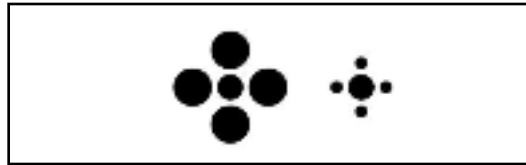


Human Expectation and Divine Action

Our expectations have incredible influence on how we perceive events. How many of you, I wonder, have had a positive result from taking cough medicine? Did you expect to find relief from your sore throat because you had heard the ad say, "Tastes awful, but it works!" I'm sure you've all heard of the placebo effect -- the idea that your expectation that there is some medicinal value in a pill you're about to swallow actually helps you get better. Well, a review of studies on cough medicines concluded that 85% of their effectiveness comes from this placebo effect and only 15% comes from the medicine itself. Here are some other facts about the placebo effect: if you pay more for the pills, even if they only contain sugar, you are more likely to get better. If the pills are large, or if they have a name brand that you recognize, or if you have to take two instead of just one, you are more likely to improve.

Let's look at a simple expectation that we might have because we live in an ordered world:

Which of the center dots is larger -- the one on the right or the one on the left?



In one recent test, psychologists asked 32 volunteers to sample strawberry yogurt. To make sure they based their judgments purely on taste, they insisted that the lights be turned out, then they gave the volunteers chocolate yogurt. 19 out of the 32 praised the strawberry flavour. The word "strawberry" so influenced their expectations that they were unable to taste the chocolate flavour in their mouths.

What happens when we don't have expectations but must rely on what only one of our senses tells us? One person used to invite customers to guess which soft drink they were drinking. The 3 glasses contained either Pepsi, 7-Up or ginger ale and the person would take a sip from each glass while eyes were closed. It was all sugar and carbonation and they couldn't distinguish flavours at all.

I find it interesting to think about the disciples' belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. And I wonder to myself if it is remotely possible that these men were so convinced that Jesus would rise again that, a few days or weeks after His horrible execution, they began to believe that He had risen, that they had seen Him and that He had spoken with them. Was the expectation of resurrection so powerful that it made resurrection real to them, even though it never really happened, as today's skeptics would argue? I mean, the human mind can play incredible tricks on us ... and these people would surely have wanted Jesus to be alive again. Was that enough?

A hundred years ago, it was quite popular among skeptics to promote the idea that Jesus' disciples were under such stress that they hallucinated an appearance of Jesus. A hundred years later, hardly anyone is willing to risk the embarrassment of defending that position. Why? Because now we know something about hallucinations and realize that this can't apply to the experiences of the disciples.

Candidates to become U.S. Navy SEALs undergo intense training before they are

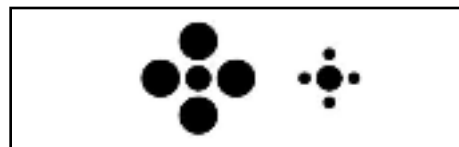
accepted, including enduring something called “Hell Week”. During that week the candidates are put through intense exercises and experience extreme stress on only a total of 3-5 hours of sleep. As fatigue and sleep deprivation set in, they start to experience hallucinations. Some who were interviewed said that most of these hallucinations occurred when they as a team were paddling in a raft out in the ocean. One of them saw an octopus surface and start waving at him. Another saw a train coming across the ocean right towards their raft and a third saw that they were paddling right towards a large wall. When they reported what they were seeing to the others in the raft, no one else saw the same hallucination, even though all were under the same stress and sharing the same experience on the raft.

Jesus appeared to all the disciples, gathered together, at the same time. It is unreasonable to suppose that this was a shared hallucination because hallucinations are not shared. But there are several other reasons for rejecting this theory as a failed one:

1. The empty tomb. Even if a few disciples hallucinated an appearance of the risen Jesus, this would not account for the fact that the tomb was empty.
2. Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, was not in any frame of mind that would create the conditions necessary for a hallucination. He hated Christians, was persecuting them, did not believe in Jesus’ resurrection, but felt that God had called him to crack down on them.
3. From what we know of James the brother of Jesus, he was a very devout Jew who believed that his brother was deluded, was a false Messiah who had been cursed by God through His crucifixion, and was, like Saul, or Paul, one of the least likely persons to experience this kind of hallucination, an appearance of his brother risen from the dead. Yet James went on to become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and later a martyr for his faith. Gary Habermas, in his book The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus, says that the hallucination theory has probably been refuted more than any other.

But when we started on this topic, we talked about illusions and the immediate result of falling for an illusion is that we can quickly fall into delusion. Let’s look at the circle size illusion again. You may be convinced

that the centre circle on the right is larger than the centre circle on the left, but once you have a dozen people each



measure the diameter of each circle and tell you that they are exactly the same size, you should admit that the illusion fooled you. If you can’t admit it, then you become deluded. A delusion is a false belief held with the conviction that it is true, in spite of evidence that invalidates its truth. An illusion, like the one in the diagram, is a distorted perception of something that really is there. A hallucination is a false perception -- you think you see something that really is not there. A delusion is a false belief. A man who has attended his wife’s funeral, has her death certificate in his hand and can no longer see her or hear her voice, yet still believes that she is alive, is deluded.

What evidence do we have that the disciples who claimed they saw a resurrected

Jesus were not deluded? Maybe you heard about Marshall Applewhite of the Church of Venus who committed suicide with 38 followers in 1997, believing that a spaceship hiding behind the Hale-Bopp comet would pick them up after the event. Could one of the disciples, maybe Peter, have convinced the others of Jesus' resurrection and then led the movement to establish the Christian church? The same problems arise as the problems that undermined hallucinations:

1. How do you account for the empty tomb? Peter wasn't the only one to visit the tomb.
2. How do you account for the conversion of a Jewish skeptic like Jesus' brother James?
3. How do you account for the conversion of the antagonist of the church, Saul of Tarsus?
4. What evidence do we have that the disciples were so willing to believe something that defied logic, something they held to be incredible? Does that description fit the personality of Thomas, the doubter? Does that description fit Matthew, the former tax-collector? There is nothing in the backgrounds or personality traits of these followers of Jesus that makes the delusion theory likely.

Some modern skeptics have raised the idea of visions as explaining the resurrection, particularly pointing to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus as being a vision that he then shared with others which became part of the myth of resurrection that was then retold by the disciples. But neither in Acts 9, when Luke describes Paul's conversion, nor in Acts 22 where Paul tells the angry mob how he came to follow Jesus, nor in Acts 26 where he makes his defense to King Agrippa -- in none of those descriptions can the term "vision" be applied because a vision is a personal thing, something that is given to only one person, while each of the three accounts in Acts describes the Damascus Road experience as something that those with Paul either heard or saw. Not that they saw or heard all that Paul did, but they heard or saw something; they saw a light, they heard a sound. It's not a vision.

Plus, the vision theory doesn't explain the empty tomb, doesn't explain how James could have been converted or the number of group appearances of the risen Jesus -- it fails on a number of counts.

There is a brain malfunction called "conversion disorder" that produces symptoms in the person such as severe pain. What if Paul suddenly had some kind of profound reaction to what he was doing in dragging followers of Jesus off to prison? What if he had a neurological break that caused him to see a bright light and hear a voice? There are so many problems with this theory, including the fact that Paul didn't fit the profile of a person likely to experience conversion disorder, it requires a complex series of events to take place which have the appearance of being contrived to fit the situation rather than provide a reasonable explanation . . . and we still have the empty tomb, the conversion of James, the appearances to numbers of people at the same time, and the fact that Paul would have also had to be stricken with a "messiah complex" at the same time and it's easy to write this one off as well.

Personally, I get annoyed by the endless daydreams of people who are called biblical

scholars and who have no connection to the people they write about. One critic, Evan Fales who teaches in the philosophy of religion department at the University of Iowa, has written this: "What Paul absolutely needed . . . was to legitimate a claim of independent authority . . . I would suggest that he had the vision because he needed the authority." That goes a long way towards explaining why Paul laid low for the next 14 years -- he was power hungry. And that explains why he bore up under decades of physical suffering and depriving himself of normal life pleasures - he needed to be in charge of a movement. It's weak, but he gets to teach this stuff in a university setting.

The critics of today are having to resort to this kind of quack psychology because the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is so very compelling. There is no other reasonable explanation for what happened to the disciples, and for what has taken place in the world since that first resurrection Sunday, and so something has to be invented. If I were to give more time to this topic, you would be amazed at how far people with scholarly reputations are willing to go in an attempt to provide some alternative explanation.

What about the differences in the various accounts of the resurrection? How many women actually went to the tomb that Sunday morning? And did they see one (Mark and Matthew) or two (Luke, John) angels at the tomb? Some conclude that because of these discrepancies, we have to throw out the whole story. Actually, when we study history, we should expect to see variations in different accounts. For example, there are several versions of the fire in Rome that occurred while Nero was emperor, with different views on how big it was and who started it, but those differences do nothing to throw water on our belief that there was a fire in Rome during the reign of Nero. And historians will tell you that varying viewpoints tell us that there was no copying between different writers, but that each serves as an independent historical source. More value, not less. And, many scholars have written about these apparent conflicts and helped make good sense of the differences. If you want help with that issue, I can point you to some sources of information.

Some people point to the fact that our most informative sources are biased -- these people were Christians and they were defending their point of view. Bias is not a sound argument against accuracy. Witness the care that Jewish scholars and researchers have taken in compiling all the horrific details of the holocaust during the second world war and compare that with the work of revisionist historians who are not nearly so concerned with the facts. Bias does not necessarily produce inaccuracy.

Desperation brings further theories to attempt to explain away the resurrection. "The disciples experienced 'something', but what it was will never be known." Really? We put together the pieces of the puzzle in a way where each piece interlocks and we come up with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the best you can say is, "we just don't know what the disciples experienced." This is a rejection of the obvious conclusion by overlooking, or ignoring, the evidence. When you look at the evidence and at the failure of all the opposing theories, you should be able to reasonably conclude that the resurrection is a true historical event.

Further desperation: Jesus was an alien who tricked us into thinking he had died and risen again. I was amazed that Dr. Habermas actually took the time to refute this one, too, even though no scholar takes it seriously.

Bottom line: there is more than enough evidence to convince any reasonable and objective person that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate AND, that He rose from the dead on the following Sunday morning, appearing to many who had put their hope in Him.

Let me mention two more briefly. One is the fact that both Jesus' death and resurrection took place in close proximity to Jerusalem -- and so did the first proclamation of His resurrection. Why would those who had the most to lose from the disciples' bold preaching about Jesus' resurrection, why would they not produce the corpse? Why would they not show that the tomb was not empty? Why would they let the disciples carry on their ministry and allow them to baptize thousands if there was no truth to their teachings? Why would those who wrote later against Christianity, like Celsus in the second century, not mention the Jewish religious leaders producing a body? There was no body in the tomb.

One more critical factor: if you were inventing a story that supported your agenda or your belief system in some way, you would make it as airtight as possible. You would avoid planting obvious weaknesses into your narrative and would work at making it sound as credible as you could. Not so for the Gospel writers describing the resurrection of Jesus! No, they all tell us that the first visitors to the tomb that morning were women. Thankfully we are not under the same cultural assumptions that existed among the Jews during the time of Jesus. Here is one quote from the Jewish Talmud:

Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to women. (Sotah 19a)

Any evidence which a woman gives is not valid. (Rosh Hashannah 1.8)

And from Jewish historian Josephus:

Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex . . . since it is probable that they may not speak the truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment. (Antiquities 4.8.15)

The logical, reasonable conclusion is that the gospel writers described women at the tomb because it was true!

What does all this mean to us on Resurrection Sunday, April 2014?

1. We can have confidence that our Lord and Savior is alive. And if Jesus is alive, then His promises are true, His forgiveness is real and effectual, His power over sin and death is no illusion -- it's real.
2. It means that when Jesus said He would be with you always, to the end of the age, He is with you. He has never left you, whether during times of intense pain or

struggle, or times of great joy and success in life -- Jesus is near, He's here.

3. It means that you can make a profound case to your family and friends who don't yet believe. With the Holy Spirit's guidance and the historical information we have, we should not be afraid to engage in discussion with those who have serious questions. Read a book like The Case for the Resurrection, by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona and become familiar with the reasoning.

4. It means that you and I will also experience resurrection someday. The New Testament demonstrates a strong link between Jesus resurrection and ours. Jesus tells us that we will be with Him. Listen to this from Hebrews 7:

Because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. (vv.24f) That's us!

The glory of the resurrection is that sin and death have been defeated and that we who trust in the Lord Jesus will share in His victory -- we too will rise to new life and to share the glory of God's eternal dwelling. His resurrection gives us good reason to believe in our own, and to look forward to it with confidence, peace and great joy!