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# THE HALLUCINATION THEORY OF THE RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS CHRIST

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## *Introduction*

The historical bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the foundation of orthodox Christianity. The apostle Paul asserts, “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14). [Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.] One argument skeptics, like former Catholic Priest and Jesus Seminar scholar John Dominic Crossan, use to counter the force of the historical claim of a bodily resurrection of Jesus is to say that the early Christians experienced hallucinations. I intend to demonstrate the early Christian claim of Jesus appearing bodily after His resurrection is the best explanation for the resurrection appearances of the New Testament over Crossan’s hallucination theory.

*First*, I critique the hallucination theory of Crossan for contradicting the bodily resurrection language of the New Testament. *Second*, I demonstrate how Crossan’s trance mechanism for a hallucination imposes an anachronistic understanding on Paul’s words. *Finally*, I dispute Crossan’s denial of the falsifiable of the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

## *Early Christians Believed in a Bodily Resurrection*

The language of the miracle claim asserts that Jesus resurrected and appeared bodily to His disciples (John 20:27; Luke 24:39). However, a secular worldview primed by naturalism demands an alternative explanation of “what really happened” to Jesus other than a bodily resurrection. Gary Habermas explains that a naturalist theory for the resurrection draws “from a host of philosophical backgrounds, the basic idea is to suggest an alternative explanation

in place of divine causation. . . . ‘Jesus didn’t rise from the dead. What really happened is (fill in the blank)’” The horns of the dilemma were posed by David F. Strauss (1808-1874), “either Jesus was not really dead, or he did not really rise again” (736). The longer form: “a dead man has returned to life, is composed of two such contradictory elements, that whenever it is attempted to maintain the one, the other threatens to disappear. If he has really returned to life, it is natural to conclude that he was not wholly dead; if he was really dead, it is difficult to believe that he has really become living” (735-36). However, all the details of passion-week Friday, such as, scourging, dehydration, crucifixion, etc., make any interpretation Jesus did not die to be “at odds with modern medical knowledge” (1436). The category of hallucination, as an explanation theory, is a popular attempt to claim the disciples hallucinated the bodily appearances of Jesus, and mass hysteria then spread their claim. As Dale C. Allison, Jr., frames it, “it was not the empty tomb that begot the hallucinations but hallucinations that begot the empty tomb” (204). Allison offers seven categories and sub-categories of resurrection appearance hypotheses each with different psychological catalysts (199-213). The charge is ancient. In the third-century AD, Origen of Alexandria (d. 254) combatted Celsus’ second century claim that the disciples suffered a “delusion.”

Another pushback against the orthodox view of a bodily resurrection is that it is just a fictional myth that developed over time as a result of a personal hallucination of Paul. To establish this claim, liberal Bible critic Crossan introduces the writings of two early non-Christian historians (Josephus and Tacitus 15.44) which he believes limit “what happened *both before and after* Jesus’s execution” (*Jesus*, 161-62, emp. added). Crossan argues their religious profiles of the Christian movement lack mention of the resurrection. Additionally, the *Gospel of Thomas* speaks of the “living Jesus” and the *Epistle of Barnabas* is void of resurrection talk. Crossan believes this evidence affirms that early Christian faith did not need to believe in a post-mortem appearance of Jesus. He further claims that Paul uses his experience of Jesus appearing to him (1 Corinthians 15:8) to give him the gravitas to be the equal of all the apostles in a political powerplay (166).

Crossan’s novel hallucination theory also requires that the present passive indicative verb *ōphthē*, translated *appeared*

in most translations, actually means *revealed*. This would be a culturally conditioned trance where Paul experienced an “altered state of consciousness” and used this personal experience to stabilize the infighting in the Corinthian church (167; 87-88). Crossan’s theory requires the church to have completely misread Paul’s testimony by taking his personal experience for apostolic orthodoxy. Crossan’s theory offers a “growth-politics” twist to the category of the hallucination theory.

The words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11, however, do not support Crossan’s theory. In fact, this passage is a test-case of the united shape of the earliest Christian tradition concerning the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The following four arguments presume the work of Gary R. Habermas (“Resurrection” 264). The minimal facts theory of apologist Gary R. Habermas provides a firm critical foundation to respond to Crossan. The minimal facts theory is a critical approach that uses “the minimal, best-established facts surrounding the appearances” of Jesus that even Bible critics grant “to determine what really happened after Jesus’ death” (262). Habermas has established four historical facts. *First*, there is very little controversy that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians early, as Crossan dates the letter to AD 53-54 (or possibly later, AD 64, cf. Neill and Wright 163; Crossan, *Jesus* 163). *Second*, Paul’s articulation of the gospel predates him: “I delivered to you . . . what I also received” (1 Corinthians 15:3). Here, Paul affirms the normative nature of what he is preaching. *Third*, Paul received this “tradition” anywhere between AD 32-38, less than a decade after the crucifixion. Dodd argues that Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem was “not more than seven years after the crucifixion” (16). *Fourth*, this reception of the creed occurred during Paul’s Jerusalem information gathering “visit” (cf. *historéō*) with Peter and James (Galatians 1:18-20) and anchors his tradition to the early Jerusalem church (cf. Farmer 122-28; Habermas, “Resurrection” 265-67).

Bible critical scholar, A. M. Hunter (1906-1991), argues that Paul claims in this passage “a very early Christian summary” of what the united apostolic voice affirms about the gospel and Jesus’ resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:11) (99); namely, “that Christ died for our sins . . . that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day . . . and that he appeared” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Crossan argues that Paul went to great pains to validate his own apostleship, yet, it was not *the* voice but *a competing* voice among

many regarding the importance of the resurrection (*Jesus* 159-92). The bodily death and resurrection appearances of Jesus legitimizes the existence of the Christian faith, for “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20; cf. 15:6, 14). There is no powerplay. Paul is in fact arguing from within the earliest Christian tradition and meaning of resurrection appearance. This is a substantial point since Crossan’s theory offers a reinterpretation of the early Christian tradition which cannot be sustained internally.

Ultimately, a naturalistic argument forces Crossan’s hand to redefine what is a resurrection and how one experiences it. Resurrection was not, according to N. T. Wright, a generic term for “life after death” but instead “the second stage in a two-stage process of what happens after death: the first stage being nonbodily and the second being a renewed bodily existence. . . . Paul really did believe in the bodily resurrection” (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1) (Wright and Crossan 17). It is precisely this firm belief in the bodily resurrection that invalidates Crossan’s theory for Paul and is in conformity with other the New Testament descriptions of the bodily resurrection appearances of Jesus (cf. 1 John 1:1-4; John 20:1-21, 24; Acts 1:1-3; 2:29-32).

Beyond the evidence of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 of multiple eyewitnesses, there are the public resurrection expectations (Matthew 28:8-20; Luke 24:13-52; John 20:1-23, 25-30; 21:1-14; Mark 16:6-7) and appearances in the Gospels; moreover, there are the resurrection creedal statements in the sermons of Acts (1:1-3; 2:23-24, 32; 3:16; 4:10; 10:41; 13:3-4; 17:31; 23:6; 24:21; 26:8, 23). It points to a clear unified belief among the earliest Christians that Jesus rose bodily from the dead and appeared in a renewed bodily existence. Bodily existence is the expected concept non-believers were to understand as the Christian view of the resurrection, as Judean Procurator Festus explains to Herod Agrippa II, “a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive” (Acts 25:19; Acts 17:32). The New Testament evidence affirms, then, the early Christian claim that Jesus was alive again.

### *No Mechanism for Hallucination*

As we shall argue, there is no cause for Paul to need a hallucination. Such a theory redefines the unified Christian claim



of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Crossan, keenly aware that Paul provides the earliest creedal statement, posits that Paul is the key for all the New Testament internal evidence. For Crossan, what really happened is Paul was desperate to have a trance experience of the resurrection. He theorizes the Easter tradition developed over the years into its current boundaries of the canonical New Testament. Crossan offers “*apparition*—which involves trance” as the alternative dissociated state in which he believes Paul experienced resurrection (*Jesus*, 160-61). Based on the work by Erika Bourguignon on “dissociational” states, Crossan affirms trance to be “a human universal” that may be a culturally trained and controlled experience by one’s social and religious expectations (87-89). Crossan’s reading of Paul’s words is an eisegetical fallacy importing a modern socio-religious model of an “altered state of consciousness” into Paul’s experiences to establish his political equality with the other apostles (166-67; cf. Acts 9:3-4; 22:6-7; 26:13-14). Again Crossan claims, “Paul needs . . . to equate his own experience” with the apostles to establish “its validity and legitimacy but not necessarily its mode or manner” (169). Crossan’s methodology is problematic on this point.

However, there are three major problems with Crossan’s hallucination theory. *First*, Crossan imports an anachronistic definition into the use *ōphthē* in Paul’s words. It should be noted with significance that in the Greek Old Testament *ōphthē* is used in appearances of God (i.e., theophanies) to Abraham, and clearly to Abraham in bodily form where he ate with the Lord (Genesis 18:1; cf. Genesis 12:7; 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24.). Paul was quite familiar with Genesis as he makes substantial arguments about justification by faith with the stories of Abraham in Galatians and Romans. To posit a modern theory while ignoring this Old Testament tradition of the verb, “he appeared,” ignores the textual evidence. Furthermore, it calls into question the validity of Crossan’s exegetical methodology. *Second*, he exchanges his own meaning for Paul’s intended meaning of the verb *ōphthē*. The following argument is based on Daniel B. Wallace’s discussion of the dative + the present passive indicative form of *ōphthē* in the New Testament (165, cf. Bauer et al. 719). Crossan’s claim puts the power of the trance in Paul’s hands, but Paul’s verbal word choice indicates the appearance was out of his hands. Greek scholar, Daniel B. Wallace, reminds in grammatical instances

like this, “volition rests wholly with the subject [Jesus], while the dative noun is merely recipient [Paul]” (165). What Wallace says for Paul applies equally to all listed in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8: Cephas and the twelve, the “more than five-hundred,” and James and the apostles. It is Jesus who *appeared*. Paul did not conjure a *revelation* of Jesus.

*Third*, Crossan’s portrayal of Paul as desperate for apostolic power does not agree with Paul’s own success in Judaism prior to his conversion and call. He writes, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely jealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:13b–14). Paul had the pedigree of a rising Jewish leader (Philippians 3:4–8). There is no explainable mechanism which accounts for exchanging this advancement in Judaism for the trials of following Christ outside of an actual appearance of the resurrected Jesus which he did not initiate in a trance. Paul joins the pre-existing united voice of the apostolic witnesses, other earlier skeptical witnesses, and the large groups seeing Jesus post-burial. Crossan’s theory cannot take these elements into account. Furthermore, Habermas’s minimal facts theory renders his mechanism historically implausible since its critical timetable places Paul as recipient, not creator, of the bodily resurrection confession.

### *Paul’s Claim was Falsifiable*

This conclusion then leads to question of falsifiability. The early Christians claimed a dead man lived again. Writing about twenty years after the resurrection, Paul asserts there were many eyewitnesses who could verify or falsify his claim that Jesus rose bodily. Paul wrote, “I delivered to you . . . what I also received” (1 Corinthians 15:2) and proceeds to outline six lines of eyewitness testimony evidence: Cephas, the twelve, over five hundred, James, all the apostles, and Paul. The most audacious claim is that Jesus appeared “to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:6). Paul’s submission invites investigation into the genuineness of the resurrection of Jesus and is essential to Paul’s argument for the validity of the gospel. Paul’s claim to have “seen the Lord” is falsifiable (1 Corinthians 9:1). Even Crossan understands the surface argument of this passage, and observes, “no Jesus resurrection, no general resurrection; or, no general

resurrection, no Jesus resurrection” (*Jesus*, 164). He does not, however, believe it.

Crossan believes that it would be impossible to falsify the traditional empty tomb and resurrection stories. When asked whether the empty tomb was historical, Crossan emphatically responds, “No.” Crossan expands, “I doubt there was any tomb for Jesus in the first place. I don’t think any of Jesus’ followers even knew where he was buried—if he was buried at all” (Crossan and Watts 122). From Roman sources Crossan argues the Roman expectation for the crucified was the denial of both body and burial (cf. Seutonius 13.1-2; Tacitus 6.29). To the point, Crossan says, the “final penalty was to lie unburied as food for carrion birds and beasts [i.e., animals that eat decaying flesh]” (*Who*, 160). Crucifixion meant, then, “death-without-burial” and “body-as-carrion”; consequently, there was little likelihood of Jesus’ body making it off the cross let alone into the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (163; cf. Mark 15:42; Matthew 27:1-61). In Crossan’s perspective, Joseph of Arimathea is purely a construct of Mark’s imagination; see his discussion on Luke 23:50-54 and John 19:35-42. It would likely take “bribery, mercy, or indifference” to get the Romans to release the body over to a Jew seeking to avoid violating Jewish protocols of burying the hung (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Such a hope would be the exception for only one contemporary crucified body remains have been found where thousands have been so executed; as such, it “is not history” (163-68). This clearly undermines the Gospel tradition of the empty tomb where Jesus had been buried.

Crossan’s historical reconstruction of customary expectations and practices is a strong counterargument against falsification by the presentation of the cadaver of Jesus. If there is no body which survives the cross, there is no body to be buried, and therefore the Christian claim cannot be falsified. However, Crossan cannot historically rule out that Jesus was buried as Mark affirms. He can only suggest burial would be highly unlikely. Crossan’s alternative depends on advancing a legendary basis for the burial of Jesus. Yet, William Lane Craig responds this “would ignore the specific evidence” in Jesus’ case (qtd. in Strobel 208). As established by the “minimal facts” critical theory, the creedal statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is very early. Furthermore, this four-line creedal formula affirms crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and then appearance.



The burial of Jesus was essential to the creed and Mark's reference to it is substantial corroboration. *First*, the "assured results" of critical scholarship considers Mark the earliest gospel as it is the most bare bone narrative of Jesus (cf. Guthrie 150). *Second*, the Passion week narrative includes Jesus' rejection and crucifixion. *Third*, Mark introduces Jesus' burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb from which He resurrects. Mark retains the burial tradition (cf. Strobel 209). Crossan's methodology is prejudicial because it rules out, beforehand (*a priori*), the established testimony of the earliest claim of the Christians: Christ was buried, was raised, and He appeared.

### *Conclusion*

This article affirms the bodily resurrection of Jesus over the challenge raised by the hallucination theory developed by Crossan. The language of the New Testament affirms that Jesus resurrected and appeared bodily to His disciples, unbelievers, and to many others. Crossan claimed that the resurrection from the dead was not a main element of the Christian faith. However, a critical examination of the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 verifies that the primary and earlier Christian creedal tradition which teaches that Jesus arose bodily and appeared. There is no other normative belief in the New Testament than Jesus resurrected from the dead.

Crossan's trance mechanism for a hallucination imposes an anachronistic understanding on Paul's words. The alternative theory offered by Crossan that Paul had a dissociative hallucination-trance experience to gain religious political power is based on seriously flawed exegetical methodology. There is ultimately no proper mechanism for Paul's conversion to Christianity and his claim of seeing the resurrected Jesus, when he was living a successful Jewish life as a persecutor of the church. Paul's claim that he saw the Lord resurrected must be taken seriously.

Finally, the early Christian claim of a bodily resurrection would have been falsifiable by the cadaver of Jesus. Crossan's claim that Jesus' body would likely never have survived nor made it to a burial actually is self-defeating because he cannot rule out known exceptions. In Jesus' case, there were elements to His story that made it possible for Jesus to be taken off the cross and buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. This is in keeping with the earliest Christian claim regarding His burial.

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