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Historians and the Paranormal

Supernatural phenomena—miracles, visitations, revelations, prophecies, and so forth—are a very squeamish issue among historians these days. For millennia many cultures embraced these phenomena wholeheartedly as a regular and extremely important part of life, but in the last five hundred years our scientific and technological advancements have naturally explained a significant amount of what had previously been understood as supernatural. A storm is not the tantrum of an angry god but a manifestation of global weather patterns. A disease is not the result of sin or divine ill favor but an infection, genetic predisposition, or other biological explanation. The bright light in the sky is not a flaming chariot but a very close star around which we orbit. We truly got a lot wrong and, in the process, proved that we have an inordinate tendency to seek supernatural explanations. As a result, historians have spent the last few hundred years undoing these errors and grounding us in a strict study of the natural. Anything that smacks of the supernatural is often shunned as something that could lead us back to pre-Enlightenment thinking.

The problem with this is that it leaves the supernatural ignored and unstudied. Many will respond that this is entirely appropriate. The supernatural was a false construct of our ancestors' minds to explain what they were not developed enough to explain otherwise. I argue, however, that we need a more modest response than that. We did fail rather miserably to understand the supernatural and rashly made it our default answer to most unsolved questions of causality, but that merely indicates a failure on our part.

Perhaps the supernatural truly does exist, and we simply failed to see it properly. In this paper, I shall examine this possibility, and I shall use as a backdrop the most significant reported supernatural event in the Western tradition: the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This reported supernatural (I shall henceforth use the more neutral “paranormal”) event is an excellent test case. Some may groan at using a biblical example at all since, by some accounts at least, Christians are among the worst offenders for pushing the paranormal onto historians. I would respond, however, that a wholesale objection to the Bible is itself actually a perfect example of an overly general rejection of the supernatural. The Bible, despite some Christians’ demonstrably wrong claims to the contrary, is composed of diverse and mutually exclusive texts. Almost all of them testify to some paranormal incident or another (and often to many), but the texts bring remarkably different evidentiary qualifications to the table. Perhaps the two most extreme examples are Genesis and Galatians. Genesis is an ancient Hebrew mythic text. It is anonymous,¹ and its date cannot be determined for certain. It may have been an edited collection of previous and somewhat contradictory anonymous texts, the precise dates of which also may not be determinable. The text is clearly not an eyewitness account or anything close to it, for it describes many sensational events stretching across thousands of years during almost all of which the author was obviously not yet born. The text also does not site the author’s sources for the stories, nor does it say that the successive generations in it passed along stories from previous generations. Also (despite a popular view to the contrary), the author never claims to have received information directly from

¹ Some have believed (and still do believe) that Moses wrote it. However, the text does not claim this, and there is no independent evidentiary rationale for believing this.

God. Finally, there is no particularly good reason to believe that the author himself actually believed in all the stories. He may have intended it to be, at least in part, a fictional yet still inspirational work.

Contrast this to Galatians. This text claims to be a letter from Paul, and there is a tremendous scholarly consensus that that claim is true. There is also a consensus on a very narrow window in which it was written (the 50s, and possibly mid-50s, CE).² In the text, Paul claims to have been the recipient of a divine revelation (an appearance of Jesus appointing Paul as an apostle) and goes into some detail to justify that claim. He says that other apostles had the same information, and when they met after twenty years, he verified the authenticity of his claim by seeing that his knowledge overlapped with theirs. He even lists his prior travels to show that he had not had an opportunity to collaborate with them before that time (1:11-2:10).

Whatever you conclude about his claims, the point here is that we should have a greater evidentiary appreciation for Galatians than Genesis. This often gets missed today. The Bible is viewed as far too monolithic³, and the result is that the Galatians baby has been thrown out with the Genesis bathwater. Of course, this is by no means all the fault of historians. To their own great detriment, some contemporary Christians have expended a lot of their political and social capital defending Genesis while ignoring more viable books. The result for them has been a string of major defeats on incredibly unfavorable

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 467-8.

³ As the late Christian scholar Raymond Brown said: “one should be cautious of statements claiming ‘The Bible says...’ even as one would not state, ‘The Public Library says...’ when one means to quote from Jane Austen or Shakespeare. The better phrasing names a specific book or author: ‘Isaiah says’ or ‘Mark says,’ thereby recognizing that individuals from different periods of time with different ideas wrote the individual books of the Bible.” Ellipses original. Brown, *An Introduction*, xxxiii.

terrain. One question lurking behind this paper will be whether they would be in better shape today if they had chosen different battles (such as the resurrection itself).

Views of the Paranormal Among Current Jesus Scholars

The problem with Jesus for those who reject the paranormal is that Jesus and the resurrection are intertwined extremely early in the historical record. Jesus was executed right around 30 CE, and during the 50s we see our first firmly datable sources: those letters of Paul that are widely accepted to be authentic (including Galatians and a few others). Paul fills these texts with references to the resurrection. So does the author of the New Testament's 2nd Gospel (the so-called Gospel According to Mark, even though it is actually anonymous). It may be our next source for Jesus (written c. 70). The 1st and 3rd Gospels (so-called Matthew and Luke and likewise anonymous) are based on the 2nd Gospel and also report the resurrection. They were written in the c. 70-90 range. A non-surviving source that we have nicknamed Q (the first letter of the German word for "source"), which was used by both the 1st and 3rd Gospel authors and perhaps written around 50, is more silent on the Resurrection but may contain some references such as Jesus' comment about the sign of Jonah (Mt 16:4/Lk 11:29). The 4th Gospel (John, also anonymous) may have been completed in the 90s, by which time several other surviving Christian texts (including several of the other New Testament texts) had been written. Many of them discuss the Resurrection.⁴

⁴ I am basing these dates on a fairly widely accepted timeline among scholars. For instance see (with some variations), Brown, *An Introduction*, 5-9; Marcus Borg in Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) 12; John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) 109-14; and Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 24-37, 59. Peter Kirby also keeps a detailed chronology with links to numerous sources on his website: <<http://earlychristianwritings.com>>. The Gospel

These sources are numerous and early enough so that scholars must confront the resurrection as at least an issue. They cannot dispatch it like they dispatched the fall of Adam and Eve, for which no sources come within thousands of years of the claimed event itself. Nevertheless, some Jesus scholars have attempted to bracket the resurrection in one way or another and thus to remove it from the scope of their historical inquiry. I shall look at three such historians.

- E.P. Sanders pointedly ends his book on Jesus, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, with his burial. Sanders then discusses the resurrection in a subordinated epilogue, in which he notes that “The resurrection is not, strictly speaking, part of the story of the historical Jesus, but rather belongs to the aftermath of his life.”⁵ He believes that the apostles did in fact have some sort of experience that they construed as seeing Jesus, but Sanders is unable to know what those experiences were: “That Jesus’ followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.”⁶ He thus comes to a dead end in his own reconstructive abilities. However, this happened because he had prematurely trimmed his own sails. Earlier in the book, he had unilaterally rejected miracles and had quoted Cicero to sum up his own view: “nothing can happen without cause; nothing happens that cannot happen, and when what was capable of happening has happened, it may not be interpreted as a miracle. Consequently there are no miracles.”⁷ This statement appears to limit him to believing in either regular events or extraordinary ones that then automatically acquire a regular explanation. The problem with this is that when he does come across something that does not fit either category, he freezes. The resurrection is neither regular nor does it lend itself to a regular explanation, so all Sanders can do is say “I do not know.” This does not work. We cannot have a reconstructive model that automatically implodes on itself as it approaches the resurrection.
- Bart Ehrman instead takes the approach of granting for the sake of argument that miracles can occur. However, he then says that a

of Thomas (which actually does bear his name but was likely not written by him) importantly does not discuss the resurrection, but its date is somewhat more disputed and lands in a larger 50-130 neighborhood. Because unorthodox texts are generally (but not exclusively) of low evidentiary value, I am excluding them from this brief analysis.

⁵ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1995) 276.

⁶ Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 280.

⁷ Quoted in Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 143.

miracle is by its nature very improbable and thus a historian cannot use a miracle as an explanation because doing so is, in essence, going to the bottom of the pile of possible explanations. In other words, to say that a miracle has occurred is to say that something that is improbable is probable, which is nonsense.⁸ The problem with this view is that he does not adequately appreciate that the historian must judge something's probability not in the abstract but in light of the particular evidentiary record. For example, if I have a friend who lives far away and who owns twelve shirts only one of which is red, I would be unjustified in ever believing that he is wearing that red shirt (even on those days when he is). However, if on a particular day I received phone calls from three mutual friends who had visual contact with him and they all said that he was wearing the red shirt, I would be justified in such a belief. In that case, I would not be recklessly going up against a 92% chance of being wrong. Factoring in the evidentiary record, my chances of being wrong would be approaching 0%. Thus if we were asking whether a random person would be resurrected upon death, Ehrman would be correct that we cannot answer Yes. However, in Jesus' case we are dealing with someone around whose death an evidentiary record (regardless of its quality) has developed. We must answer in light of that record, and no one is better suited for that than a historian.

- Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz put forward a view based on Ernst Troeltsch's criteria for determining historicity. Since (quoting their summary) "all events are in principle of the same kind [which] conditions them and makes it possible to compare them" and "all phenomena in culture and history are correlated with one another," for an event to be historical, it must fit within a context of other events. In other words, for us to document an event, it must occur within a cause and effect context along with other events. Thus they conclude that "the resurrection of Jesus cannot be a historical event" because it does not fit in with any surrounding events and there is not a separate causal event with which it can be associated.⁹ This solution does not work either. We frequently accept that an event has occurred even while being mystified about both its relationship to surrounding events and its location within a chain of causality. When TWA Flight 800 went down in 1996, the event's causation defied easy explanation and was the subject of debate for some time. Nevertheless, the plane was destroyed, and we very acutely acknowledged that event's factuality while not understanding its causation.

⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Historical Jesus*, audio lecture series, The Teaching Company, <<http://www.teach12.com/ttc/assets/coursedescriptions/643.asp?id=643&d=Historical+Jesus&pc=Search>>.

⁹ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 503-4.

A Solution: The Resurrection as “Spatio-Temporal Event”

Having now explored these different views, I want to frame this discussion in a way that is largely lacking in the scholarship that I have read on this issue. I want to make two distinctions. The first is between what I shall call a “spatio-temporal event” and an “other-worldly claim.” The former, which includes anything that actually occurs in this universe, theoretically can be preserved in a historical record (in one way or another) and thus subsequently analyzed by historians. An other-worldly claim is something that never touches a distinct spatio-temporal moment and thus is not detectable to the historical record. Such claims would be “there is a God” and “there is a heaven” and so forth. A historian has no tools to process these statements.

In saying this, I have probably said nothing to which a traditional Enlightenment secularist would object. That objection will come with my second distinction. Among spatio-temporal events, I want to sub-distinguish two types: “normal events” and “paranormal events.” Let us say that someone, Sue, is sitting in a room and another person, Rodriguez, picks up a chair and moves it across the room. There are any number of ways that this event could be preserved for the historical record. She could videotape or photograph it. She could bring other people into the room to eyewitness it. She could write down an account. She could make herself available as a source for a non-eyewitness’s account. In any number of ways, a record could be made of sufficient quality to convince most people that Rodriguez had moved the chair.

Now let us say that Sue is in the room, and the chair levitated, floated across the room, and came to rest in precisely the same spot in which Rodriguez put it in the first example. Is not this event just as able to be documented as the first? Just as before,

witnesses and camcorders could verify it quite effectively.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it seems that those who argue against the historian's role in documenting paranormal activity insist that such an event should be classified with what I am calling the "other-worldly claim." Yet it is no such thing. It is neither a theological tenet nor a statement about another dimension but an event very much occurring in this world. It may defy causality, and it may be totally unparalleled in our history. Yet it remains an event just like any other event.

To put this the other way, let us accept momentarily that such phenomena are not within the historian's domain. What should the historian say about that moment in space and time? Regardless of what occurred in it, it was a moment and a space just like any other. Is it merely to be a black hole corded off from the historical record? The same question must be asked about the Resurrection. No one disputes that two calendar days after Jesus died, a day did in fact occur. Peter, James, Mary Magdalene, and all the others did exist during that day. They presumably woke up, went through the day, and then went back to bed. Is the historian prevented from reconstructing those days? That seems like a very odd conclusion. Had technology developed earlier, they potentially could have owned a camera or camcorder. If they had had computers, they could have e-mailed people or written diary entries during that day. In principle, there are any number of ways that that day (and the subsequent days and months) could have been preserved. It is only a result of history that that spatio-temporal period was not better preserved into the

¹⁰ Marcus Borg has argued that the resurrection appearances could not have been videotaped. Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 130-5. However, his point is that those appearances were "apparitions," nonphysical visions directed only toward a particular person (or people). Thus the paranormal event did not occur in the physical space in front of the person but in his or her brain and eyes. Thus even under Borg's model, a camcorder could at least detect the person talking to empty space, and a brain scan could record uncaused sensory input being processed. Thus, despite Borg's attempt to understand an apparition as minimally as possible as a spatio-temporal event, it remains one in his model.

historical record. Nevertheless, it was preserved some, and we can inquire into that record accordingly.

Conclusion

The resurrection either was or was not a spatio-temporal event. If it did not occur at all, then it did not happen and thus is untrue. Likewise, if it did not happen within this universe (say, if Jesus had been resurrected into heaven or a parallel universe), then such an occurrence would be undetectable to us. However, this latter option is not what the historical record attests to. It speaks to a spatio-temporal event within our universe. We should explore it as such. I do not claim here that we will determine that it occurred, but I do say that the systematic effort by some to remove reported paranormal events from the historian's purview is misguided. Who else will handle these reports? Philosophers? Theologians? Scientists? They are not technically trained to do so any more than they are to reconstruct the spatio-temporal events occurring fifteen minutes before or after. Historians would never surrender jurisdiction over determining what Tiberius Caesar was doing at that exact same temporal but different spatial point. They would not even surrender jurisdiction over Pontius Pilate. So why do they do so (and go out of the way to do so) for Peter and Mary Magdalene? This fundamentally does not make sense.

However, I should note that if a historian were to affirm the resurrection, doing so would not automatically mean that the historian must adopt a full complement of theological tenets. People lived for three hundred years believing in the resurrection prior to the Nicene Creed even existing. The historian need not do what those people did not do. The historian does not even need to share the apostle's interpretation. Paul thought in

terms of progressive revelation with history dividing into phases between Adam, Abraham, and Moses. The resurrection fit into this framework as the beginning of a new phase in salvation history (Gal. 3:1-4:7). However, the historian can now see that Paul was completely wrong, because of his views not on Jesus but on practically everything else. Thus historians do not need to go in those traditional directions. While it would probably be difficult for a historian to believe in the resurrection and be an atheist, historians would only need to adopt a theology at their own personal urging. Their professional duty would be done at that point, and they could hand off their findings to the philosophers, theologians, and scientists.