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

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"After-Death Communications and the Resurrection of Jesus: an Engagement with Ken Vincent and Gary Habermas" by Stephen Smith. Review for *Qeios* by Lucy Bregman

About 10 minutes after dawn on Easter morning, Jesus' friends and followers began to argue about the resurrection of Jesus. They've been at it ever since. What did "resurrection" mean? Who really saw what/whom? Why were some unreliable reports given such prominence in the retellings? The mix of narratives, creedal affirmations and visionary-apocalyptic reports from the first century of the Common Era that eventually made it into the New Testament canon cannot be made into a consistent "Doctrine of the Resurrection" any more than other important incongruities among these same texts. For example, what did Jesus really say at the Last Supper? What were his last words on the cross? When one learned and pious interpreter from a much later era tried to smooth all these matters out and write up a reconciliation of all the accounts, the Church wisely rejected his effort.

I begin a review of Smith's essay this way, to emphasize how ambiguous and sometimes contentious the topic of Jesus' resurrection has been, without any need to interject very post-Enlightenment criteria of scientific rationality or historical accuracy. Those are the norms which Smith himself endorses, but at the risk of squeezing some very complicated understandings into more simplified questions of "objective" vs, "subjective" categorical judgments. Indeed, this approach is also reflected in his treatment of the 19th and early 20th century accounts of "after-death communications" collected by the Society for Psychical Research. An anthology by scholars on *The Anthropology of Disappearance* proposes how the category of "disappeared" is a political and psychological interpretation (as when the state "disappears" its citizens). So, the resurrection of Jesus may be treated as a case of "reappearance," where surprise, awe, fear and rejoicing all mix together in the reports of the experiencers and those who retold their versions of what happened. Who saw what or whom? And how and why? And, of course, why did it matter, and to whom? I do not have to claim that Jesus' reappearance is absolutely and utterly unique in all of history, but it is the claim of all the New Testament materials that God and God alone is the agent of reappearance. The Romans, the religious leaders and the disciples themselves were not agents here.

To disregard this, Smith's essay begins by bypassing this issue, by dismissing all of the Gospel narratives as unreliable, and irrelevant to the actualities of the first disciples' experiences. The empty tomb was concocted to avoid a Gnostic

interpretation of a completely spiritual resurrection (where a body did not count). By doing so, Smith loses the messages of ambiguity that these stories include, and many of the most interesting questions they raised – for their ancient readers/hearers and for some of us. This makes Smith concentrate on Paul's exposition of the resurrection of Jesus especially in I Cor 15. First by his list of witnesses (himself at the end) and then with a very "transcendental" (to use Smith's word) and deeply image-laden meditation on the "bodies" and "flesh" of stars, plants and people. Paul argued that the resurrection of Jesus is central to Christian faith, for Jesus' is a prequel to the universal resurrection ("first-fruits") when God will be all in all. It is important that Paul lists lots of "witnesses" – including some whose experiences are not found in the four canonical Gospels. And apparently, he is sure that they all knew that they had seen Jesus himself, recognized him just as the 17 persons in the Irish town of Knock were certain they had all seen Virgin Mary together in one place. I am not sure if Paul, or others who told and then wrote these stories could have made the kind of distinction between "merely" a vision, vs. hard, objective physical factual encounter. But I think this Paul material from I Cor 15 pulls us back to the stories in the Gospels, rather than being limited to Paul's own experiences (as reported and repeated in Acts).

So I will turn us back to the Gospels' narratives, rejected by Smith but important for the topic of "reappearance" and "resurrection." The first thing to notice, I believe, is that all four canonical Gospels have the first "witnesses" as women; they visit the tomb to complete the burial preparations left off at sunset on the start of the Sabbath. John's Gospel has Mary Magdalene as the first visitor to the tomb. If the aim of creating and retelling such stories was to enhance the authority of the experience, or persuade others that this was an "objective" and really-real event, surely other first-reporters would have been chosen and cited. Peter and the Beloved Disciple together, for example. Another ambiguous area for interpreting these accounts is the role of angels, who appear to announce and explain -sort of- what has happened to Jesus. Something so divine requires a divine communicator; the women are not left to figure it out for themselves. Third, there is the mystery of Mark's ending (Ch. 16:9ff.). As we know, the earliest manuscripts do not have Jesus' reappearance and his speech. The content of this speech in the version traditional texts include is, quite frankly, weird. Snakes and poison? This does not sound like Jesus, an indication that some other voice has been substituted. Yet without this ending, the story is even stranger. "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid." (Mk 13:8 NIV) Were this the end of the story, there would have been no "resurrection" message or "good news" at all. The women were intimidated witnesses, silenced. They went home and began to sit *shiva* for Jesus, and that was that. This mystery could have been glossed over, were it not for the conviction (shared by almost all New Testament scholars) that Mark's Gospel is the earliest, and most likely to be "historically accurate," i.e closest to what a CNN or BBC team of reporters could have reported.

Somewhat ironically, then, the additional canonical resurrection stories add extra ambiguities. Among these are the lack of instant recognition of reappeared-Jesus. Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener, and she would obviously have been expected to recognize him. He speaks, she suddenly does know that he is Jesus- and then he tells her not to touch him. Is this because he is purely "spiritual" (to use Smith's category), a non-material vision? No, because later in the same chapter, Thomas is ordered to touch Jesus and this becomes a sure sign of recognition. I do not believe we need to introduce second-century Gnostic opponents here; the ambiguity is within the stories themselves. To touch is to hold Jesus back, attached in the wrong way to the beloved companion. But to touch is to validate: this is the same person who

died and whose wounds are still ugly and repulsive to touch. Going through the wall of a locked room might make Jesus as ghost; the wounds in his side, when handled, make him a "reappeared" as alive. I am not arguing for the "historical accuracy" (as CNN might supply) of these accounts, but to show how the authors portrayed their subject as defying all the obvious, simple categories their readers brought to the text.

Another case of this delayed recognition is the story of the two travellers along the road to Emmaus. This is only in Luke's Gospel (24:13-32), and focuses on the question of identification, of "hidden in plain sight." The two are not leading characters in any of the other stories; only one, Cleopas, is named at all. Like the women at the tomb, they would not have been key creators of the entire "resurrection" belief. They walk and talk with a stranger, and do not recognize Jesus even though as followers they ought to have. They invite him to supper at an inn, and as he breaks bread, they do recognize. Rembrandt's famous painting captures their surprise and awe, at the moment just before he vanishes. The bread remains; maybe this is the theological message about the Eucharist as the retained "reappearance" of Jesus in the world. If Luke really wanted to stress the historical objective accuracy of the resurrection as event in the world, this story barely fits at all. Instead, it sends another message: Jesus resurrected has reappeared hidden in plain sight.

What I'm trying to suggest is what the authors of the*Disappeared* volume pursue: bracket dichotomies of "objective" vs. "subjective," and concentrate on the questions and aims of the narrators who try to uproot our expectations and understandings. For centuries, Christians and others have mulled over these stories, tried to fit them into a coherent, unambiguous doctrinal formulation, and sometimes smoothed out the mysterious and messy. But I believe this throws out the baby with the bathwater, and in dismissing them entirely, this is what Smith has done. He may have a lot of distinguished company, such as Rudolf Bultmann, who also used a truncated view of what "modern man" found believable. But it is a loss when it comes to the task of interpretation. In a workshop on story-telling, participants were asked to retell the Emmaus story in our own words. The women I partnered with simply could not do this; she could not tell a story, but floundered around while I very confidently began a lively version in contemporary speech. I now wonder whether either of us grasped the author's aims.

After having examined the New Testament resurrection data, Smith then reviews the literature on "appearances of the dead," of which there is an abundance. He gives several examples in his essay. These stories were first collected in the 19th century by the Society for Psychical Research, and of course collecting continues today. The SPR goal was to apply "scientific methods" to the study of survival after death. I place the quotes there, because repeatedly historians, interpreters and cultural analysts have drawn attention to this aim. SPR recruited experts in the natural sciences, they wanted to separate the topic from religion and philosophy. They really tried hard. They failed to find unambiguous, convincing evidence for survival of physical death, although they also did not unambiguously reject that, either. (Christopher Moreman, in *Beyond the Threshold*, gives their favorable evidence more credibility, but admits it falls short of undeniable proof)). Later, with the same methods and goals, their intellectual descendent established research centers for Parapsychology. There, use of experimental methods substituted in part for collection of anecdotes. These too failed, and one by one the departments and study centers closed. Whatever was or is going on, the method of study did not pay off in absolutely convincing scientific proof or disproof. Indeed, many interpreters insist that the SPR would better have recruited stage magicians for much of their research, rather than physicists.

Let us stick to the stories of “after-death communications” in the form of personal narratives. I can supply two simple examples, to add to those Smith cites: 1) a student was sure his dead girlfriend came to share the sofa as they watched TV together; 2) Doris, a widow saw her husband Harry, dead 16 years, sitting in the kitchen. This was not the first time she’d seen him, but that day he came twice, and this disturbed her. The student objected strongly to the term “hallucination” to label his experience, and as Smith mentions, counselors and researchers working with the bereaved have now dropped this word because it pathologizes. Doris was a good-humored unimaginative person who told of Harry in the kitchen in a matter-of-fact voice. She was not frightened or overcome with awe. In both cases- one without visual cues, the other a visual experience – the experiencers did not use the word “ghost.” That would have been too spooky!

Smith allows that cultural permission to experience the dead in this way varies. Doris the widow quickly corrected herself: “I know Harry is really in heaven.” Many Western persons may be embarrassed to speak of these experiences, but it is unusual that the American dead come to appear as spooky, threatening or taunting. A few accounts by modern Americans do have a frightening, intrusive quality. One woman told of how her dead sister “invaded” her. “Get out! Get out!” she screamed at the presence of the reappeared. Elsewhere, such accounts are more common, including those from Japan where the aborted “water baby” unhappily reappears to trouble the family who excluded them. We could include an example of a threatening reappearance from the New Testament. In John of Patmos’ encounter, the risen Jesus threatens the church at Laodicea (Rev 3:14-19) with rejection and abandonment. I am unsure how the alarmed Laodiceans would have reacted; was this a trustworthy message from the Jesus they worshipped, or a piece of “fake news”? Would they have drawn the same distinction between objective and subjective communications which Smith and the SPR depend upon?

For Smith and many psychologists, the interest is not in survival after death, but in the experiences that are intrinsic to bereavement. “Normal” or “simple” grief responses have been collected and debated, with an overall trend of de-pathologizing even the strange and disturbing experiences. Some examples of grieving are truly “complicated,” but the large majority of the bereaved are not in and of themselves in need of psychiatric treatment. Yet they persistently report experiences like that of the student who watched TV along with his dead girlfriend. More in the recent decades will speak of such events, not as hallucinations but as what William James called “the experience of a presence.” Americans, at least, are willing to bracket where and how the dead really exist and reside. Harry may be in heaven, but he was also in the kitchen for his widow Doris. The SPR approach, seemingly endorsed by Smith in his focus on a measure of “objective reality” drawn from natural science, just does not seem appropriate even by psychologists who see themselves as scientists. Hence, “hallucination” is no longer used as a label, not only because it risked alienating their clients, but because it forecloses on the reality of what is remembered as a significant event in the lives of the bereaved. (I use William James here.)

An alternative approach to these same narratives, one that I find helpful, comes from an excellent study by Bennett on British widows’ after-death communications. In *Traditions of Belief* she examines them as “folklore,” defined as “word of mouth communication” not as defective scientific or historical evidence. She explains why the traditional language of ghosts and haunting is completely off the mark. Her interview subjects seemed as matter-of-fact about their dead

husbands' reappearances as was Doris. At least these experiencers were "objectively" widowed; we are not in doubt that their husbands had died, or that they had grieved. Some, like Doris, had been widowed for a long time when they received their reappeared spouses. It is possible to consider the collection of resurrection stories in the Gospels as originating within such "word of mouth communications" before they had been crafted into the written form we read them now. This reshapes the kinds of questions we could ask of them, or the kinds of knowledge we can reasonably expect.

By now it should be clear why I find the concluding sections of Smith's essay so dubious. He wants to show how modern accounts of bereaved persons' after-death contacts explain the resurrection of Jesus as a belief based on an error.. The bereaved disciples, Peter especially, experienced such a vision of their teacher, as a part of normal grief-reactions. They mistakenly took this for an objective happening, claimed that Jesus was present and active in the world ("alive" although in a mode different from his previous physical existence) and proceeded to convince everyone they could that this was the case. Jesus' closest disciples of Jesus were horrified, grief-stricken and guilt-ridden by his dreadful death. Their experience, misperceived as a genuine encounter, must have occurred in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion. Peter who would have had the most credibility as Jesus' friend, shared his experience, or convinced the others that it had objective reality ("It was really Jesus! Alive as you and me!"). They accepted this, acceded to it, and so "the Resurrection" was born. And so it was broadcast to all the world. All the physical details were elaborations, to counter Gnostics or maybe to make the case stronger. So the empty tomb, unmentioned by Paul and dismissed as history by Smith, became critical to the enhancement of the original tale. Instead of holding a funeral for a dead teacher, they celebrated the victory over death of their Messiah. They were not conspirators, knowingly deceiving after they had stolen the body of Jesus and buried it in secret. They were unwittingly self-deceiving, along with the student, Doris and all those other experiencers whose accounts filled the reports of the SPR.

To put it bluntly, this reconstruction does not fit the texts' narratives. Peter was not the first recipient of an after-death communication. That role fell to a bunch of women, who would hardly have been authoritative enough to convince all the leading figures of Jesus' movement. Neither Peter nor James (who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem) play a role in initiating the claim "Jesus is risen!" However, the latter (all male, of course) would not all have been so thoroughly surprised and guilt-ridden by Jesus' death as Smith assumes. Yes, they did desert him, and Peter particularly was guilt-ridden for denying his friend and teacher. But this was remembered and retold, it was not an unconscious unadmitted emotion that would cause the compensating, reassuring vision Smith presents. Were his friends really surprised by his death? Jesus had not only foreknowledge of his death at the hand of the authorities, he symbolically rehearshed his death for them at the Last Supper. (John F. Kennedy, Indira Ghandi and other leaders have shared this sense of impending violent death, so it is not anything that unique to Jesus.) As we have seen, the complexities and ambiguities of the retained and transmitted stories cannot be reduced to this explanation of "subjective" mistaken for "objective." Even as the stories went from "folklore" into texts into creedal statements, their challenges abide.

There is an even more glaring discrepancy between the bereaved persons' stories of after-death communications and what Smith wants to discover in the New Testament. Since for Smith Paul's own account of himself as a witness to the resurrected Jesus takes priority over anything in the four Gospels, he must omit or ignore the fact that Paul never knew

Jesus pre-resurrection, hated him and his movement with a passion, and therefore could not be counted among the bereaved. Paul labels himself a belated witness, because he had been an enemy. None of the psychology of grief would apply at all. If there were a collection of parallel stories – of the murder victim appearing to his killer, offering foregiveness and inviting friendship – I am sure they are modelled after Paul's experience. But they do not fit within the psychology of bereavement and the study of grief.

I have written a long analysis of what I think are the problems with Smith's approach. These problems are widely shared, and tied to the positivist understanding of history which dominated much scholarship for a long time. It is not that "What really happened?" is not important, for some contexts. The volume on *Disappearance* makes it clear when this is the most urgent question. But I do not find this works for either the New Testament or the stories of widows and other modern bereaved persons. And even within ancient documents, there appears to be much awareness of how some events stretch awareness of what is possible, while raising questions about how to make sense of it.

Books mentioned in this review

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