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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The opportunity to comment on Stephen Smith's article has come as a pleasure, since I taught him during the period he studied at Sheffield University. Care, precision, and clarity always characterized his work, and those virtues have patently matured with time. He has also become much more engaged conceptually, as the article shows. It needs no summary, since its abstract provides that effectively. Stephen has written on this topic at greater length before, and the article as a whole might be regarded as a précis of his position as it has evolved.

At several points, I would suggest that the analysis might be strengthened, qualified, or pursued in an additional direction. My comments are set out under those categories:

Strengthening

Stephen selects the work of Gary Habermas to dispute. Habermas functions more as apologist than as exegete, but he repeats the fallacy, quite common in New Testament circles, that, as Stephen puts it, "All the Gospels are agreed that the tomb of Jesus was discovered to be empty." In fact such agreement does not exist among the Gospels. The site is only described as being empty of Jesus' body (not counting the Johannine graveclothes) in Luke and John, the last of the canonical Gospels. In Mark an angelic "young man" interrupts any visit, and in Matthew an earthquake has confused the site before any visit. Habermas represents an example of projecting a physicalist view of the Resurrection upon the sources. The theological claim of American Fundamentalism at the close of the nineteenth century that Jesus rose "in the same body" in which he died has influenced many researchers since then, included those who are not Fundamentalists. (Denial or questioning of a physical Resurrection has cost some scholars their positions, and not a few of them the placement of their books and articles.) That has resulted in the false exegetical assertion that all the relevant texts refer to or assume the empty tomb. I recently discussed the implications of this problem for interpretation in "A Resurrection Fallacy," *Misusing Scripture. What are Evangelicals Doing with the Bible?*Routledge New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (edited by Mark Elliott, Kenneth Atkinson, and Robert Rezetko; Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023) 226-243. The literature is considerable, but the basic issue has now been clearly established, and might be pressed within the perspective that Stephen develops.

Qualification

By stressing that “vision” is a category native to the New Testament’s handling of the Resurrection, Stephen performs an important service. Perhaps as a result of condensing his treatment, however, he does not explore the variety among the presentations involved, and those he does present (notably from Acts and the Revelation) are from the latest stages of the New Testament. “Seeing” Jesus, or Jesus being “seen” subsequent to his death seems rather to belong the earliest datable strata of the texts (well before narratives of the tomb). Here again, exegesis would enable the case to be made with less recourse to hermeneutical argument. Perhaps more importantly, the visionary tradition in which the New Testament takes part, which includes every phase of the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism as well as Near Eastern and Graeco-Roman literatures, demonstrates that, whatever the current assessment, visions featured as pivotal features of religious systems. But in many (indeed most) cases, visions are not set in an “after death” context, and even those that are do not consistently involve an affect of bereavement. The wider set of visionary narratives, within which the Resurrection represents a subset, would be a productive framework of discussion, especially because visions often feature as the pivot of prophetic activity, which may be compared to apostolic activity.

An Additional Direction

The cutting edge of Stephen’s article lies in his attribution of a “transcendentalist” perspective to both Evangelicals such as Habermas and some of those who pursue a visionary understanding of the Resurrection, such as Ken Vincent. In either form, Stephen rejects that viewpoint and prefers to think in terms of the Resurrection being a matter of a subjective experience, and (following the late Michael Goulder) delusion. The experiences involved were in his view neither “veridical” nor “objectively real.” He reviews some of the literature of “after-death communication” in order to fill out his analysis in these terms.

That literature, and Stephen’s description, emphasize the cognitive and experiential aspects of after-death communication. That is natural, since paranormal writings by definition tend to emphasize what is out of the ordinary. In the case of visions of Jesus as raised from the dead in the New Testament, however, that is not the emphasis. Instead, there is persistently a clear imperative that arises from the report of each encounter with Jesus after his death, and that imperative is not simply a repetition of Jesus’ teaching during his life. In fact, some of the accounts of the Resurrection involve breaking with Jesus’ earlier policies (such as contact with Gentiles, to give the most obvious example). Those imperatives, with all their differences from one another, are the leading edge of accounts, and the Resurrection’s measurable impact in history, as I have explored in *Resurrection Logic. How Jesus’ First Followers Believed God Raised Him from the Dead* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019). The experience of the Resurrection may or may not be accessible in historical terms, but the impact of the Resurrection has been historically palpable.

Bereavement is a mysterious process; I agree that after death communication is more often a part of it than is commonly recognized. But analogy with the Resurrection would demand that we investigate what it means, not merely to experience solace in the presence of the departed, but also to realize a new purpose, indeed a revised program of activity, as the result of that contact. That sense of purpose need not be transcendental in order to be real, but if lived with commitment, it would not be limited to the subjective. History has the curious capacity to coalesce with philosophical fashions, and also to survive them. In the present case, the poles of “objective” and “transcendentalist,” once neatly

distinguished in the wake of the Enlightenment, now seem less to form a dichotomy in the physics of theorists such as Roger Penrose. How that discussion will evolve can hardly be predicted; fortunately, exegetical and historical work need not await its outcome.

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