2005).

³⁶ Michael Barbato et al., 'Parapsychological Phenomena near the Time of Death,' *Journal of Palliative Care* 15 (1999) pp. 30-37.

³⁷ G.J. Byrne and B. Raphael, 'A longitudinal study of bereavement phenomena in recently widowed elderly men,' *Psychological Medicine* 24 (1994) pp. 411-421.

³⁸ Maria Carlson and I.M. Nilsson, 'Bereaved spouses' adjustment after the patients' death in palliative care,' *Palliative and Supportive Care* 5 (2007) pp. 397-404.

³⁹ Susan Datson and Samuel Marwit. 'Personality constructs and perceived presence of deceased loved ones,' *Death Studies* 21 (1997) 131-146.

⁴⁰ A. Grimby, 'Bereavement among elderly people: grief reactions, post-bereavement hallucinations and quality of life,' *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 87 (1993) pp. 72-80.

Houck 2005 ⁴¹	162	10% (16/162)	19% (30/162)	3% (5/162)
Jahn 2014 ⁴²	1301	117/1301 9%	114/1301 9%	NR
Kalish 1973 ⁴³	434	Unclear**	NR	3% (12/434)
Kamp 2023 ⁴⁴	310	7% full figure person (22/310)	7% *** (22/310)	12% (38/310)
Kamp 2019 ⁴⁵	175	27% (48/175)	23% (41/175)	NR
Klugman 2006 ⁴⁶	202	38% (76/202) (vision or image)	35% (71/202) (voice)	25% (51/202) (touch)
Longman 1988 ⁴⁷	97	15% (15/97)	16% (16/97)	5% (5/97)
Olson 1985 ⁴⁸	46	48% (22/46)	30% (14/46)	13% (6/46)
Rees 1971 ⁴⁹	293	14% (41/293)	13% (39/293)	2.7% (8/293)
Schuchter 1993 ⁵⁰	350	NR	NR	NR
Zisook 1985 ⁵¹	300	NR****	NR	NR
Zisook 1986 ⁵²	61	NR****	12% (7/61)	NR
*seen, heard, or felt as touched; **appeared or spoke; ***auditory-verbal occurring outside the head; ****visual image of the deceased was judged insufficiently precise to be included; NR=not reported.				

⁴¹ James Houck, 'The universal, multiple, and exclusive experiences of after-death communication,' *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 24 (2005) pp. 117–127.

⁴² Danielle Jahn and S. Spencer-Thomas, 'Continuing Bonds Through After-Death Spiritual Experiences in Individuals Bereaved by Suicide,' *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 16 (2014) pp. 311–324.

⁴³ Richard Kalish and David Reynolds, 'Phenomenological reality and post-death contact,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 12 (1973) pp. 209–221.

⁴⁴ Karina Kamp et al., 'Prevalence and phenomenology of sensory experiences of a deceased spouse: A survey of bereaved older adults,' *OMEGA* 87 (2023) pp. 103–125.

⁴⁵ Karina Kamp et al., 'Bereavement hallucinations after the loss of a spouse: Associations with psychopathological measures, personality and coping style,' *Death Studies* 43 (2019) pp. 260–269.

⁴⁶ Craig Klugman, 'Dead Men Talking: Evidence of Post Death Contact and Continuing Bonds,' *OMEGA* 53 (2006) pp. 249–262.

⁴⁷ A.J. Longman et al., 'Sensory-perceptual experiences of bereaved individuals. additional cues for survivors,' *American Journal of Hospice Care* 5 (1988), pp. 42.

⁴⁸ P.R. Olson et al., 'Hallucinations of widowhood,' *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* 33 (1985), pp. 543–547.

⁴⁹ Dewi Rees. 'The Hallucinations of Widowhood.' *BMJ* 4 (1971) pp. 39–41.

⁵⁰ Stephen Schuchter et al., 'The course of normal grief,' in *Handbook of Bereavement*, edited by Margaret Stroebe et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 23–43.

⁵¹ S. Zisook et al. 'The time course of spousal bereavement.' *General Hospital Psychiatry* 7 (1985), pp. 95–100.

⁵² S. Zisook, et al. 'The first four years of widowhood.' *Psychiatric Annals* 16 (1986), pp. 288–294.

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Table 1. Summary of studies assessing the incidence or prevalence of bereavement hallucinations

Smith also concedes that the literature rarely reports tactile hallucinations occurring in addition to other sensory modalities (e.g. visual or auditory). He offers a speculative solution, ‘so it is quite possible that some who felt the touch of the “presence” might also have had a visual or auditory impression too.’⁵³ However, multimodal hallucinations like those portrayed in the Gospels (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, verbal) are rarely recorded in studies of bereavement hallucinations so there are limited data to inform this speculation.

3.2. *The Problem of Shared Hallucinations*

A further difficulty for the hallucination hypothesis, as acknowledged by Smith, is that hallucinations are experienced by individuals not groups. Based on the data mentioned previously, one or two people experiencing a bereavement hallucination is not that unlikely, but accounting for eleven or twelve people (this number is indicated by the early creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3–5)⁵⁴ hallucinating at one time is more challenging.

By standard definition in the *psychological* literature, ‘it is unreasonable to think that causal mechanisms internal to each person in a group simultaneously generated similar experiences.’⁵⁵ However, Smith is correct to point out that shared apparitions are reported in the *parapsychological* literature. For example, he cites Sidgwick’s 19th century survey, that 8.74% of people who reported a visual hallucination claimed to have seen it collectively.⁵⁶ This is true, however such cases account for only 0.8% of their total sample. A further problem is that shared apparition claims tend to be made by groups of five people or less. Therefore, the spiritual apparition hypothesis for Jesus’ post-resurrection appearance posits a

⁵³ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 239.

⁵⁴ It is not necessary to be overly dogmatic about whether the creed speaks of twelve disciples minus Judas or perhaps includes Judas’ replacement Matthias.

⁵⁵ Loke, *Resurrection*, pp. 100.

⁵⁶ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 239.

rare subset (eleven or more witnesses) to an already rare event (claims that a group saw the same vision), which makes it doubly improbable. A more recent survey by Allison cites a number of reports of group apparitions,⁵⁷ but determining the precise number of unique case reports is challenging, as there is some overlap in discussion of cases across citations. Allison himself argues that there are no well authenticated cases of groups much larger than eight people.⁵⁸ Even the authenticity of what Allison regards to be the strongest cases of up to eight people has been challenged in scholarship.⁵⁹ Smith himself rightly cautions against the reports from parapsychology literature such as those mentioned above, by noting that they depend heavily on ‘witness statements’ from ‘the general public who are simply allowed to tell their stories in their own way without any requirement to justify or explain their experience, and the parapsychologist is left to make what he will of the data received. Clearly, the way is open not only for conscious fraud, but unconscious fraud too.’⁶⁰ By contrast, Allison observes that the Fraud Theory has long been discarded in the case of Jesus’ resurrection, citing E. P. Sanders: ‘I do not regard deliberate fraud as a worthwhile explanation’ of Easter faith, for some of those in 1 Cor 15:3–8 and the canonical resurrection narratives ‘were to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming that they had seen the risen Lord, and several of them would die for their cause.’⁶¹

Smith acknowledges that bereavement hallucinations alone are unlikely to explain Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. Multimodal hallucinations like those portrayed in the

⁵⁷ Allison, *Resurrection*, pp. 218.

⁵⁸ Allison, *Resurrection*, p. 221n.49, citing Green and McCreery and arguing against ‘a possible exception’ (‘the so-called Cummings apparition’) that it is a hoax.

⁵⁹ For example, regarding the Samuel Bull case, there was only one group of eight witnesses all of whom belonged to the same family, and the investigator’s report does not rule out the possibility that they colluded to make up the story for various forms of perceived benefits that were not limited to housing benefits (Loke, *Studies*, pp. 175-181).

⁶⁰ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, p. 237.

⁶¹ Allison, *Resurrection*, p. 310. Concerning additional considerations against the Fraud Hypothesis, see Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection*, chapter 3.

Gospels (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile, verbal) are rarely recorded in these studies.⁶² If we discount multimodal or tactile hallucinations reported in the Gospels, based on these data from the psychological and parapsychological literature, the probability of eleven people experiencing a visual hallucination is just under 1 in 2.5 billion.⁶³ A more conservative estimate (assuming after the first hallucination, each subsequent person is twice as likely to experience one) is still just over 1 in 2.4 million.⁶⁴

3.3. *Insight About Hallucinations*

A further challenge to Smith's argument, is that bereaved individuals often have insight that they are experiencing a hallucination. For example, Anna Castelnovo, a psychiatrist and researcher argues:

No matter how vivid such visions maybe, to the extent that some people behave in response to them, reality testing [they know that these experiences are not reflective of "reality"] seems preserved, at least in the absence of conditions such as pathologic grief reactions, sub-threshold or overt psychiatric/neurologic disorders, sensory/cognitive impairment, or drug/alcohol abuse.⁶⁵

Although people with a psychiatric condition, such as psychosis, may lack the insight to distinguish real events from hallucinations; greater insight is found in non-

⁶² Allison notes that it is not obviously true that all 'apparitions' are purely endogenous (Allison, *Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 231). Therefore, even if there exists a well-established case of 'apparition', this will not falsify the case for Jesus' resurrection, given that both cases could be veridical.

⁶³ 0.14^{11} since according to probability theory, the probability of individual events co-occurring is estimated by multiplying the probabilities of each event (in other words, $0.14 \times 0.14 \times 0.14 \dots$ etc.). It might be objected that a bodily resurrection would be even more unlikely. Others have replied that, *ex hypothesi*, the resurrection of Jesus was supposed to be an event that was caused by God ('God raised Jesus from the dead') rather than caused naturalistically such as in the case of a hallucination. Given this consideration, (statistical) infrequencies should not be assumed to equate with (epistemic) improbability in the former case given that God (if He exists) might freely choose to act in certain ways only on rare and special occasions in certain religious contexts for the purposes of revelation and accomplishing salvation. For detailed discussion on this point, see Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection*, pp. 175-176, citing philosopher Stephen Davis. An evaluation of the objection and its reply belongs to the field of philosophy of religion and it is beyond the scope of this article which focuses on psychology and New Testament studies.

⁶⁴ That is, $0.14 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28 \times 0.28$.

⁶⁵ Anna Castelnovo et al., 'Post bereavement hallucinatory experiences: A critical overview of population and clinical studies,' *Journal of Affective Disorders* 186 (2015) pp. 266–274 (272).

clinical populations. For example, Linszen *et al.*, in an online study of 10,000 people, found that only 10.2% of people experiencing auditory hallucinations and 11.4% experiencing visual hallucinations were fully convinced they were real.⁶⁶

Smith claims that ‘many scholars fall into the error of assuming that the ancients would have understood hallucinations on a par with our present understanding, and would have been aware that although the experience was real, the image seen, the voice heard, or the presence felt was not. Recently, however, Bible scholars have drawn on anthropological studies to show that ancient polyphasic societies are unlikely to have distinguished between kinds of reality as sharply as monophasic societies do today. The content of dreams, trances, shamanic activity, and what we would call hallucinations would probably not have been regarded in terms of pseudo-reality to be distinguished from the reality of normal waking consciousness.’⁶⁷

However, Smith falls into the error of not considering the following two points taken together.

First, he fails to distinguish between different kinds of appearances that the ancients talk about. While ancient people widely believed in the reality of ghosts and thought that they could encounter them in dreams, trances, shamanic activity, they knew the difference between the appearance of a ghost compared to the appearance of a resurrected body, as indicated by the ancient (first century) people to whom the Gospel of Luke was written. For example, Jesus was depicted as distinguishing himself from a ghost which the disciples thought they were seeing (Luke 24:36-39). Regardless of whether this account is historical, it indicates that the author and his audience were aware of the distinction.

⁶⁶ Mascha Linszen, ‘Occurrence and phenomenology of hallucinations in the general population: A large online survey,’ *Schizophrenia* 8 (2022), p. 41.

⁶⁷ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, p. 248.

Second, Smith fails to note that the first-century audiences of the earliest Christian preachers were skeptical of resurrected bodies, as indicated by 1 Corinthians 15:12 ('But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?') and Acts 17:32; regardless of whether this passage in Acts is historical, it shows that this scepticism was present among ancient (first century) people. Even the apostles themselves were portrayed as rejecting this claim initially. 'But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:11; see also Matt. 28:17; pseudo-Mark 16:11).

3.4. Violent and Non-Violent Deaths

Smith argues that hallucinations are more common after violent deaths. However, the studies he cited have substantial methodological limitations. Haraldson⁶⁸ interviewed 337 Icelanders who had experienced some form of apparition of the dead. They recruited participants from magazine advertisements⁶⁹ and from an earlier population survey. They found that apparitions of those with a violent death (accident, suicide, or murder) were a greater proportion of their sample than expected by general population rates. Comparisons are limited by the small number of murders and suicides among the apparition cases. Of the 267 people with known causes of death, four of the apparition cases had been murdered (1.5%), compared with 0.08% in the general Icelandic population (1951 to 1970). Twelve of the apparition cases died by suicide (4.49%) compared with 1.51% of deaths by suicide in the general Icelandic population. Differences were more substantial for deaths by accident, 64 cases (23.97%) compared with 7.15% of the general Icelandic population. Information concerning the proportion of apparitions to individuals or groups appeared not to be reported. The conclusion is limited by an important methodological flaw – there was no attempt to

⁶⁸ Erlendur Haraldsson. 'Alleged encounters with the dead: the importance of violent death in 337 new cases.' *The Journal of Parapsychology* 73 (2009) 91-118.

⁶⁹ Targeting fisherman, sailors and the fishing industry; spiritualism, theosophy, and new religious movement; people living in the countryside.

adjust for potential confounding factors (i.e., factors associated with experiencing apparitions of people who had a violent death). Failure to make such statistical adjustments can either overestimate or underestimate prevalence rates. For example, the targeting of participants with an interest in spiritualism, theosophy, and new religious movements may have biased results (if they are also more likely to experience apparitions of those who had a violent death). Another paper⁷⁰ cited by Smith also did not consider the potential for confounding which compromises the validity of the author's conclusions.

Field and Filanosky's online survey⁷¹ also found that participants grieving a suicide, homicide, or accident were more likely to experience 'externalised continued bonds'⁷² than participants grieving someone who had died from a chronic or acute illness. This study statistically adjusted for potential confounders which increases its validity. However, to put these findings in context, on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much), all groups of grieving participants were close to 0, indicating low levels of 'externalised continued bonds.'⁷³

4. "Mass hysteria"

4.1. Smith's strategy

Smith's strategy to side-step the extremely low probability of at least eleven people experiencing hallucinations is to posit that only Peter did. To explain the reported experiences of a wider set of disciples, he suggests that the rest of the disciples experienced 'mass hysteria' or 'collective delusions':

⁷⁰ Ian Stevenson, 'The Contribution of Apparitions to the Evidence for Survival', *JASPR* 76 (1982), pp. 341–58 (346–47).

⁷¹ Nigel Field and Charles Filanosky, 'Continuing Bonds, Risk Factors for Complicated Grief, and Adjustment to Bereavement,' *Death Studies* 34 (2009), pp. 1–29.

⁷² Either imagined or 'actual' seeing, hearing, or being touched by the deceased.

⁷³ Chronic disease (mean= 0.24), acute disease (mean=0.27), accident (mean=0.32), suicide (mean=0.33), homicide (mean=0.46).

collective delusions hypothesis is equally plausible and has the distinct advantage of our knowing for certain that hysterical reactions to particular suggestions by an individual do occur with some regularity.⁷⁴

Below we will summarise this literature on ‘mass hysteria’, now more commonly termed mass psychogenic illness. Smith lumps this literature together with claimed sightings of Mary, and so these data will also be considered below.

4.2. *Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI)*

Smith posits that the disciples came to believe they had seen the risen Jesus – by a process of MPI – initiated by Peter’s bereavement hallucination. Robert Bartholomew, a leading expert on MPI, notes that symptoms typically include, ‘one or a combination of complaints, most commonly involving hyperventilation, headache, cough, symptoms include laughing, dizziness, involuntary shaking, sleepiness, echolalia, and many others.’⁷⁵ Many of these symptoms reflect, ‘characteristics of collective actions that Western trained investigators would typically classify as unusual behaviour.’⁷⁶ Simon Wessely distinguishes two subtypes of MPI: mass anxiety hysteria (acute anxiety, often in school children) and mass motor hysteria (abnormal motor activity experienced by groups).

These symptoms do not map on particularly well to the events described in the Gospels or the early creed of 1 Corinthians 15. The disciples’ reported experiences were primarily perceptual in nature, directed towards Jesus rather than themselves. Such experiences are rare in MPI. Across four reviews⁷⁷ we identified 165 unique case reports (from 1879 to 2001). Of these cases, only one included reports of multiple people with

⁷⁴ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 251.

⁷⁵ Robert Bartholomew, ‘Tarantism, dancing mania and demonopathy: the anthro-political aspects of “mass psychogenic illness,”’ *Psychological Medicine* 24 (1994) pp. 281-306 (281).

⁷⁶ Bartholomew, ‘Mass Psychogenic Illness,’ pp. 281.

⁷⁷ Bartholomew, ‘Mass Psychogenic Illness,’ pp. 281–306. Simon Wessely, ‘Mass hysteria: two syndromes?’ *Psychological Medicine* 17 (1987) pp. 109-120; Robert Bartholomew and Simon Wesseley, ‘Protean nature of mass sociogenic illness. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 180 (2002), pp. 300–306; Leslie Boss, ‘Epidemic Hysteria: A Review of the Published Literature,’ *Epidemiological Reviews* 19 (1997), pp. 233–43.

perceptual experiences – young people in Pitcairn Islands in the 19th century.⁷⁸ Although claims of perceptual experiences were reported by multiple people, these appear to have been individual experiences rather than shared by a group. Therefore, there is limited applicability to Smith’s scenario. The only other case, one student reported what appears to be a hypnagogic hallucination; but the predominant symptoms of these students were nightmares, fainting, laughing, and screaming.⁷⁹ Once more very limited applicability to the disciples’ reported experiences. In summary, this literature provides little to no support for Smith’s scenario occurring frequently.

4.3. *Marian Visions*

Although Smith refers to the literature on MPI, understandably given the data summarised above, he looks elsewhere for analogies to the disciples’ experiences. He cites a second-hand anecdote of a nineteenth century event of a group of people claiming to see a cross in the sky, and famous claims of Marian visions. We will focus on the Marian visions, as the validity of the anecdote is unclear. A crowd in Fatima of 70,000 people claimed to see the Sun fall to the earth, which Smith assumes is a delusion similar to that experienced by the disciples. Allison’s explanation, that these reports may have reflected an observation of a rare meteorological phenomenon, appears more plausible.⁸⁰

Smith’s characterisation of events like ‘the Sun Miracle,’ and reports of the disciples’ experiences of Jesus as ‘collective delusions,’ is problematic. Some confusion is not surprising, as psychiatrist Peter McKenna points out researchers have grappled with how to define delusions for over a century. Yet there are some key features:

⁷⁸ Rosalind Young, *Mutiny of the Bounty and story of Pitcairn Island 1790–1894* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1894), pp. 216–217.

⁷⁹ Raymond Lee and S.E. Ackerman, ‘The sociocultural dynamics of mass hysteria,’ *Psychiatry* 43 (1980) pp. 78–88.

⁸⁰ Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, pp. 250.

delusions truly are un-understandable . . . they are by and large directed to only one relatively small area of the person's beliefs, those about him- or herself. Deluded patients typically believe that they, not other people, are being conspired against, or are suddenly very important, or are undergoing disturbing bodily changes, etc.⁸¹

Delusions are bizarre beliefs that people have – primarily about themselves. Common forms of these delusional beliefs are paranoid (e.g., people are conspiring against them), grandiose (e.g., they develop unrealistic views of their importance), and reference (e.g. ‘The whole neighbourhood may seem to be gossiping about him, far beyond the bounds of possibility, or he may see references to himself on the television or in newspapers.’⁸²). Neither the ‘Sun Miracle’ or the disciples’ experiences fit these definitions well, as they are primarily perceptual in nature. If we are to account for these phenomena naturalistically, hallucinations and illusions are better candidates. Hallucinations are a perceptual experience ‘by an awake individual in the absence of appropriate stimuli from the environment or from the body,’⁸³ and as explained in Section 3.2 it is very unlikely for a group of people to share the same hallucination at the same time. Illusions, on the other hand, are various forms of errors in perception.⁸⁴ For example, with a mirage, the refracted patterns of light rays are actually there – so we are not hallucinating. But the perception that there is sky or water is in error – it is an illusion.

Given that illusions have extra-mental causes, they can be seen by many people at the same time, thus accounting for Smith's observation that the Marian apparitions at Fatima and

⁸¹ Peter McKenna. *Delusions: Understanding the Un-Understandable* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 16.

⁸² McKenna, *Delusions*, pp. 11.

⁸³ Elodie Peyroux and Nicolas Franck, ‘An Epistemological Approach: History of Concepts and Ideas About Hallucinations in Classical Psychiatry,’ in *Neuroscience of hallucinations*, edited by Renaud Jardri et al., (New York: Springer, 2012), pp. 3.

⁸⁴ Richard Gregory, ‘Putting Illusions in Their Place,’ *Perception* 20 (1991), pp. 1–4.

at Zeitoun (Egypt, between 1968–71) were witnessed by thousands simultaneously. Moreover, Smith himself notes that the thousands at Fatima merely saw the supposed ‘effects of her (Mary’s) presence’ and not Mary herself.⁸⁵ This is disanalogous to the case concerning Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances (see further, below), and as argued above the most plausible naturalistic explanation for the Fatima event is an illusion. As for the case at Zeitoun, Smith fails to note that ‘everyone agreed that the Virgin at Zeitoun did not speak. The fact that the Virgin at Zeitoun was seen by so many people, and that she did not speak, would in themselves suggest that the apparitions at Zeitoun—like those at Pontmain and Knock—were illusions.’⁸⁶ Likewise, Allison writes concerning the vision of Mary at Zeitoun: ‘I do not believe . . . the seemingly mechanical and repetitive nature of the lights . . . strike me as impersonal.’⁸⁷

By contrast, concerning Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, we do not have evidence that everyone agreed that Jesus did not speak (and thus Smith has failed to show that the cases are parallel). On the contrary, as noted in Section 2, there is agreement among the different portrayals of the characteristics of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances that he spoke and was touched (unlike the illusion at Zeitoun). It is important to note that when the earliest Christians talk about Jesus’ resurrection, they are referring to a bodily resurrection.⁸⁸ They were not talking about ghosts, or saying that a person’s soul went to heaven and then appearing to people in the form of visions. Rather, the earliest Christian witnesses (‘whether

⁸⁵Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 239-240, noting that only the three child seers supposedly ‘saw’ the Virgin. However, three is a small group compared to thousands, or the Twelve and five hundred, and children are more prone to hallucination; see Vaughan Bell, ‘Childhood Hallucinations Are Surprisingly Common—But Why?’ *The Guardian*, June 7, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/07/childhood-hallucinations-common-research-psychotic-schizophrenia-why>.

⁸⁶Michael Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 213.

⁸⁷Allison, Resurrection of Jesus, p. 299; the same point applies to the ‘flying luminous doves’, which also appear mechanical and impersonal.

⁸⁸James Ware, ‘The Resurrection of Jesus in the Pre-Pauline Formula of 1 Cor 15.3–5,’ *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014), pp. 475–98.

then it was I or they, so we proclaim' 1 Cor 15:11) were referring to a person's (Christ's) body which died, was buried, was reanimated and was seen by groups of people (v.3-7), and this was what the different portrayals of the characteristics of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in the Gospels agree on (e.g. claiming that Jesus spoke to groups and was touched, as noted in Section 2).

5. Cognitive Dissonance

5.1. Summarising Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT)

Cognitive Dissonance is the final psychological concept to be considered. We will start by summarizing Leon Festinger's theory, before assessing Smith's arguments.

CDT was developed by Festinger in the 1950s and has become one of the most prominent theories in social psychology. Michael Hogg and Graham Vaughn, summarise the theory below:

Festinger proposed that we seek harmony in our attitudes, beliefs and behaviour and try to reduce tension from inconsistency between these elements. People will try to reduce dissonance by changing one or more of the inconsistent cognitions (e.g., if in the case of the person having an extramarital affair, "What's wrong with a little fun if no one finds out?"), by looking for additional evidence to bolster one side or the other ("My partner doesn't understand me"), or by derogating the source of one of the cognitions ("Fidelity is a construct of religious indoctrination").⁸⁹

Vaidis and Bran⁹⁰ make important distinctions between the different stages of the cognitive dissonance process, which will help evaluate Smith's argument. Firstly, a triggering situation is required, where there is an inconsistency between beliefs and reality. Secondly, a

⁸⁹ Michael Hogg and Graham Vaughn. *Social Psychology (Ninth Edition)* (London: Pearson, 2021), pp. 221.

⁹⁰ D.C. Vaidis and A. Bran, 'Respectable Challenges to Respectable Theory: Cognitive Dissonance Theory Requires Conceptualization Clarification and Operational Tools,' *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019) pp. 1189.

cognitive dissonance state emerges, where we experience discomfort in response to the inconsistency identified in the previous stage. Finally, the person experiencing a cognitive dissonance state employs a regulation strategy to reduce their feelings of discomfort.

According to Vaidis and Bran, researchers often hastily investigate what they assume to be regulation strategies without first verifying earlier steps in the model.⁹¹

Another important concept to consider, is that many social psychologists agree CDT only operates where the inconsistency between an attitude and reality is extreme.⁹² To use a light-hearted example, if I am on a diet and decide to have a biscuit on occasion — this is unlikely to cause me dissonance. This falls within what psychologists call the ‘latitude of acceptance.’ But if I ate the whole packet of biscuits, this would likely constitute a crossing of the latitude of acceptance. I must find an explanation for why I’ve gone so far outside of my original intentions. CDT predicts I need to find a way to resolve this dissonance.

5.2. Jesus’ Death as a Trigger for Cognitive Dissonance?

Smith argues that

Jesus’ death on the cross would have come as a tremendous blow to their beliefs. Their options would have been to admit that they had been mistaken, which would no doubt have involved a humiliating loss of face, or to readjust their views to take account of the sudden turn of events. If, in the midst of their turmoil, Peter believed that he had ‘seen the Lord’, this might have been grasped by his colleagues as a providential way out of their dilemma. For now, of course, Jesus was not dead after all, but in heavenly repose—a sign that Jesus’ messiahship, and their belief in it, had been vindicated by God. Peter’s co-

⁹¹ Vaidis and Bran, ‘Cognitive Dissonance,’ pp. 1189.

⁹² R.H. Fazio, M.P. Zanna, J. Cooper, ‘Dissonance and self-perception: An integrative view of each theory’s proper domain of application,’ *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13 (1977) pp. 464–479.

believers were only too eager to take up this delusion for themselves, and so the church was born.’⁹³

Smith draws a comparison between the deaths of Jesus in first century Palestine and the Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) in 21st century United States (in 1994), claiming that ‘it runs parallel to the matter in question here.’⁹⁴

In reply, there have been thousands of religious movements throughout history, finding examples that are consistent with CDT does not imply that this is a good explanation for the rise of Christianity. Smith fails to note a number of crucial differences between the two cases which have been argued for in recent scholarship, and which indicate that, while CDT is a plausible explanation for the case concerning the Rebbe, it is not plausible concerning Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. We shall list out the differences below, before explaining their significance.

First, unlike the case concerning earliest Christianity,⁹⁵ there was no context of persecution for the Rebbe and his followers. Second, while a minority of the Rebbe’s followers claimed that he was resurrected from the dead, this was not a widely held conviction among their followers, and there was no tradition of collective appearances,⁹⁶ unlike the case of Christianity which claims appearances to groups of people including the Twelve, more than five hundred people and the other apostles.⁹⁷ Third, there is evidence of widespread objection raised by the leaders of Schneerson’s closest followers against the claim that he was divine, arguing that such a claim is contrary to the Jewish monotheistic faith.⁹⁸ By contrast, there was no such evidence of widespread disagreement among the

⁹³ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, pp. 253.

⁹⁴ Smith, ‘Post-Resurrection Appearances’, p. 252.

⁹⁵ Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection*, chapter 3.

⁹⁶ Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection*, pp. 162–63. Some other followers claimed that the Rebbe was not dead but in heavenly repose, as Smith notes on page 252.

⁹⁷ For replies to Allison’s objections that there might only be two groups rather than three, see Loke, *Studies*, pp. 194–195.

⁹⁸ Andrew Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology* SNTSMS 169 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 205–8.

earliest Christian leaders to the claim that Jesus was on the Creator side of the Creator-creature divide (which was affirmed, for example, in 1 Corinthians 8:6).⁹⁹ This would have been regarded by them as blasphemy and contrary to the Jewish monotheistic belief that they held, unless they were utterly convinced that this claim was not a delusion but that Jesus was truly resurrected as a divine vindication of this claim.¹⁰⁰

We shall now explain the significance of the above differences. To begin, Smith's point concerning 'humiliating loss of face' and his claim that 'Peter's co-believers were only too eager to take up this delusion' fails to consider the context of persecution for those who would choose to continue to follow a persecuted (crucified) leader. Given this consideration, it is understandable that Jesus' disciples were initially doubtful and fearful after his crucifixion (as multiple attested in the Gospels: Matt. 28:17, Ps.-Mark 16:14, Luke 24:36–41, John 20:24–29),¹⁰¹ rather than being 'too eager to take up this delusion' as Smith stated. By contrast, there was no context of persecution for the Rebbe and his followers, given which the eagerness to 'take up this delusion' (Smith) would be more plausible. For Jesus' disciples, the way of the Cross would have resulted in greater humiliation and loss of face, unless they were utterly convinced that Jesus' messiahship was not a delusion but that Jesus truly resurrected as a divine vindication of his messiahship and thus was worth their sacrifice. Hence the foundational nature of the factuality of Jesus' resurrection for the earliest Christian movement which distinguished faith and fact: faith (including believing that Jesus was the messiah and 'through whom are all things' [1 Cor 8:6]) is worthless if the resurrection of Jesus is not a fact (1 Cor 15:17: 'if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile'). Their reason for thinking it is a fact was that there were people who 'witnessed' the resurrected Jesus (15:3–11). Given the above considerations, it is unlikely that multiple groups of earliest

⁹⁹ Loke, *Origin of Divine Christology*, chapter 5.

¹⁰⁰ Loke, *Origin of Divine Christology*, chapters 3 and 8.

¹⁰¹ Loke, *Investigating the Resurrection*, chapter 3, which also argues that James and Paul were unbelievers initially before their conversion due to witnessing Jesus' post-resurrection appearance.

Christians would be happy to testify that they saw the resurrected Jesus and be willing to face persecution, without fear that they would be condemned as false witnesses¹⁰² and idolators¹⁰³ by the God of Israel whom they believed, if in fact they did not see anything like that but merely ‘take up [Peter’s] delusion for themselves’ as Smith claimed.

Additionally, productive comparisons with Christianity can be found in the various Messianic candidates of first century Palestine. According to Richard Horsley, “the Jewish peasantry at the time of Jesus produced several concrete movements led by figures recognized as kings, movements and leaders who actually ruled certain areas of the country for a time.”¹⁰⁴ These movements appear to have been inspired by Biblical notions of an anointed King, occurring after the death of Herod and then during the first great revolt against Rome (66-70 CE). Messianic candidates included Simon the former Herodian servant, Simon bar Giora, Athronges, Judas son of Ezekias, Menahem, and Simon bar Kochba. Horsely distinguishes these Messianic movements from other forms of ‘popular discontent: social banditry, prophetic movements, more general peasant uprisings (i.e., without distinctive ‘kings’ or ‘prophets’ as leaders).’¹⁰⁵

NT Wright, surveying a slightly broader period, comes to similar conclusions as Horsely:

many of the messianic movements between roughly 150 BC and AD 150 ended with the violent death of the founder. When this happened, there were two options open to any who escaped death: they could give up the movement, or they could find themselves another Messiah.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² ‘Because we testified of God that he raised Christ’ (1 Cor 15:15).

¹⁰³ For claiming that Jesus was on the Creator side of the divide, as indicated by 1 Corinthians 8:6.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Horsley, ‘Popular Messianic Movements around the Time of Jesus,’ *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 46 (1984) pp. 471–494 (pp. 472).

¹⁰⁵ Horsley, ‘Messianic’, pp. 494.

¹⁰⁶ Wright, *The Resurrection*, p. 700.

The above examples from Palestine around the first century indicate that disbandment of Messianic movements after the messianic figure was killed was common. Despite the fact that bereavement experiences and beliefs about apocalypticism, messianic ideas, preexisting beliefs in bodily resurrection, miraculous stories, angelic visitation, etc. would have been common around the first century, in not one single case concerning the other Jewish messianic movements during that period do we hear

the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was.¹⁰⁷

In summary, the evidence indicates that the above mentioned Jewish messianic movements around the first century AD ended with the execution of their leader. No cognitive dissonance or other psychological theories rescued those (frequent, not rare) movements. This provides further indication that CDT is improbable as an explanation for the rise of earliest Christianity.

Finally, CDT (and other hypotheses suggested by Smith) does not explain the empty tomb. Concerning the Gospels' portrayal of women discovering the empty tomb, Smith (citing Carrier) claims that while sexist attitudes in the matter of women's testimony did exist at this time, 'there was certainly no blanket ban, and little evidence to suggest that no man ever believed what he was told by a woman.'¹⁰⁸ However, this does not answer the point that, given that disparagement of women's testimony was nevertheless present and that the Gospel

¹⁰⁷ N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 63.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', p. 233

writers had apologetic motivations as Smith thinks, why would all of them not remove the detail concerning the women's discovery of the empty tomb which would have removed a perceived weakness of their case. Unless 'the memory of their role was so persistent that it could not be removed.'¹⁰⁹ Smith objects by claiming that 'Paul has nothing to say about the empty tomb'¹¹⁰ and that

even if it had been possible to locate and identify the body of Jesus, this would not necessarily deal the hallucination hypothesis a fatal blow. It was quite common in first-century Judaism for people to believe that great prophets and heroes such as Enoch, Moses, Elijah, and others had been translated directly to heaven in spiritual form when they died, and in the minds of Jesus' disciples, it may be that Jesus was considered to have been added to that number, and that his appearance to them took the form of a heavenly vision.¹¹¹

However, Smith fails to consider recent scholarship which has shown that, when used with reference to the physically dead (as in Jesus' case in 1 Cor 15:3–5), the term *egeirō* (raise) refers unambiguously to the reanimation or revivification of the corpse.¹¹² This claim is different from 'translated directly to heaven in spiritual form' (Smith), and it implies the empty tomb.

Smith's failure to note this point also underlies his claim (citing Festinger) that 'As the nineteenth-century Millerites found when their prophecies concerning the precise timing of the Parousia were discredited, the idea of Christ's indefinite repose in heaven was a convenient face-saving option, since that claim could not, ipso facto, be falsified.'¹¹³ In the case of the Millerites, 'the prophesied event is reinterpreted in such a way that what was

¹⁰⁹ Carolyn Osiek, 'The Women at the Tomb: What are they Doing there?' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 53/1–2 (1997), pp. 103–18.

¹¹⁰ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', p. 235.

¹¹¹ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', pp. 242–243.

¹¹² Ware, 'The Resurrection of Jesus.'

¹¹³ Smith, 'Post-Resurrection Appearances', p. 253 n. 81.

supposed to have been a visible, verifiable occurrence is seen to have been in reality an invisible, spiritual occurrence. The event occurred as predicted, only on a spiritual level.’¹¹⁴ However, it has been argued earlier that the claim concerning Jesus’ resurrection was foundational to the early Christian movement and it was not spiritualizing but was the opposite: claiming a bodily resurrection leaving behind an earthly empty tomb (rather than claiming an event happening at an invisible spiritual level) and claiming that many earthly people saw the bodily resurrected Jesus. These claims were falsifiable, for example, if the body of Jesus were to be found or if the ‘eyewitness’ renounced their claim. The early Christians recognized the falsifiability of their faith, as indicated by the mentioning of eyewitnesses for the bodily resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 15:3-11) and the consequence of their faith being shown to be ‘in vain’ if the eyewitnesses testimonies (v.15) and the claim that Jesus resurrected (v.17) were false.

6. *Conclusion*

The importance of interdisciplinary studies has been increasingly recognized in historical Jesus studies, and Smith’s article stands in line with this healthy trend. Nevertheless, Smith’s article shows inadequacies in his discussion of the scholarship in psychology and New Testament studies, as exemplified by his failure to defend his claims against the objections raised in academic peer-reviewed publications in these two fields.¹¹⁵ In particular, Smith’s discussion of memory distortion fails to distinguish between studies of real-life cases and laboratory experiments, and fails to consider that various factors in real-life cases which contribute to accurate recall were likewise present in the earliest Christians’

¹¹⁴ J. Gordon Melton, ‘Spiritualization and Reaffirmation: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails’, in J.R. Stone ed, *Expecting Armageddon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 149.

¹¹⁵ Throughout his article, Smith uses the loaded word ‘evangelical’ to label those whose conclusions disagree with his. However, he fails to note that there are non-evangelical scholars who have also argued for similar conclusions, and that many of the publications which argue for these conclusions are not published by Evangelical publishers but by leading academic peer-reviewed publishers such as Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, Routledge, etc., as can be seen in the footnotes above.

remembrance of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Smith acknowledges that bereavement hallucination is an unlikely explanation for the group appearances and suggests supplementing it with the collective delusion hypothesis. However, he confounds the literature on mass psychogenic illness (which is unlikely to give rise to the report of multiple people sharing perceptual experiences) with claimed mass sightings of Mary at Fatima and Zeitoun, which were likely to reflect impersonal illusions and therefore disanalogous to the case concerning the personal appearance of the bodily-resurrected Jesus. Smith's discussion of Cognitive Dissonance Theory fails to note a number of crucial differences which indicate that, while cognitive dissonance is a plausible explanation for some cases such as that concerning the Rebbe and the Millerites, it is not plausible concerning Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Smith also fails to note that disbandment of Messianic movements after the execution of the messianic figures was common. Therefore, cognitive dissonance or other psychological factors were unable to rescue those (frequent, not rare) movements. These data challenge CDT and other psychological explanations for Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Smith's dismissal of the case concerning the empty tomb fails to consider important recent scholarship in New Testament studies¹¹⁶ in which his objections have already been answered.

Given the above conclusions, Smith's attempt to explain the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus with a combination of distorted memory, bereavement hallucinations, mass hysteria, and cognitive dissonance is implausible. Despite his claims concerning Marian apparitions, etc., he has failed to demonstrate any case that substantially parallels the case concerning Jesus. Allison's observation concerning the uniqueness of the case concerning the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus therefore stands unrefuted:

¹¹⁶ In particular, Ware, 'The Resurrection of Jesus'; see also John Cook, *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis*. WUNT 410 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

‘Nonetheless, I know of no close phenomenological parallel to the series of likely events as a whole. Early Christianity offers us a missing body plus visions to several individuals plus collective apparitions plus the sense of a dead man’s presence plus the conversion vision of at least one hostile outsider. Taken as a whole, this is, on any account, a remarkable, even extraordinary confluence of events and claims. If there is a good, substantial parallel to the entire series, I have yet to run across it.’¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Allison, *Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 346.