

In this post I continue with my response to Larry Hurtado's critique of How Jesus Became God. In the previous posts I dealt with factual errors - where he assigned views to me that I do not state and do not have. As I have pointed out, Larry was generous to retract these critiques in a subsequent post on his blog. In this post I want to deal not with a factual mistake but with an assertion he makes about my motive for part of my discussion - an assertion that I take issue with.

One of my major premises in How Jesus Became God is that Jesus was not considered divine during his lifetime, but that it was belief in his resurrection that made his followers begin calling him God. But since my study is a historical account of how Jesus came to be considered God, rather than a theological or religiously motivated account, I have to deal with a very big problem, which is that historians cannot declare a God-produced miracle as a historical event (even if it *is* something that happened). I give lengthy reasons for why historians cannot argue for miracles in the book, and will not go into that matter here. For now it's enough to say, historians cannot establish that miracles (such as the resurrection) have happened in the past. (In the book I argue that "history is not the past," since all sorts of things happened in the past that cannot be shown to have happened by the historical disciplines - including miracles. If that doesn't make sense to you - I'd suggest you read my chapter on it!)

They also cannot establish that miracles have NOT happened either. Maybe they have. If so, I'm afraid that the historical disciplines simply have no access to them (either do the mathematical disciplines, or the biological disciplines, etc.).

What historians *can* talk about in the case of Jesus' resurrection is not whether God really raised him from the dead (the historian, as a historian, cannot make any statements about what God has done - since those are theological statements that require faith, but history does not require faith), but about what the disciples came to believe. *That* is part of the historical record. And one interesting question involves what made them believe what they came to believe.

In the book I argue that one and only one thing made the disciples come to believe in Jesus' resurrection. Some of the disciples had visions of him afterwards. In my view - I argue vigorously for this in the book - this is a *historical* explanation, not a *theological* one. We can say, on historical grounds, that the disciples had visions of Jesus. But doesn't that require the miracle of the resurrection to have happened? No, claiming that the disciples had visions of Jesus does not require the historian to say that God worked a miracle, and that Jesus was really raised from the dead, and that Jesus then as the resurrected Lord really appeared to his disciples. But how can we claim, historically, that the disciples had visions without saying that God really did a miracle by raising Jesus from the dead? Because we can talk about visions without claiming that a person sees (in a vision) something that is actually there.

People have visions all the time. And historians do not have to decide whether the visions they have are caused by external stimuli (so that they are what psychologists call "veridical" visions) or not (so that they are "non-veridical" visions). Now, everyone knows what it would mean if the disciples of Jesus saw Jesus because he was really there (i.e. that there was a real historical stimulus, making these veridical visions). It would mean that Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to his disciples. But what would it mean if he was not really there? That's an interesting historical question and NOT everyone knows how that could be. And so I devote a lengthy discussion to how it can be historically valid to claim

that the disciples had visions of Jesus whether or not he actually appeared to them.

This is what Larry says in critique of my discussion:

[It is] curious that Ehrman then devotes a section of the ensuing discussion to comparing early experiences of the risen Jesus with apparitions of deceased loved ones to the bereaved, and with other such phenomena. The point of doing so, quite obviously, seems to be to give reasons for taking early Christian experiences as hallucinations, and so not really valid. To do this, however, is (in Ehrman's own terms) to move from historical analysis to something else. To be specific, this discussion seems more aimed to counter Christian apologists and give justification for doubting Christian claims. But this makes just a bit coy his profession of not being concerned to judge the question whether experiences of the risen Jesus were valid.

This is not a generous reading of my discussion. Larry is arguing that I am anti-Christian and want to demonstrate that the visions of Jesus were non-veridical hallucinations. This is "obvious" to him. The reason I take some umbrage at this charge is that I went completely out of my way to prevent precisely this reading of my discussion. I explicitly state "I am not taking a stand on the question of whether there was some kind of external reality behind what the disciples saw" (p. 186); "I am not going to take a stand on this issue of whether Jesus really appeared to people or whether their visions were hallucinations" (p. 187). Did Larry not read these statements? Or did he simply think that I was being deceitful or duplicitous? I assume that latter.

Either way, I don't think it is a generous reading of my discussion. One may well ask, in reply, why, if I'm not taking a stand, do I spend so much time talking about hallucinations - for example of people who see deceased loved ones weeks or years after their demise, or of people who see the Blessed Virgin Mary (sometimes hundreds or even thousands of people at once). Why spend so much time on hallucinations if I'm not trying to convince people that the disciples had hallucinations?

For PRECISELY the reason I've explained. There are basically two options about what happened. Either Jesus really appeared to his disciples after his crucifixion, or they were seeing things. Now, if Jesus really appeared to his disciples, how much discussion of the matter is required to indicate that this is what happened? Does one need to devote a chapter to saying "Jesus appeared to his disciples"? Of course not. If he appeared to his disciples (something historians cannot prove and cannot disprove) he appeared to his disciples. Full stop. But if Jesus did not appear to his disciples, why did they *think* (or at least *say*) that he did? THAT is a matter that needs to be unpacked, explained, gone into. Most people don't know the scholarship on hallucinations, and might automatically think that when I'm saying that it was the visions that made them think Jesus had been raised EITHER that I must mean he really was raised (which I've just argued historians cannot say) OR that I've made a mistake and made a non-historical claim (God did a miracle) and claimed it as historical.

If I'm going to argue that it was the visions that convinced the disciples that Jesus was raised, I *have* to show how that can be a historical claim rather than a theological one, and to do that I have to talk about hallucinations. In my chapter on this I am clear and explicit on repeated occasions: the discussion is *not* in order to argue that the disciples must have had hallucinations. I'm not taking a stand on whether the visions were veridical or not.

That's my entire *point*. I'm not taking a stand. If you think the visions were veridical, then you think Jesus was really raised. You can take that view. But how can you think they had visions if they were not veridical? They would have to be hallucinations - and if that's the view you want to take, you need to know what we know about hallucinations.

I'm really not being duplicitous, as Larry charges. I'm simply giving people two options. I'm explaining only one of them at length because the other one needs no explanation. If the visions were veridical, then Jesus was raised from the dead.



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