Review of: "After-Death Communications and the Resurrection of Jesus: An Engagement with Ken Vincent and Gary Habermas"

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OPEN PEER REVIEW

of the article

“After-Death Communications and the Resurrection of Jesus: An Engagement with Ken Vincent and Gary Habermas” by Stephen Smith in *Qeios* ID: CNKRIH, https://doi.org/10.32388/CNKRIH

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This article analyzes the post-resurrection accounts of Jesus in the New Testament as instances of after-death communication (ADC). The article contends that, in light of comparison with scientific study of bereavement visions (pp. 9-11), the “group visions” of the resurrection of Jesus by his disciples “may be explicable in terms of collective delusions” (Abstract, p. 1), borrowing a phrase from earlier studies by M.D. Goulder in 1994, 1996, and 2000 (p. 9). This article phrases its thesis “against the transcendentalist position” (p. 16). The article elaborates on an earlier interchange published in 2012 between “the psychologist and researcher in religious experience Ken Vincent” and “the evangelical New Testament scholar Gary Habermas” (p. 1).

In what follows, this open peer review will survey how Smith’s article engages modern theory about the phenomena of after-death communication and of bereavement visions (§ 1), then it will evaluate how the article discusses ancient contexts of discourse on the resurrection of Jesus (§ 2), and finally, it will turn to evaluation and conclusions about the article’s thesis and methodological approach (§ 3).

1. **Modern theory**

1.1 After-death communication (ADC)

This article critically evaluates the prior studies by Ken Vincent and Gary Habermas with regard to their position toward New Testament accounts of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus as instances of after-death communication (ADC). This is an interesting topic by itself, in which Vincent is attributed a “transcendentalist position” and Habermas a “physicalist position” regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

However, after this discussion of these studies by Vincent (pp. 2-4) and by Habermas (pp. 4-7), Smith appears to conflate various categories of visions. When he relates the resurrection of Jesus to “contemporary Christic visions” (pp. 7-9), relying heavily on studies by P.H. Wiebe (1997, 2000, 2014), these latter visions do not relate to a recently deceased person known in the visionary’s lifetime, such as ADCs generally do as a category. His idea that these experiences can be readily applied to the New Testament accounts runs up against his own critical observations about Vincent’s survey of apparitions in terms of “cultural conditioning rather than veracity” (p. 4). To be sure, the earliest disciples of Jesus were not culturally conditioned about images and theologies of Jesus in the way contemporary visionaries may be. That which matters for comparison with New Testament accounts concerns bereavement-related ADCs, and it is this subject which Smith discusses more appropriately on pp. 9-11.

1.2 Bereavement visions

On pp. 9-11, Smith elaborates his alternative approach to the subject of the resurrection of Jesus, digressing on bereavement visions. Smith prefers “visions” to “hallucinations”, due to “its pejorative overtones” (p. 9). Yet paradoxically, toward the end of his paper Smith goes along with a “collective delusion” hypothesis of M.D. Goulder (1994, 1996, 2006) as “rather more promising” (p. 15), while surveying further qualifications such as “epidemic hysteria” and “mass sociogenic/psychogenic illness” (p. 15) in relation to the “birth of the Christian Church” (p. 16), centred around bereavement ADCs about Jesus. Is this really without pejorative overtones?

Some critical observations should be made about the use of the word “delusion”, which Smith readily takes over from studies by M.D. Goulder.

In modern psychological scholarship, delusions may rather be identified as symptoms of psychosis than of grief hallucinations (Gillette 2022). It has further been emphasized in recent scholarship that “voices in bereavement” differ from “voices in psychosis”, since the “former are seldom anonymous and are instead clearly linked to the hearer’s biography and past relationships”, whereas non-bereavement voices constitute “less obvious, indirect, or symbolic” “connections to persons or events in the voice-hearer’s life” (Kamp et al. 2020: 1376). This is also an important distinction to be kept in mind, when relating “contemporary Christic visions” to New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. For, in any case, the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ resurrection refer to witnesses who had accompanied Jesus in his and their lifetime, being part of their “biography and past relationships”, whereas the same cannot be said for “contemporary Christic visions”.

In antiquity, delusions could be associated with demons, as illustrated by an incantation for warding off a demon in the night as “a face of [delus]ion” and with “horns of illu[si]on” (11Q11 [11QapocrPs] col. 5 ll. 6-7; translation García Martínez and Tigchelaar 2000: 1203). To be sure, in ancient contexts, people’s ideas about visions of resurrection could be

negative is terms of intrusive symptoms of flight, trembling, astonishment, and silence (Mark 16:8), of disbelief about sensory perception (John 20:25), and of an ambivalent response including mockery (Acts 17:32). Yet these negative ideas did not necessarily coincide with the concept of "delusion". In the ancient Greek novel of *Callirhoe*, dated to the turn of the common era, perceptions of after-death communication could be guidance of a soul by a deity and the voice of powers below ground relating to the dead person on the one hand and of terror at a ghost relating to the living on the other (*Callirhoe* 1.9.3-4).

In sum, "delusion", or even "collective delusion", is a problematic label for the study of New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, both from the perspective of modern psychological scholarship and of ancient perceptions.

It should be added that there are other options for interpreting bereavement visions than the line of thought of Smith which ends up with "collective delusion". Recent psycho-analytical studies have suggested other options:

a. A coping strategy which helps the brain deal with "intense emotional pain" (Gillette 2022)
b. A meaning making process (Wortmann and Park 2009: 17-18)
c. Theoretical perspectives on "sensory experiences of the deceased" (SED) in varying terms of "intrusive symptoms", "attachment-related responses", "continuing bonds" with a beneficial effect for the bereaved, a "part of a dialogical self", and, from a more controversial parapsychological perspective, the "survival of consciousness" (Kamp et al. 2020: 1376-1377)

Smith does refer to "attachment theory" and "continuing bonds", but his reference to studies in the 1970s and 1980s that continuing bonds with the dead are "generally considered unhealthy" (p. 10) after a benchmark of twelve months appears outdated. A recent interdisciplinary study has observed that "the continuing bonds perspective, which arose in response to 20th-century Western assumptions that grief required the gradual relinquishment of ties to the deceased, suggests that maintaining one's connections with the deceased is normal and can be of benefit to the bereaved" (Kamp 2020: 1376-1377).

Smith's approach which turns from bereavement visions to "collective delusions" also does not seem to value the phenomenological variety of spiritual experiences, as it is also the object of study today (Yaden and Newberg 2022), but appears aimed at reducing beliefs of afterlife to a psychological category of delusion.

2. Ancient contexts

2.1 *Paul's Letters vs. Gospels*

Smith's article is eager to contrast the reliability of Paul's Letters, in particular 1 Corinthians 15, as the earliest accounts of resurrection of Jesus in terms of a transcendentalist, spiritual approach to a "physicalist view, along with the story of the empty tomb, (which) was *concocted* (sic) by the Evangelists themselves" (p. 2). He elaborates no argument to question the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus in this way, and the idea that it would be the Evangelists' invention thereby remains a baseless claim. The idea that Paul would only have "spiritual experiences" in mind, thereby referring to 1 Cor 9:1, 15:8, and Gal 1:16 (p.2), begs the question. In reality, Paul remains "agnostic" to the

question whether “visions and revelations of the Lord” (2 Cor 12:1) are “in de body or out of the body”: “I do not know, God knows” (2 Cor 12:2-3, RSV). It could be that Paul remains at a distance on this subject, even though he does digress on the concept of “body” at the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:35-58), because he was not originally among the followers of Jesus, who would have a biography and past relations with Jesus’ bodily existence during life, but a former persecutor of the church (Gal 1:13).

The idea of the priority of Paul’s Letters over against the Gospels with “suspect historical reliability” (p. 2), which simply sets aside the empty tomb stories as “concocted”, follows the order of visions in 1 Cor 15:3-8 at face value, taking Peter (Cephas) in 1 Cor 15:5 as the leading visionary. Thus, Smith argues for the likelihood that “one of the disciples – perhaps Peter, who after all shouldered more guilt than the rest (Mark 14:66-72) had a bereavement ADC” (p. 16; cf. p. 9). Yet the gospel accounts start with the witnesses of women of the empty tomb and of angelic report to them that Jesus had risen (Mark 16:1-7; Matthew 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-11.22-23). It does not start with Peter, even if Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians implies this idea (1 Cor 15:3-5), perhaps in terms of categorizing circles of leadership of the Jerusalem church. In John 20:1-10.11-18, it is Mary Magdalene who first reaches the empty tomb, being followed by Peter and another disciple, and it is Mary Magdalene who first witnesses the risen Jesus. Thus Smith’s overview of Gospel accounts, starting with an “ocular bereavement vision” of Peter and turning to Paul (p. 16), overlooks this gendered interchange between women followers and disciples with Peter as leading disciple. In this way, gender perspectives are, perhaps unintentionally but regrettably, filtered out of early Christian history by setting aside Gospel accounts as “concoctions” in favour of a priority for 1 Corinthians 15.

2.2 *Broader Ancient Contexts to Afterlife*

Certain phenomena mentioned by Smith are more broadly attested in antiquity than only in the New Testament, but these contexts do not receive adequate attention in his article.

a. Post-mortem appearances – these also occurred in Graeco-Roman contexts (cf. Ogden 2002, chapter 8 on ghosts and categories of restless dead, such as the prematurely dead, those who died a violent death, single people, the unburied dead).
b. Belief in resurrection also occurs across various texts of ancient Jewish literature, such as Daniel 12:1-3.13;*1 Enoch* 24-25, 90:33, 91:8-10, 103:4, 104:2.4.6; *Psalms of Solomon* 3:10.12; 2 Maccabees 7:9.14.23; 4QPseudo-Ezechiel; 4Q521; *Sibylline Oracles* 2.221-237; Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities* 3.10, 19.12-13, 25.7-8; *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* 103-108; *2 Baruch* 30:1-5, 50-51; *m.Sanhedrin* 10:1 (cf. Hogeterp 2009a: 19-114; 247-334).

The diversity of early Jewish eschatology in the first century CE appears to be recognized by Smith (p. 3), but this may only be a rhetorical disclaimer. For he goes on to single out a contrast, juxtaposing 1 Corinthians 15 as “Paul’s *personal* view” of “natural man preceding the spiritual (1 Cor 15:46)” over against an “exact opposite” idea of Philo of Alexandria (p. 3). The article does not go into ancient Jewish texts which attest belief in resurrection, such as the texts noted above, even though resurrection is central to the article’s subject.

Does a psychological approach to the resurrection of Jesus as “bereavement visions” do justice to all facets involved in

the phenomenon of Jesus' resurrection in antiquity?

Several ancient contexts militate against this idea that the resurrection of Jesus may be limited to an exclusively psychological framework.

a. ***Political dimensions.*** Mark refers to allegedly popular beliefs in Jesus as a resurrected John the Baptist, whom Herod had beheaded (Mk 6:16), while Flavius Josephus refers to popular belief of Herod's military defeat as divine vengeance for his treatment of John the Baptist (*Ant.* 18.116). Thus "resurrection" could also have political dimensions as a leading narrative in the popular imagination against victimization by political leadership. Speeches in Acts also insist on lawless killing (Acts 2:23), release of a murderer over against the killing of the "author of life" (Acts 3:14-15), betrayal and murder (Acts 7:52, next to referring to Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven (Acts 2:24.32-33; 3:15, 7:55-56). A political dimension to resurrection further concerns collective hope in ancient Judaism, which Acts 23:6-8 presents as a bone of contention between believing Pharisees and denying Sadducees. Smith notes messianic expectations surrounding Jesus and the idea that Jesus' resurrection vindicated his messianic status (p. 15), but further skirts the question of political dimensions.
b. ***Martyrological/apocalyptic vindication*** – Starting with *1 Enoch* and 2 Maccabees 7, ancient Jewish literature includes references to suffering righteous who have died at the hands of wicked people, who are vindicated through resurrection and final judgment. The insistence on the innocence of a person meeting a violent death and on a higher, divine cause of justice against the lawlessnes of this violent death also recurs in speeches of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. e.g. Acts 2:23-24).
c. ***Dimensions of religious beliefs***. As I have highlighted elsewhere, conceptualizations of the afterlife could have various faces in the Dead Sea Scrolls, ranging from the imagery of light (4Q548), to revivification of dry bones (4QPseudo-Ezekiel), to the dead being brought to life (4Q521), and to the renewal of the works of heaven and earth (4Q434a 1+2 ll. 2-3) (see Hogeterp 2009b: 299-320). It should further be noted that Acts 23:8-9 includes resurrection in a broader domain of religious beliefs, which further include angels and spirits.

3. Evaluation and Conclusions

Evaluating this article, Smith may have a point that states of bereavement constitute an "area of research which shows most promise in resolving some of the issues" (p. 2) and his survey of "bereavement visions" (pp. 9-11) has some added value. His survey of the views of Ken Vincent and Gary Habermas (pp. 2-7) has some critical merit, such as his right distinction of features of contemporary appearances of Christic visions from Gospel accounts of the risen Jesus (p. 4) and his argument against Habermas that the quality of arguments for historicity of the "empty tomb tradition" matters, not quantity (p. 5). However, Smith's own arguments against its historicity fare little better, briefly mentioning only two "viable alternatives" of R. Bultmann, on empty tomb accounts as reaction against earlier traditions, and R.M. Price, on empty tomb accounts as legendary "invention" altogether (pp. 5-6). This is a citation of two disparate examples over against complete silence about various handbooks and edited volumes about the study of the historical Jesus (e.g., Theissen and Merz 1996; Bockmuehl ed. 2001; Holmen and Porter, eds. 2010; Schröter and Jacobi, eds., 2022). It further leaves the impression as if redaction criticism or historical criticism have not been the subject of discussion regarding their limitations

to uncover historical kernels or layers in the New Testament about Jesus.

With regard to modern theory in relation to ancient contexts, the overall application of ADCs, bereavement visions and the question of veracity to the subject of the resurrection of Jesus falters on several grounds.

First, it constitutes a reductionist psychologizing perspective on the study of the resurrection of Jesus. Even recent interdisciplinary study of "sensory and quasi-sensory experiences of the deceased in bereavement" recognizes the relevance of complementary perspectives, taking into account both "spiritual/religious" and "psychological frameworks" (Kamp 2020: 1371). This does not mean that the subject of Jesus' resurrection merits no attention from the point of view of psychology of religion and philosophy. Yet even from a psychological perspective, the qualification of bereavement ADCs as "(collective) delusions" constitutes a therapeutically unwarranted judgmental perspective, since it is in tension with "general guidelines for clinicians" in terms of "nonjudgmental exploration", "cultural sensitivity", and an "affirmative stance (if relevant)" (Kamp et al. 2020: 1372).

Second, the one-sided hermeneutics of suspicion in favour of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 15 and at the expense of the Gospels leaves the impression of a tendentious and unbalanced argument. His inference from relative chronology, in which the Gospels are later than Paul's Letters, that this renders the Gospel accounts "less likely to be historically accurate", of "dubious reliability", and "inaccurate" (pp. 3-4) appears strained as historical generalization. For instance, should one set aside additional materials in the Gospel of Luke, as compared with Mark, as of "dubious value", just because the evangelist has written in his prologue that his account comes after that of many "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Lk 1:1-4 at v. 2)? Even though Mark is usually considered as the oldest Gospel, the double tradition materials in Luke and Matthew and the special materials in Luke and Matthew respectively are not set aside as being of "dubious reliability" for overall portraits of Jesus in New Testament scholarship. And even though the Gospels are usually dated later than Paul's Letters, this does not preclude the use of earlier sources and traditions by the evangelists. To be sure, the historical evaluation of gospel materials may have to be argued on a case-by-case basis, but to bypass this discussion altogether and jump to conclusions about "dubious reliability" can certainly not be considered as a methodologically sound historical method.

Third, Smith's approach to the subject of the resurrection of Jesus has a basis in materialism as "the predominant view of the world today" regarding everything, including "human life" (p. 12), without making a compelling argument for it at the expense of dualism. In fact, Smith does not cite any secundary liteature at this point. There are schools of thought about consciousness, diverging between materialism and dualism, but Smith does not engage in this debate, simply presupposing materialism as a hermetic universe. Admittedly, accounts of paranormal experiences have the "burden of proof" (p. 12), but to suppose that materialism is above discussion negates debates between materialism and dualism. It is this materialist view which probably informs Smith's pejorative idea, following Goulder, of New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection as "collective delusions", for anything else than an ultimately "this-worldly" perspective then appears the opposite of "veracity".

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