

## Jason and the Halluci-Nots

### Recent Controversy

A spate of recent blog articles (1) has rekindled an old debate between bible believers and critics of the Christian religion on whether or not the so-called "post-resurrection appearances" of Jesus were real or hallucinatory in nature. Since I know of no good reasons to limit the debate to only these alternatives, I am not writing to defend the view per se that the individuals which the New Testament claims to have witnessed Jesus after his alleged resurrection were in fact hallucinating; indeed, I have no confessional investment to protect on this issue and thus am not committed to such predetermined outcomes. Rather, I am seeking to give some brief observations on various objections which have been raised against this proposal by Jason Engwer & co. of the Christian blog known as [Triablogue](#).

### An All Too Typical Defense

In [one of his articles](#) defending the New Testament's claim to eyewitness accounts of the resurrected Jesus from the charge of hallucination, Jason repeatedly claims that "every major strand of early evidence" (he uses this very phrase four separate times), disconfirms - even "contradicts" - what we would expect to be the case if those accounts were in fact hallucinatory in origin. By "early evidence" he is no doubt referring to various claims found in the texts of the New Testament. Throughout his rejoinder to such proposals, Jason's approach to the matter rests on the assumption that the elements of the New Testament's stories are accurate and historical to begin with, and that a theory attributing the experience of the risen Jesus to hallucination would have to come to grips with these stories on their own terms. Elsewhere I have already explained my view in regard to the claim that the bible constitutes "archaeological evidence" in [Contra Dusman](#), where I clarify my position on this matter as follows:

I'm perfectly willing to accept the text of the New Testament as evidence showing what some ancient people \*believed\*. But this is far from supporting the claim that what they believed is true... I'm not disputing against the view that there were people in the first and second centuries who believed writings found in the New Testament.

Furthermore, in my blog [Reckless Apologetic Presumptuousness](#), I have already raised issue with the assumption, so commonly taken for granted by believers, that the texts of the New Testament present a uniform picture of Jesus and early church figures and activity, an assumption which is easily reinforced by reading the details we find in the gospels into the early epistolary records. So even before going very deeply into Jason's offerings on the issue, I already detect some areas of concern.

### The Legendary Nature of the Evidence

Given the scant details that can be adduced from the New Testament on the psychological stability of the characters mentioned in its stories and chronicles, it is unclear where defenders of Christianity think they get their certainty about the supposed truthfulness of the incredible claims found in the New Testament. Here we have an ancient set of texts, written over a period of several decades and later assembled together in one volume, all apparently about the same individual who is claimed by believers to be the supernatural creator of the universe walking the earth fully clothed as a human man named Jesus. The earliest of these documents are a series of letters written mostly by one man, known to us as the apostle Paul, and his accounts put Jesus in some unspecified past in an unspecified setting, for the most part giving no time, location or other details one could confidently call historical. Much of his letters are preoccupied with doctrinal disputes, ethical teachings, theological arguments, etc., and shows no interest in a pre-Easter Jesus. Paul also includes references to his own mystical experiences of this Jesus, who he says died by crucifixion and was later resurrected, after which time Paul was paid a personal visit in the form of a visionary experience (according to one later source, at any rate) and selected to be Jesus' traveling emissary in search of converts to a belief program built on worshipping this resurrected "savior."

Later, some time after Paul's life and missionizing campaign, a new series of texts starts to be written. These texts also speak of a man named Jesus who was divine, and who was also crucified by the Roman state, and who was later resurrected from the dead. But these texts, known as *gospels*, place this Jesus into a historical context that is

absent from Paul's many letters. All four of these texts portray a Jesus that bears little if any resemblance to the Jesus that Paul describes. The gospel Jesus, for instance, is said to have been from Nazareth, was born of a virgin, survived a slaughter of infants ordered by a jealous king, was baptized by a man named John the Baptist, worked as a carpenter, conducted a preaching ministry in and around Judea, taught in parables, cast out demons and healed diseases, worked various miracles, raised the dead back to life, was betrayed to Roman authorities by a man named Judas Iscariot, and was executed under the rule of Pontius Pilate. While the letters of Paul speak of a Jesus in an unspecified, vague past with virtually no historical details, the later gospel texts paint a detailed portrait that comes alive in the imagination of the reader, complete with other characters who interact with Jesus as well as place names and other location references, all of which give their portrait of Jesus a historical context that Paul's letters do not have.

What's more is that the gospel texts essentially repeat the same story (suggesting that later narratives were derived from the earliest account to produce new versions), and - significantly - that the gospel story grows more elaborate and impressive with each telling. For instance, the earliest account, found in the book of Mark, begins with Jesus as an adult getting baptized under the supervision of John the Baptist. This detail is nowhere mentioned in any of Paul's letters. The next two gospels, Matthew and Luke, seeking to confer a miraculous beginning to their Jesus, portray Jesus as having a virgin mother. And again this detail is nowhere mentioned in any of Paul's letters. The last of the canonical gospels, John, goes even further in giving its Jesus divine credentials by equating Jesus with the Logos (an idea which bears an uncanny resemblance to one of the same name enjoying reverence among Hellenistic Jews in the decades prior to the writing of John), an eternal being existing forever in a magic kingdom and enjoying immutable bliss as a member of the "Godhead." Similar progressions from relatively bare to more embellished treatments of the same anecdotal material can be observed throughout the story of Jesus' gathering of disciples, his performance of healings and other miracles, on up through to the passion and post-resurrection scenes. Thus the gospel accounts themselves are unhelpful in uncovering any truths in the earliest testimony, for the narrative accounts that we find in the gospels bear the signs of literary invention rather than historical reporting.

## **Our Limited Vantage**

We do not have the benefit of seeing what Paul identified as Jesus when he tells us things such as that he received his gospel story by means of revelation (Gal. 1:12) and that "it pleased God... to reveal his Son in me" (Gal. 1:15-16). So again, it's unclear how believers can conclusively rule out at least the possibility that what Paul experienced was hallucinatory in nature, or at least subjective. As what appears to be a private deliverance to Paul that apparently informs his whole gospel (cf. Eph. 3:2-4), this "strand of early evidence" is not, contrary to what Jason has told us, "inconsistent with hallucinations and other psychological disorders," for these are internal experiences that Paul claims for himself, not experiences that are suggested to have been shared with others. Since the book of Acts reads like a later concoction whose intention is to portray a kind of "golden age" pageant of post-Easter adventures of the apostles, all we really have from Paul are his letters. Indeed, how does one rule out psychological disorders as at least a contributing factor in one's reasoning when an individual takes belief in invisible magic beings so seriously?

Jason and other Halluci-Nots may claim that the experience that Paul is referring to in these passages in the first chapter of Galatians, is the incident in which the book of Acts puts Paul on the road to Damascus with fellow travelers. Unfortunately, however, the book of Acts, which tells the same conversion story twice (with conflicts), could only indicate that the content that Paul later referred to as "my gospel" (cf. Rom. 2:16, 16:25) - of which he tells us that he "neither received it of man, neither was I taught it" (Gal. 1:12) - was delivered to him at a later point in time since he was instructed to proceed to Damascus "and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do." (Acts 22:10) The story does not indicate that any more than this was communicated to Paul on this occasion. Since it does not appear that Paul was given a full education on Christian theology at the time of his conversion on the road to Damascus (at least, according to Acts), and since he was not "taught it" or "received it of man," this leaves unexplained exactly how he acquired (if that's the right word) knowledge of Jesus. The record we have nowhere rules out later private visitations by Jesus; in fact Paul's frequent appeals to having knowledge by means of divine revelation suggests that he enjoyed repeated visits by Jesus, or that he was in regular contact with the risen deity.

Of course, at this point, one might raise the question: why doesn't Jesus do for everyone he wants to save what the New Testament says he did for the apostle Paul (i.e., pay a miraculous personal visit), rather than just for one man who lived upwards of 2,000 years ago, whose writings are the only record of these private deliverances from a divine source, and whose ideas have been hotly debated throughout the centuries? It's larger questions like this that serve to put these disputes about whether hallucinations et al. played a part in the development of the early Christian testimony. As it is now, with a private message hand-delivered to one individual who died centuries ago and penned

into texts which read like legend and myth, the result that reaches us in the modern era tends to raise more questions than it can hope to answer, and to cause more problems than it can hope to resolve. Apparently the all-wise, all-knowing creator of the universe finds the present method of disseminating its word to be preferable to a direct approach, but for reasons that we will likely never know.

### Needlessly Limiting Possible Alternatives

A common apologetic tactic is the artificial restriction of available options for consideration on some point of contention to only two alternatives, one preferred by the apologist and the other presented as too implausible to be taken very seriously. Even though such strategem typically trades on superficial understanding of the issues involved, the intention behind such a ploy is not only to score an easy victory for theism, but also to belittle any alternative to theism (and any would-be adherents by implication). In [Basic Contra-Theism](#), I encountered this proclivity for simplistic bifurcation as I considered the common apologetic treatment of the "origin" of the universe as "a choice between self-generating matter and an intelligent Creator." It seems that apologists are so accustomed to thinking in terms of square circles vs. circular squares, that non-believers should be mindful not to fall into the same booby-traps. For we see this propensity to bifurcate in an article called [A Closer Look at the Subjective Visions Theory](#), to which Jason linked for support. Its author writes:

according to the 'subjective visions' theory, those that saw Jesus did so within the context of a dream, vision, etc., but Jesus did not really appear. In other words, it was the result of the mind playing tricks, or a hallucination.

Of course, the causality behind the experiences that Paul and other alleged eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus need not have been either hallucinations or "the mind playing tricks." An individual can have what some might term 'visions' as a result of a heightened, frenzied state, akin to what many charismatics and Pentecostals sometimes experience when brought to a trance-like state in which a subject may be heard babbling a "nonsense language" (so-called "speaking in tongues"). An individual can in fact be encouraged to "let go" of himself and be "taken over" by what are supposed to be "spirit forces." The subject may not experience actual hallucinations, but may be expected that the exhilaration thus experienced has religious significance. Since the details of what Paul's 500 witnesses actually experienced are nowhere given, it is possible that the individuals he had in mind underwent a kind of mass trance-like episode. Earl Doherty points out that the wording Paul uses in I Cor. 15 suggests precisely this:

In a study of the meaning of "*ophthe*" (the 'seeing/appearance' word in the Greek), *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. V, p. 358) points out that in this type of context the word is a technical term for being "in the presence of revelation as such, without reference to the nature of its perception." In other words, the 'seeing' may not refer to actual sensory or mental perception. It may simply be "an encounter with the risen Lord who reveals himself... they experienced his presence." If what we have here is more a sensing of Christ's "presence" than a full-blown hallucinatory vision, this would make it easier to accept that so many individuals and even a large group could imagine they had undergone such an experience. It is far from clear, therefore, that Paul in 15:5-8 is describing anything more than a series of occasions on which many people, most of them within a group already formed for a religious purpose, felt a conviction of faith in the spiritual Christ, experiences which took on heightened significance with the passage of time. (2)

In fact, from the scant description that we are given, Paul's 500 witnesses could very well have experienced the same kind of delusion nurtured by indulged religious hysteria not unlike the kind experienced by Marshall Applewhite and his Heaven's Gate followers. Applewhite was so certain there was a space ship hiding in a comet's tail, that he happily poisoned himself so that he could be resurrected on board the otherwise undetectable craft and be carried off into paradise to live happily ever after. The familiar ring of this kind of sold-out certainty concerning a set of ideas that are clearly absurd is due to its sounding for some 2,000 years now. Whether this delusion is constituted by "subjective visions" or by something else, can certainly be debated. But the dubiousness of such claims cannot. Was Marshall Applewhite hallucinating? I don't know, but I tend to doubt that he was since his devotion to his nonsense was sustained over a long period of time. Do I believe that the space ship he said was hiding in a comet's tail really existed? No, I don't. Do I believe that a universe-creating deity "became flesh and dwelt among us" some 20 centuries ago, only to be nailed to a cross and resurrected back to life three days later, and later wafted up to a magic kingdom above our heads some place? No, I don't.

Christian believers have a vested interest in rejecting out of hand explanations that do not affirm their predetermined religious commitments, only then to concoct occasionally plausible-sounding objections to any alternative hypothesis that's been proposed by a non-believer. The problem is not restricted to their inability to explain how they could possibly know for certain what was going through the apostle Paul's mind so as to confidently

rule out psychological disorders as a key or contributing factor behind his claims; it also includes the implausible outcomes that their objections lead to when applied as principles in determining the truth of rival claims of a religious nature. I'm referring here to the unintended consequences that are likely to arise from the implications generated by the objections apologists raise against criticism, as well as to the ingenuity they must summon up in order to craft a host of qualifications that are enlisted to stave off unwelcome applications of the same. For instance, apologists will insist that the mystical claims in Paul's letters do not indicate psychological disorders, while the belief that a space ship hiding in the tail of a comet and waiting to scoop up believers' souls after they imbibe a lethal cocktail, is clearly whacko. O what a tangled web they weave...

## Rival Miracle Claims

There is no doubt that religious believers reserve for themselves the right to pick and choose which miracle reports they will accept. But this privileged selectivity does not reduce to the application of rational principles. Non-Catholic Christians, for instance, while blindly affirming the stable-mindedness of the anonymous five hundred witnesses mentioned in I Cor. 15, typically dismiss the eyewitness testimony of the estimated 70,000 or so who attest to [the Miracle of the Sun](#), seen outside Fatima, Portugal in October 1917 by 140 times the number that the New Testament claims to have spotted the resurrected Jesus. And unlike Paul's claim to so many eyewitnesses in I Cor. 15, in the case of the Miracle of the Sun we have actual names of witnesses who were present at the miracle, such as the attending newspaper reporter Avelino de Almeida, and Dr. Joseph Garrett, Professor of Natural Sciences at Coimbra University.

Another Halluci-Not and prolific writer of [sweet nothings](#), Steve Hays has sought to preempt the use of what many take to be well-documented [Marian Apparitions](#) as counter-examples to the Halluci-not thesis. When attempting to counter the proposal that Paul's experience of Jesus was visionary in nature, the apologist exhibits a strong tendency to take Acts as actual history:

This fails to distinguish between an objective vision or appearance and a subjective vision or appearance... Even in the case of the Damascus road encounter, this was a public event, not a private event, for Paul's escort were also witnesses to this audiovisual event. It's a spatiotemporal phenomenon.

We must not forget that the book of Acts itself puts the words "heavenly vision" into Paul's mouth when it portrays him as recounting his conversion experience to King Agrippa (Acts 26:19). Thus it is up to the author of Acts to clarify whether his story's purported experience by Paul was "an objective vision or appearance" or "a subjective vision or appearance." The details given in Acts are too scant and inconsistent with themselves to allow us to make this clarification with much confidence. Naturally the apologist does not want it to be considered subjective, but in [the cartoon universe of theism](#), everything is ultimately subjective anyway. Steve may say to me that, since I am persuaded that, like the gospels, Acts is more legend than history in the first place, that I therefore cannot rely on Acts 26:19 to support the visionary proposal. But if Acts is more legend than history, then the stories of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus are brought into serious doubt anyway. As Earl Doherty points out in response to Gary Habermas' statements to Lee Strobel on page 234 of *The Case for Christ*, we actually have in the New Testament "a wealth of invention" (Doherty) where Habermas chooses to see "a wealth of sightings of Jesus."

Each writer sat down to provide 'proofs' of Jesus' rising in the flesh," explains Doherty, "and they all quite naturally come up with anecdotes of their own, which best explains their incompatible variety. (3)

Anxious to dispel the subjective implications of phrases such as "heavenly vision" used by Acts to describe Paul's sighting of Jesus, Steve exclaims:

There is also an obvious difference between saying the same Jesus appeared to Paul and the twelve, and saying that Jesus appeared the same way to Paul and the twelve. Even if the Damascus road encounter involved a different mode of presentation, this does not imply an identical mode of presentation for Easter.

But does Paul ever distinguish between the nature of his sighting of Jesus and the sighting of Jesus he says these others enjoyed? On the contrary, it remains ambiguous and unspecified, thus allowing believers to uncritically read gospel details into what they read in Paul. Apologists need to understand that, while they want to put the onus on the New Testament's critics, the onus is really on the New Testament itself to shore up the very areas where they claim its critics habitually default. Steve claims that

the whole point of this chapter is to repeatedly stress the physicality of the glorified body

even though the chapter nowhere uses the word 'physical' (at least not in any of my translations), not to mention the fact that this position needs to be reconciled with what we read in I Peter 3:18, which speaks of Jesus as "being put

to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." It is hard to read this statement as coming from one of Jesus' own disciples who, according to the gospels, met face to face with a physically resurrected Jesus.

Steve may counter that Paul spoke of Jesus having been resurrected in the flesh, but Paul himself indicates that there are different kinds of flesh, that "all flesh is not the same flesh" (I Cor. 15:39), which leaves open the possibility that Paul may have reserved the use of the term 'flesh' in some circumstances to refer to some spiritual, non-physical "substance" which is to be distinguished from the tissue, bone and organs of living organisms. So this is at best inconclusive. Moreover, Paul insists that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50), which suggests that the physical bodies we have are not analogous to the resurrected bodies that believers should expect to awaken in once they are resurrected. All these issues point to just some of the many serious ambiguities that plague the New Testament record, thus inviting endless contests between conflicting interpretations and wide-ranging speculations. (I'm glad these aren't my problems.) To be sure, there have been many efforts over the centuries to codify an authorized interpretation, but this endeavor is about as effective as trying to harvest wheat on the dark side of the moon; and no matter how much effort is applied to this ambition, the early record is still what it is: laden with incompatible variances and unyielding ambiguities.

Concerning reported sightings of the Virgin Mary, Steve hedges when considering the question "Do we reject Marian sightings?" giving no firm answer one way or another. He says that

some reports are more credible than others because some reporters are more credible than others.

I agree: some reports are more credible than others, and some reporters are more credible than others. But here we might inquire as to what criteria Steve consults in determining whether a report is "more credible than others," or in determining when one reporter is "more credible than others." Obviously the writers of the New Testament meet his criteria, while what he has written strongly suggests that his contemporaries (or near contemporaries) who have claimed to have been visited by the Virgin Mary, do not meet his criteria. What are those criteria? Heaven knows! But he does give some indication here:

After all, how do they know what Mary looks like? Jesus was seen by his contemporaries. But no one today is a contemporary of the Virgin Mary. No one knows what she used to look like when she was walking the earth two thousand years ago. Any "recognition" of Mary would be based, not on a knowledge of the historical individual, but on Catholic art and iconography. Mary a la Raphael.

If it is valid to ask how those who claim to have experienced a visit from the Virgin Mary "know what Mary looks like," we should also ask: How did Saul of Tarsus know what Jesus looked like? Steve says that "Jesus was seen by his contemporaries," but this may be read as saying far too much. That one is a contemporary of another, does not indicate that either has seen the other or knows what the other looks like. For instance, both Steve and I are contemporaries, but I would never be able to pick him out from a crowd. Nor would he be able to do the same with me. Today we have cameras which record faithful images of our physical features, such that I could pass my picture to Steve via e-mail, and then he very well might be able to pick me out of a crowd. But cameras were not around in 1st century Palestine, so Jesus' "contemporaries" (an expression which takes the gospels as history) didn't even have this benefit. The "no one knows what she used to look like" approach is certainly applicable in considering claims involving inanimate objects, such as that the burnt markings on a tortilla are the image of Mary. But a sighting of the Virgin Mary is usually claimed to involve an encounter with the real McCoy, though perhaps only in spirit form, which can enable direct communication, sometimes even dialogue (such as we find in Acts' versions of Paul's firsthand encounter with Jesus). And if the apparition *identifies* itself as the Virgin Mary (just as whatever it was that appeared to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus allegedly identified itself as Jesus), then there's no need for face recognition based on prior knowledge of "what she used to look like when she was walking the earth two thousand years ago" in the first place. The apparition could very well have introduced itself as the Virgin Mary, and the person experiencing the vision, whether subjective or otherwise, might very well be prone to believing it.

Regardless, Steve makes it clear that he is committed to taking the New Testament - including significantly the gospels - as historically accurate on its say so when he writes:

We have more than the Easter appearances to go by. We also have everything that went before. Easter Sunday comes at the tail-end of the Gospels.

How these apologists' belief in the bible amounts to anything better than "it's true because I want it to be true," is not at all clear. But it is clear enough that Steve has the gospels in mind when he asserts that

this additional biographical material gives us a chance to become acquainted with the apostolic witnesses to the

Resurrection.

But what the witnesses that Paul speaks about in I Cor. 15? For instance, what "biographical material" do we have in the case of the 500 who Paul claims saw the risen Jesus? Even though this is among the earliest post-resurrection sightings of Jesus reported in the New Testament, Paul mentions it *only in passing*, not even telling us who any of these 500 might have been or where the sighting may have occurred. Apparently this doesn't matter, because the gospel details are read into the accounts we read in Paul's and other early letters, such that "by the time we arrive at the Resurrection, we know a good deal about the character and quality of the reporters." Were I to take so much for granted in my criticism of Christianity, apologists would try to make a field day of me.

Steve says:

This is not at all the same thing as comparing a reported sighting of Jesus with reported sighting of Mary, where you have two isolated reports without any supplementary background material to help us size up the reporters. To compare the first Easter with Lourdes or Fatima or other suchlike is comparing the incomparable.

Indeed, the sighting of Mary at Fatima is so better documented than the unattested and conflicting reports that we find in the New Testament's epistolary record, that the two are essentially incomparable.

In a last-ditch effort to discount sightings of the Virgin Mary, Steve asserts:

The Resurrection is a purposeful event. Seeing Mary is a grilled cheese sandwich is not.

This merely puts the onus to prove a negative squarely on Steve's shoulders. Otherwise he risks asserting from his own ignorance while standing on New Testament invention. It is not difficult to suppose that the individual(s) who saw Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich would agree that their sighting was not a purposeful event. If one can suppose that turning water into wine or causing a fig tree to wither is sufficiently purposeful for an incarnated deity to take trouble to effect, one can with as much imagination consider that an apparition in burn marks, water stains, tree knots, etc., to be just as purposeful. A mind inebriated on religious faith has already stepped onto the wild-card grounds of make-believe. Surely if apologists had something more substantial than special pleading and rash dismissals, they'd be screaming it instead of these paltry offerings.

### **The Questionable Value of Purported Eyewitness Testimony**

It is important to keep in mind that, in many cases of eyewitness testimony reported in the New Testament, we do not have this testimony from those who are said to have been the eyewitnesses themselves. The reports are at best secondhand (if not further removed) even to those who recorded them. In fact, in most cases we don't even have their names! For instance, in Acts' stories of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul is said to have been travelling with an unspecified number of companions. Who these men were and why they, too, were not converted as was Paul, we are not told. The story seems to include them only so that it can be claimed that Paul was accompanied by witnesses to the same event, thus serving as an element deliberately included (perhaps invented?) to anticipate the charge of hallucination, for they serve no other purpose in the story.

Would we accept stories of such supernatural character if we were told that they have taken place in our time? Suppose a woman takes the stand in defense of her husband who is being tried for a murder which took place 20 years earlier. The known facts of the case are that there is a victim whose death clearly resulted from foul play, that a blood-stained knife has the accused's fingerprints all over it, that there is a receipt for the purchase of the blood-stained knife signed by the accused, that the accused had strong motive to eliminate the victim, etc. The prosecution is confident that they have an airtight case against the accused. But when the wife takes the stand, she explains to the court that she was present at the scene of the murder when the victim met his violent demise, but that the perpetrator was in fact not her husband. On the contrary, she tells the court that a vampire bat had flown into the room where the victim was killed and turned into a dark-haired man wearing a long, flowing cape. The caped man then walked over to the accused and grabbed the murder weapon, which was in the accused's possession at the time, then strutted over to the victim and stabbed him right into the heart. As the victim lay dying in a pool of his own blood, the caped man turned back into a bat and flew back out the window, never to be seen again. The members of the audience in the courtroom are aghast at what they had just heard, and naturally find the witness's testimony unbelievable. But as she is cross-examined, she insists that her testimony is true, and tells the court that there were more than 500 other witnesses to these very events. Thus the sighting of the vampire was therefore, as Steve says of Paul's sighting of Jesus on the road to Damascus, "a public event, not a private event," and therefore not dismissable as an hallucination or psychotic episode. Of course, this was 20 years ago, so she does not have the

details as to the identity and present whereabouts of these unnamed witnesses to this amazing event; she even indicates that some have already "fallen asleep," which the court is to understand as meaning deceased. When asked if any of these 500 witnesses had names, she assures the court that they in fact had names, such as (and I quote) "[Bob, Nick, Dan, Pete, Frank, Eddie, and Arnold](#)." She goes on to list the names of no fewer than 12 of the more than 500 witnesses she insists were at the scene of the crime when it happened. So her story is clearly on a par with what we find in the New Testament relating to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, with the added benefit of a live witness who can be cross-examined. What do you suppose that further cross-examination will uncover holes in her story? What if we had the benefit of being able to cross-examine Paul and other NT writers on the stories that they told? From our vantage, we will never have this opportunity, but the Halluci-Not thesis is driven by the dogma that we are to believe what we read in the New Testament on its own say so. Critical thinking need not apply.

Now here's the question to ponder, and I'm sure it wasn't hard to see it coming: If you were a member of the jury in this trial, how would you evaluate this woman's testimony? Would you think that what she told the court accurately reflects what actually happened at the time of the murder? Or, would you suppose that she

On Jason Engwer's reasoning, we cannot suppose that hallucination was involved, for

Subjective visions, whether we would call them hallucinations or something else, would be experiences within an individual's mind, not shared experiences. While it would be possible for people to have similar hallucinations around the same time, we wouldn't expect the details to be identical.

But since we do not have any testimony from the 500 or so witnesses that the accused's wife claims were present at the scene of the crime, we have no confirming indicators of which details those 500 or so witnesses would report, had we the opportunity to consult them. Thus we would not know whether their experience was shared or dissimilar. Such factors do not seem to concern Jason, for he continues:

If some people lost at sea begin having hallucinations, it's possible that they would all think that they're seeing a ship, but it's highly unlikely that all of them would think that the ship is the same color, is at the same distance, is traveling at the same speed, has the same markings on the side of it, etc.

Similarly, in his blog [Hallucinations?](#) Jason quotes Gary Habermas:

Let us suppose that a group of twenty people is sailing across the Atlantic Ocean when the ship sinks. After floating on the ocean for three days with no sleep, food, or fresh water, and with the strongest desire for rescue, one member points to a large ship on the horizon that he is hallucinating. Will the others see it? Probably not, since hallucinations are experienced only in the mind of the individual. However, let us suppose that three others in the group are so desperately hopeful of rescue that their minds deceive them into believing that they see the ship as well. As their imaginary ship approaches, will they all see the same hull number? If they do, it is time for the entire group to begin yelling at the top of their lungs because the ship is real. (4)

This is all well and good, at least in the case where details such as the color of the vessel, the rate at which and direction in which it may traveling, its hull number, even its port of call, might be reported by those experiencing the hallucination so that they can be compared. But in the case of Paul's unnamed 500 or so witnesses, we do not have their testimony, so we do not know what they would report if they in fact existed and could be questioned. That's just the point: this is all a secondhand claim by Paul, with no references, no details, not even an indication of time or place! So even if this were a case of hysteria-induced mass hallucination (which the apologists have not proven impossible), we are not given any details as to what they might have experienced, so if there were discrepancies in their experience, they are omitted from Paul's secondhand (or further removed) report. In other words, we do not have firsthand testimony from these 500 witnesses, so the question of their uniformity is unanswerable on what we are given in the New Testament. For all we are given, some of Paul's 500 might have seen a Jesus who had long hair, suffered from chronic acne and smelled of urine, while others might have seen a Jesus who was balding, bearded and smelled of fish. Still others might have seen a pristine Jesus, glowing with white light and surrounded by singing angels. Habermas' objection is thus insufficient to put the believer's worries to rest, because the scenario he uses to inform it is not sufficiently analogous to the situation recorded in the New Testament.

"...it's highly unlikely that..."

My attention is often piqued when a Christian apologist insinuates that a proposal under consideration is deemed "unlikely," such as when Jason writes:

It seems unlikely that a group of 11 people or a group of more than 500 people would have hallucinations of Jesus at the same time without eventually discovering that they had been mistaken.

Of course, we should not expect any New Testament writer to have come forward to correct the record if in fact any of these alleged eyewitnesses did discover that they were mistaken. But there is an even larger concern here. While we are told that coincidental mass hallucination "seems unlikely," this is stated in the context of a defense of a belief system which tells us that "all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26), that the universe was created by an act of consciousness, that dead people rose from their graves (cf. Mt. 27:52-53), that serpents and donkeys and burning bushes speak in human languages, that water was turned into wine by a wish, etc. To assess the likelihood of some event or occurrence under consideration, a thinker, whether he realizes it or not, is making reference to fundamental premises that he holds about the world in general. As some apologists might say, he is "invoking his worldview presuppositions." Greg Bahnsen explains:

presuppositions have the greatest authority in one's thinking, being treated as your least negotiable belief and being granted the highest immunity to revision.(5)

What 'seems likely' to me is that the apologist is not mindfully conscious of his own worldview's basic premises and their implications as they concern the issues on which he makes such pronouncements. He is torn between the premises of the position he wants to defend, and premises he employs in that position's defense: on the one hand, the Christian's position affirms a fanciful, cartoon-like view of the universe where anything the ruling consciousness wishes is not only possible, but the very standard of reality as such; while on the other hand he seeks to dismiss alternatives to his paradigm on the basis that certain elements of those alternatives "seem unlikely." There's a fundamental inconsistency here, one that usually runs along undetected by the believer as he insists on a fantasy while illicitly borrowing from a reality-based worldview. On the basis of my worldview's fundamentals, I can consistently suppose that it is "highly unlikely" that a group of individuals will have the same hallucination, complete with shared uniform details, and for reasons not unlike those which Jason himself has mentioned. For instance, an hallucination is not only an individual and private experience, its distortion of what one perceives is most likely to be influenced by such an enormous number of imperceptible factors that it would be essentially unrepeatable. But if I held to the view that the universe is run by a magic spirit who choreographs all events in human history according to a divine "plan," on what grounds could I confidently say that uniform hallucinatory experiences shared by even enormous numbers of human beings is either "unlikely" or impossible? Blank out.

In the final analysis, the proposal that hallucinations or other subjective factors played a role in the development of early Christian accounts, is not as implausible or "unlikely" as these apologists would like to believe. The objections raised against the possibility of hallucinatory causes behind the alleged eyewitness testimony in the epistles of Paul, for instance, rely on numerous questionable and sometimes indefensible assumptions, a tendency to read too much into what is actually given in the New Testament, the failure to distinguish between detailed firsthand account and secondhand or further removed testimony wholly lacking in details, and other hallmarks of over-anxious reasoning which frequently accompanies defenses of religious worldviews. Most ironically, we are told that it is "highly unlikely" that mass hallucinations may have played a role in Christianity's beginnings, while being assured that the New Testament's fanciful, myth-like stories are not only true, but divinely inspired truth, fit to serve as the bedrock of our perspective on life and reality as such. One can only say: May the Force be with you!

Notes:

(1) Some of the recent blog articles fueling this controversy include:

[The Visionary Basis of Christianity](#), by Matthew (8 May 06)

[God Fought Monsters In Order To Create The Universe: How John Loftus Reads The Bible](#), by Jason Engwer (8 May 06)

[The Hallucination Theory: A Skeptical Delusion](#), by Jason Engwer (10 May 06)

[Hallucinations](#), by Jason Engwer (11 Apr 06)

(2) *Challenging the Verdict: A Cross-Examination of Lee Strobel's "The Case for Christ,"* pp. 253-254n.88.

(3) *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

(4) *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 106.

(5) [Van Til's 'Presuppositionalism'](#)



by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:00 PM](#)

#### 10 Comments:

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Yet another useless and already-dealt-with post that Dawson Brainless posts.

[May 13, 2006 10:02 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Wow, Frank, you destroyed Dawson's post. I'm going to have to join your team now. How can I sign up? Do I just wait for God to 'call' me, or maybe you could put in a good word for me? Oh Jesus, save my soul! I need you Lord! Your workers, such as Frank, have done such a good job of refuting 'the world,' and I know I need to be saved now. Please help me lord Jesus! Help me!

Dawson, beware. As soon as the Lord decides to call me, and transform my soul, you will be in big trouble. With Frank as my ally, no atheist stands a chance.

I just need to get saved first....if only I could initiate this process on my own...

[May 15, 2006 1:27 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Yes, you're right, NR. Frank has demonstrated unprecedented mastery at scalding refutations, hasn't he? He really leaves all the other apologists in the dust. How does he do it?

As for initiating the process of salvation on your own, Van Til, in his autobiographical and miserably unpersuasive [Why I Believe in God](#), suggests that anyone can be saved if he wants to. When he was yet an impressionable child and scared out of his wits one night when he imagined someone approaching his bed, he turned inward to the Christian god. He writes:

**Already I had been taught to say my evening prayers. Some of the words of that prayer were to this effect: "Lord, convert me, that I may be converted." Unmindful of the paradox, I prayed that prayer that night as I had never prayed before.**

Sure sounds like he initiated this action himself. After all, no one's forcing him to pray. This surely does not strike me as the "unexpected conversion" of a St. Paul or John Calvin. Van Til begin his Christian walk as a wimpering child. Now, doesn't that inspire you?

Regards,  
Dawson

[May 15, 2006 7:31 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Thanks for your support, not reformed :)

[May 16, 2006 11:56 AM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

"Yes, you're right, NR. Frank has demonstrated unprecedented mastery at scalding refutations, hasn't he? He really leaves all the other apologists in the dust. How does he do it?"

Thank you, Dawson. It's easy, you have to first be honest in your assessments when criticizing someone. If not then your assessment isn't worth much. Thus one would be vindicated if they were to say, "Yet another useless and

already-dealt-with post that Dawson Brainless posts." I hope that helps. I'll pray for both you and not reformed.

[May 16, 2006 12:10 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Well, you know what they say: Nothing fails like prayer.

By the way (since you seem to like the term), since the Christian god is said to be immaterial, it must be literally brainless, since brains are material things. Thus, referring to me as "Brainless" (with a captial 'B' mind you) is like equating me to a deity.

Regards,  
Dawson

[May 16, 2006 4:41 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

*Well, you know what they say: Nothing fails like prayer.*

Well, the Bible doesn't teach that. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that your prayers may indeed fail. Nevertheless, I will still pray fro you and not reformed.

*By the way (since you seem to like the term), since the Christian god is said to be immaterial, it must be literally brainless, since brains are material things.*

You're right, God doesn't have a physical brain. However He is still omniscient.

*Thus, referring to me as "Brainless" (with a captial 'B' mind you) is like equating me to a deity.*

I'm comparing you to a deity but not equating you to a deity. For instance, my mousepad does not have a physical brain but I wouldn't say that the mousepad is equatable to God. However my comment of you being "brainless" wasn't meant to be literal but figurative. LOL, unfortunately you were too brainless to figure that out!

[May 17, 2006 12:37 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Frank: "In fact, the Bible makes it clear that your prayers may indeed fail."

I don't have any prayers, Frank. And, what's more, I don't need any. Prayer is for those who have given up on themselves and do not want to take responsibility for their own choices and actions. Those who do not give up on themselves and who do not seek to evade moral responsibility, have no need for the pretense of prayer.

Frank: "You're right, God doesn't have a physical brain."

Then Christians worship something that is literally brainless. Thanks for making this clear.

Frank: "However He is still omniscient."

The Christian imagination is strong with you.

Frank: "my comment of you being "brainless" wasn't meant to be literal but figurative."

No, it was meant to be inflammatory, and you resort to it in place of genuine intellect. You demonstrate repeatedly that you have nothing better than childish epithets, and that's probably because you operate on a childish level, as I pointed out [here](#). If you think your comments have any hope of being persuasive against my position, you are indeed more delusional than I had supposed to date.

**Now, Frank, your ridicule and insults are unproductive and unwelcome. I have tolerated them in the past, but you will find that this will change. If you find that you cannot interact with maturity and respect, you will have to find**

somewhere else to post your graffiti. Please take this in consideration before commenting on my blog again.

Regards,  
Dawson

[May 17, 2006 3:38 AM](#)

[Matthew](#) said...

Dawson,

I am pleased to have seen a response to Mr. Engwer's critique of my post about "visions" on John Loftus' blog. I notice that your blog seems to be devoted to incinerating presuppositionalism. I am just beginning to learn in greater detail about this. I have read some cursory material on presuppositional apologetics and I'd like to dig deeper as time permits.

I am curious about one thing though: I am an atheist and I consider myself an evidentialist in that I consider the supernatural to be possible but quite unlikely given the lack of extraordinary evidence and I agree that philosophical naturalism is probably the most rational position I can take given the evidence from history, science, and philosophy that I have studied so far. I am wondering about "Presuppositional Naturalism". Is such a thing possible? Is such a position rational or even defensible?

I'd like your thoughts on it if you have the time and interest in responding.

Matthew Green, author of "The Visionary Basis for Christianity" on 'Debunking Christianity'

[May 18, 2006 1:39 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Matthew,

Thank you for stopping by my blog and leaving your comment.

You wrote: "I am pleased to have seen a response to Mr. Engwer's critique of my post about 'visions' on John Loftus' blog."

Yes, there were a number of errors in the Triablogue postings regarding this topic, and when I had listed a few of them in an offline venting to John Loftus, he urged me to post them. The Triabloggers quickly dogpiled after I had published my say on the matter, apparently thinking that I am defending the hallucination theory when in fact I made it a point in my initial paragraph to indicate that I am not doing this per se. Perhaps I was not clear enough in stating that I see no reason to limit our alternatives to theories such as that the early Christians suffered mass hallucination, that Jesus faked his death (the so-called 'swoon' theory), that the body was stolen, etc. To say that I am confident that there is a much better explanation to the accounts that we find in the New Testament, one which does not resort to the irrationality of supernaturalism, would be somewhat of an understatement of my position. It is apparently my confidence that Christianity is false that likely arouses apologists. At any rate, the theories I mention here (hallucination, swoon, stealing Jesus' body) all grant to the New Testament record much more than it warrants. Since I know of no good reasons to tailor explanations of Christianity's beginnings in ways that make it a priority to come to grips with the New Testament's accounts on orthodox Christianity's own terms, and since I know of many good reasons to do otherwise, I understand that there's a much stronger case to be made against the New Testament than those provided by hallucination, swoon and body-snatching theories. My point in my present article was to show how the route of defense chosen by the Triablogue apologists is insufficient to rule out precisely what they're objecting against. ([Jason concedes](#) that the conclusions I've given so far are "not impossible.") In their hasty dogpile to respond to me (a fire needs to be quenched immediately or the whole house is at dire risk), the Triabloggers did pose some good questions, but questions coupled with question-begging arguments couched against the background hum of condescension and ridicule, are not the best formulae for refutation. I have drafted comprehensive rejoinders to the Triabloggers' responses to my piece, though I am still debating whether or not to post them as I suspect it will only serving to fan the flames of their resentment. Besides, since the hallucination theory is not my angle, I don't want to spend much time on it. In the meanwhile, I am focusing my investigation on a few of the non-Pauline epistles, to see how credible they are as testimony on behalf of orthodox Christianity. (Judging by what many NT scholars have pointed out about these sources, I'd be pretty concerned if I were a

Christian.)

You wrote: "I notice that your blog seems to be devoted to incinerating presuppositionalism. I am just beginning to learn in greater detail about this. I have read some cursory material on presuppositional apologetics and I'd like to dig deeper as time permits."

When it comes to presuppositionalism or other types of apologetics, I strongly suggest that critics review apologetic sources firsthand, so that they have familiarity with these defenses in the words of their promoters. You will find numerous articles by presuppositionalists at the following sites:

[Monergism.com apologetics jump page](#)

[Covenant Media Foundation's free articles](#)

[vantil.info](#)

Here's a link to [The Transcendental Nature of Presuppositional Argument](#), which you may find interesting as well. This is my transcription of section 7.4 of Greg Bahnsen's book *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, pp. 496-529 (typos of course are mine).

You wrote: "I am curious about one thing though: I am an atheist and I consider myself an evidentialist in that I consider the supernatural to be possible but quite unlikely given the lack of extraordinary evidence and I agree that philosophical naturalism is probably the most rational position I can take given the evidence from history, science, and philosophy that I have studied so far. I am wondering about "Presuppositional Naturalism". Is such a thing possible? Is such a position rational or even defensible?"

At the moment I could only speculate as to what "presuppositional naturalism" may be (as with many labels, it could be used to refer to a variety of positions), and without more specifics, any judgment of such a beast being rational would be premature. But I will mention this in case it's helpful. One of the distinguishing characteristics of presuppositionalism is the attention it seeks to direct on those fundamental premises which provide a pretext to evidential investigations, especially if those investigations have to do with alleged events in the distant past. I think this focus is important because, well before we get to considering what may have happened in the remote past, we have already accumulated a sum of knowledge sourced in the immediate basis of our present existence. We are aware of things in the present tense, and this very fact itself implies numerous fundamental principles that should be identified explicitly and understood rather than left implicit only to risk being jettisoned in preference for less stable, even dubious assumptions, simply because they were not properly identified and understood. In other words, we should be ready to identify our starting point, and understand whether or not it meets the proper criteria of a starting point. As one familiar with the importance of an ultimate starting point, I make it a point to question what the Christian might think his starting point may be. Of course, once a critic of Christianity has declared his starting point, he should not be surprised when apologists aim to distort its content in order to make it vulnerable to their "interaction" with it. See for instance my 4 Oct. 05 blog [Probing Mr. Manata's Poor Understanding of the Axioms](#). (I do appreciate Paul Manata's habit of enumerating his points; it helps to separating the strands of incoherence that pour forth in his writing.) This is why, in my present article, I found it important to point out the cognitive dissonance between the affirmation on the one hand that mass hallucinations are "highly unlikely" and, on the other, the endorsement of a worldview which asserts the existence of invisible magic beings which can manipulate the objects in the universe (including human agents) at will and without the limitations of external constraints (a view which, if consistently followed, could only mean that one has no idea what may be likely or unlikely, since whatever happens depends on the ruling consciousness' unpredictable whims). The upshot is that the apologist has to borrow from my reality-based worldview in order to defend his fantasy-based worldview. This is known as the fallacy of the stolen concept, and it invalidates such defenses. (Meanwhile, [Steve says](#) that my "appeal to a 'reality-based' worldview is question-begging," only to ask "What is real?" and "How do we know what is real?" His answer to this latter question is limited to "only two or three ways: by intuition, or observation, or revelation," giving the faculty of reason short-shrift. From this oversight, he nowhere explains how an "appeal to a 'reality-based' worldview is question-begging." This just confirms my overall point.)

I am curious, Matthew, what makes you think that "the supernatural" is possible? What exactly is being referred to by the term "the supernatural," and how does one distinguish what he calls "supernatural" from something he's merely imagining?

Regards,

Dawson

[May 19, 2006 7:54 AM](#)