

Peer Review

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

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

Stephen Smith

The author purports at the outset to “clear the undergrowth” of rationalists’ explanations for the “resurrection” of Jesus of Nazareth by bringing to the forefront the explanation of bereavement visions to explain the sightings and interactions of Jesus in the time following his death by crucifixion. He presents his argument for a collective delusional hypothesis clearly and logically. Indeed, there is an established phenomenon of collective delusion, whereby the group can be persuaded to believe events or appearances declared by only one or two of the assembly. Smith uses the recorded sighting of the Virgin Mary at Zeitoun, Egypt, in 1968. But there are others. At Fátima, Portugal, on October 13, 1917, a crowd of many thousands, perhaps even 100,000, gathered to witness a “miracle of the sun” described by some as a spinning and careening of the sun towards Earth. Not all saw it, including many believers, and scientists present did not witness any such miraculous occurrence.

So, what are the collective sightings of a resurrected Jesus that lend credence to collective delusion? Biblically speaking, the two significant appearances of Jesus after his death occurred on the day of his purported resurrection on the road to Emmaus, when two of his followers were joined by, at first, a stranger who walked with them and eventually ate with them. His mannerisms resembled their Jesus, and “their eyes were opened” (Luke 24: 13–35). Likewise, the same gospel writer Luke described Jesus suddenly appearing to the eleven apostles soon after the Emmaus event, of which they were just appraised. The gospel writer, John, writing independently of the synoptic gospels, tells the same tale of Jesus’ sudden appearance to his disciples (minus Thomas) behind locked doors. One point of

dispute might be that he showed them his hands and side. How this physical evidence could be explained by collective delusion is a bit up in the air (John 20:19). Aside from crucifixion wounds, was this also a collective delusion? Possibly. The next week, Jesus purportedly appeared again, this time with Thomas present. Once again, he showed them his wounds. Collective delusion? Reported physical evidence points to the contrary (John 20: 26).

What Smith might also add to his essay is any physical evidence of a resurrection. Was there any? Probably none that all would agree is valid. However, there is one piece of hard evidence that many are convinced is genuine – the Shroud of Turin. While disputed by carbon dating, there is enough room for technical error and a plethora of other verifications that this indeed could be the first-century burial cloth of someone strikingly similar to a crucified Jesus. And, more perplexing, if it really was, how was the image transposed? This defies explanation.

Nevertheless, Smith makes a contribution to the seemingly unresolvable question of resurrection. There is certainly room to disparage such a miraculous happening and certainly room to believe it as factual. Indeed, without the *a priori* assumption that there is a God, the “scientific” evidence – including witness testimony – is disputable and not yet convincing. I would submit that the only piece of hard evidence present is the Shroud. Let the arguments on that one continue to fly.

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Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.