Research Article

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

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Were the post-resurrection sightings of Jesus instances of after-death communication (ADC) commonly found in the literature on the paranormal? Ken Vincent argues that they were, whereas Gary Habermas refutes this, insisting that Jesus appeared in carnal form. The two scholars are agreed, however, that the disciples' experiences were veridical and not subjective. In the present article I agree with Vincent against Habermas that the disciples experienced visions, but disagree that they were veridical. By reference to the work of Phillip Wiebe on Christic visions, I show that the claims of some people in the modern age to have 'seen' Jesus are relatively common, and that as these are generally regarded as subjective visions, it is feasible to argue that the disciples' sightings of Jesus were of a similar kind. As they would have been in a state of bereavement following the death of their beloved 'attachment figure', I apply the findings of contemporary studies on bereavement visions, concluding that at least one of the disciples had such an experience, and that the group visions may be explicable in terms of collective delusions.

A few years ago, the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* carried an interchange between the psychologist and researcher in religious experience Ken Vincent (2012a, 2012b) and the evangelical New Testament scholar Gary Habermas (2012) concerning the possible relationship between the after-death communications (ADC) phenomena and the resurrection of Jesus. Guggenheim & Guggenheim (1996) have been credited with coining this term, and provide the following explanation: 'An after-death communication (ADC) is a spiritual experience that occurs when someone is contacted directly and spontaneously by a deceased family member or friend' (1996: 15). Vincent's view is that the resurrection of Jesus is simply one particular example out of thousands of other experiences classed as ADCs, whereas Habermas counters that this event was absolutely unique and stands outside the

 doi.org/10.32388/CNKRIH

corpus of experiences to which the epithet 'ADC' attaches. On examining their respective views, however, I find that they are agreed on one important point, namely on their adoption of a transcendentalist position. As applied to the resurrection, this suggests that neither scholar believes it to be explicable in purely naturalist terms, and for Vincent, at least, the same applies to ADCs in general. The transcendentalist view suggests that, however much can be explained by the natural and human sciences, a full understanding of human experience is impossible on that basis alone, and requires more than our current scientific understanding for a complete explanation.

During the course of this paper, I shall examine the debate as it is represented by Vincent and Habermas and hope to demonstrate that a psychological explanation for Jesus' resurrection and ADCs alike is at least as plausible as a transcendentalist one. ADCs are frequently associated with states of bereavement, and in my view, it is that area of research which shows most promise in resolving some of the issues.

Ken Vincent, the Resurrection of Jesus, and ADCs

Although the Guggenheim's (1996: 15) definition of ADCs is admirably reticent as to their cause, it is abundantly clear that both they and Ken Vincent adopt a transcendentalist approach. Vincent (2012a) ascribes to writers of an earlier generation such as James Hyslop, (1908) and Rudolf Otto (1958 [1917]) the view that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were visionary or spiritual manifestations rather than physical ones. As such, they belong to a class of anomalistic phenomena experienced by ordinary people across a wide range of cultures and under various circumstances, particularly in response to traumatic personal events such as the death of a loved one. Vincent points out that the post-resurrection sightings of Jesus are unique only in the sense that they were claimed by his followers alone.

Vincent recognises that the only first century accounts available to us are to be found in the New Testament, stating that the earliest of these – and hence likely to be the most reliable – is Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 15: 3–8 which contains a brief list of alleged visionaries. The Gospel narratives, which post-date the Pauline account (c. 55 CE) by between fifteen and sixty-five years (unusually, he dates the Gospel of John to 95–120 CE), are narrative developments of the earlier tradition whose chief aim is to physicalize what in truth was a series of spiritual experiences. Paul probably understood the disciples' experience as visions akin to his own (1 Cor. 9: 1; 15: 8; Gal. 1: 16; cp. Acts 26: 19); he did not regard any of these appearances as physical. The physicalist view, along with

the story of the empty tomb, was concocted by the Evangelists themselves, some of whom may have been faced with the threat of proto-gnosticizing elements within their various faith communities who were beginning to disseminate the view that the earthly Jesus had never been a flesh-and-blood figure at all (a position openly adopted by the Docetists in the early second century).

If we set aside the Gospel accounts on grounds of suspect historical reliability, we are left with Paul's presentation in which the appearances of Jesus seem to fit the description of many of the ADCs studied under the aegis of parapsychology. It is no rare thing to find claims of deceased loved ones appearing visually to the bereaved (Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1996; Sparrow, 1995), and the faith community abounds with stories of various members, even down to the present day, claiming to have had visions of someone they identify with Jesus (Wiebe, 1997, 2000, 2014). Vincent concludes his article with the somewhat telling statement: 'This [ADC] phenomenon is a source of great comfort to me, and I hope it is to other people who are sceptical of the physical resurrection' (2012: 147).

What are we to make of all this? Let us begin with a point of agreement: we do need to commence with Paul's basic statement in I Corinthians 15: 5–8, as Vincent suggests. It is the earliest relevant source we have, dating back to just twenty-five years or so after the crucifixion of Jesus, and it is the only available statement of a first-hand post-resurrection account (v. 8 –'last of all he appeared to me also'). Despite the best efforts of Craig (2002: 157–59) to show that Paul regarded the resurrection of Jesus as a physical one, this cannot be proved on the basis of Paul's solitary term *horaō*, 'to see', which is no more specific in meaning than its English equivalent. Certainly, it can imply a physical sighting, but it can just as readily apply metaphorically to insight. Paul used the term both of his own experience and that of the other apostles – always in the passive, *ōphthē*, literally, 'was seen by' – without distinction, and if his encounter was visionary in nature, as Luke's accounts imply (Acts 9: 1–9; 22: 4–16; 26: 9–18), he seems to have assumed the same to be true of the others too.

The key to Paul's understanding of the resurrection body lies in his discussion in 1 Corinthians 15: 35–50. The purpose of the seed analogy is to show that personal identity embraces both sameness and difference. The seed is of the same substance as the plant that springs from it, but they are different in form. For Paul, all physical things, not merely living ones, are bodies. The sun, moon and stars have their bodies, as well as animals, birds, fish and humans. All living things are composed of flesh (*sarx*) and animated or ensouled (*nepheš*) by the breath of God (Gen. 2: 7). Thus, God gave humans 'soulish' or natural bodies (*sōma psychikon*) suitable for earthly life.

In the next stage of his argument, Paul distinguishes between earthly and heavenly bodies, thereby preparing the way for a distinction between natural bodies and spiritual ones. The heavenly bodies are regarded as differing from one another in splendour, including the individual stars (v. 41) which outwardly share the same form. If at one level, therefore, astral bodies can differ from one another, it follows that the same is true of human bodies. Indeed, 'if there is a natural body (*sōma psychikon*) there is also a spiritual body (*sōma pneumatikon*)' (v. 44). This latter term does not mean a body *made* of spirit in much the way that the natural body is made of flesh; it means a body animated or directed by spirit. It remains a body, thereby retaining the personal identity of the original, but it is now a body transformed and attuned to the heavenly realm. When Paul later declares that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (v. 50), he does not mean that the resurrection world will be populated by spirits, but rather by heavenly bodies that have been transformed – clothed, as it were, in immortality – because they have become attuned to the Spirit of God. Individual human identities are fully retained. At every turn, Paul draws parallels between his vision of resurrection for all Christians with that of Jesus (Rom. 6: 5; 1 Cor. 15: 48–49; Phil. 3: 21). He seems to have regarded the nature of Jesus' own resurrection as the precursor, or 'firstfruits' (*aparchē*) (1 Cor. 15: 20, 23) of what he expected for himself and all believers.

It should be stressed that all this was Paul's *personal* view. First-century Jewry was awash with all manner of ideas about eschatology, and the very fact of Paul's insistence on the natural man preceding the spiritual (1 Cor. 15: 46) may well have been in conscious defiance of his near-contemporary, Philo, who had argued the exact opposite (Philo, *De opificio mundi*, 134; *Legum allegoriae*, I. 31; see Bruce, 1971: 153).

Although Vincent adopts an uncommonly late date for the Gospels (based exclusively on White, 2004), the more widely-accepted dating (Mark, c. 70 CE; Matthew and Luke-Acts, 75–85 CE; John 90–100 CE) would, in any case, serve his point – that the later sources, all else being equal, are less likely to be historically accurate than the earlier ones. There is a sense, however, in which Vincent wants to have his cake and eat it: having affirmed the dubious reliability of the Gospel accounts, he has no qualms about using them to compare their outline of the post-resurrection appearances to the paranormal apparitions associated with the ADC phenomenon, in which case the corollary surely must be that if the Gospel narratives are regarded as inaccurate or dubious, the same could apply to many of the contemporary vision cases.

A more far-reaching problem for Vincent, and all engaged in anomalistic psychology, concerns the self-reported nature of the accounts which in many cases are the only sources available, and which compel the researcher to rely exclusively on what he or she is told by the percipient. The following case is typical in all but the fact that the sighting was claimed by two individuals simultaneously:

> Then a figure emerged, a most brilliant sight. We were both speechless, but not afraid, it was so beautiful. The figure, Jesus Christ, glided onto the centre of the road while we were on the rough pavement... We could see the white gown with a broad, twisted girdle about the waist, knotted and falling down his left side. The figure glided along, but we could see no feet, and as it got nearer, we tried to make out his face and features but could not, and as it got level with us, it gradually faded away from the gown up to the head, and it had vanished! (Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990: 78).

While Vincent himself refers to this report (2012: 142), he leaves untouched the raft of critical questions which might have been addressed. There are, for example, some intriguing differences between this apparition and the appearances of Jesus in the Gospels. The contemporary encounter seems to suggest that the apparition had no feet (a feature apparently typical of traditional ghosts) and that it *gradually* faded away from bottom to top, whereas in the Gospels, the women clasp Jesus' feet (Matt. 28: 9) and he can appear and disappear instantaneously (Luke 24: 31, 36; John 20: 19, 26). Further, we are told that the couple in the modern account immediately identified the figure as Jesus, whereas this is precisely what the witnesses in the Gospels had difficulty in doing (Luke 24: 16; John 20: 14; 21: 4). These are significant discrepancies which do not aid Vincent in his aim of establishing some kind of parity between the Gospels and contemporary ADC accounts of Christic visions. Other questions also obtrude: How could the couple in the story above have identified the figure with certainty when the facial features were obscure? The traditional garb (which might have helped) is more likely to be indicative of cultural conditioning rather than veracity. And did the two individuals spot the apparition simultaneously, or was there a hint of suggestion in the correlation of their experiences?

Vincent lays greater store by the life-changing effects of visionary encounters which can indeed be extremely vivid on occasion (Myers, 1903: 326–29), but these do not always accrue from such experiences, and even when they do, this alone does not guarantee veracity. Finally, if such visions are divinely generated, as Vincent seems to imply, there can presumably be no obstacle, in principle, to

the traditional claim that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead as the Gospels aver. If God is able to generate objective visions, he is presumably capable of raising a corpse in bodily form.

Gary Habermas's Response to Ken Vincent

Since Habermas is of the view that the resurrection of Jesus was a physical one, he sets out to minimise its similarities to the various ADC experiences as presented by Vincent, while admitting that there is some superficial kinship. For example, although the risen Jesus appeared to two or more people simultaneously on several occasions (Matt. 28: 8–10, 16–20; Luke 24: 13–31, 36–53; John 20: 19–29; 21: 1–14; Acts 1: 9–11; 1 Cor. 15: 5–7), this does not make the resurrection appearances unique, as the same has been claimed of various ADC experiences (Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1996: 285–300; Wiebe, 1997: 77–78). On one occasion, Jesus was touched by some of his women followers (Matt. 28: 9), but something similar is reported to have happened in a small minority of ADC cases too (Sparrow, 1995: 32; Green & McCreery, 1975: 102–13). And if the risen Jesus walked through locked doors to reach his disciples (John 20: 19, 26), according to one of the modern Christic visions reported by Wiebe (1997: 77), he was collectively observed to walk through a solid pulpit in much the same way as apparitions are sometimes said to have walked through walls (Myers, 1903: 326–29). Whilst acknowledging all this, Habermas insists that similarity should not be confused with sameness. Some of the similarities noted by Vincent are of such a general kind that it would have been surprising had they *not* been observed.

Habermas underscores this last point by listing six areas of *dis*similarity between Jesus' resurrection and ADCs, not all of them equally pertinent (2012a: 154–57). In order to free up more discussion space, I shall overlook what I consider to be Habermas's merely incidental points in order to focus on the more significant issues. One is that the empty tomb tradition is well-founded, suggesting that Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were physical in nature and not of the ADC type. Another is that various New Testament passages do describe certain visionary appearances of Jesus and that these are fundamentally different from the nature of the appearances immediately following the resurrection.

All the Gospels are agreed that the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be empty (Mark 16: 1–8; Matt. 28: 1–7; Luke 24: 1–11; John 20: 1–13). However, says Habermas, if Vincent's view that Jesus appeared to the disciples in spiritual form (and thus in the manner of an ADC) is correct, there would have been no need for an empty tomb account, for it is only the physical remains which are buried. The fact that

there is a well-attested one suggests that, at the time the empty tomb tradition was being developed, most Christians were convinced of a *bodily* resurrection.

Entire books have been written on the empty tomb (Price & Lowder, eds., 2005), but I will restrict myself at this point to a brief response to a comment made by Habermas. He says: 'a strong majority of scholars now accept the historicity of the empty tomb' and have amassed 'over 20 arguments favouring this event' (2012: 154–55). Naturally, *evangelical* scholars will embrace this view, but there are plenty of liberal scholars – Crossan, 1991: 393–94; Lüdemann, 1994, 1995, 2004; and Goulder, 1994, 1996, 2000, for instance – who demur. Further, like many evangelicals, Habermas is fond of resorting to the 'numerical fallacy', which in the present case takes the form: N arguments favour a historical empty tomb, therefore, the tomb must have been found empty. For Habermas, N = 20 on this occasion, but even if N = 2,000 were the case, it would make little difference; what is paramount is the *quality* of the arguments. Twenty weak arguments – or 2,000 – can never amount to one strong one.

There are some viable alternatives to the evangelical view of the empty tomb. One is that the empty tomb tradition arose in reaction to the earlier resurrection traditions with the purpose of affirming that the appearances were physical rather than simply visionary (which would not have necessitated the tomb's being empty) (Bultmann, 1968: 290). Some have argued that the tradition was invented altogether, possibly by Mark (Price, 2005: 155–82).

Habermas claims that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples differ markedly from other New Testament narratives in which the appearances of the risen Jesus to various individuals – Stephen (Acts 7: 55–56), Paul (Acts 9: 1–9; 22: 4–16; 26: 9–18), and John (Rev. 1: 10–18) – are clearly described in visionary terms. This being so, why would the Gospels have described Jesus' appearances in bodily terms if they were really as visionary as those just noted?

Before attempting a response, it may be as well to glance at the nature of these visionary experiences. In Acts 7: 55–56, we are told that immediately prior to his death by stoning, Stephen claimed to see the Son of man (presumably Jesus, given that this was the term he used of himself throughout the Gospels) standing at the right hand of God. Luke tells us that he saw God's glory (*doxa*).

The next visionary appearance is to Paul, to which the apostle himself refers (1 Cor. 9: 1; 15: 8; Gal. 1: 16), and Luke describes (Acts 9: 1–9). Paul uses the passive voice to declare that he 'saw' Jesus (1 Cor. 15: 8), which may possibly have significance in that, in strict terms, the action is attributed to the visionary rather than to the subject of the vision: he (the visionary figure) was 'seen by' Paul, who

addresses him/ it as ‘Lord’ (*kyrios*), a common term of respect in Greek equivalent to our ‘sir’, and which does not necessarily reveal the true identity of the one speaking. In any event, Paul understands his vision to be a divine revelation (Gal. 1: 16). Luke’s account, which is generally assumed to refer to the same event, but which we must remember post-dates Paul’s own testimony by some thirty years, describes Paul’s vision in terms of a ‘light from heaven’ (Acts 9: 3), ‘brighter than the sun’ (Acts 26: 13), along with a heavenly voice. There is some suggestion that Paul’s travelling companions also had some awareness of the vision, though not in the same sense as Paul (Acts 9: 7; 22: 9; 26: 14), and there is some doubt as to whether or not they saw the light (Acts 9: 7; cp. 22: 9). It is possible that Paul had some anomalous experience involving luminosity which he interpreted in terms of Christ, since he was at that moment on an errand to arrest Jesus’ followers in Damascus. It should be noted that Paul was prone to heavenly visions (Acts 23: 11; 27: 23), and even heavenly journeys (2 Cor. 12: 2–4), so the vision on the road to Damascus seems to have been in character, and it is as likely to have been subjective as objective, which is precisely how Jung (1928: 257), Kent (1999: 49–61, 65–69), Lüdemann (1994: 79–84; 2004: 166–72), and many others interpret it.

The final vision of Jesus to be mentioned is that experienced by John on the isle of Patmos (Rev 1: 10–18). As in the case of Paul, it contains auditory as well as visual elements. On hearing a loud noise, John turned to see the vision of an angelic-like figure whose appearance and dress are meticulously described. Light, again, is an important feature, his eyes being ‘like blazing fire’ (v. 14), his feet ‘like glowing bronze’ (v. 15), and his face ‘like the sun shining in all its brilliance’ (v. 16). There is in this figure some resemblance to the angel at the tomb as described in Matthew 28: 2–3.

Up to this point, Vincent and Habermas are in broad agreement. If all the New Testament reports of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances were like those described above, neither scholar would baulk at comparing them with modern ADC experiences, and would no doubt be prepared to classify the Christic visions studied by Wiebe (1997, 2000, 2014) and Lundmark (2010) in this way. The only sticking-point, then, is that Habermas takes a physicalist approach to the Gospel accounts, on which basis he seeks to formally disengage these narratives from the characteristics found in most ADCs. However, as I shall show below, the differences are not as pronounced as Habermas would aver. Visions can appear strikingly real to the witness, and there are many cases in the parapsychological literature in which the witness has casually taken the apparition to be a normal living person, the Bowyer-Bower (Anon, 1919a) and M’Connell (Anon, 1919b,) cases being two examples. In the case reported by Myers (1903: 326–29) the apparition is said to have cast its shadow on the carpet when it

moved in front of a lamp, and in the famous Chaffin Will case (Anon, 1927) the revenant was able to communicate information to his son that could not have been received in any other way (see also Green & McCreery, 1975: 75–79) – although in this case the information seems to have been communicated through a series of dreams. Yet other revenants have been recognised by their familiar attire (Myers, 1903: 326–29, again).

Habermas objects that, despite apparent exceptions, ADCs are rarely witnessed by more than one person at a time, and even the exceptions are limited to two or three witnesses at most. Jesus, on the other hand, not only appeared several times to his disciples, but on one occasion to over 500 (1 Cor. 15: 6). Even here, however, the humble ADC is not to be outdone. If I may be allowed to extend this phenomenon to religious figures such as the Virgin Mary, there are occasions when hundreds, if not thousands at a time have reportedly witnessed strange anomalistic phenomena. The appearance of Our Lady on the roof of the Coptic church in Zeitoun, Egypt, was witnessed by thousands over a period of some three years (Nelson, 1973), and the majority in a crowd estimated to number some 70,000 reputedly witnessed the sun 'dancing' at Fátima, Portugal, in 1917 (Nickell, 1998: 76–81). The census of apparitions conducted under the auspices of the Society for Psychical Research (Sidgwick, 1894) reported that of 1,087 cases of visual apparitions, ninety-five (8.7%) were allegedly witnessed collectively, while Tyrrell (1943: 69) claimed to have collected a further 130 cases independently, and more recently Haraldsson (2009: 109–11) stated that of 337 cases of apparitions collected by him, thirty-nine (11.57%) were witnessed collectively. Sightings of this kind, therefore, although in the minority, are not especially uncommon.

The Resurrection of Jesus in Relation to Contemporary Christic Visions

Turning to modern Christic visions, we find that many of them share features with the visionary experiences from the New Testament, noted above, while others bear comparison with the Gospel accounts which Habermas insists describe bodily post-resurrection appearances. Wiebe (1997: 40–88) studied twenty-eight visionaries, some of whom experienced more than one vision, totalling thirty-six individual cases. He then classified the data obtained, taking account of the specific details of each vision, and adding a few personal details such as the age of the visionary at the time the experience(s) took place. The factors taken into consideration included whether or not the visionary saw the Christ-figure in the normal ocular sense, whether the environment was altered or remained

normal, and whether the figure moved, was radiant, looked solid, was of normal size, and of traditional appearance. After detailed discussion, the data were fed into a summary grid (Wiebe, 1997: 227). Using this grid, I have calculated the percentages for each of the related factors as follows:

Datum	Percentage
Subject's eyes were open	97
Subject's environment remained normal	69
Christ-figure was animated	88
Christ-figure was of traditional appearance	91
Christ-figure was solid, not transparent	91
Facial features were distinct	82
Figure was radiant in appearance	36
Figure was of normal human size	91
Whole of figure could be seen	76
Figure was collectively seen	6

These figures, which I have rounded to the nearest whole percent, are accurate for each of the key features, but do not account for their distribution among the individual witnesses or experiences. For example, one subject who had two visions separated by a lapse of thirty years, experienced an altered environment (or translation) on the first occasion, but not the second, and witnessed the Christ-figure as a radiant form the first time, but as a non-radiant form subsequently. The data as a whole reveal a wide range of variables. Only one of Wiebe's cases (1997: 77–82) purports to represent a collective sighting. In this case, the Christ-figure is said to have appeared to Pastor Kenneth Logie and his entire Lakeshore Gospel congregation twice during a five-year period.

The point I wish to draw from Wiebe's study is that many of the features pertinent to his subjects' experiences could easily be applied to the case of Jesus' appearances to his disciples as recorded in the Gospels. Like them, most of the witnesses in Wiebe's sample were open-eyed, saw the figure as

traditionally conceived, were able to peruse the facial features, and perceived a figure of normal human size, solid in form, and moving around in a natural environment. A significant minority (34%) claimed to have had some auditory sensation, as if the Christ-figure were somehow addressing them, if not always by word of mouth. It is difficult to see how these features collectively do not amount to an experience similar to those of the disciples on Easter Day. Yet in these contemporary cases, in which the subjects were available to testify first-hand, we can be virtually certain that what was experienced was entirely visionary. Why, then, should this not have been the case with the first disciples? Habermas assumes the fundamental accuracy of the Gospel narratives, which apparently testify to a bodily resurrection. However, accepting such texts at face value without historiographical verification is fraught with danger, especially if it fails to take account of developments in the various fields of social science, such as the contribution of anthropological studies by scholars like Craffert (2005, 2008a: 183–205, 2008b, 2011, 2018) and Pilch (1998) which suggest that dreams, visions, trance-states, shamanic practices, heavenly journeys, and the like, were all part-and-parcel of the polyphasic, first-century Mediterranean society of which Jesus was a part. So, yes, says Craffert,

> Jesus' resurrection was a genuine cultural experience for his first followers and yes, he was resurrected, as the texts indicate, in a first-century conceptualized material body … [But] no, culturally constructed intentional objects and phenomena are not necessarily objectively real. Jesus' resurrection as a first-century culturally experienced event was in this view not an event in time and space. (Craffert, 2009: 147–48).

An Alternative Approach: Bereavement Visions

So far, I have argued with Vincent and against Habermas that, assuming the post-resurrection appearances in the Gospels reflect events which the disciples actually experienced, they describe visionary manifestations similar to that of Paul on the road to Damascus. But if this is so, the question now arises as to their cause. Vincent deposes that they were objective experiences of the ADC type, arguing that this objectivity is inexplicable on the basis of science alone; a transcendentalist approach is also required; somewhere along the line, a divine agent is pulling the strings. Yet that view inadvertently weakens the objective vision argument he also favours: if God is at work, then surely, he could as well have raised Jesus bodily from the dead as in visionary form, and since the Gospels state that such *did* happen, Vincent's vision hypothesis is undermined. I would venture to suggest that, in as far as the Gospel accounts describe real events, they are describing the inner experiences of the

disciples which occurred in reaction to Jesus' crucifixion. In other words, the initial sighting or sightings were ADCs generated by a deep sense of bereavement. Peter may well have been the prime candidate for such an experience, given his denial of Jesus (Mark 14: 66–72), and this initial event of his 'seeing the Lord' may have led to a series of 'collective delusions' (Goulder, 1994, 1996, 2000) once the other disciples had been made aware of it.

The bereavement vision has become a widely-accepted phenomenon among psychologists and social scientists in general. The term 'vision' (which I use here in preference to the more traditional term 'hallucination', with its pejorative overtones) is to be applied more widely than to the visual sense alone, since the bereaved may just as readily hear the departed, or even, on occasion, feel their touch. In many cases there is only a vague 'sense of presence' (SoP) (Beardsworth, 1977). Thus, I am using the term somewhat loosely.

The widely-acknowledged pioneer of studies in bereavement visions is the late Dewi Rees, a Welsh GP with a rural practice who used his widowed patients, with their full co-operation, to research into the effects of bereavement. In his seminal study (1971) he interviewed a total of 293 widows (277) and widowers (66), 137 (46.7%) of whom testified to having experienced the presence of a deceased loved one on at least one, and sometimes several occasions. Of these, the largest number, 115 (83.9%) described their experience as a 'sense of presence', while forty-one (29.9%) claim to have seen the deceased, and thirty-nine (28.5%) to have heard the deceased's voice. Eight (5.8%) claimed to have felt the touch of the deceased. Some experienced more than one of these modes.

Taking their cue from Rees's initial study, others began to conduct their own research. In a sample of 1,445, Greeley (1987) found 25% to have had some awareness of a deceased loved one; in Olsen's study (1985), the figure was 61% of forty-six subjects, for Grimby (1998) 83% of fifty subjects, for Lindstrom (1995) 75% of thirty-nine subjects, Kalish & Reynolds (1973) 44% of 434 subjects, and MacDonald (1992) 35.6% of 465 subjects. A comparison of these figures reveals a wide range of results which is due largely to an equally wide range of variables, including the gender, age, culture and attitude of the participants, and the nature of the scientific methods developed by the investigator, as well as sample type and size. Grimby's sample, for instance, was taken entirely from two American care homes full of elderly residents, whereas Rees's sample was drawn from a much wider cross-section of the population. Ultimately, however, these discrepancies do not prove decisive. The fact remains that in all these studies, the percentage of people claiming to have had some kind of ADC was

relatively high. We now know, thanks to the willingness of participants to share their experiences with researchers, that bereavement-related ADCs are really relatively common.

A few trends in current research which may prove relevant for present purposes should be flagged up, although they can only be noted briefly here. Some studies suggest that cultural traits play a significant role in the type and frequency of bereavement visions. In a study of twenty Japanese widows by Yamamoto and his colleagues (1969), eighteen (90%) testified to having experienced a sense of the presence of their spouses, if not a full-blown vision. One possible reason for this remarkably high figure (from an admittedly very limited sample) is that traditional Japanese society, with its singular spiritual perspective, has tended to be more receptive than Western culture to bereavement experiences of this kind, and ridicule from others is less likely, thus leading to a greater willingness of subjects to share their experiences. (Fear of ridicule was a reason given by subjects for reticence in Rees's study). Again, it has been noted that native peoples, including ethnic minorities living in a predominantly Western culture, often display a markedly positive disposition towards bereavement visions, as a number of anthropological studies have demonstrated. Matchett (1972) and Shen (1986) noted in their studies of Hopi Indians that their mourning practices were conducive to bereavement visions, even to the extent of their being induced. Bilu & Abramovitch (1985) came to much the same conclusion in respect of Moroccan Jews living in Israel, while Grindal's (1983) fieldwork among the Sisala people of Ghana revealed a keen interest in raising the spirits of the dead through ritual, and Kalish & Reynolds (1973) reported a greater number of SoPs occurring among Mexican Indians than among their white counterparts or other ethnic groups in their sample. The upshot of all this is that the occurrence of bereavement visions and SoPs appears to be a worldwide cultural phenomenon, and there would seem to be little reason for denying that experiences of this kind were well-known among the bereaved in first-century Palestine, and that a sense of reality was attached to them.

A further factor in bereavement research which may impact upon the disciples' reaction to the death of Jesus is the recent development of attachment theory and continuing bonds (Field, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Attachment theory relates to the need of the individual to be attached to or in the physical proximity of a revered figure who can be relied upon as a 'safe base', and it is not specific to bereavement, although it can obviously be applied to it. Its relevance to our present sphere of concern lies in the question of what happens when this figure is no longer there. Is it possible that ADCs, whether visions or SoPs, provide a coping mechanism allowing for a transition period in which

the bereaved person learns to let go of the attachment figure, either by transferring allegiance to someone else, or by simply coming to terms with the loss? Psychologists differ over the ultimate value of a person's nurturing contact with a deceased loved one, some stressing the need to 'move on', but for many researchers, the first twelve months of bereavement provides a benchmark (Parkes, 1970; Olsen, 1985), after which it is generally considered unhealthy to maintain bonds with the dead. Grimby (1998) showed from her sample that all types of bereavement attachment (SoPs, visual, auditory, tactile) declined during the first year, with SoPs proving the most resistant.

Two other factors should be mentioned in passing. A few scholars (Stevenson, 1982; Haraldsson, 2009, pp. 103–07, 113–14; Field & Filanosky, 2010) have shown from their studies that the occurrence of sensory visions as opposed to mere SoPs, is more likely in those bereaved persons whose loved ones or attachment figures have suffered sudden or violent deaths, and/ or harbour a feeling of being in some sense responsible for it, whether justified or not. Obviously, we should not make too much of these findings, since sensory experiences are clearly not restricted to such cases; but it does seem that a higher proportion of those in the relevant categories experience sensory visions in comparison with the general population of bereaved individuals.

Finally, a few studies have focused on the connection between the perceived veracity of bereavement visions and spirituality (Becker, 2007; Benore & Park, 2004; Rees, 2010; Wortmann & Park, 2008). If, on religious grounds, people already hold a belief in a personal afterlife, any experience of an ADC encounter following bereavement is more likely to be deemed veridical than in cases where the perceiver holds no religious belief at all, and who, on reflection, is likely to account for the experience as a self-generated reaction to the death of a loved one.

ADCs, Bereavement Visions, and the Question of Veracity

Before passing on to consider whether bereavement visions might provide a sufficient explanation for Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, a word on the issue of veracity is required. Are there any characteristics of ADCs (of which the bereavement vision is a sub-set) which may favour the view that at least some of them are objectively real? The chief contenders are: the so-called 'Peak in Darien' effect; collectively witnessed ADCs; clairvoyant knowledge; and shared death experiences. I will outline the nature of each in turn but, in order to avoid unnecessary repetition, critique them as a whole.

'Peak in Darien' cases (Greyson, 2010) are those in which the perceiver has a vision of a friend or relative – usually, but not always, under NDE conditions – who was thought to have been alive, but is seen on the 'other side', often to the perceiver's surprise or bewilderment. Much the same phenomenon can pertain to crisis visions in which someone witnesses an apparition of an acquaintance at the very moment of that person's death. In the Bowyer-Bower case (Anon, 1919a), for example, a young World War I pilot, shot down over France in 1917, fleetingly visited his half-sister in Calcutta, supposedly at the moment he was killed. Two weeks later she discovered that he had been posted missing.

I have already touched upon the matter of collective ADCs above, and need not elaborate, except to admit that if such reports are accurate, they could potentially provide strong evidence for their veracity.

Clairvoyant knowledge is that which, so it is claimed, can have been obtained only by paranormal means. Sometimes, those who have experienced OBEs, either as part of an NDE experience or independently, depose that they secured information that it would have been impossible to gather had their consciousness not been detached from their body which, in the case of an NDE, is usually lying prone in a hospital emergency room, or by the roadside following an accident. Others testify to having received information from an 'apparition' clairaudiently (Anon, 1927; Zorab, 1962; Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 2010: 257–70).

The shared death experience, in which friends and relatives gathered around the bedside of a dying person are supposed to share in his or her deathbed visionary experiences, is a more recent area of study (Moody & Perry, 2010), although isolated cases have been languishing in the parapsychology archives for many years. The idea seems to be that this kind of experience offers the family and close friends an opportunity to 'see off' the deceased on his or her heavenly journey.

A full critique of these phenomena, which some regard as veridical 'proofs' of life beyond the tomb, would require more space than is available here, so the following remarks do not claim to be exhaustive. The overriding problem, which affects all the above-mentioned categories, is that they are all heavily dependent on anecdotal evidence with its ever-present susceptibility to conscious and unconscious fraud. I fully accept that the great majority of witnesses are not consciously fraudulent, and will do their best to relate as accurately as they can what they experienced. However, many are unable to sufficiently discriminate between describing what they witness and their interpretation of it. In the Western world, for instance, holy or angelic figures seen during NDEs or ADCs are frequently

assumed to be apparitions of Jesus, even when the features are indistinct. Identification depends largely on cultural conditioning, an observation made, among others, by the philosopher Antony Flew (2005: 133–34).

The predominant view of the world today is that everything in it, including human life, has a material basis. The brain is a physical organ on which the apparently immaterial effects it produces are wholly reliant. A thought, for example, is a product of electro-chemical reactions, even if it is not identical with them. This is not to say that paranormal experiences cannot be irreducible, but it does suggest that the burden of proof must rest with those who claim that the paranormal exists. The matter of critical scholarship in this area has become a bone of contention among contributors to the parapsychological literature. In the view of Ian Stevenson and his colleagues, the evidence for survival gleaned from NDE reports is 'far from compelling' (Cook, Greyson & Stevenson, 1998: 378) – this despite their broadly transcendentalist stance. They concede that, of the thousands of cases in the parapsychological archives, very few can be classed as potentially veridical, 'and none have been adequately corroborated' (1998: 382). Here, there is at least a welcome recognition that those involved in the academic study of the paranormal are required to detach the raw material of the various anecdotal accounts from the obvious emotional involvement of the experiencers themselves, and to take a strictly objective approach.

Unfortunately, this view is not adopted by every scholar. Some thirty-five years after his ground-breaking NDE study, *Life after Life*, Raymond Moody, with the assistance of a journalist colleague, Paul Perry, published *Glimpses of Eternity* (2010), a study of the shared death experience. In the final chapter of this book (151–66), Moody makes a regulation attempt to consider various proposed natural explanations for this phenomenon, but in the following citation he manifests his general disapproval of any form of scientific enquiry:

> When it comes to the desire to explain a phenomenon, scientists can be somewhat like children on a long road trip: Instead of looking out of the window and enjoying the voyage, they are constantly concerned about getting there. The childish question 'Are we there yet?' is replaced with 'Do you have an answer yet?' … Rather than try to explain how a phenomenon so great as a shared death experience takes place, I most often like to observe the sense of wonder and serenity on the face of a person who is telling me what it is like to accompany a loved one into the heavenly realm (Moody & Perry, 2010: 162–63).

No doubt, as the physicist Hermann Bondi once said (Stannard, 1996: 28) there is always a place for wonder and mystery, even in a world of science, but he added: 'We live on a small island of knowledge in a huge sea of ignorance. What we do in science is to reclaim some land for that island'. Jeffery Long's claim that Moody's book is 'scientifically sound' (see back cover) hardly fits that assessment.

A further hurdle to be negotiated, again acknowledged by Stevenson and his colleagues (1998: 382–83), is that witnesses are frequently called upon to report events which may have occurred decades before their interview with the investigator, by which time some key players in the event may no longer be available, while others are unable to recount what happened with sufficient accuracy. In the Lakeshore Gospel Chapel case reported by Wiebe (1997: 77–78), the supposed appearances of Jesus took place in 1954 and 1959 respectively, but it was not until 1965 that he was able to interview any of the witnesses and watch the screening of a cine film purporting to show the 1954 event. By the time he conducted a second interview 25 years later, the film had reportedly been stolen from the pastor's office, and some members of the original congregation who were known to have been present at the 1965 screening could not recall having seen it.

A good deal of work has been done in recent years by cognitive scientists on the fallibility of memory, in which it has been shown not only how fragile the memory is in its capacity for retaining accurate detail (Schacter, 1996), but that it is quite commonly the case that people 'remember' events that never occurred either in their own experience or to anyone known to them (Loftus, 1993). Some scholars have shown that episodic memory of an event tends to deteriorate quite rapidly during the following five years before stabilizing thereafter (Wagenaar, 1986; McIver, 2011). If this is the case, witnesses reporting an event after the first few years of its occurrence are unlikely to report the details with a very high degree of accuracy. Even 'flashbulb' memories – recollections of highly significant events – can easily be misremembered, even within the first few months (Greenberg, 2004, 2005). We cannot take it for granted, therefore, that NDEs and ADCs reported years after the experience will be recounted exactly 'as it happened'.

Finally, it should be noted that all human experience, including the apparently paranormal, must ultimately be this-worldly, however interpreted, and that it is always wise to exhaust all natural explanations before resorting to the supernatural (a maxim of Sherlock Holmes, no less!). Whatever position we adopt, we should always be open to the alternative, and the lack of a bibliography in Moody's *Glimpses of Eternity* and the wholly non-critical nature of the bibliography in the Guggenheim's *Hello from Heaven!* speak for themselves.

It has not been my intention in this section to demonstrate that there can be no such thing as a veridical NDE or ACD – the matter is beyond proof, in any case. However, I have tried to show that there are some formidable obstacles standing in the way of the transcendentalist position which cannot simply be ignored, and that many ADCs, regardless of type, are as likely to be subjective as veridical in nature.

The Significance of Bereavement Studies for the Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus

In the light of our brief survey of modern psychological studies of the bereavement process, and in particular the occurrence of visionary experiences, is it possible to explain the Gospel resurrection narratives, at least in part, on the basis of bereavement visions? We noted earlier in the discussion that Paul clearly regarded his Damascus road experience as a veridical visionary encounter, and seems to have understood Jesus' appearances to others as being of the same order. Let us suppose that Jesus appeared first to Peter (Luke 24: 34; 1 Cor. 15: 5): could it reasonably be argued that this event might be explained in terms of a bereavement vision? Two immediate objections may be advanced against such a proposal. It could be pointed out that the large majority of bereavement ADCs occur with close family members (although communications with close friends are not uncommon), and that Jesus, although an important attachment figure, was related neither to Peter nor to any of the other the disciples. This objection, however, is not so very difficult to refute. There was, on both sides, a keen sense of familial relationship. The disciples had 'left everything' (Mark 10: 24), including their family ties, to attach themselves to Jesus, a move which he not only encouraged and commended (Mark 10: 29–30; Matt. 8: 21–22; Luke 9: 59–62), but reciprocated (Mark 3: 31–35; Matt. 12: 46–50). There can be little doubt that the disciples would have mourned the loss of Jesus not only as an attachment figure but as a family-type member.

A second objection might be that if the post-resurrection appearances were visions, they evidently must have played a different role to that expected of modern bereavement visions. As previously noted, many psychologists believe that the function of such experiences is to assist in the smooth transition through the bereavement process. They help the mourner readjust and 'let go' of the deceased attachment figure. This certainly did not happen in the case of the disciples who maintained a lifelong attachment to Jesus and experienced a continued sense of his presence.

This may be so, but it does not prove that the post-resurrection appearances were not visions. Rees and others have shown in their studies that the influence of the deceased, often in the form of SoPs, can be felt long after the 'statutory' first year of bereavement – even for decades; extended periods of attachment and continuing bonds do occur. But why would Jesus' disciples have found it so difficult to let go? First, and most practically, the Gospels suggest that they had burned their bridges. Having left their families to follow Jesus, they had nowhere else to turn (Mark 10: 28; John 6: 68). They needed the sustaining power of the Master, even though he was no longer physically present.

Next, there is the question of what they believed about their bereavement experience. Whatever it was, it seems to have been both visual and auditory in nature, which could imply a vivid visionary experience in the first instance. The suggestion by Field & Filanosky (2010) that sensory experiences, as opposed to SoPs, are especially prevalent in cases where the loss is sudden and violent certainly rings true in this case. In their initial disoriented state following Jesus' unexpected crucifixion, the disciples would have been in no frame of mind to calmly rationalize about the precise nature of the 'sightings', and in any case, their cultural view of reality would probably not have been subject to the kind of rationalizing discrimination familiar to our modern monophasic way of thinking, as Craffert (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2018) has repeatedly indicated.

Finally, there remains the issue of what the disciples believed about Jesus himself. If it is true that, despite their doubts and misconceptions, they eventually came to acclaim him as Messiah (Mark 8: 27–30; Matt. 16: 13–16; Luke 9: 18–20), his sudden violent death at the hands of the Roman authorities, the very people most Jews expected the Messiah to overthrow, would no doubt have been a profoundly disorienting experience, and it would not be surprising to find that it was the catalyst for some kind of visionary manifestation. Here, the man of their most fervent hopes for Israel (Luke 24: 21) had been ripped from their grasp. But then he was 'seen alive'. What would that have meant to the disciples? – surely that their faith in Jesus' messianic status had been justified, and that God had vindicated him as his chosen one. Jesus' death had been part of the divine plan all along. So the disciples might have reasoned among themselves.

There is more than a suggestion here of cognitive dissonance. Faced with Jesus' sudden and apparently counterintuitive death, the disciples seemed initially to be 'beaten men' (Cupitt, 1985: 163). Perhaps their belief in Jesus' messianic status was misplaced, and he was really under God's curse (Deut. 21: 22–23) instead of his blessing. A single bereavement ADC, however, might have been enough to restore the disciples to their initial messianic view. It would have spared them public

embarrassment and enabled them to move forward into a positive and open future. I am not concerned here with the precise details of the cognitive dissonance theory as first set out by Leon Festinger and his colleagues (1956, 1957) which, in any case, is open to challenge (Harmon-Jones and Mills, eds., 1999; Cooper, 2008), and which has been too uncritically embraced by some New Testament scholars in the past, if too airily dismissed by others. The point is that, like most social-psychological theories, it observes the patterns in human behaviour and attempts to interpret them. The interpretation can, of course, be challenged, but the behaviour itself is there for all to see. When outcomes prove to be in a dissonant relationship with existing, highly-cherished beliefs, something has to give and, more often than we would care to admit, it is not the disconfirmed belief that is jettisoned. Excuses are found for maintaining the status quo, and in the case of the disciples, a visionary ADC of Jesus may have been all they needed to justify it.

The obvious question still outstanding concerns collective appearances. Subjective visions, by definition, must be the exclusive property of the individual percipient, but Jesus is said to have appeared to groups of disciples. How are these to be explained if Jesus did not appear in physical form? As we have seen, claims of collective appearances are not confined to the appearances of Jesus in the Gospels, but appear also in the parapsychological literature. Moreover, there are even a few evangelical scholars who are prepared to accommodate the veracity of the latter (O'Connell, 2009), and Perry (1959) interpreted Jesus' collective appearances in terms of the 'letter from heaven' approach in which God somehow communicated visions to the disciples telepathically in such a way that they were received simultaneously. Unsurprisingly, this hypothesis has received little support.

Goulder's (1994, 1996, 2006) 'collective delusion' hypothesis is rather more promising, although his recourse to the psychological and parapsychological literature is limited, and the overall impression is that of thinking on the hoof: dead men cannot rise, so the various appearances of Jesus to the disciples *must* have been collective delusions. Still, the fact that human beings are prone to such phenomena is overwhelmingly obvious once we consider the mountain of evidence relating to occurrences throughout history down to the present day. Regardless of whether we call it 'epidemic hysteria' (Boss, 1997), 'mass sociogenic/ psychogenic illness' (Bartholomew and Goode, 2001; Bartholomew and Wessely, 2002), or anything else, the phenomenon is a very common one, but it must always begin with an individual: where collective delusion is concerned there is no such thing as 'spontaneous combustion'. It is not at all impossible, or even highly unlikely, that one of the disciples – perhaps Peter, who after all shouldered more guilt than the rest (Mark 14: 66–72) – had a

bereavement ADC, and that, naturally, he told the others about it who subsequently were persuaded that they, too, had similar experiences. It would not have taken much to convince men who were desperate to believe Peter's testimony. The birth of the Christian Church was the result.

Summary

The first part of this article briefly reviewed the respective approaches taken by three scholars – Vincent, Habermas and Wiebe – to issues concerning the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. All three take a broadly transcendentalist view, but differ over the precise nature of these appearances. Vincent argues that not only Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, but the disciples' encounters with Jesus on Easter Sunday and beyond were of a visionary, though veridical kind. These experiences were not dissimilar to the many ADC accounts found in the parapsychological literature, popularist or otherwise. Habermas demurs, arguing that the Gospels describe the post-resurrection appearances in unashamedly physicalist terms because that is precisely what they were. Any affinities with modern ADCs are superficial and insignificant. Wiebe's studies of contemporary Christic vision cases reveal both similarities and dissimilarities when compared with the Gospel accounts, but, given that the former are clearly visionary in nature, the likelihood is that the same was true of Jesus' appearances to the disciples.

If these appearances were visions, what was their precise nature? In the following section I argued, against the above-named scholars, that they were subjective and required no external agency. The bereavement vision phenomenon, which has been much-explored by social psychologists in recent times, may well serve as a paradigm for the disciples' experiences of the risen Jesus. Visions of this kind can often seem remarkably vivid to the perceiver, convincing him or her that the deceased loved one is alive in some form.

In the final section I applied these findings to the Gospel accounts, tendering the suggestion that Peter, racked with guilt over his denial of Jesus in his hour of need, experienced an ocular bereavement vision and told his fellow disciples who, in turn, experienced collective 'sightings'. Along with Paul at a later date, they had no difficulty in understanding their experiences in visionary terms, since Jewish eschatology in first-century Palestine was extremely diverse (Nickelsburg, 2006; Wright, 2003: 129–206) and well-able to accommodate this view. The ethnic and cultural balance of the Church shifted with the growing influence of Greek ideas following Paul's outreach to the Gentiles, and the Gospels, which are generally representative of Paul's theology, came to reflect the Hellenistic understanding of

the ‘divine man’ (*theios anēr*) whose godly attributes were manifested in human form. Hence, the visionary manifestations evident at the outset later adopted a physicalist interpretation.

I do not urge that the present proposal should be accepted in every detail, but would argue, against the transcendentalist position, that it is equally as feasible as the traditional explanation of the post-resurrection accounts.

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Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.