Research Article

The Current Impasse in Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus: An Attempt to Clear the Undergrowth

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1. Independent researcher

Some time ago, Simon Joseph[1] considered the impasse between evangelical and rationalist scholars concerning the nature of Jesus's resurrection. Clearly, this deadlock had been reached long before Joseph wrote about it, and so it remains. Is there any hope of a resolution? The key stumbling block is undoubtedly the presuppositional stance taken by each side. For the evangelical, no proposed solution must be allowed to override the belief that the resurrection event was an act of God, whereas the various proposed rationalistic alternatives are generally based on the assumption that brain-dead individuals cannot be restored to life, and that Jesus, as one such individual, cannot be regarded as an exception. I shall begin the present paper by expanding a little on the causes of the current impasse before attempting to clarify the question of history and miracle. I shall then try to clear the undergrowth from the accumulation of rationalistic explanations for the resurrection, thereby enabling us to better see the wood for the trees. I shall suggest that a hypothesis based on bereavement visions is the most plausible rationalistic explanation, and that it has the advantage of not requiring a supernatural element.

1. Introduction

Some years ago, Simon Joseph[1] published an article entitled 'Redescribing the Resurrection: Beyond the Methodological Impasse' in which, like Dale Allison[2] before him, he set out to take an even-handed approach to assessing the possibilities of how these events, as represented in the New Testament, might be explained. The 'impasse' of which he speaks suggests that evangelical and rationalist scholars, in their entrenched positions, reached deadlock some time ago and remain implacably opposed to one another. The names will be familiar enough to many: William Lane Craig[3]

[4][5][6], Gary Habermas[7][8][9][10], Michael Licona[11][9], and N.T. Wright[12], among others, for the evangelicals; and John Dominic Crossan[13][14][15], Gerd Lüdemann[16][17][18], Michael Goulder[19][20][21], Robert Price[22][23], and Bart Ehrman[24] for the opposition. This impasse exists not only among New Testament historians but equally as trenchantly among their counterparts in the field of philosophy, as the lively correspondence between Stephen Davis[25][26] and Michael Martin[27][28][29][30] demonstrates. This issue has been conducted through books, articles, and public debates.

The title of Joseph's article would suggest that the various combatants treat each other's positions too dismissively, as if we were being confronted with an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. On the evangelical wing, it is assumed that all proposed rational explanations are as simplistic as they are implausible: the bodily resurrection could have been facilitated only by divine intervention, but since God does not exist, the resurrection, as traditionally conceived, could not have occurred[31]. For the rationalists, it is argued that, since, to the best of our scientific knowledge, our world works wholly along empirical lines, gods must necessarily be the stuff of belief and should be left out of account. Therefore, whatever happened at the empty tomb and beyond is best explained in physical and psychological terms.

In the present paper, I shall begin by expanding a little on the causes of the current impasse and then follow Joseph in briefly trying to clarify the question of history and miracle before turning attention to 'clearing the undergrowth' from the accumulation of rationalist explanations of events.

2. Identifying the Causes of the Impasse

By far the most essential ingredient of the current impasse is the presuppositional stance taken by those involved. Belief is an exceedingly powerful instrument when laid down as the bedrock of scholarship, trumping every other consideration and corrupting methodological integrity. The extent to which presuppositions exert a hold on scholarship is evident in some revealing examples. Craig's[4] *magnum opus* in New Testament studies, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus*, actually pays lip service to historical method, resorting to several fallacious arguments, including the dubious *ad maius a minori* form: that the truth of a single instance can be confirmed by the whole. For instance, taking his cue from Wolfgang Trilling[32], he states:

> *It is impossible to 'prove' historically a particular miracle. But the totality of the miracle reports permit [sic] no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact performed miracles. That holds*

> *analogously for the appearance reports. It is not possible to secure historically the particular event. But the totality of the appearance reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact bore witness to himself in such a way*[32]

Another champion of Craig's, Jacob Kremer[33], identified an impressive list of German scholars who championed the veracity of the traditional resurrection accounts, to which Craig himself added a further list of English-speaking ones. However, I have taken to calling this approach the 'numerical fallacy', for it makes not a jot of difference to the weight of the evangelical argument. No doubt I could draw up a list of just as many sceptics, in which case we are no further forward.

A good many rationalists regard these accounts as legendary, which Craig[4] denies, retorting that stories of this kind would require 'at least one or two generations or even centuries' before they acquired legendary status. However, he refers to no scholarly literature to back up his overtly simplistic claim, except the *ex cathedra* pronouncement of Sherwin-White[34]. By contrast, if we examine the Gospel accounts of Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15: 42–47; Matt. 27: 57–61; Luke 23: 50–54; John 19: 38–42), we can see the rudiments of legendary status beginning to develop. In Mark, Joseph is a prominent and faithful member of the Sanhedrin who received Jesus's body and placed it in a tomb; in Matthew, we are told that he had become a disciple of Jesus and that the tomb in which he laid the body was his own. Luke describes Joseph as a 'good and upright man' and the tomb in which he laid Jesus had never been used. Finally, we come to John's account, which is the most elaborate of all. Here, Joseph, again described as a disciple of Jesus, engages the help of Nicodemus, and the two of them entomb Jesus's body, anointing it with some 'seventy-five pounds' (NIV) of spices—a royal burial indeed. The detail that the tomb was new is repeated, with the addition that it was located in a garden. There are certainly elements of legendary accretion here, even though only thirty years or so (one generation) had elapsed between the earliest and latest versions of the story.

I mention this as just one instance of Craig's somewhat slack use of method. Others could readily be deployed. For instance, the assertion that Paul's use of the so-called credal formula in 1 Cor. 15: 3–5 assumes the empty tomb because it refers to the burial of Jesus, and the view that the formula itself may well date back to within five years of the crucifixion, are simply lacking in hard evidence. On this score, however, it is possible to tar some rationalists with the same brush. In his overtly popularist work, *Jesus is Dead* [23], Robert Price, in response to Craig's point here, simply retorts that the entire section in 1 Cor 15: 3–11 is a post-Markan interpolation and tells us nothing at all about Paul's

position. In fairness to him, he does attempt to argue this in some detail in an earlier piece[22], but his bias is still rather transparent.

Thus, the problem of sacrificing method to presuppositions is evident in evangelical and sceptical communities alike. We shall see later that debates concerning the question of whether the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were bodily in nature or subjective visions are beset on both sides by a lack of any serious attempt to engage with the psychological literature[19][20][16][18][35][36][4][9][24]. For now, however, enough has been said to stake out the ground before us.

3. Redescribing the Resurrection

i. Miracles and History

An obvious but essential issue that morphs into the above discussion is the old Enlightenment question regarding the relationship of miracles to history. It is generally pointed out that in order for a miracle to be so-called as traditionally conceived, it requires the intervention of God, or *a* god. Naturally, this must apply supremely to the resurrection. How, then, can history apply to this event? Secular historians generally dismiss the divine element, asserting that whatever occurred, if anything at all, must have been due to human agency. Enter the usual suspects: regarding the empty tomb: stolen body, wrong tomb; regarding the resurrection appearances: resuscitation, fabrication, Jesus's twin brother, hallucination, collective delusion. As we shall see, some of these are less convincing than others.

Working within the constraints of history is naturally much more of a problem for evangelical scholars than for sceptics, because their faith is paramount and cannot be allowed to be overridden by purely historical considerations. It is vain to think that it can be otherwise. One cannot establish a historical fact on the basis of a belief. 'God raised Jesus from the dead is a dogma, not a fact'[24]. Facts deal with the everyday: Was the tomb empty? Were guards placed on the tomb? Was Jesus crucified, and was he fully brain-dead when removed from the cross? At this remove, historians have little hope of providing answers, but at least such questions come under their scope, whereas the question of miracles lies beyond it.

Joseph[1] is well aware of all this. Singling out Craig and Wright as examples, he writes: 'The [Christian] "historian" believes that s/he already knows the "truth" (through other-than-historical-means) and simply uses historical tools and methods to "prove" that which s/he already knows'. All

this makes perfectly good sense, but this citation is particularly apposite, for in large part exclusively religious historians do *not* play the 'historiographical game', as he puts it; they often launch in without any methodological consideration at all. The Gospel evangelists may well have been honest in their attempts to proclaim the truth as far as they could know it, but that does not prove that they *did* know it. The Synoptic Gospels throw up all kinds of discrepancies, and the committed historian should be tackling these issues without fear or favour.

Occasionally, even evangelical biblical scholars do make some effort to engage with secular historians. Both Craig[6] and Licona[11], the latter especially, based their historical enquiry into the resurrection on Behan McCullagh's[37] presentation of the 'inference to the best explanation' (IBE) method. But just as we might have had hopes of a conversion experience, it turns out that McCullagh himself is also an evangelical Christian[37], a revelation neatly hidden away in his Preface. In any case, why choose IBE over some other method such as the principle of analogy[38] or some form of Bayes' Theorem[39][27][28][25][26][40][41]—or even some alternative presentation of IBE[42]? Either the choice made by Craig and Licona was purely arbitrary, or they were aware of McCullagh's true colours.

ii. Rationalising the Resurrection

In his next section, Joseph surveys the 'usual suspects' among the rationalising options – deception, resuscitation, hallucinations, and collective delusions. We can take these in ascending order of probability, spending very little time on the least likely. The fact that the disciples seem to have been prepared to face hardship and even death shows that they were extremely unlikely to have set out to deceive others, while the view that Jesus may have had a twin who impersonated him and deceived his followers[43][44][45][46] borders on the ridiculous. A little less unlikely—but not very—is the resuscitation hypothesis. It was certainly possible that a crucified individual could be removed from the cross alive (Josephus, *Life* 420–21), and this possibility was mooted by a surgeon and his wife, a biblical scholar[47], but the speculation as to what happened after that can safely be passed over without comment.

None of the above suggestions has a shred of textual evidence in its favour. Indeed, the Evangelists seem to have been rather keen to rule out various theories current in their own day, such as the idea that the women mistook an empty tomb for that of Jesus (Mark 15: 47), or that the disciples stole the body (Matt. 27: 62–66; 28: 11–15), or that Jesus was still alive when removed from the cross (John 19:34). Some form of hallucination-cum-collective delusion hypothesis (HH/ CDH), however, is of a

different order because it takes the text as seriously as the traditional resurrection hypothesis (RH), the only real difference being the nature of the interpretation placed upon it. Naturally, most evangelical scholars dismiss HH virtually without comment, and certainly almost without reference to any of the current socio–psychological literature. In my view, however, if we begin on a level playing field, it is possible that HH/ CDH could turn out to be equally as persuasive as RH.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that not just any old HH will do. There may be a hundred reasons why some people hallucinate. It is a common condition among schizophrenics[48] and people with other brain disorders. Every hallucination has a cause, even if the cause cannot be immediately identified. In the past few decades, however, it has been increasingly recognised that people are more vulnerable to hallucinations during periods of stress, notably during bereavement. In an effort to avoid the pejorative stigma of the term, most psychologists and psychiatrists now adopt the term 'bereavement vision' (BV). Could one or more of the disciples have experienced something of the kind in the wake of Jesus's traumatic crucifixion? The answer is 'possibly,' but it remains for us to flesh out this suggestion.

4. Bodily Resurrection Versus Bereavement Visions

Apologists like Craig, Habermas, Licona, and Wright are by no means tardy in defending their faith stance and affirming the truth that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead. It is not their usual strategy to demonstrate without recourse to belief why the status quo should be maintained against the rationalist alternatives, but rather to expose their perceived flaws. Some of these comments, such as Craig's[4][6], assert that, in the wake of the crucifixion, the disciples would not have been in the correct frame of mind to hallucinate, are simply not the result of sound reasoning. After all, modern psychological studies[49][50][51][52][53] have reached a broad consensus that bereavement trauma is just the kind of state that makes hallucinations *more* likely, not less. Wright's[12] contribution, however, offers the distinctive observation that only RH is capable of explaining the *whole* of the available evidence, empty tomb and post-resurrection appearances alike; all the rationalist alternatives endeavour to explain *either* the empty tomb *or* the post-resurrection appearances. Certainly, Wright's observation satisfies Occam's razor better than any alternative, but that of itself is not sufficient to award the laurels to RH.

HH is a logically viable alternative that is able to account for the individual appearances, while CDH, also logically viable, is able to account for the collective appearances, albeit requiring some liberties to

be taken with Occam's razor. The term 'hallucination', however, is a wide-ranging one and has been the focus of mountains of literature (conveniently summarised in introductions and overviews[48][54][55]). Psychologists often make a point of distinguishing 'normal' from 'psychotic' subjects, stressing that the term can apply to any of the senses, not simply vision. Most of those working professionally in the field of bereavement prefer the term 'bereavement vision' in order to avoid any confusion regarding the subject's mental health. Bereavement visions of one kind or another are comparatively common among the non-psychotic or 'normal' population and can range from full-blown visual experiences to a vague 'sense of presence'[56].

As a caveat at this point, it should be noted that bereavement is not the only cause of sensory visions in mentally stable people. It is not particularly uncommon, even today, for individuals to 'see' a person they identify as Jesus[57][58][59][60], even when their physical and mental well-being is sound. Take an instance from the last-cited of these texts:

> *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 around his 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 features, but could not, and as it got level with us, it gradually faded away from the bottom of the gown up to the head, and it had vanished!*

Like the above example, some such experiences are reported in remarkable detail, as if the Jesus figure were physically before the viewer. Given this, it is hardly surprising if the disciples, who had known Jesus like a brother, experienced something of a similar kind in the wake of his loss. In the light of contemporary bereavement studies, we should not be too dismissive of the possibility that one or two individuals among the group experienced some kind of bereavement vision and conveyed this fact to others. The prime candidate for this would be Peter since, although the entire group deserted Jesus in his hour of need (Mark 14: 52; Matt. 26: 56), it was Peter alone who disowned him when challenged (Mark 14: 66–72, pars.), which would surely have played on his conscience.

Let us pause to consider our options. On the one hand, we have RH, the view that God raised Jesus from the dead. Now, gods are not the kind of beings that are susceptible to historical enquiry, so, for the sake of argument, let us lower our sights a little by considering what the canonical gospels themselves affirm – that Jesus really died (John 19:34), that he was buried in a tomb (Mark 15: 41–47, pars.), that

the tomb was discovered to be empty on Easter Sunday morning (Mark 16: 1–8), and that Jesus was subsequently found to be alive. There is some contention as to whether he first appeared to one or more of the women (Matt. 28: 8–10; John 20: 11–18) or to Peter (Luke 24: 34; 1 Cor. 15:5), but both assume that this was after daybreak on Sunday morning, or even while it was still dark, according to John. If we follow the recorded evidence, we cannot know precisely when Jesus was allegedly resurrected. Indeed, there is no actual account of the resurrection at all. For that, we must turn to the second-century apocryphal Gospel of Peter. However, we do know that Jesus's body was in the hands of others from 3.00 p.m. on Good Friday until shortly before the onset of the Sabbath – let us say two hours – which would have been more than sufficient for brain death to have occurred. On very rare occasions, resuscitation has been successfully carried out after almost thirty minutes of the heart ceasing to beat, but usually, the brain is unviable after about ten minutes. Physically speaking, then, the odds of Jesus's brain being viable after two hours would be virtually zero. Divine intervention would be the only hope. But then, by what means would a wholly spiritual being be able to intervene in the operation of a wholly physical universe? Traditionalists have no option here but to resort to the old adage: 'God works in mysterious ways.' There is also the question as to what the early Christians had in mind when they described these events as 'resurrection' (*anastasis*). Anthropologists like Pilch[61] and Craffert[62][63][64][65][66][67][68] have argued that distinctions must be made between the monophasic understanding of reality favoured by the modern developed world and the polyphasic approach of pre-scientific society. What would resurrection have meant to the first-century Palestinian society in which Jesus lived? Craffert[67] wrote:

> *[Y] es, 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. Since these people lived by a different logic and consensus reality it was neither mere delusion nor objectively real, but culturally real. [So] 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.*

Traditionalists often claim that the first Christians adopted the term *anastasis* ('a rising up') from its regular secular usage and transformed it into a *terminus technicus* for physical resurrection, but they overlook the fact that they are basing their judgement on our monophasic understanding of the term. In other words, they remain locked in their contemporary world instead of trying to enter another dimension.

By contrast, what does BVH have to offer? Recent scholarly bereavement studies, as well as popular literature (Guggenheim and Guggenheim 1995), have presented hundreds of real-life cases in which people have claimed encounters with their deceased loved ones. In the popular literature, these are normally left to speak for themselves. We do not learn whether or not the subjects really believe the deceased person is palpably present and, to be frank, some of the stories included in this kind of literature sound rather twee. The scholarly literature attempts to dig beneath the surface, but even this is stymied by the fact that the researchers are obliged to work with largely anecdotal evidence provided by percipients who are not generally qualified in sociology, psychology, or any associated discipline. They are simply allowed to tell their story viva voce (occasionally via questionnaire) in their own words, which is often reported with the 'ums' and the 'ers' thrown in for good measure. From the very outset[49], this has been the approach that has been taken by serious researchers. It is for the professional to process the data and draw conclusions from it. Although it is important to avoid the 'numerical fallacy' (the greater the number of accounts in broad agreement, the greater the probability that they represent reality), there does now seem to be a consensus that the bereaved can experience (primarily visual or auditory) sensations of the presence of a dead loved one, bringing solace. Why, then, should not the disciples have experienced similar sensations in the wake of Jesus's crucifixion? It seems to me equally as likely as the traditional view.

One more recent line of enquiry which may help to strengthen the credibility of BVH is the focus of bereavement specialists on 'continuing bonds'[69][70][71][72][73][74][75][76]. These are studies that investigate the psychological reaction of the bereaved to the loss of their loved ones. Reactions can include the gamut of sensations, ranging from a vague sense of presence through to vivid auditory or visual encounters. Other studies[77][50] have focused on the length of time taken to work through the effects of a bereavement, with a time lapse of twelve months sometimes set as an approximate benchmark beyond which psychologists may consider the struggle for detachment in terms of 'complicated grief', perhaps requiring some form of psychiatric intervention. Further, there is some suggestion that the manner of a loved one's death may, in some cases, determine the nature of the bereavement experience, with violent or sudden death (murder, accident, suicide, cardiac arrest, for instance) more likely to generate a vivid visual occurrence in the subject[78][51][79].

Although the disciples and Jesus were not kin in the natural sense, there is no doubt that they did enjoy a close fraternal relationship. He was their *attachment* figure without whom they felt disorientated. Moreover, many of them had left their biological families to make this attachment

(Mark 10: 28), a move that Jesus himself not only commended (Mark 10: 29–30; Matt. 8: 21–22; Luke 9: 59–62) but reciprocated (Mark 3: 31–35; Matt. 12: 46–50). There is little doubt, then, that the disciples would have mourned Jesus as a family member. The fact that he died such a violent and probably unexpected death could well have contributed to the disciples' sense-driven reaction to it. In his study, Rees[49] found that people were most likely to report bereavement visions in the first few years after the death of a loved one (0–10 years – 52% of his sample), but that these instances dwindled exponentially thereafter (31–40 years – 32%). Based on these findings, it would hardly be surprising to find Jesus's disciples encountering him by means of sense-based visions after his death. Possibly they eventually resolved their grief by readjusting their views from who Jesus *was* to who Jesus *is* through something like the process described by Festinger (1957) in his classic cognitive dissonance theory. However, there is no space here to pursue that line of enquiry, which, in any case, has been treated by others[80][81][82][83].

5. Bodily Resurrection and Collective Delusions

There is one further step to take. BVH has been presented as a possible alternative to RH in respect of the appearances to individual disciples, but, as evangelical scholars are eager to point out, most of the appearances are collective. What if all the disciples claimed to have seen Jesus simultaneously? Surely that would deliver the knock-out blow to BVH! This approach, however, is founded on a partial understanding of what we shall label the collective delusion hypothesis (CDH), a proposal presented in one of its most popular forms by Michael Goulder[19][20][21]. In relation to HH, it is not as far-removed as might be surmised.

Despite the occasional submission to the contrary[36][84], there is no such thing as a collective *hallucination*. The term is surprising in the work of Zusne and Jones in particular, given that they are qualified psychologists. Terminological clarity is essential if we are to avoid misunderstanding. O'Connell, for instance, allows that collective hallucinations are not merely a figment (although he is sure they do not explain Jesus's collective appearances); a collective hallucination, he suggests, consists of two or more persons hallucinating the same object individually but simultaneously[36]. Surely, the use of the term collective *delusion* is far more appropriate here. O'Connell is on the mark, however, in his differentiation between a delusion and an *il*lusion. In the first case, we 'see' what is not there or believe what is not so; in the second case, we see what *is* there but misinterpret it for something else – say, a small limestone boulder for a moorland sheep. That is an *illusion*. A man who

dresses as Napoleon, behaves like Napoleon, issues edicts, and speaks early nineteenth-century French because he claims to *be* Napoleon is clearly deluded. Goulder's[19][20] choice of the Bigfoot (or Sasquatch) panic in South Dakota in 1977[85] to illustrate the concept of collective delusion may muddy the waters to some extent. On that occasion, following a locally-shown film about the 'creature', individuals, rather than large groups, began reporting sightings, and the incident took on the nature of an epidemic, quickly reaching a tipping point and then dying away once the initial excitement began to evaporate. In the case of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, we seem to be dealing with events of a rather different order.

It may be worth mentioning that even the most compelling delusions can be reversed once the spell is broken, as in the following example taken from an incident concerning an Italian by the name of Mazzini reported to the philosopher C.D. Broad[86].

> *In or near some Italian town, Mazzini saw a group of people standing gazing upwards into the sky. He went up to one of them and asked him what he was gazing at. 'The cross – do you not see it?' said the man ... Mazzini could see nothing in the least cruciform in the sky; but, on inquiring of others, he found that they also thought they were seeing a cross. At length, Mazzini happened to notice one gazer who looked rather more intelligent than the rest and also seemed to have a faint air of doubt and perplexity. Mazzini went up to him and asked him what he was looking at. 'The cross,' he said, 'there.' Mazzini took hold of his arm, gave him a slight shake, and said to him: 'There is not any cross at all.' A change came over the gazer's face as if he were waking from a kind of dream, and he answered: 'No, as you say, there is no cross at all.' He then walked away with Mazzini, leaving the rest of the crowd to enjoy their collective hallucination [sic].*

Mazzini's words to the man served as a counter-suggestion to the one he had already been given, thereby breaking the spell he had been under.

Anyhow, if there are no collective hallucinations, there are collective delusions aplenty. It is possible for a single individual to be deluded, or for thousands. Delusions come in all shapes and sizes[87][88][89][90]. Undoubtedly, the most spectacular instance of a probable delusion took place at Zeitoun in Egypt between 1968–71 when hundreds of thousands, Christian and Muslim alike, claimed to have physically seen the Virgin Mary on the roof of St. Mary's Church[91][92][93]. The huge numbers involved certainly put Christ's appearance to the 500+ (1 Cor. 15: 6) in the shade. But what kind of

'presence' did they see? Several features are suggestive of its delusional nature. First, the figure seems to have been witnessed at the outset not by several people simultaneously, but by two bus mechanics, one of whom may have alerted his companion to what he thought he was seeing. People soon began to gather, and the sightings are likely to have quickly grown through the power of suggestion. This is a common—possibly essential—factor of collective delusion. It takes but a single individual to arouse the interest of others—such as Peter alerting his companions to his alleged sighting of Jesus.

Second, where large crowds gather for a common purpose such as this, some in expectation, some out of curiosity, not everyone sees the same thing, and some see nothing out of the ordinary[94]. In the present case, of those who claim to have witnessed some kind of phenomenon, not all claimed a vision of Mary; others testified to some kind of light effect, which Persinger and Derr[95] even ascribed to the effects of geomagnetic activity in the vicinity! Attempts were made by some to capture the image on camera, but the photographs available on YouTube are rather grainy and devoid of any detail, while some are demonstrably fraudulent. None are especially convincing.

Third, there are some socio-political factors to be considered in the present case[96][97]. Zeitoun already had long associations with the Virgin Mary, since the area was believed by the faithful to have been the resting place of the Holy Family during the flight to Egypt from the persecution of Herod the Great (Matt. 2: 13–15). Moreover, St. Mary's Church had been built twenty-five years previously after the landowner was commanded by Mary in a dream to turn this plot over for the purpose. Mary then made a promise to return, which was fulfilled only a year after Egypt's humiliating defeat by Israel during the Six-Day War of 1967, and the so-called Marian appearances were seen by some observers as a reaction to these events. Even President Nasser is said to have paid a visit to the Church during the period of the appearances. Thus, there was a great deal going on behind the scenes that could have affected the timing and manner of these visitations. In the wake of Egypt's humiliation, many of the population may have been on the *qui vive* for something to happen to demonstrate that God had not forsaken Egypt – and who better to extend these assurances than the Mother of God?

Finally, it is not without interest that in the years following these events, several 'copycat' apparitions were recorded at other sites in Egypt. These included Edfu (1982), Shoubra, Cairo (1986–91), Menoufiya (1997), Assiut (2000–01), and Warraq-el-Hadar (2010). In every case listed here, the key features match those at Zeitoun: the apparitions took place during the hours of darkness on the roof of a church generally named after Mary (Shoubra and Assiut being exceptions). All attracted crowds stretching into thousands at a time, and in no case did the Virgin Mary speak. Surely, there is

something dubious about so many alleged apparitional appearances taking on a near-identical form. It is to be noted, too, that the common features of these Coptic visions differ markedly from those typically approved by the Roman Catholic Church. Three of these occurrences (Zeitoun, Shoubra, and Assiut) were 'approved' by the Coptic Pope but not by the Pope in Rome.

My intention here is not to suggest that the post-resurrection appearances to the disciples bear some conceptual similarity to these more recent cases, but to point out that if the Egyptian apparitions of Mary can be considered delusional, as some features suggest, it is equally possible that the Gospel accounts of sightings of Jesus may also be speaking of delusional events initiated by the disciples' state of mind following the catastrophic events of Good Friday. After all, the human imagination seems to know no bounds in the business of creating weird and wacky UFO cults led by charismatic leaders[98][99], some of whom are even able to induce their followers to commit mass suicide[100]. Compared to these excesses, the claims of the first Christians are really quite modest.

I would reiterate that the collective visions leading to the formation of a cult do not start by means of spontaneous combustion along the lines of a Big Bang. It requires an individual to light the blue touch-paper, and the power of suggestion accomplishes the rest. In the case of the Jesus movement, this may have been triggered by Peter's announcement that he had 'seen the Lord'; and since, at Jesus's death, he had been left as the pre-eminent disciple of the group, the others eagerly took up the suggestion and began to 'see' the risen Jesus for themselves. This may sound speculative – indeed it is – but it is no more so than the view that a brain-dead individual was miraculously restored bodily back to life, appearing to his own before being spirited away to the heavenly regions.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that the widely-recognised *impasse* between evangelical and rationalist scholars, of which Simon Joseph speaks, lies fundamentally in the tendency of the participants in the resurrection debate to argue according to their presuppositional stance rather than paying strict attention to the available data, meagre though it is. The fact that none of the original biblical material was provided by authors who were not fully committed to the evangelical cause makes the investigator's task somewhat lopsided, since there exists nothing of any substance on behalf of the sceptic prior to Celsus (which we must read chiefly through Origen [c. 185–253 CE]), although, of course, it is obvious that scepticism existed widely from the outset.

If all scholars could bear to put their personal presuppositions to one side, what would remain? A large majority agrees that *something* occurred, either veridically or in the minds of the disciples. Clearly, the former demands some kind of divine presence, since no brain-dead individual can raise him/ herself, physically or otherwise. All that can be made known to us, however, is grounded in the physical sciences, and it seems to me that the available data for the 'resurrection' event can be explained along these lines equally as well as along the traditional ones.

Using data from modern bereavement studies and insights from collective delusion analysis, this is what I have endeavoured to show. It is probably the most persuasive of the rational alternatives to the traditional account and can plausibly explain the data without recourse to divine intervention. On the negative side, it is averse to the Occam's razor principle because it requires the fusion of two separate hypotheses (BVH and CDH). However, we have abundant evidence in our own day for both bereavement visions and collective delusions, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that, on occasion, the one may give rise to the other[2].

The traditional alternative necessarily requires the assumption of God's existence and so must necessarily be grounded in belief. But in the words of the fearless nineteenth-century rationalist W.K. Clifford[101]: 'It is wrong, in all cases, to believe [anything] on insufficient evidence, and where it is presumption to doubt and investigate, there it is worse than presumption to believe.' It is sobering to think that the rationalist, who *does* doubt and investigate, is being presumptuous when s/he does so, but Clifford goes further by suggesting that each of us has an ethical duty to isolate what can be known epistemologically, to lay aside belief, and to focus entirely on expanding our tiny store of knowledge. … If only matters could be so simple!

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