Research Article

Muddle and Method: The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Focus

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In the present paper, I engage with the debate between the late Michael Goulder and Michael Licona regarding the best explanation for the New Testament accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. I first outline Goulder's view that these can best be explained by means of a single hallucinatory experience of Peter, followed by a series of collective delusions on the part of the other disciples, generated by Peter's account of his initial experience. Next, I consider Licona's critical response to this proposal, for which he adopts Behan McCullagh's presentation of the 'inference to the best explanation' as a valid historiographical method. While acknowledging that Goulder's hypothesis suffers from a failure to sufficiently take account of the relevant psychological literature, I also note that Licona's choice of McCullagh's 'inference' method may have an underlying ulterior motive. I conclude that, although the resurrection hypothesis has sufficient explanatory power when measured against McCullagh's historical method, it is no greater than that which can be ascribed to Goulder's hallucination/ collective delusion hypothesis which, in addition, does not require a supernatural explanation.

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This paper is aimed at considering the debate between Michael Goulder and Michael Licona on the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Goulder represents those scholars who believe that they are best explained on the basis of a hallucination-cum-collective delusion hypothesis, whereas Licona – naturally enough, given his evangelical standpoint – believes that the traditional idea of bodily resurrection is far more persuasive. I shall begin with an outline of Goulder's position, and then comment briefly on Licona's historical method before dealing with his critique of Goulder. After critiquing the critique, I shall

identify some possible remaining deficiencies in Goulder's approach, and finally offer one or two tentative comments by way of conclusion.

Michael Goulder's Resurrection of Jesus

Michael Goulder's decision in 1981 to resign his post as priest in the Church of England on the grounds that he could no longer subscribe with a good conscience to what he was required to believe (see his biographical sketch in 1983: 1–30), is well-known enough not to require further comment, except to say that it fully explains his naturalistic position on the resurrection. This appears to have been set out initially in his provocative book *A Tale of Two Missions* (1994a), and repeated without much development in subsequent publications (Goulder 1994b; 1996; 2000). The basic thesis of his book is that the view that the early church put on a united front for some years before the inevitable schisms began to appear is a myth and that it split into two distinct missions within a very short time – in fact, as soon as Paul arrived on the scene. Goulder attempts to show that these divisions of thought, doctrine and practice extended to virtually every area of church life, including law, christology, spiritual gifts, ministry, sex, possessions, eschatology, and particularly the doctrine of the resurrection. Regarding this last point, Goulder argues that Peter and the others in the church in Jerusalem worked with a *visual* basis for the resurrection appearances: first Peter, and then the Twelve generally, believed that they had 'seen' Jesus alive on Easter Sunday without necessarily specifying the precise nature of the experience. These initial sightings are recorded by Paul in a rather peremptory manner in 1 Corinthians 15: 5–7 – the earliest record we have of any resurrection appearances. But within a few verses of this, Paul testifies to a dispute between the Jewish Christians who held the 'official view', and the Pauline church which maintained a specifically physicalist view, one that was fleshed out, as it were, by the four Evangelists whose narratives increasingly described Jesus' post-resurrection body in fleshly, tangible terms (Matt. 28: 8–10; Luke 24: 13–49; John 20: 10 – 21: 24). Thus, when Paul asks his Corinthian interlocutors, '… how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?' (1 Cor. 15: 12), Goulder contends that these opponents were Jewish Christians who believed the 'official' line – namely that Jesus had been 'seen', but not in a gross physical body. For Paul, as for all those of a Pharisaic background, the physicality of the resurrection was not in doubt. We have to remember that of Goulder's proposed two competing 'missions' within the church, it was the Pauline one which won the day and became so influential that, with few exceptions, the entire canon of the New Testament was influenced by it.

One point on which the two factions were able to agree, however, was that the appearances of Jesus were *veridical*, regardless of whether they were visionary or grossly physical. Goulder's next proposal is that all the appearances can be explained on a psychological basis, including Paul's conversion experience. This he interprets along broadly Jungian lines, at one point quoting Jung himself (Goulder 2000: 94; cf. Jung 1928: 257) to show that Paul's conversion-vision was very likely due to the fact that he had already unconsciously become a Christian, and that his conversion experience marked the point at which this acceptance broke the surface of consciousness. Paul's blindness was psychogenic and disappeared the moment he consciously accepted the new faith, which was marked by his receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 9: 17–18). By way of comparison, Goulder (1996: 48–51) discusses two more recent crisis conversions – that of Susan Atkins, an accomplice of the notorious mass-murderer Charles Manson, to the Christian faith; and the conversion of Arthur Koestler to Marxism. His aim, no doubt, is to show that 'Damascus road' experiences, which frequently involve visions of light and the hearing of voices, although comparatively rare, are by no means unique to Paul, and can readily be explained along psychological lines.

The appearances to Peter and the other disciples can also be explained psychologically. Despite the claim of Matthew and John that certain women were the first to see Jesus after his resurrection (Matt. 28: 8–10; John 20: 10–18), a more subtle and possibly earlier alternative is that it was to Peter that Jesus appeared first (Luke 24: 34; 1 Cor. 15: 5). Peter's experience, like that of Paul, may well have been a conversion-vision. Although the circumstances were different, they still had a psychological basis, as conversion-visions always do, for their purpose is to turn a person's life around from a state of hollow, meaningless phoneyism to one of direction, purpose and fulfilment. Thus, in words similar to those he uses to describe Koestler's conversion to Marxism, Goulder writes of Peter: 'he might well [have seen] himself as a sham and a phoney, paying lip-service to the kingdom of God which was to lift the earth from its axis, and climbing the worm-eaten ladder of self-preservation' (1996: 51). Peter's experience, therefore, like that of Paul, can be explained in terms of a sensory hallucination. Of course, the circumstances were different. Paul consciously saw Jesus as the enemy, whereas Peter regarded him as an attachment figure to whom he had been entirely devoted and whose sudden and violent death had left him in a state of disorientation and bereavement, all the more so because he had not only abandoned him in his hour of need, along with the other disciples (Mark 14: 50), but had denied ever knowing him (Mark 14: 66–72) – and he alone had done that. His feelings of guilt, therefore, must have been greater than the rest. He would have been ripe for experiencing a bereavement hallucination. In this connection, Goulder alludes

to the seminal article of W. Dewi Rees (1971: 37–41) who was one of the first to demonstrate the frequency of bereavement hallucinations among widows and widowers.

But what of the subsequent appearances, frequently witnessed by groups of believers, even including one of over five hundred on one occasion (1 Cor. 15: 6)? Goulder is well-aware of the evangelical argument that hallucinations, being subjective in nature, cannot be experienced collectively, and that since Jesus' appearances were so witnessed, they cannot have been hallucinations (so Habermas & Licona 2004: 106–07; O'Collins 2011: 229–30; Strobel 1998: 78–79). His counter-thrust is that the collective appearances were delusions initiated by Peter's suggestion that he had 'seen the Lord'. The collective delusion is not a particularly uncommon phenomenon, probably accounting for many of the Marian apparitions down the centuries, and Goulder relates the story of the Bigfoot (or Sasquatch) epidemic in South Dakota in 1977 as an interesting example (see further Stewart 1989: 287–304). One point about these phenomena which is not sufficiently emphasised is that collective delusions cannot be spontaneous. They must always occur at the suggestion of an individual before spreading throughout the neighbourhood and subsequently the wider community. 'Epidemic' is an apt description of what takes place. If such things occur today in our sophisticated, scientific, monophasic world, it is little wonder that they occurred in an ancient, semi-literate, polyphasic society like the one in which Jesus lived.

Goulder's forthright conclusion is that there were no veridical resurrection appearances of any kind. The bereavement or conversion-visions of Peter and Paul were entirely subjective, while the collective appearances were also delusional. This applies equally to the original Jewish church in Jerusalem whose views were based on 'sightings' of Jesus, and the Pauline church which placed more emphasis on the physicality of the appearances.

Michael Licona's Historical Method

In his compendious *The Resurrection of Jesus* (2010), Michael Licona claims to have developed a 'new historiographical approach' which he applies to the Easter events, claiming to show that they lie on a solid historical bedrock. Given that his book extends to over seven hundred pages, it is obviously impossible to take account of his entire project, nor is it necessary in the present instance, since we only need see how it functions when he applies it specifically to Goulder's hypothesis. We should also note that this approach is not 'new' in every particular, since the criteria he uses to evaluate the competing resurrection theories are drawn from the work of historian C. Behan McCullagh (1984), which had already

been applied to Gerd Lüdemann's hallucination hypothesis (1994: 174–75; 1995: 129–34; 2004: 163–66) by William Lane Craig ('Visions', online).

We may wonder, first, why it is that for Craig and Licona, McCullagh is the flavour of the month when there are so many other historians they might have consulted for guidance. Why McCullagh's thesis rather than any other? After all, Lipton's *Inference to the Best Explanation* (1991, rev. 2004), published seven years after McCullagh's work and devoted entirely to the 'inference' problem, never once references his predecessor. Part of the answer, I suspect, lies tucked away in his preface which he concludes with the following extraordinary statement: 'Finally, I would like to acknowledge what I believe to have been God's guidance and support in the production of this book. It is just a pity that the clay He had to mould was so recalcitrant. Please praise Him for what is true in it, and forgive me for what is not' (McCullagh 1984: x). For McCullagh to begin with such a heartfelt testimony to his Christian faith in a work dealing with truth statements in history, and which is all but devoid of references to the Bible (he makes just a single reference to the resurrection), is nothing short of remarkable. No wonder Craig and Licona find him such a congenial bedfellow.

McCullagh points out that there can be 'conflicting descriptions' of a historical event and that these can be explained or interpreted in various ways. The problem for the historian is to determine which is the best explanation – that is, which is the most successful in covering all the alleged facts or evidence. In an effort to address this problem McCullagh (1984: 19) has developed a set of criteria in order to help determine which, out of a range of explanatory hypotheses relating to a specific historical event or series of events is most nearly likely to be correct. These are set out as follows:

i. *Explanatory scope.* The most plausible hypothesis must be able to explain more, and a greater variety of facts about an event than any rival, incompatible hypothesis.
ii. *Explanatory power.* The most plausible hypothesis must be able to show its explanation of an event or events to be more probable than that of any rival, incompatible hypothesis. How many of the facts can be accounted for with the least ambiguity, and without resorting to the Procrustean bed approach?
iii. *Plausibility.* The most plausible hypothesis concerning a historical event is one that can explain a greater variety of accepted truths, and be implied more strongly, than any other, incompatible hypothesis, 'and its probable negation must be implied by fewer beliefs, and implied less strongly than any other' (McCullagh 1984: 19).

iv. *Less ad hoc.* In some cases, no hypothesis regarding a historical event may offer a *complete* explanation, in which case the best hypothesis will be the one which relies on the fewest suppositions and to the greatest extent on the available evidence.

v. *Disconfirmation by fewer accepted beliefs.* The best hypothesis is the one which violates the fewest generally accepted beliefs relating to the event in question.

Before proceeding further, we need to remember that McCullagh's set of criteria is not the final word in historiography; it is but one means among others of helping the historian establish a likely hypothesis for determining the best explanation of a historical event or sequence of events. Indeed, McCullagh himself is aware of its limitations (1984: 26), affirming that arriving at the best hypothesis in this manner does not prove it to be true, merely that it stakes the best claim to be considered sound.

Licona's Critique of Goulder Critically Considered

Licona's treatment of Goulder has to be seen in the context of his procedure as a whole. He selects five scholars who argue for a naturalistic explanation of the resurrection of Jesus (Vermes, Goulder, Lüdemann, Crossan, and Craffert) and applies McCullagh's criteria to each in turn, judging the extent to which each one 'passes' (P) or 'fails' (F) these criteria, and then compares these with the performance of the traditional resurrection hypothesis (RH). The results tend to fluctuate with the successive introduction of each competitor, but it hardly need be said that, in the final analysis, RH wins hands down. For what it is worth, here is Licona's final table (2010: 606). It should be noted that the term 'illumination' in the final column is a substitute term for McCullagh's 'disconfirmation by fewer accepted beliefs':

	Scope	**Power**	**Plausibility**	**Less ad hoc**	**Illumination**
Vermes	F	F	F	P	-------
Goulder	P	F	F	F	P
Lüdemann	P	F	F	F	P
Crossan	P	F	F	F	P
Craffert	F	F	F	F	P
Resurrection	P	P	P	P	P

This enterprise feels rather suspect, and despite one of Licona's reviewers (most of whom are evangelical scholars) describing him as 'fair minded', we have already noted a subtle undercurrent of evangelical bias. Anyway, let us see what he makes of Goulder and how 'fair minded' he is towards his hallucination hypothesis (GH).

'We may applaud Goulder for his innovation', begins Licona somewhat patronisingly. 'His efforts go beyond others in his attempts to explain the appearances to the disciples and Paul in psychological terms' (2010: 483). But one suspects that this is merely the prelude to a barrage of criticism, and so it transpires. The significance of these criticisms is variable, some referring to issues which are really no more than 'asides' in Goulder's presentation, so I shall focus on the more essential ones. At the outset, Licona repeats the common evangelical criticism that one cannot psychoanalyse a person who lived two thousand years ago, which is perfectly true, as Goulder himself admits (1996: 52). However, we do not require a meticulous psychoanalysis to know that when people are in a state of mental crisis, such as bereavement, they are more likely to experience a hallucination, or a strong feeling of the presence of the deceased, than at any other time (Rees 1971). A good deal of work has been done in this direction by psychologists in recent years (for a useful overview, see Steffen & Coyle 2012: 33–56), and one study has even suggested that sensory bereavement hallucinations (as opposed to a mere sense of presence) are more common among those whose loved ones have suffered a sudden, violent death, and for which the bereaved person may somehow feel a sense of responsibility (Field & Filanosky 2010: 1–29). Others (Haraldsson 2009; Stevenson 1982) have reached a similar conclusion. It hardly need be stressed that Peter, and perhaps other individuals among the Twelve, suffered a bereavement of this kind – assuming that the Gospel accounts are broadly accurate renditions of recent events.

The process of natural evolution has not come so far in the past two thousand years that we can confidently declare our brain-structures to be significantly different from those of first-century Palestinians. If hallucinations can be experienced by people in a 'normal' (non-pathological) state of mind today, it could have happened then, although, of course, such experiences would not have been called by that name. Indeed, recent cultural-anthropological studies which have focused on the post-resurrection appearances (Craffert 2008: 383–419; 2005: 227–52; Pilch 1998: 52–60; Wiebe, 'Altered States', online) have tended to suggest that what we label 'hallucinations' may well have been understood in terms of what scholars have labelled 'alternate states of consciousness' (ASCs) – cultural realities which would have been given as much credence as experiences associated with normal consciousness. If so, it is

possible that those who experienced 'hallucinations' in the polyphasic communities of first-century Palestine would have been less likely to dismiss them as pseudo-realities than we do today. If Peter did see Jesus in this way, he would hardly have said, 'I've had a hallucination', or 'I've experienced an ASC', but rather: 'I have seen the Lord!'

When he comes to tackle Goulder's contention that the group appearances can be explained as communal delusions, Licona proceeds in two stages, the first of which is entirely irrelevant. He considers how remote would be the chance of all the disciples hallucinating Jesus' presence simultaneously, and not unnaturally concludes that it would be very remote indeed. But Goulder never entertains this possibility in any case. More pertinent are Licona's comments concerning Goulder's Bigfoot analogy which, he thinks, does not compare well with the post-resurrection appearances. The bone of contention here, however, is primarily a terminological one, and depends on the precise nature of the Bigfoot 'sightings'. Without knowing all the facts in detail, it is difficult to form a judgement, but if they included people mistaking some natural object for Bigfoot – say, a depression in the ground for one of his footprints – then it is true, as Licona says, that these would not be delusions (imagining something to be there when it is not), but *il*lusions (mistaking something that *is* there for something else). I do not think, however, that Goulder is attempting to draw a close analogy between this case and that of Jesus' appearances. It really does not matter much whether we are dealing with *de*lusions or *il*lusions; the point is that people were eager to take up the suggestion of others that they had witnessed something extraordinary without stopping to consider whether there might be a more commonplace explanation, and were all agog to see the extraordinary phenomena for themselves. What Goulder stresses most, namely the epidemic nature of such cases (for an entertaining overview of some of these, see Bartholomew 2001; Bartholomew & Goode 2000; Bartholomew & Wessely 2002; Showalter 1997: and Ilechukwu 1991), Licona never mentions. In both cases, too, somebody – an individual – must have set the ball rolling – Goulder calls this the primary vision – which then rubbed off on others who believed that they, too, were seeing the same or similar phenomena – the secondary vision. In this sense, if not the terminological one, the two cases would be comparable, as long as the analogy is not forced.

Licona spends more time considering various Marian apparition cases which Goulder barely mentions in passing. Again, if Goulder had been trying to draw any strict parallels between these and the apparitions of Jesus, he would surely have made more than a passing comment. As things stand, the common features of the Marian apparitions do not readily commend themselves to rational scrutiny. Many of the so-called 'seers' in such cases are children who have been steeped in the Catholic tradition from birth,

often from poor rural backgrounds, and perhaps with vivid imaginations, but little or no formal education – a dangerous cocktail which makes the germination of superstition highly likely. Certainly, this description would fit the children at Lourdes, Fátima and elsewhere perfectly well. One supposed 'seer', Giles Bouhours from Espis in France, was only *two years old* when his 'visions' began (Maunder 2016: 66–69; Guiot 2010). Another suggestive feature is that although the seers claim to be able to see the Virgin Mary in person, often dressed in all her finery and complete with rosary, in most cases none of the bystanders can see any of it, nor can they hear her speaking. It is likely that these accounts tell us much more about the gullibility of the believer than the veracity of the experience – but then, this *may* be a factor in the experiences of the first disciples, too. How ready were they to accept as veridical what was in truth a subjective vision or delusion?

Finally, Licona weighs Goulder's hypothesis by testing it against McCullagh's criteria:

i. *Explanatory scope.* Licona considers that in this respect, Goulder passes the test with flying colours. His hypothesis (GH) explains the crucifixion (Jesus had been truly dead) and his reappearance to the disciples. It also accounts for Paul's conversion-vision in sound psychological terms. Obviously, RH can do all this, too, but as an alternative, GH passes muster.

ii. *Explanatory power.* This criterion is concerned with how persuasive the explanation is, and here Licona considers that GH is much less successful than RH. It tends to rely on the view that Peter was vision-prone (Mark 9: 2–8; Acts 10: 9–18), and, in his post-crucifixion psychological state, would have been just the candidate to experience a hallucination of the risen Lord. However, this encounter could easily be explained otherwise – by RH, for example – and Goulder is too loose in his psychological interpretation, leaving himself open to counterattack with some of his statements: 'Psychologists have suggested various theories to account for such conversions [as those of Peter and Paul], the cognitive dissonance theory, for instance; but we do not for the moment need to claim that we fully understand such experiences; it is enough that we see the general thrust of what is happening' (Goulder 1996: 50). In this, however, Licona scores: there is nothing wrong with scholarly precision, and Goulder does not provide it. Nevertheless, the fact that GH fails the explanatory power test whereas RH does not, cannot prove that the post-resurrection appearances to Peter and Paul were not subjective after all. Licona seems to imply that Goulder is determined to adhere to a psychological explanation, even if he cannot accurately define it because 'any natural explanation is to be preferred over one that is supernatural' (Licona, 2010: 492–93; cf. Goulder, 1996: 52). Perhaps – but we cannot rule out that, in the final analysis, this may turn out to be a significant consideration.

iii. *Plausibility.* Here the question is whether GH takes account of accepted truths better than rival hypotheses, and Licona alleges that it fails in this respect. But when we scrutinise his response, we find it to be decidedly weak. In opposition to GH he states: 'It is now generally accepted that no split existed between Paul and the Jerusalem leadership' (2010: 493). In other words, there never was any 'two missions'. What we have here is a bald, *ex cathedra* dictum with no accompanying evidence. Granted, it would not have been possible for Licona to enter on a full-blown discussion, but surely some kind of justification is required. Goulder's thesis may not always be meticulously argued, but there are clear signs that relations between Paul and the Jerusalem church were frequently strained. Galatians is full of it (Gal. 2: 1–6, 11–14), and although Luke did his best to paper over the cracks, he could hardly conceal the rift over the conditions for admittance of Gentiles into the church which necessitated the so-called 'council' (Acts 15: 1–21), or the unease felt by some Jewish Christians about their being allowed entry at all (Acts 11: 1–3). It would only have taken frictions of this kind, not necessarily a full-blown schism, to set Paul and the Jerusalem church off in different directions, and this would be sufficient to validate GH.

The remainder of Licona's response here frankly betrays his partial understanding of the nature of hallucinations. He keeps on gnawing away at the impossibility of group hallucinations, even though, as already noted, GH never suggests such a view; Licona is simply shying at Aunt Sallies here. Then he claims that Paul's conversion experience was not a hallucination 'since he was not in a state of grief over Jesus' death' (2010: 493). But he did not need to be; the kind of conversion experience associated with Paul is quite unrelated to bereavement, and modern examples of the kind (Alphonse Ratisbonne, Sundar Singh, Susan Atkins, and many others) are regularly explained by psychologists in psychological and neurological terms. It would be perfectly possible, for instance, to derive such an explanation from the biblical material at our disposal. Paul himself tells us that he was an ambitious young man (Gal. 1: 14) – a 'go-ahead guy' who was determined to get on in his chosen profession – the next Gamaliel, perhaps. The well-ordered brand of Pharisaic Judaism with which he had grown up, however, was far from ideal in facilitating these personal goals; Paul may have been some way down in the pecking order. The Christian church that he was intent on persecuting, on the other hand, was still a relatively fledgling sect. True, it had a firm command structure based in Jerusalem, but there were swathes of territory beyond which were ripe for harvest. It was not in Paul's nature to play second fiddle to anyone, and circumstances surrounding the church at the time of his conversion gave him the opportunity to strike out on his own as an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul's fractious relationship with the leaders in Jerusalem (Gal. 2: 1–14) was

borne out of this situation. The Jungian approach (1928: 257) would readily feed into this hypothesis, as Paul's dilemma may have germinated within his unconscious at the outset. His conversion would have been occasioned by its breaking through into consciousness. Clearly, this proposal would require some fleshing out, but the point I wish to establish here is that a scenario of this kind is a perfectly reasonable alternative to the traditional evangelical approach represented by Licona.

iv. *Less ad hoc.* Licona argues that since GH is purely speculative and lacking in hard evidence, it is clearly *ad hoc.* There is little doubt that, at certain points, Goulder goes too far. For example, his Jungian view of Paul's secret doubts regarding the Jewish faith includes the speculation that he may have had a Gentile friend in boyhood which fuelled them (Goulder 2000: 95). *Ad hoc* can be writ large over this; but other 'speculations' are far more plausible, and can be supported by our ever-growing knowledge of bereavement hallucinations, conversion disorders, and other kinds of behaviour open to psychological investigation. Aside from this, however, we must question whether RH really is significantly less *ad hoc* than GH. After all, the only evidence we have is the New Testament which needs to be established as a firm historical bedrock if Licona's proposals are to be upheld. But we do not need to venture very far before we find some formidable objections to the historical reliability of these accounts. Even given a historical basis, it is notoriously difficult to determine which statements are historical and which are purely theological or symbolic. The dozens of contradictions in detail between the various narratives in the Gospels and these, in turn, with 1 Corinthians 15: 3–8, demonstrates that our reliance on the New Testament is far from secure, and if we cannot rely upon it for historical accuracy, there is little reason to think RH any less *ad hoc* than GH.

v. *Illumination.* Here, Licona simply allows that if GH is true, it may well shed light on the religious beliefs and practices of the day, and would in that case pass this criterion. However, since all the other alternative hypotheses he considers also receive a 'P', little is gained from this observation.

We must not be fooled by Licona's summary chart (see above) which would have us believe that RH has trounced all-comers, including GH. A moment's thought will tell us that matters are not as simple as that, although no doubt Licona, Craig, Habermas and company would like them to be. On a statistical basis alone, it is extremely unlikely that RH would score 100% positive, whereas all five rival hypotheses would fail almost unanimously on the three most important criteria. Vermes earns a 'P' for the 'less *ad hoc*' criterion, but even here we cannot suppose that Licona regards VH as any *less ad hoc* than RH. Licona's 'method' may look impressive and fair-minded, but it is all too reminiscent of those university debates

between an evangelical and a sceptical speaker which are monitored by a panel of 'impartial' judges to decide on who the 'winner' will be (for example, Miethe 1987: xiii–xv). The bottom line in the present case is that Licona's results are influenced by his evangelical presuppositions whether or not he is prepared to admit it.

Goulder, Muddle and Method

Although Licona is a slave to his presuppositions, he has endeavoured to fashion a historical method – based on the work of McCullagh who 'coincidentally' shares the same presuppositions – to his own satisfaction, if not to everyone else's. But can Goulder claim a similar achievement? We must admit that he cannot. Almost from the outset, Goulder developed a reputation as a maverick among scholars, as is evident from comparatively early works like *The Evangelist's Calendar* (1974) and *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (1978), which surely owed something to the work of his close friend and mentor Austin Farrer (1951; 1954), with its bold typological approach. Goulder was nothing if not imaginative, but while the power of imagination may assist Sherlock Holmes in solving some of his most puzzling cases, it does not work well for biblical scholars without the application of sound method which, in the case we are dealing with, Goulder seems to lack. Is he – again like Sherlock Holmes – simply presenting us with results while deliberately concealing from us the logical steps he has taken to reach them? Perhaps he is; for in the introduction to his popularist *A Tale of Two Missions* he explains: 'I have left out virtually all footnotes, and I have tried to write with a little wit and some feeling. But I hope that this informality will not lead my professional colleagues to overlook the work... If they would prefer an 800 page statement, I am preparing one' (1994a: xi). Alas, the promised tome seems never to have materialised.

One of the weakest points in GH is Goulder's interpretation of Paul's quarrel with his Corinthian opponents in 1 Corinthians 15: 12–19 to the effect that these people were Jewish Christians who believed in a form of spiritual resurrection as opposed to Paul's own Pharisaic belief in bodily resurrection. The problem is not that Goulder must be mistaken – it is at least possible that he may have hit on the truth – but that he provides no shred of evidence to support his position. One has only to consider the mountain of secondary literature on this passage to appreciate what a contentious issue this is, and there are far more plausible hypotheses than the one Goulder presents – for example, the view that Paul's opponents were Greeks who had decided to maintain or revert to some Platonic understanding of the afterlife.

As this issue is not instrumental to the thrust of the present paper, we can refrain from further comment. I mention it here simply as an example of Goulder's over-casual approach throughout. The hallucination

hypothesis remains unaffected either way. If Peter saw Jesus in this sense, he would have done so regardless of whether the tomb was full or empty, and the hallucination approach is meant to serve as an *alternative* to the idea of veridical appearances whether or not these were supposed to be corporeal or visionary.

Perhaps Goulder is best seen as a creative artist (like Farrer, in fact) who relies on the general sweep of inspiration to create the desired effect and push out the boundaries to encourage expansion of ideas and further exploration. No doubt exegetical precision is well within his grasp, but that is the part he chooses to conceal from the public gaze. Still, he cannot quite as easily be absolved from his failure to develop the hypothesis in question here. It appears first in 1994 in two works simultaneously (1994a: 173–80; 1994b: 58–68), then in *slightly* expanded form in 1996, and again in 2000. There is also a brief reference to it in his contribution to the 2005 issue of the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* devoted to a review of N.T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2005:187–95), although, as Goulder was recovering from a stroke at that time, we can hardly expect a full-blown account on that occasion. From that point on he never seems to have returned to the issue. Perhaps these deficiencies have allowed Goulder's critics to go for the jugular (although most evangelicals – Craig, Habermas, Johnson – have focused on Lüdemann's very similar theory), but his general proposal is perfectly plausible. What it requires is the tangential support of professionals in the social sciences disciplines, particularly psychology and psychiatry, which has certainly been forthcoming in the past twenty years or so, and continues unabated.

Muddle, Method, and a Possible Solution

Licona (2010: 468) has reduced Craig's celebrated 'four facts' (see Copan & Tacelli 2000: 163–86) regarding the historicity of the resurrection to three, which he identifies as the 'historical bedrock' of his traditionalist position:

- Jesus died by crucifixion
- Very shortly after Jesus' death, the disciples had experiences that led them to believe and proclaim that Jesus had been resurrected
- Within a few years after Jesus' death, Paul converted after experiencing what he interpreted as a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to him.

We can admit to all three of these points as a sound basis on which to work. Clearly, they serve Licona's purpose, since RH can adequately explain them. But so can the hallucination hypothesis – and probably

as adequately, if we admit the collective delusion hypothesis too. Admittedly, Goulder's view would require two hypotheses rather than one, which is a point in favour of RH; but we must balance this with the sensible dictum – again, Sherlock Holmes springs to mind – that it is always preferable to exhaust all natural hypotheses before turning to supernatural ones. Moreover, the two hypotheses which constitute GH are not so much two separate ones as two aspects of the same. Both involve delusional experiences. Typical of the various definitions of the term 'hallucination' is the following, adopted by Aleman and Larøi from Anthony S. David (2004: 108; cit. Aleman & Larøi 2008: 15):

> A sensory experience which occurs in the absence of corresponding external stimulation of the relevant sensory organ, has a sufficient sense of reality to resemble a veridical perception, over which the subject does not feel s/he has direct and voluntary control, and which occurs in the awake state.

A sensory experience without a corresponding external stimulus is a delusion, and in the case of a hallucination one that occurs subjectively in the individual. Regarding collective delusions, Licona is correct to point out that the examples chosen by Goulder for illustration purposes are on the whole *il*lusions. One external object – a weather balloon, say – may be mistaken for a UFO, which is clearly an illusion rather than a delusion. Licona may be right to explain most of the 'sightings' of Bigfoot in this way. However, this does not change the underlying principle. Collective experiences need not necessarily be illusory, they can be delusory too. All that is required is an individual suggestion that a certain phenomenon, such as an apparition or the sound of voices in the breeze, is present, and if others are convinced enough, they may imagine that they, too, can sense these things, even though they correspond to no external stimulus other than the individual's initial suggestion. (An interesting example can be found in Broad 1953: 90). There is nothing unreasonable, therefore, about Goulder's proposal that Peter, in a state of shock, shame and bereavement, hallucinated the presence of Jesus visually, declared what he had 'seen' to the other disciples, and so set off a wave of hysteria which convinced the others that Jesus was manifesting himself to them also.

That such a scenario is logically possible requires no further argument, neither does the view that it is *practically* possible. The question of its likelihood is more debatable. It is important from the outset not to claim too much. We are not alleging that the hallucination-cum-delusion hypothesis is any more persuasive than RH, only that when set in the balance they prove to be of equal weight. And if there is anything to tip the balance it may be that the former hypothesis does not have to appeal to the supernatural for which, in our present world, there would seem to be remarkably little evidence.

I will draw matters to a close by suggesting one or two pointers in the direction of further progress on this issue. Until recently, few biblical scholars who concerned themselves with the issues under discussion took the relevant psychological literature seriously. John Johnson's article (2001: 227–38), made just three footnote references to such literature out of thirty-four largely bibliographical footnotes, and much the same can be said for Jake O'Connell's (2009: 69–105) discussion on the possible relationship between collective visions and the nature of Jesus' resurrection appearances (four out of 104 references), while Goulder's motley collection of sources, although more extensive than Johnson's and O'Connell's, includes volumes that have been gathering dust since 1903 (Starbuck, rev. edn, 1903). Probably his most helpful source is Meadow and Kahoe's *Psychology of Religion* (1984), to which he refers several times.

Two reasons for this apparent aversion to the psychology literature are immediately obvious. First, in the 1990s, when Goulder and Lüdemann were at their most active on the issue, the range of literature on the relevant themes – bereavement, hallucination, collective delusion, and so on – was nowhere near as wide as it is today. For some years now, there have been entire journals devoted to the 'ephemeral stuff' – *Death Studies; Omega – Journal of Death and Dying; Mortality; Journal of Near Death Studies* – and some impressive volumes on hallucination which, while maintaining a high scholarly standard, are also accessible to the non-specialist (the Aleman and Larøi volume is a case in point). No longer is the biblical scholar obliged to rely on Slade & Bentall (1988), useful as that volume may have been, and perhaps still is. The second point follows on from this, and it concerns the problem of non-specialism. Naturally, most biblical scholars are not trained psychologists or psychiatrists, and will understandably baulk at the prospect of accessing the more technical material. However, we live in an interdisciplinary world in which scholars from different departments frequently collaborate, so ignorance can no longer be touted as an excuse for not tackling the issues.

No doubt traditionalists will continue to insist, on the strength of their presuppositions, that RH by far outstrips any naturalistic alternatives. Wright (2003: 686–96) even goes so far as to assert that only the traditional view can provide both the sufficient *and necessary* conditions for explaining both the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances. However, his use of the word 'necessary' seems, to say the least, somewhat ambiguous in this context (Smith 2020), and even if GH fails to meet the requirements of Occam's razor quite as well as RH, this does not in itself invalidate it or any other form of the hallucination hypothesis. Indeed, I have provided evidence to suggest that its plausibility rating is much

higher than Licona and other evangelical scholars credit. It is to be hoped that future discussions on this issue, regardless of theological persuasion, will take full account of the resources currently available.

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