

# The Rationalization Hypothesis: Is a Vision of Jesus Necessary for the Rise of the Resurrection Belief?

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## Abstract

Although the bereavement vision hypothesis is widely regarded as a plausible naturalistic explanation for the rise of the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, I have never quite found this hypothesis completely convincing. This article draws on social psychology to propose what I believe is a better, or at least significantly complementary, explanation for the rise of the resurrection belief, followed by a critique of the bereavement vision hypothesis. (This article was also published at the blogsite *Κέλσος* on the same date: <http://celsus.blog/2019/01/04/the-rationalization-hypothesis-is-a-vision-of-jesus-necessary-for-the-rise-of-the-resurrection-belief/>.)

## Introduction

The conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead is found in the earliest evidence of Christian origins and appears to have come about almost immediately after Jesus' death.<sup>1</sup> How does one account for the rise of this extraordinary belief if the later Gospel accounts of a discovered empty tomb and corporeal post-mortem appearances of Jesus are legends, as many scholars believe is the case?

One popular answer to this question is that the resurrection belief came about as an inference from an unconsciously generated and cognitive dissonance reducing bereavement vision of Jesus, described by one proponent of the vision hypothesis as “an auditory and visual experience of Jesus alive and in heavenly glory.”<sup>2</sup> The vision hypothesis is supported by the fact that the Gospels often connect *seeing* Jesus with causing belief in Jesus' resurrection, so a historically causal connection between the two seems natural. However, the earliest statements of Jesus' appearances (1 Cor. 15.5-7) actually do not state any causal connection between the appearances of Jesus and belief in Jesus' resurrection; they only state that Jesus appeared. Additionally, the Gospel appearance traditions are trying to bolster belief in Jesus' resurrection many years or decades after Jesus' death, so they may simply be part of a legendary trajectory that is trying to ground the initial resurrection belief in hard evidence for apologetic purposes, just like the discovered empty tomb tradition does. If so, then it is possible that the resurrection belief came *first*, and then the visions of Jesus followed. Allowing for this possibility, this article attempts to improve on an already developed but I believe undervalued explanation for the rise of the resurrection belief that draws on the extraordinary human phenomenon of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 15.4 – “he was raised” – appears to be part of a teaching/preaching formula that is often dated to within a few years of Jesus' death, or earlier (Licona 2010: 223-235).

<sup>2</sup> Gerd Lüdemann 2012: 552 (cf. 550-557); 2004: 159 (cf. 163-166); 1994: 174 (cf. 173-179). See too Bart Ehrman 2014: 183-206, although as far as I can tell Ehrman never describes the vision he proposes. Other proponents of some form of vision hypothesis include Michael Goulder 1996; 2000; 2005 and James Crossley 2005, although Goulder proposes only a spiritual resurrection belief emerged initially, and Crossley considers Jesus' predictions of his own death historical and a contributing factor to the resurrection belief.

## **What is Cognitive-Dissonance-Induced Rationalization?**

Cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization is my own term used to describe a well-known aspect of cognitive dissonance theory that is most easily explained by asking the following simple question: How would Jesus' most intense and ardent followers, those who thought or hoped he might be the Messiah, react to the harsh reality of Jesus' death? For most people most of the time, the reaction in such a situation would be the depressing realization that expectations were wrong, that Jesus was not the Messiah as they had hoped. However, we humans have a tendency, when we deeply believe or want to believe in something, to look for and arrive at conclusions that confirm what we already believe or want to believe. This tendency can lead to extraordinary displays of rationalization when strongly held beliefs are inescapably disconfirmed by reality, even to the point of sometimes giving birth to new beliefs. The *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling* explains this aspect of human nature this way:

An individual holds beliefs or cognitions that do not fit with each other (e.g., I believe the world will end, and the world did not end as predicted). Nonfitting beliefs give rise to dissonance, a hypothetical aversive state the individual is motivated to reduce....Dissonance may be reduced by changing behavior, altering a belief, *or adding a new one.* (Timpe 1999: 220, emphasis added)

It is important to emphasize that this article only draws on the *rationalization* aspect of cognitive dissonance theory, not the *proselytizing* aspect of cognitive dissonance theory that has not received as much support in social psychology studies and that some have tried to apply to Christian origins (e.g., Gager 1975: 37-49). In her 2006 Terry Lectures at Yale on human cognition and belief systems, Barbara Smith noted the "firmly established" support for the rationalization component of cognitive dissonance theory (2009: 4, cf. 1-24).

The first person to formally study how cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization can lead to a new belief was Dr. Leon Festinger, one of the most highly respected researchers and professors in the field of social psychology.<sup>3</sup> In one of his studies from the 1950s that would probably violate research ethics today, Festinger infiltrated a small cult group and observed firsthand the emergence of a new belief when their religious beliefs were disconfirmed by the harsh reality of events (Festinger et al. 1956). This study will be summarized below, followed by three other examples of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization leading to a new belief in three other religious groups: the Millerites, Sabbatai Sevi's followers, and the Lubavitchers. These four examples will serve as models for an aspect of human nature that likely affects all of us to some degree and therefore likely affected Jesus' followers – that people can sometimes come up with new, ingenious, and complex explanations in order to make sense of a disconnect between deeply held beliefs and the harsh reality of events. After presenting these four models, it will be explained in detail how the resurrection belief may have come about from cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization. This will be followed by a critique of the bereavement vision hypothesis and a conclusion.

As already alluded to, this article is not the first time that cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization has been proposed as a cause of the resurrection belief. Even though the term "cognitive dissonance" had yet to be coined, Alfred Loisy in 1948 intuited that "faith" and the "fruit of that inner process" could have led to the resurrection belief (96, cf. 96-98). Hugh

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<sup>3</sup> "[A] towering figure in contemporary social science and one of its foremost adventurers of the mind" (Zukier 1989: xxii). "[T]he dominant figure in social psychology for a period roughly spanning the two decades from 1950 to 1970" (Jones 1998: 22; Festinger moved on to visual perception research, archaeology, and history starting in 1964). "Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance has been one of the most influential theories in social psychology" (American Psychological Association 1999: 3).

Jackson in 1975 referred to “cognitive dissonance” by name and said that the resurrection belief was “a creative response to the disconfirming event of the crucifixion” (415, cf. 415-425). Francis Watson in 1987 referred to the resurrection belief as “an attempt to reinterpret the old hopes in the light of the crucifixion” (368, cf. 367-368). Robert M. Price in 1993 presented probably the most complete argument up to that point in time for cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization leading to the resurrection belief, referring to some of the same examples that will be referred to in this article (84-86). Price would later call N.T. Wright’s 2003 critique of the theory “suicidal” (Price 2007: online book review of Wright 2003: 697-701). There are also others who have advocated cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization is a plausible explanation for the resurrection belief, including myself in 2009 (48-76) and again in 2014 (44-82).<sup>4</sup> William Craig critiqued the first of these in 2011. The critiques of both Craig and Wright will be addressed in this article.

The rationalization hypothesis – a formal name for the hypothesis presented in this article that seems fitting – is intended as a standalone hypothesis, but it could also be integrated into the vision hypothesis at any point where Jesus’ followers were consciously trying to make sense of events. Some of the ideas in the rationalization hypothesis could also be used to help explain connections that, according to the vision hypothesis, were made at the *unconscious* level, leading to a vision of Jesus alive in heavenly glory.

In the models below, I have attempted to provide enough detail so that readers unfamiliar with the referenced religious groups can understand the gist of what happened. Readers already intimately familiar with these models could skip to the section titled “Conclusion from Models”.

### Model #1: Leon Festinger’s Cult Group Study



Dorothy Martin (aka “Marian Keech”), the cult leader in Leon Festinger’s cult group study (credit: AP Photo/Charles E. Knoblock).

The cult group Leon Festinger studied consisted of eleven hardcore members and numerous transitory participants. It was led by a woman who believed she was receiving mental messages from spacemen on another planet. This woman, Dorothy Martin (aka “Marian Keech”), received a message from the imaginary spacemen in August of 1954 that said a great cataclysm would ensue around the world on December 21<sup>st</sup> of the same year. The cult group publicly declared this belief, which attracted a lot of attention from the media and the public. Additional messages from the spacemen led the cult to believe that at midnight on the eve before the cataclysm they would be removed from the planet and spared from the destruction. In order for this to happen, they were instructed to wait inside certain identified parked cars and the spacemen would then transfer them from the parked cars to a flying saucer where they would be whisked

<sup>4</sup> “[T]he challenge which Festinger presented...still has to be met” (Cyril Rodd 1997: 225); “[T]he discovery of a new and positive way in which to speak of Jesus’ death and of Jesus after his death” (Paul van Buren 1998: 21); “[A] simple act of proclamation in the face of great odds” (Stephen Patterson 1998: 237, cf. 232-233); “[An] explanation was found” (David Berger 2008: 157, cf. 157-158); “[An] affirmation of faith and hope in the face of the stark, disconfirming fact of his crucifixion” (Roy Hoover 2010: 6).

away. Imposter cult members – two social psychologists and sometimes up to five hired participant-observers – infiltrated the group and were able to observe firsthand over a period of weeks the buildup to these expectations and the reaction of the hardcore believers to the shock of disconfirmation on December 21<sup>st</sup> when none of the events occurred as they expected.

When none of the events occurred as they expected, two of the hardcore cult members rejected their beliefs and left the group. But the other nine did not. Instead, they went through a period of intense group rationalization over a period of hours (Festinger et al. 1956: 158-170). Many explanations were floated as the group wrestled with their catastrophic disappointment. For example, they reasoned that the spacemen must have given them the wrong date. Another explanation was that the events had been postponed, possibly for years, so that more people could prepare to “meet their maker”. Yet another was more complex: The message from the spacemen, which had them waiting inside parked cars from which they would be moved to the flying saucer, must be symbolic because parked cars do not move and hence could not take anyone anywhere; therefore, the parked cars must symbolically refer to their physical bodies, and the flying saucer must symbolically refer to the importance of their own inner “strength, knowing, and light” for their rescue. The cult group even considered leaving the disconfirmation unexplained while insisting that the plan had never gone awry and accepting that they did not have to understand everything for it all to still be essentially true.

During this rationalization period, one of the participant-observers feigned frustration and walked outside. One of the hardcore members, a medical doctor, followed and offered verbal support. Here are the words of a normal human being who has staked everything on a belief, only to have that belief cruelly disconfirmed by reality:

I've had to go a long way. I've given up just about everything. I've cut every tie. I've burned every bridge. I've turned my back on the world. I can't afford to doubt. I have to believe. And there isn't any other truth....I won't doubt even if we have to make an announcement to the press tomorrow and admit we were wrong. You're having your period of doubt now, but hang on boy, hang on. This is a tough time but we know that the boys upstairs are taking care of us....These are tough times and the way is not easy. We all have to take a beating. I've taken a terrific one, but I have no doubt. (Festinger et al. 1956: 168)

In the end, the group settled on an explanation provided by the group's leader, which was based on a timely message she received from the spacemen. She said that the steadfast belief and waiting by their group had brought so much “light” into the world that God called off the pickup and the cataclysm (Festinger et al. 1956: 169). This explanation was jubilantly received by the group. According to Leon Festinger, “The group was able to accept and believe this explanation because they could support one another and convince each other that this was, in fact, a valid explanation” (1989: 255-256).

We know the above explanation was not an *unconscious* formulation by the cult leader that was perceived by her as a mental message from the spacemen because the cult leader *verbalized* her explanation in tentative terms during the group rationalization process mentioned earlier: “...maybe people will say it was this little group spreading light here that prevented the flood” (Festinger et al. 1956: 166). The cult leader's rationalization only became more formal by the time she delivered it as a message from the spacemen two hours later: “Mighty is the word of God – and by his word have ye been saved....Not since the beginning of time upon this Earth has there been such a force of Good and light as now floods this room and...now floods the entire Earth” (Festinger et al. 1956: 169, with additional flourish before and after). So the mental message from the spacemen was *not* an unconscious formulation; rather, it was a *conscious*

*rationalization*, with the mental message from the spacemen serving as some kind of legitimizing function. If Festinger's cult group was used as the sole analogy for Christian origins, it would suggest that Jesus' followers *tentatively* rationalized Jesus' resurrection, but did not commit to it until they had further evidence from a legitimizing source. Assuming Jesus' followers did not have a special communication channel open to God like Festinger's cult group thought they had with the spacemen, *scripture* would be one means of confirming a tentative rationalization of Jesus' death. This will be addressed more later.

Although the mental health of all the cult members was not open for examination, there was an opportunity for professional psychiatrists to evaluate one of the hardcore cult members, the medical doctor quoted earlier who had his worldview cruelly disconfirmed by reality. The only reason this psychiatric examination was conducted was because relatives questioned his sanity and sought to gain custody of his children. This doctor, a believer in the cult all the way through the disconfirmation and beyond, was cleared by two court-appointed psychiatrists. They concluded that although the physician had some unusual ideas, he was "entirely normal" (Festinger et al. 1956: 232).

There have been two objections to Festinger's experiment when attempting to apply it to the rise of the resurrection belief. First, since the cult group studied was very small, there is no way to rule out the possibility that the imposter cult members influenced the cult in a way that actually caused the results (Wright 2003: 699). Because of this possibility, Festinger's cult group study is only useful for showing that a rationalization can be *artificially* triggered with enough effort by participant-observers. This limitation of Festinger's experiment will be addressed shortly when we turn to three other examples of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization in much larger religious movements where observers could *not* have caused the results.

The second problem sometimes cited with Festinger's cult group study is that it did not follow the cult members for longer than one month after the disconfirmation event. For all we know, belief in their rationalization only lasted a month and then faded away (Wright 2003: 699). Because of this possibility, Festinger's cult group study is not useful for showing that cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalizations last for any significant length of time. This limitation of Festinger's experiment will also be addressed in the next three examples involving much larger religious movements where the new beliefs *were* sustained for very long periods of time.

The basic theory of how cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization can lead to a new belief is summarized by Leon Festinger:

Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before....The dissonance [conflict between belief and reality] would be largely eliminated if they discarded the belief that had been disconfirmed....Indeed this pattern sometimes occurs....But frequently the behavioral commitment to the belief system is so strong that almost any other course of action is preferable....Believers may try to find reasonable explanations and very often they find ingenious ones....For rationalization to be fully effective, support from others is needed to make the explanation or the revision seem correct. Fortunately, the disappointed believer can usually turn to others in the same movement, who have the same dissonance and the same pressures to reduce it. Support for the new explanation is, hence, forthcoming. (Festinger et al. 1956: 3, 27-28)

## Model #2: The Millerites



Millerite prophetic chart showing the year 1843 for Jesus' second coming (credit: Wikipedia).

This second model illustrating how cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization can lead to a new belief involves the Millerite movement. The Millerite movement began in 1818 in New York with a man named William Miller. By the 1840s, the movement had gained membership in the thousands across many cities. Miller believed that the Bible predicted Jesus' second coming would be sometime between March 21<sup>st</sup> 1843 and March 21<sup>st</sup> 1844. When the later date came and went without incident, the movement did not crumble as many expected. Instead, and despite heavy ridicule, the group's founder and his apostles rationalized that there must have been some minor error in calculating the exact time, but the end was nevertheless still near. A corrected date came from a follower within the movement by the name of Reverend Samuel Snow. Despite the objections of the group's leaders that the exact date could not be known, Snow declared October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1844 as the new date for Jesus' second coming.

Belief in this new date by the Millerites took on a life of its own as described by a Millerite newspaper editor:

At first the definite time was generally opposed; but there seemed to be an irresistible power attending its proclamation, which prostrated all before it. It swept over the land with the velocity of a tornado, and it reached hearts in different and distant places almost simultaneously, and in a manner which can be accounted for only on the supposition that God was [in] it....The lecturers among the Adventists were the last to embrace the views of the time....It was not until within about two weeks of the commencement of the seventh month [about the first of October, the editor is using the Jewish year], that we were particularly impressed with the progress of the movement, when we had such a view of it, that to oppose it, or even to remain silent longer, seemed to us to be opposing the work of the Holy Spirit; and in entering upon the work with all our souls, we could but exclaim, "What were we, that we should resist God?" It seemed to us to have been so independent of human agency, that we could but regard it as a fulfillment of the "midnight cry". (Himes 1844: 93)

Based on this new date, things reached an incredible pitch of fervor, zeal, and conviction. One of the elders in the Millerite movement described it this way:

The "Advent Herald", "the Midnight Cry", and other Advent papers, periodicals, pamphlets, tracts, leaflets, voicing the coming glory, were scattered, broadcast and everywhere like autumn leaves in the forest. Every house was visited by them....A mighty effort through the Spirit and the word preached was made to bring sinners to repentance, and to have the wandering ones return. (Boutelle 1891: 65)

But October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1844 came and went with no second coming of Jesus. This second disconfirmation almost killed the movement, but still, yet another and this time more complex belief emerged – the date had been correct, but Jesus' second coming had occurred in heaven not on earth; Jesus had begun an investigative judgment of the world, and when he is done he will return to earth, but no one knows exactly when. This rationalization was sustained and continues

to this day with membership in the millions. It is known as the Church of Seventh-day Adventists.

Some Seventh-day Adventists claim that the founding event of their religion was a heavenly vision experienced by Millerite follower Hiram Edson the morning after the disappointment, after he and other dejected Millerites had “wept...till the day dawn...[and then] bowed before the Lord...in earnest prayer” (Steinweg 1993: 2). However, Seventh-day Adventist critic Fernand Fisel makes a persuasive case that Edson’s vision was a decades later embellishment by Edson (Fisel 1983: 25-27). If so, then the idea of Jesus’ second coming occurring in heaven instead of on earth, again, seems to have been the result of a *conscious rationalization* occurring during, or as a result of, those long hours of weeping and earnest prayer the night after the disconfirmation. Fisel also explains in detail how this rationalization was confirmed and further developed with scriptures in the months after the disconfirmation (Fisel 1983: 25-27).<sup>5</sup>

### Model #3: Sabbatai Sevi



Sabbatai Sevi in 1665 (credit: Wikipedia).

The third model of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization leading to a new belief is documented in a one thousand page tome by Gershom Scholem (1973), former president of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. This example of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization occurred in the seventeenth-century Jewish messianic movement of Sabbatai Sevi (sometimes spelled “Zevi” or “Zvi” or “Tzvi”), a Jew who publicly proclaimed himself to be the Messiah in 1665.

Sevi, an adherent to a popular Jewish theology called Lurianic Kabbalism, was a charismatic manic-depressive who would deliberately and spectacularly break the law of Moses, eat forbidden foods and utter the sacred name of God, and then claim he had been inspired to do so by special revelation. Sevi gained a huge following spanning Italy, Holland, Germany, and Poland. Sevi’s followers thought he would usher in a new age of redemption for Israel. However, when Sevi traveled to Istanbul in 1666, he was arrested and imprisoned by Muslim authorities. The Sultan then gave him a choice: convert to Islam or be put to death. Sevi chose Islam.

Gershom Scholem explains the effect of Sevi’s shocking choice on his followers:

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<sup>5</sup> Two other date specific second-coming-of-Jesus movements whose disappointments were rationalized are the second-century Montanists and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Although these are good examples of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalizations, I have not used them as models here because their rationalizations were simplistic and somewhat vague, along the lines of God keeping his promises and eventually overthrowing the enemies of these movements. The nineteenth-century Joanna Southcott movement has some potential as a model here, but I found it difficult to find information about this movement that I was sure was reliable. Supposedly, tens of thousands of followers thought the sixty-four-year-old Joanna had conceived a messiah-like child by divine means. When Joanna died and the autopsy revealed excessive fat instead of a child in her belly, some in the movement supposedly rationalized that the baby had been born spiritually and would return to earth soon. According to historian James Hopkins, “Upon this fragile base – the belief that Shiloh’s birth had been spiritual instead of temporal – the Southcottian movement continued to exist, if not flourish, following new prophets into the wilderness of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (1982: 211).

Sabbatai's apostasy burst like a bombshell, taking by surprise the messiah's closest associates as well as the most vehement unbelievers. Neither literary tradition nor the psychology of the ordinary Jew had envisaged the possibility of an apostate messiah....In order to survive, the movement had to develop an ideology that would enable its followers to live amid the tensions between inner and outer realities....The peculiar Sabbatian doctrines developed and crystallized with extraordinary rapidity in the years following the apostasy. Two factors were responsible for this, as for many similar developments in the history of religions: on the one hand, a deeply rooted faith, nourished by a profound and immediate experience...and, on the other hand, the ideological need to explain and rationalize the painful contradiction between historical reality and faith. (1973: 792-795)

Initially, two rationalizations emerged among a small number of Sevi's followers. One rationalization was that Sevi "had to disguise himself for a while for the better success at the execution of his great design" (Scholem 1973: 694). The other rationalization, held even by Sevi's brother, was that Sevi "had not apostatized at all but had ascended to Heaven and only his 'shape appeared to them in the likeness of an apostate'" (Scholem 1973: 695, cf. 703, 723). This second rationalization was eventually dismissed in favor of the first, which was made easier by the fact that Sevi acted like a Muslim in front of Muslims and acted like a Jew in front of Jews. In response, many of Sevi's followers rationalized that Sevi's apostasy was part of an *intentional* strategy to assume evil's form by converting to Islam and then killing it from within (Scholem 1973: 708-710, 720-721, 727-728, 800-801). According to Scholem, "When discussing the Sabbatian paradox by means of which cruel disappointment was turned into a positive affirmation of faith, the analogy with early Christianity almost obtrudes itself" (1973: 795).

Scholem also notes the role of scripture in forming and confirming the rationalizations that emerged after Sevi's death:

Sabbatai's followers...believed in the holy books. Hence their first reaction – one might almost say reflex – was to search Scripture and tradition for intimations, hints, and indications of the extraordinary and bewildering events. And lo and behold – the Bible, rabbinic Haggadah, and kabbalistic literature turned out to abound in allusions to Sabbatai Sevi in general and to the mystery of his apostasy in particular....From biblical verses and fragments of verses, from rabbinic sayings whose implicit possibilities nobody had noticed before, from paradoxical expressions in kabbalistic literature, and from the oddest corners of Jewish literature, they produced material the like of which had never been seen in Jewish theology. (1973: 802-803)

Although reliable information is hard to come by, the Sevi movement appears to still be alive today, primarily in Turkey. They are known as the Dönme (Turkish for "convert"), with numbers ranging from tens of thousands to several hundred thousand.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Model #4: The Lubavitchers**

The fourth and final model of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization leading to a new belief involves another Jewish Messiah movement, this one from the 1990s. A Hasidic Jewish movement called Lubavitch (or Chabad), a subgroup of Orthodox Judaism, was headquartered in New York City and had approximately two hundred thousand followers worldwide. Beginning in 1991, there grew an increasing fervor among some of the Lubavitchers that their spiritual leader – the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson ("Rebbe" is the formal title for the Lubavitch spiritual leader) – might be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, the one who would usher in the end-times redemption. Just like may have been the case with Jesus, Rebbe Schneerson never

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<sup>6</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabbatai\\_Zevi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabbatai_Zevi) and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dönme> (accessed 8 Jun 2018).



explicitly claimed that he was the Messiah, but he made such a big impression on so many of his followers that many thought he might be.

In March 1992, the eighty-nine year old Rebbe Schneerson had a stroke that rendered him paralyzed on the right side of his body and unable to talk. Simon Dein, a psychiatrist, social anthropologist, and Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and Medicine at University College London, was living in a Lubavitch community in Stamford Hill, England at the time, studying another aspect of the Lubavitchers. Dein explains how some of Rebbe Schneerson's followers made sense of the Rebbe's new disabilities in light of their belief that he might be the Messiah:

Despite his profound incapacity, messianic fervor in the Lubavitch community intensified, culminating in plans to crown him as Mosiach [the Messiah]. Lubavitchers referred to Isaiah 53, “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering”, and argued that his illness was a prerequisite to the messianic arrival...that the Rebbe himself had chosen to become ill and had taken on the suffering of the Jewish people. (2010: 542; 2001: 394)

Two years later, on March 10<sup>th</sup> 1994, Rebbe Schneerson had another stroke, this one rendering him comatose. His followers were unshaken, again holding fast to their belief that Rebbe Schneerson was the Messiah. One Lubavitch Rabbi gave the following rationalization:

The Rebbe is now in a state of concealment. The Jews could not see Moses on Mount Sinai and thought he was dead. They built the golden calf and had a vision of him lying dead on a bier, whereas he was in fact alive and in a state of concealment. The Rebbe is in a state of Chinoplet, a trancelike state where the soul leaves the body. The soul of the Rebbe has to go down to lower realms to drag up the souls of the sinners. He must do this before he declares himself as Moshiah [the Messiah]. (Dein 2001: 395)

According to Dein:

[Rebbe Schneerson's] faithful followers saw this [the second stroke] as a prelude to his messianic revelation and the arrival of the redemption. As he lay dying in intensive care, several hundred followers assembled outside Beth Israel Medical Centre singing and dancing – anticipating the imminent arrival of the redemption....Supporters and believers signed petitions to God, demanding that he allow their Rebbe to reveal himself as the long-awaited Messiah and rise from his sickbed to lead all humanity to their redemption. (2012: 58; 2010: 543)



Rebbe Schneerson's burial place next to his predecessor in Queens, New York (credit: Wikipedia).

Three months after this second stroke, on June 12<sup>th</sup> 1994, Rebbe Schneerson died. Dein, who was still with the Lubavitch community in Stamford Hill when Rebbe Schneerson died, observed yet another and this time more startling rationalization: “Many Lubavitchers expressed the idea that he would be resurrected” (2001: 397). Dein watched the funeral procession in New York City via satellite TV on the same day that Schneerson died and saw Lubavitchers “dancing and singing in anticipation of his resurrection and imminent redemption” (2001: 397). One observer on the street said of these people celebrating, “They were certain that any second, the hoax would end and the Rebbe would get up and lead us to the redemption right then” (Marcus 2001: 394).

Although exact numbers are unknown, the belief that Rebbe Schneerson would resurrect from the dead swept through the Lubavitch community worldwide and gained a significant following. In Stamford Hill, Dein reported, “Very soon, the overwhelming feeling in the community was that the Rebbe would resurrect and that the redemption would arrive” (2001: 397-398).

Five days after the Rebbe’s death, a full-page advertisement in a widely circulated Jewish Orthodox weekly in New York City (*The Jewish Press*) declared that Rebbe Schneerson would be resurrected as the Messiah (Berger 2008: 11, 41).

Two years after Rebbe Schneerson’s death, the *International Campaign to Bring Moshiach* set up a huge billboard next to New York’s George Washington Bridge proclaiming Rebbe Schneerson was the Messiah (Dein 2012: 63).

Seven years after the Rebbe’s death, David Berger, professor of Jewish History, past president of the Association for Jewish Studies, and outspoken critic of the belief that Rebbe Schneerson would resurrect from the dead gave this assessment of the movement:

[A] large majority of Lubavitch hasidim believe with perfect faith in the return of the Rebbe as Messiah son of David....The dominant elements among hasidim in the major Lubavitch population centres of Crown Heights in Brooklyn and Kfar Chabad in Israel – perfectly normal people representing a highly successful, very important Jewish movement – believe that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson will return from the dead...and lead the world to redemption. (2008: xxxi, xxxvi, 26)

Berger goes on to say, “With the exception of Sabbatianism, Lubavitch messianists have already generated the largest and most long-lived messianic movement in Jewish history since antiquity” (2008: 28).

Berger also explains why Rebbe Schneerson’s followers should not have been able to rationalize a dead Messiah:

[The Lubavitch movement is] a major movement located well within the parameters of Orthodox Judaism....There is no more fundamental messianic belief in Judaism than the conviction that the Davidic Messiah who appears at the end of days will not die before completing his mission....[A person] is invalidated as a potential Messiah the moment that he dies in an unredeemed world. (2008: 18, 41, xli)

This expectation about the Messiah shows how radical the Lubavitch rationalization was and explains Berger’s reaction when he saw his fellow Jews rationalize after Rebbe Schneerson’s death that he was still the Messiah despite his death and would resurrect from the dead:

...My sense of puzzlement, bewilderment, disorientation began to grow. The world appeared surreal, as if I had been transported into Alice’s Wonderland or a Jewish Twilight Zone. The rules of Judaism seemed suspended....Here was a movement of posthumous false messianism self-evidently alien to Judaism that no generation of mainstream Jewish leaders would ever have countenanced even for a fleeting moment....Any appeal to Maimonides’ criteria seemed clearly impossible.<sup>7</sup>

But rationalizing a dead Messiah was not impossible. Rebbe Schneerson’s followers rationalized that their dead Messiah would complete his mission *later*, after he resurrected from

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<sup>7</sup> Berger 2008: 13, 24. Maimonides’ criteria tied the arrival of the Messiah to the end-times redemption: utopia, the resurrection of the dead, the end of persecution, and the joyful gathering of all Jews in Israel.

the dead. Putting aside whether or not this rationalization is coherent, Berger's reaction above illustrates how big of a gap there can be between what we *think* is possible with a cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization and what actually *is* possible. Leon Festinger explains this in general terms:

[W]here there are a number of people having the same cognitive dissonance, the phenomenon [of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization] may be much more spectacular, even to the point where it is possible to withstand evidence which would otherwise be overwhelming....There is a tendency to seek explanations of these striking phenomena which match them in dramatic quality; that is, one looks for something unusual to explain the unusual result. It may be, however, that there is nothing more unusual about these phenomena than the relative rarity of the specific combination of ordinary circumstances that brings about their occurrence. (1957: 233, 247)

Explaining the Lubavitch rationalization from the perspective of a social scientist, Dein writes:

[The] Lubavitch are not a group of fanatics....They are sane people trying to reason their way through facts and in the pursuit of understanding....Like many groups whose messianic expectations fail to materialize, resort is made to eschatological hermeneutics to explain and reinforce the messianic ideology....The Rebbe's illness and subsequent death posed cognitive challenges for his followers. They made two predictions that were empirically disconfirmed: that he would recover from his illness and that he would usher in the Redemption. In accordance with cognitive dissonance theory...they appealed to a number of post hoc rationalizations to allay the dissonance. (2001: 399; 2010: 550; 2012: 139)

Dein goes on to say, "Not surprisingly, these new beliefs have attracted a lot of derision from the wider Jewish community and, on account of their proclamations of the imminent resurrection of Schneerson, some have labeled [them]... 'Christians'" (2010: 551 n. 5).

Of course, the Lubavitch rationalization was not quite the same as that of Jesus' followers who claimed that Jesus had *already* been resurrected from the dead, but it turns out that there is a good reason for this difference. In Lubavitch theology, there is a "prince", in this case Rebbe Schneerson (who did not designate a successor like Rebbes before him did), who must be present in this world in some *physical* capacity in order to mediate the world's divine force. If not, then the world would cease to exist. Since the world still existed, Rebbe Schneerson had to still be physically present in the grave; he could not have been resurrected from the dead and transported up to heaven like Jesus' followers believed of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> However, one additional speculation by some Lubavitchers is worth noting. A small number of Lubavitchers speculated "the Rebbe as being in his grave but having his physical body intact and not decomposing since he was a 'righteous person'."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Berger 2008: xxxii-xxxiii. This was also confirmed to me by David Berger via private email on Dec 4, 2013 (used with permission): "A Lubavitch hasid attracted by the idea that Rabbi Schneerson was raised to heaven bodily might well be deterred by the movement's doctrine that there must be a physical prince (nasi) of any given generation residing in a specific location. In the absence of a prince of the generation in the physical world who mediates the divine force that sustains the world, it [the world] would cease to exist. Some hasidim who accept the Rebbe's physical death have struggled to deal with this problem by maintaining that in the exceptional moments before the final redemption, the critical divine energy can be mediated through the Rebbe's gravesite." Another factor that may have played a role in preventing Lubavitchers from rationalizing that Rebbe Schneerson was already bodily raised up to heaven like Jesus' followers believed of Jesus is the modern day realization that heaven is not a physical place located just beyond the clouds that a body can go to.

<sup>9</sup> Dein 2012: 104, cf. Dein and Dawson 2008: 170. Dein and Dawson also note, "A few Lubavitchers go as far as to hold the Rebbe to be God incarnate and worship him as such" (2008: 169). See too David Berger, who discusses

Like the Millerite and Sevi movements mentioned earlier, the Lubavitchers quickly turned to their scriptures to find support for their beliefs:

Books were published “proving” that *Moshiach* [the Messiah] could come from the dead. These deployed passages from the Torah, Talmud, Maimonides and the Rebbe’s own writings...[and were used as] proof texts to reinforce the possibility of a Messiah who suffers, dies and returns from the dead. (Dein 2012: 63, 135; see too Berger 2008: 24)

The Lubavitch example is especially relevant to the study of Christian origins because it comes so close to Christian beliefs, and we can identify the reason why it does not exactly match Christian beliefs. Although Dein says there is “no empirical evidence” (2012: 133) that the Lubavitchers were influenced by modern day Christian beliefs, even if they were, the Lubavitchers remain a powerful example of the incredible lengths that people will sometimes go to rationalize their way through a seemingly impossible contradiction, even to the point of borrowing ideas from the surrounding milieu that are contrary to their own orthodox beliefs. The significance of the Lubavitch example to the study of Christian origins is well-stated by David Berger: “Though largely ignored thus far, this is a development of striking importance for the history of world religions, and it is an earthquake in the history of Judaism” (Berger 2008: 3). I agree with Berger, and it puzzles me why so few scholars of religion use the Lubavitch and other examples in this article to illustrate how cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization could have led to the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead up to heaven.

### **Conclusion from Models**

The four models above show that cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization can lead people to new and innovative beliefs, that trying to put a limit on the human imagination when it is faced with cognitive dissonance is virtually impossible, and that the beliefs arrived at can seem wildly outlandish to outsiders but seem reasonable to those trying to reduce their cognitive dissonance.

The Festinger model illustrates the basic concept of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization. The Millerite and Sevi models show that these rationalizations can sometimes cross into territory never before seen in their respective traditions, e.g., a second coming of Jesus occurring in heaven instead of on earth, and a Jewish Messiah who would publicly disavow his Jewish faith as part of an intentional strategy to defeat evil from within. The Lubavitch model illustrates a rationalization with very close parallels to Christianity, if not arrived at independently from Christian beliefs then at least showing an uncanny willingness to borrow ideas from a competing belief system in order to reduce their cognitive dissonance.

As the eminent psychologist Elliot Aronson put it in 1968, “Dissonance theory does not rest upon the assumption that man is a *rational* animal; rather, it suggests that man is a *rationalizing* animal” (6, emphasis is original). And as Barbara Smith put it in her 2006 Terry Lectures at Yale:

[There is] an aspect of cognitive conservatism [i.e., the tendency to persist in a belief] that might otherwise appear paradoxical, namely, its *creativity*. For the psychological mechanisms involved here

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worship of the Rebbe extensively throughout his book (2008). Worship of the Rebbe appears related to Lubavitch pantheistic beliefs (“Pantheism understands God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world” (Culp 2009)), which is not something that would apply to ancient Judaism, but it nevertheless illustrates that radical rationalizations can lead to additional rationalizations/speculation.

operate not simply or primarily by maintaining our established belief systems but also and perhaps more significantly by incorporating into them whatever comes along: novel ideas, anomalous observations, new practical techniques, and so forth....As indicated by intellectual history, the reinterpretations can be substantial and, though motivated by a conservative mechanism, yield highly innovative ideas and practices. Thus religions and other belief systems, in spite of what may be efforts at strict heresy-control or claims of an unbroken tradition, are more or less radically transformed over time. (2009: 6, 16-17, emphasis is original)

### **Preconditions to a Rationalization of Jesus' Death**

Before explaining how cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization could have led to the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, it must first be emphasized that the four models of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization just outlined above are the most extreme examples I am aware of. Spectacular examples like those described above are not an everyday occurrence, and for every one of these there are probably hundreds of groups that disbanded at the first disconfirmation of their beliefs. The right circumstances and probably other not-yet-fully understood social and psychological factors probably need to be present in order for rationalizations to come about, especially the more spectacular rationalizations. Because of this, the fact that no other Jewish Messiah movement in ancient Palestine rationalized their Messiah's death in some way is not of much relevance (contra Wright 2003: 700 and Craig 2011: timestamp 5:34-6:46). This result could just mean that out of however many Messiahs one thinks there were in ancient Palestine, only one had just the right circumstances or social/psychological mixture to produce a radical rationalization. However, there are two circumstances about Christian origins that may go some of the way toward explaining why Jesus' death was rationalized but not the deaths of any other ancient Jewish Messiahs.

First, many ancient Jewish Messiahs led military movements that were crushed militarily. Because of this, the followers of these movements would have had a harder time rationalizing their man was still the Messiah, not only because their Messiah died and failed to liberate Israel, but also because of their Messiah's massive miscalculation of his own military prowess. As James Crossley points out about two of the larger of these military Messiah movements, "Simon bar Giora and bar Kochbah were military figures expecting military victories. Of course their deaths would be deemed as a failure" (2005: 171). In contrast, most scholars do not think Jesus planned or executed any military operations. Because of this, Jesus' followers did not have to rationalize an already evidenced military failure. Jesus' death and failure to liberate Israel would still have been difficult to rationalize, but easier to rationalize than other dead Messiahs who had already committed to military operations. If Jesus' followers never even thought of Jesus as a military leader, but rather as a teacher/prophet-type Messiah who would lead Israel to redemption through his wisdom and teachings, then Jesus' success or failure as a Messiah would never have even been judged in military terms. Without a military emphasis, Jesus' death and failure to liberate Israel could be more easily rationalized as part of an intentionally deferred and broader cosmic plan that would be fulfilled later. Jesus' lack of military emphasis may have been one circumstance that helps explain why Jesus' death was rationalized but not the deaths of any other ancient Jewish Messiahs.

The second circumstance that may help explain why Jesus' death was rationalized but not the deaths of any other ancient Jewish Messiahs has to do with access to Jesus' corpse. Many failed Jewish Messiah movements probably had access to the corpse of their dead Messiah, perhaps on the battlefield or visually seeing their Messiah's body on the cross as it was devoured by vultures. This would have made it difficult to rationalize the Messiah's death in a way that included favorable actions to his body after death. However, I think it is plausible that Jesus'

followers did not have access to Jesus' corpse. Since the vision hypothesis also requires that Jesus' followers did not have access to Jesus' corpse in order for them to believe that Jesus was bodily resurrected, and to prevent this article from being longer than it already is, I will not make any arguments for this here. I will only make the point that if Jesus' followers did not have access to Jesus' corpse, then any rationalization of Jesus' death that entailed actions to his body would have had a much easier time emerging because nothing could be empirically checked.<sup>10</sup>

### **Jesus Died for Our Sins and Will Return Soon**

With the above two circumstances setting the stage, how would Jesus' followers have reacted to Jesus' death? One possibility is that Jesus' followers could have simply found themselves another Messiah, with James a suggested candidate since he was from the same bloodline as Jesus (Wright 2003: 700 and Craig 2011: timestamp 7:43-8:07). However, maybe Jesus' message about the kingdom of God was compelling enough to Jesus' followers to rule out anyone being a replacement Messiah who was not already part of Jesus' kingdom of God movement, which means James would not have been considered. It may also be that neither James nor anyone else had the charisma or inspired Jesus' followers enough for them to think that person could be the Messiah. Recall from the Sabbatai Sevi movement that nobody tried to find another Messiah when Sevi apostatized, and Sevi's brother was even available (Scholem 1973: 723).

If there was no viable replacement Messiah for Jesus, the next most obvious choice for Jesus' followers would have been to call it quits. However, as illustrated by the examples given earlier in this article, followers of failed movements sometimes try very hard to find plausible explanations to maintain their current beliefs but reduce their cognitive dissonance and, as Leon Festinger pointed out, "very often they find ingenious ones" (Festinger et al. 1956: 28). Followers of Jesus who could not accept that Jesus was not the Messiah after his death would have faced two difficult and pressing questions: Why did the Messiah have to die, and how can a dead man be the Messiah? When proposing a possible answer to these two questions below, I do not intend to imply that Jesus' followers were theologians or capable of reading scriptures, but I do assume that they routinely heard and were familiar with Jewish beliefs, stories, and scriptures, and that they would have drawn on them to make sense of Jesus' death if they could have.

How a dead man could be the Messiah was probably answered first and impulsively in the same way some Lubavitchers did: Jesus would return soon to complete his mission which, according to the earliest Christian records, was mainly focused on ushering in the final redemption (Rom. 13.11; 16.20; 1 Cor. 7.29-31; 1 Thess. 4.16-17).<sup>11</sup>

The answer to the second question – why did the Messiah have to die – could have been formed from Jewish beliefs about measure-for-measure recompense and vicarious sacrifice when dealing with God. An example of such beliefs can be found in the *aqedah* story, Abraham's near-

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<sup>10</sup> Bart Ehrman proposes that Jesus' body was left on the cross for some amount of time and suggests it was then tossed by the Romans into an unmarked common grave (2014: 151-164). In this case, the lack of access to Jesus' corpse during the time Jesus was left on the cross was due to Jesus' followers fleeing home to Galilee on the same day that Jesus was crucified (Ehrman 2014: 175). I agree with Ehrman that Jesus' followers probably fled home to Galilee on the same day that Jesus was crucified, but I think an immediate removal from the cross in deference to Jewish burial sensitivities to avoid a riot on a major Jewish holiday is also a real possibility, and that this may have been followed by an obscure ground burial in an unmarked grave by a disinterested Jewish burial crew that Jesus' followers never knew the location of. For a discussion of this possibility, including the source material for Mark's burial account, see Komarnitsky 2014: 22-43, 142-150, 152-159.

<sup>11</sup> According to N.T. Wright, "Some at least of those who believed in the resurrection also believed in the coming of the Messiah, though the relation between Messiah and resurrection is not usually clear" (2002: 620).

sacrifice of his son Isaac in return for God's blessing and favor (Gen. 22.1-19). By the first century, this story had become embellished to emphasize that Isaac was a *willing* sacrifice: "[Isaac] was pleased with this discourse....So he went immediately to the altar to be sacrificed" (*Ant.* 1.13.4). The *aqedah* story was also applied to the expected deaths of martyrs heading out to battle: "Remember whence you came and at the hand of what father Isaac gave himself to be sacrificed for piety's sake" (4 Macc. 13.12). Paul van Buren explains another passage in 4 Maccabees and points out the similarities of the *aqedah* story and the belief by Jesus' earliest followers that Jesus died for our sins (1 Cor. 15.3):

The principle of measure for measure, coupled with the association of the Maccabean martyrs with Isaac, also accounts for [a]...phrase in 4 Maccabees (17:21), which calls their deaths "a ransom for the sin of our nation, as it were." The affirmation of the next verse is even more striking (17:22): "Through the blood of these righteous ones and through the propitiation of their death the divine providence rescued Israel..." In Romans 3:25 Paul used the same word – *hilasterion*, "propitiation" – with reference to Christ's death....[The] language of the primitive gospel seems very much at home in the interpretive world of the Jewish literature in which the *aqedah* was developing. (1998: 47-48)

### **The Resurrection Belief**

With the belief that Jesus was still the Messiah despite his death, that he died for our sins, and that he would return soon to usher in the final redemption, the cognitive dissonance of Jesus' followers would have been significantly reduced. However, Jesus was now the first and only dead man who was still thought to be the Messiah despite his death whose corpse was inaccessible to his followers. This may have led to further speculation about Jesus as a way of further reducing cognitive dissonance or just in the course of normal human conjecture.

As mentioned earlier, a small number of Lubavitchers in a nearly identical situation speculated that Rebbe Schneerson did not decompose in his grave because he was a "righteous person" (Dein 2012: 104). Some Lubavitchers might have speculated something more extravagant if not for their constraint requiring the Messiah's body to remain on earth. Jesus' followers may have engaged in similar speculation, influenced by Jewish and Hellenistic beliefs about vindication of and reward for exceptionally righteous prophets and great heroes. Especially influential might have been the live bodily assumptions up to heaven before or at the moment of death of great prophets/heroes like Enoch, Moses, Elijah, Herakles, Aeneas, and others.<sup>12</sup> Assuming for the moment that Jesus' followers did *not* believe that a person's soul could live separately from its body, these influences may have favored Jesus raised bodily from the dead up to heaven to be with God over a prophet-Messiah who was left to rot in the ground away from God until it was time for him to usher in the final redemption.

Some might think Jesus' followers would at most have imagined Jesus raised from the dead in his mortal body (i.e., resuscitated) and then transported up to heaven, the next best thing to the bodily assumptions of great prophets/heroes mentioned above who did not have to experience

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<sup>12</sup> See Philo Judaeus, Questions and Answers on Genesis, Book I, #86, cf. Gen. 5.24, Deut. 34.6, and 2 Kgs 2.11; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.8.48; Psalms 16.10, 49.15, and 73.24 on which, according to Mitchell Dahood, "The psalmist firmly believes that he will be granted the same privilege accorded Enoch and Elijah; he is convinced that God will assume him to himself, without suffering the pains of death" (1965: 91). Live bodily assumptions up to heaven of Hellenistic heroes before or at the moment of death that also "would have been influential in the Hellenized Jewish environment of the first century" (Patterson 1998: 222) include: Herakles in Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 4.38.3-5; Aeneas in Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.64.4-5; Romulus in Plutarch, *Life of Romulus* 2.27; Xisouthros in Berossos, *Babyloniaca*, preserved in Syncellus, *Ecloga Chronographica* 55. For an extensive cataloging of translation fables in classical antiquity see Miller 2017: 26-90.

death. However, Jesus' followers may not have been so academic in their thinking. They had no precedent to draw on of any great prophet ever being bodily raised from the dead. If Jesus' followers concluded that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead by God, they may have simply *assumed* that Jesus was raised in his final immortal body, the "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15.20) of the general resurrection that they expected to arrive very soon. Even if one wants to imagine Jesus' followers thinking carefully through all of the options so as not to cross any supposed doctrinal lines, the belief by Jesus' followers that Jesus was the Messiah, the *greatest* of all the prophets, may have led them to conclude that Jesus deserved a higher level of vindication and reward than previous prophets who were assumed alive into heaven. According to N.T. Wright, Jews viewed the final immortal body as the "final state of blessedness", the "reward", and the "ultimate prize" (2003: 142, 160, 193). If so, then it does not seem much of a stretch for Jesus' followers to conclude that Jesus was raised from the dead in his final immortal body instead of his mortal body. This conclusion by Jesus' followers may have been further encouraged by a Jewish belief that Enoch, Moses, and Elijah received some kind of super body when they were assumed alive into heaven (2 Enoch 22.6-10, cf. 23.3, 56.2;<sup>13</sup> Sirach 45.2;<sup>14</sup> 1 Enoch 89.36;<sup>15</sup> Lk. 9.28-32;<sup>16</sup> Mal. 4.5, cf. Mk 6.14-15<sup>17</sup>).

If Jesus' followers believed that a person's soul could live separately from its body, there are four reasons why Jesus' followers may still have favored Jesus *bodily* resurrected up to heaven to be with God instead of imagining that only Jesus' soul was raised up to heaven to be with God (contra Craig 2011: timestamp 8:07-8:25). First, Jesus' followers may have viewed a bodily resurrection as more vindicating of and rewarding for Jesus than just his disembodied soul being raised by God up to heaven. Second, Jesus' followers may have believed that the soul only existed in some kind of sleep state after death, so a bodily resurrection was favored because that was the only way they could imagine Jesus being with God in any meaningful sense before his return.<sup>18</sup> Third, the bodily assumptions up to heaven of Hellenistic heroes just before or at the moment of death (see the end of footnote #12) may have influenced Jesus' followers to favor a bodily resurrection over a spiritual raising. The fourth and final reason emerges if Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, as many scholars currently believe was the case. Believing Jesus was the Messiah despite his death and that he would return very soon to usher in the general resurrection, some of Jesus' followers may have had a hard time accepting a disembodied Jesus waiting in heaven, apocalyptic mission still unaccomplished. Imagining Jesus the "first fruits" of the general resurrection may have been a way for Jesus' followers to affirm to themselves, and proclaim to others, that the end-times redemption had already begun just as Jesus promised, a sort of self-created confirmation of Jesus' apocalyptic message and of Jesus as a prophet.

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<sup>13</sup> "Enoch ascended *bodily* to heaven and was transformed into an angel" (Alexander 1998: 102-104). "[Enoch] became identical to an angel" (Ehrman 2014: 60). "[Enoch's] earthly form...[was] exchanged for a form such as that of the 'glorious ones'" (Stokes 2017: 204-205).

<sup>14</sup> "God made Moses 'equal in glory to the holy ones' [Sirach 45.2]" (Ehrman 2014: 60-61).

<sup>15</sup> "1 Enoch 89.36 narrates that the sheep representing Moses transforms into a human, indicting the promotion of Moses from human to angelic form" (Stokes 2017: 195-196).

<sup>16</sup> "The transfiguration accounts of the Synoptic Gospels...likely presume the belief in a glorified Moses [and Elijah]" (Stokes 2017: 196). "[Moses and Elijah have] ascended to heaven and been transfigured and glorified" (Alexander 1998: 114 n. 47).

<sup>17</sup> Some kind of upgraded body that defies decay seems presupposed for Elijah, for how else could he return to earth a thousand years after his death?

<sup>18</sup> N.T. Wright notes a range of Jewish beliefs about the state of the soul in heaven: "They are, at present, souls, spirits or angel-like beings...Where are they? They are in the hand of the creator god; or in paradise; or in some kind of Sheol, understood now not as a final but as a temporary resting-place" (2003: 203). See too Isa. 26.19; Dan. 12.2; Hos. 6.2; LXX Hos. 13.14.



It must also be acknowledged that there is a certain unpredictability to the human imagination. Unexpected and novel traditions related to resurrection and heavenly ascents in the Jewish and surrounding ancient world include the raising of many dead saints when Jesus died (Mt. 27.52-53), the belief that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mk 6.14-16), the belief that Nero was or would be revived from death (primary sources in Wright 2003: 68 n. 203), the first live bodily assumption up to heaven of a great Jewish prophet (Enoch in Gen. 5.24), and a story of children raised bodily from the dead up to heaven (Testament of Job 39.8-40.4, versification in some sources is 9.4-14). According to Wright, these traditions are, respectively, “without precedent in second-Temple expectation”, “an exception to the general rule”, “a remarkable oddity”, and “exceptions to the otherwise universal rule” (2003: 636, 413, 68, 95, Wright does not address the *Testament of Job* story). Jesus’ resurrection would fit in well with the list of unexpected and novel traditions above and Wright’s descriptions of them. There is no need for any of these traditions to have in mind a final immortal body like Jesus had (although the first, second, and last traditions might) in order to show that Jesus’ followers could have imagined Jesus receiving his final immortal body. These traditions need only show that surprisingly novel beliefs can sometimes emerge from the human imagination without the events themselves actually happening or anyone having a vision of the events. I think Wright accurately captures the potential and unpredictability of the ancient imagination, as well as the human imagination generally, when he writes, “As with all one-way streets, there is bound to be someone who attempts to drive in the opposite direction” (2003: 82). This would seem especially true when the imagined events occur in a realm that is invisible to everyone, as was the case in all of the examples above and as was the case with Jesus’ resurrection up to heaven (assuming there was no access to Jesus’ corpse).

For all of the above reasons, it is not surprising to me that Jesus’ followers thought Jesus was resurrected up to heaven in his final immortal body instead of in his mortal body or only spiritually (contra Wright 2003: 700: “impossible”; Craig 2011: timestamp 8:40-9:24: “no reason”). Why had such a belief never emerged before or since? Because Jesus was the first and only dead man who was still thought to be the Messiah despite his death whose corpse was inaccessible to his followers.

In sum, there seems enough raw material and dynamic creative process in the Jewish tradition for the belief to arise that Jesus was resurrected up to heaven to be with God in his final immortal body and would return soon to usher in the final redemption. A resurrected and soon to return Messiah rationalization entails Jesus’ followers doing exactly what was done by the followers in all of the other movements outlined in this article – they reconfigured their current expectations and beliefs to arrive at a new belief that reduced their cognitive dissonance. An innovation that goes against traditional expectations is precisely what cognitive dissonance can be expected to produce (and has produced, as the earlier models show), because the traditional expectations are among the very beliefs creating the dissonance. The beliefs that Jesus died for our sins, was resurrected from the dead up to heaven, and would return soon to usher in the final redemption would have answered the two most pressing questions that traditional expectations posed for Jesus’ followers after his death – why did the Messiah have to die and how can a dead man be the Messiah – and they reflect all of the logic one would expect of a human rationalization trying to maintain the view that Jesus was still the Messiah despite his death.

### **From the Resurrection Belief to Visions of Jesus to the Early Creed**

Because cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalizations need the support of others to be believed, the initial rationalization of Jesus’ death may have occurred during the week long trek home

from Jerusalem to Galilee if some of Jesus' close followers were together, or shortly thereafter. The initial rationalization could have been initiated and buoyed by a leader in the group, but there also seems no reason why someone of lower status could not have initiated the rationalization, or for it to have been a patchwork of ideas from several different people.

Initially, the only people who would have believed the resurrection rationalization would have been close followers of Jesus who shared the same cognitive dissonance. As Leon Festinger explained earlier in this article, when a movement is faced with cognitive dissonance, and someone in the group finds a way to reduce that cognitive dissonance with a new belief or beliefs, he/she "can usually turn to others in the same movement, who have the same dissonance and the same pressures to reduce it. Support for the new explanation is, hence, forthcoming" (Festinger et al. 1956: 28).

Like the Millerite, Sevi, and Lubavitch movements mentioned earlier, Jesus' followers probably turned immediately to scripture for further confirmation of their new beliefs, thereby increasing their confidence that Jesus died for our sins, was resurrected from the dead up to heaven, and would return very soon. Van Buren comments on the creativity of this interpretive interaction with scriptures:

To listen to...many a...Christian, is to listen to just this mistake, as though a Jew must be either blind, stupid, or perverted not to see what is so obvious to a Christian. Such Christians fail to recognize that Jews have continued to read these texts with the closest attention over the centuries without seeing them as pointing to the gospel. They [Christians] fail as well to acknowledge their own foundations in the highly creative interpretation of Israel's scriptures. (1998: 72)

Expectation of Jesus' return and/or bereavement due to Jesus' absence may have caused a small to moderate number of visions of Jesus, just as it did in the Lubavitch movement: "Hillel Pevzner, an important messianist rabbi in France, is reported to be among the growing (though still small) number of people who claim to have seen the Rebbe since his death."<sup>19</sup> There were probably also people who had an intense feeling of Jesus' presence after his death, again, just like in the Lubavitch movement: "The Rebbe is here with us now. I can feel a definite presence.

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<sup>19</sup> Berger 2008: xxxiv. See too Dein and Dawson 2008: 174 and Dein 2010: 547. Berger refers readers to two webpages in Hebrew for some unverifiable firsthand accounts of seeing Rebbe Schneerson after his death: <https://www.chabad.fm/604/7448.html> and <https://www.chabad.fm/141/12924.html> (accessed 6 Jun 2018). See too <https://www.chabad.fm/604/> and <http://seeingtherebbe.wordpress.com/> (accessed 30 Jun 2018). The latter of these two websites claims its accounts come from a Hebrew book titled *Lifkoach et Ha'einayim* ("Open Your Eyes") published in 2006, but I could not find any information about this book even after enlisting the help of a local university librarian. Attentive readers of the accounts above might notice that some of the visions of Rebbe Schneerson occurred among a small number of Lubavitchers who believed, as did other Lubavitchers about a previous Rebbe, that Rebbe Schneerson never actually died and that his corpse only "appeared" to be in the coffin that was buried (see Dein 2010: 543, 548; 2012: 102-110). For these Lubavitchers, Rebbe Schneerson became invisible at his death and sometimes becomes visible to those with enough faith to see him. As far as I know, the majority of the Lubavitchers, those who thought Rebbe Schneerson's corpse was actually buried, always interpreted visions of him as a visit by his spirit. It is also worth noting that I included bereavement as a possible cause of visions of Jesus and Rebbe Schneerson because I am not sure how bereavement – defined as being "deprived of something or someone" (Merriam-Webster 2018) – would interact with a belief that the same person was the Messiah and would return very soon (and in Jesus' case was already bodily alive again in heaven). According to hallucination expert Oliver Sacks, bereavement hallucinations are "deeply tied to emotional needs and feelings", that when a loved one dies there is a "hole" that somehow "must be filled" and a "longing" for the deceased loved one (2012: 230-231, 233). Even though the followers of Jesus and Rebbe Schneerson believed that their Messiah would return very soon, it would seem that a "hole" and "longing" for him would still be present until he returned, possibly causing bereavement visions at the same time that they were excited about his return.

No, I cannot see him but I feel overwhelmed. You can definitely feel his power” (Dein 2010: 547). According to hallucination expert Oliver Sacks, the sensation of a dead person’s presence can be almost as powerful as a visual hallucination, with the sense of conviction that someone is there being “irresistible” (2012: 212).

As the initial months and years passed, what the emerging Christian community probably needed badly were people who had the ability to lead, that is, the ability to teach, preach, and defend their new beliefs. If so, then the appearance traditions to “the Twelve” and to “all the apostles” (1 Cor. 15.5, 7) may be authority designation appearance traditions, not reports based on some precise criteria determining what qualified as an appearance by Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

The appearance to “more than five hundred” (1 Cor. 15.6) could be a late legend that grew out of some kind of shared ecstatic and smaller group experience in the early Christian community.<sup>21</sup> The possibility that this tradition was added by Paul at a later date than the early creed is supported by Richard Bauckham: “It is possible that the summary Paul knew listed (as might be appropriate in a summary designed to assist evangelistic preaching) those appearances in which the recipients were commissioned to proclaim the Gospel, and that the appearance to the five hundred was added by Paul because of its usefulness for his purpose in 1 Corinthians 15” (2002: 308). Summarizing the work of psychologists Leonard Zusne and Warren Jones, Gary Habermas points out that, “belief, expectation, and even excitement” are key psychological conditions that contribute to shared ecstatic or hallucinatory experiences (Habermas 2003: 11; Zusne and Jones 1982: 135-136).

The above appearance traditions may also have been supplemented by “powerful religious experiences”, including “prophesy...visions...[and] dreams” (Acts 2.17) that were taken by some percipients as revelations and appearances by Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Such experiences may have been triggered or significantly magnified by the highly charged religious environment of excitement about Jesus’ resurrection and expectation of his imminent return.

As the Christian movement grew, and as Christians tried to convince others of their beliefs, it would have been natural for them to emphasize as they do in their earliest teaching/preaching formula that Jesus died for our sins and was raised *in accordance with the scriptures* (1 Cor. 15.3-4), and that Jesus appeared to all of the leaders in the new movement (1 Cor 15.5, 7). If they had any powerful religious experiences in the early Christian community, they would have emphasized those too. Emphasizing these things would have had far greater value for confirming beliefs within their own group, and convincing outsiders of their beliefs, than emphasizing that a rationalization started it all. This, and the dearth of early firsthand records from Jesus’ original disciples, would explain why the historical record does not record that the resurrection belief initially emerged from a rationalization of Jesus’ death.

### **Summary of the Rationalization Hypothesis**

This article has tried to convey to the reader the plausibility and explanatory power of the rationalization hypothesis. The four examples of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalizations given at the beginning of this article show that cognitive dissonance can lead people to new and innovative beliefs, that trying to put a limit on the human imagination when it is faced with cognitive dissonance is virtually impossible, and that the beliefs arrived at can seem wildly outlandish to outsiders but seem reasonable to those trying to reduce their cognitive dissonance.

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<sup>20</sup> See The Jesus Seminar 1998: 484-485, 492; Patterson 1998: 234-236; Komarnitsky 2014: 99-105.

<sup>21</sup> See Lüdemann 2004: 73-74; Ehrman 2006: 29; Patterson 1998: 236; Komarnitsky 2014: 105-110.

<sup>22</sup> For information about “powerful religious experiences” see Hurtado 2005: 64-70, although as far as I can tell Hurtado does not include “dreams” in the powerful religious experiences that occurred at Christian origins.

Helpful to the resurrection rationalization emerging in the case of Jesus were two circumstances: Jesus was a non-military Messiah figure, or at least had not committed to any military operations that would make it harder to rationalize his death, and Jesus' corpse was not available to disconfirm the resurrection belief. Once the stage was set with these two circumstances, it is plausible that a radical rationalization of Jesus' death led to the belief that Jesus died for our sins, was resurrected up to heaven to be with God, and would return soon to usher in the final redemption. These new beliefs were a creative interpretation and reconfiguration of Jewish beliefs about measure-for-measure recompense and vicarious sacrifice when dealing with God, great prophets ascending to heaven, the final immortal body, the state of existence of souls in heaven, and possibly Jesus' apocalyptic teachings and some minor Hellenistic influences. With shared cognitive dissonance, the rationalization hypothesis explains why Jesus' close followers would coalesce around such a radical rationalization. The malleability of scripture explains why Jesus' followers were able to find scriptural support for their new beliefs. Expectation of Jesus' return, bereavement, and possibly powerful religious experiences explain why there were visions of Jesus after the resurrection belief came about. The evidentiary value of scripture, appearances, and powerful revelatory experiences explain why these became the emphasis and means of convincing others of the resurrection belief rather than pointing to the initial rationalization that started it all. Legendary accretions over time on these beliefs and experiences explain the rise of the discovered empty tomb and corporeal appearance traditions in the Gospels.<sup>23</sup> The rationalization hypothesis is intended as a standalone hypothesis to explain the resurrection belief, but it could also be integrated into the vision hypothesis in a variety of ways or used to explain some of the unconscious connections that led to a vision of Jesus convincing enough for Jesus' followers to infer that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

### **A Critique of the Bereavement Vision Hypothesis**

When presenting his hypothesis for a bereavement vision of Jesus leading to the resurrection belief, Gerd Lüdemann writes, "To recognize Peter's situation as one of mourning, one need only peruse reports by other mourners, not a few of which attest to the image of a beloved person who has died" (2012: 555; 2004: 163). Lüdemann then gives a firsthand report from a woman who says she hugged her deceased husband in a vision: "I ran into his outstretched arms as I always had and leaned against his chest" (2012: 555; 2004: 163). To the unaware reader, this report could be taken as an example of a visual and tactile bereavement vision projected into external space. However, when one goes to the original source for this account, it is clear that this is a case of *mental imagery*: "...I opened my eyes, the image was gone. I closed my eyes and the image returned again and again – day after day – week after week" (Kreis and Pattie 1985: 15). I am sure mental imagery was all Lüdemann was trying to demonstrate here, but it can distort how people assess the bereavement vision hypothesis and its comparison to other hypotheses if people think examples like this are what typical bereavement visions projected into external space are like. Bereavement visions projected into external space with significant tactile interaction are very rare (as will be shown shortly), and mental imagery that can be controlled by opening and closing one's eyes is probably much less likely to produce the resurrection belief than an experience which occurs in external space and appears to the percipient to be outside of their control.

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<sup>23</sup> For an in-depth discussion on how fast legend can wipe out the historical core of events, including the argument of A.N. Sherwin-White that two generations is too short a time for legend to wipe out a discernable historical core from the Gospels, see Komarnitsky 2014: 188-201.

Lüdemann's next example is equally misleading. Lüdemann refers to children whose deceased parents "sit at the edge of the bed and talk to them" (2012: 555; 2004: 163). Not until one goes to the original source for this account is it clear that this is another case of mental imagery or fantasy, *not* a vision projected into external space:

A six-year-old girl...would frequently imagine that her mother was sitting on her bed in the morning. The fantasy consisted of her mother talking to her quietly...[It] retained an almost hallucinatory vigor....One form of mourning work in childhood is the playing-out of fantasies... (Kliman 1968: 87)

Lüdemann goes on to say that "similar visual disturbances" were reported by almost half of the people in a bereavement study by Colin Parkes, but he gives no page number from the Parkes study and the only thing close I could find in the entire book was a reference to half of the widows "dreaming" of their deceased husband.<sup>24</sup> I suspect Lüdemann meant to refer to another source by Parkes where almost half the widows (9 out of 22) had "illusions" of their deceased spouse (Parkes 1970: 191); however, these are all auditory hallucinations of the simplest kind – like a widow hearing her deceased husband cough or call out their name – or cases where the widow briefly misidentified someone in a crowd or passing car as her deceased husband. None of these experiences are *visions* of the deceased.

When one looks at actual bereavement visions projected into external space, they are usually brief and minimally interactive. This is demonstrated nicely by Lüdemann's final two examples of bereavement visions:

Suddenly I heard the door open and there were soft footsteps with a strange noise of knocking – I was alone at home and was rather frightened. Then the miracle happened – my beloved father came towards me, shining and lovely as gold, and transparent as mist. He looked just as he did in life. I could recognize his features quite distinctly, then he stopped beside my bed and looked at me lovingly and smiled. A great peace entered into me and I felt happier than I had felt before....Then he went away. (2012: 556; 2004: 164)

I was just preparing the fire in the stove when suddenly I felt I was not alone – I turned round, and there this woman stood behind me. She was transparent but perfect in her glory and beauty...[and] smiling. (2004: 165)

Notice in both accounts that the deceased says nothing and there is no tactile interaction with the percipient.

Other research literature confirms the predominantly brief and minimally interactive nature of bereavement visions projected into external space. For example, a leading nineteenth-century researcher reports, "[In] these post-mortem cases...it is very rare to find an apparition which seems to impart any verbal message....As a rule...the apparition is of the apparently automatic, purposeless character....We have, indeed, very few cases where actual apparitions give evidence of any *continuity* in the knowledge possessed by a spirit of friends on earth" (Myers 1903: 9, 21). Twentieth-century historian Ronald Finucane reports similar results: "Modern ghosts seem to do and say as little as their nineteenth-century counterparts....Among the motifs included in one group of narrations collected in the early 1970s, for instance, we note the following: a dead girl announcing her name, a figure seated at a fireplace...[a] mute woman at the foot of the bed...[a] lady who vanished...[a] hooded figure who beckons then vanishes" (1982: 218-219).

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<sup>24</sup> Parkes 1972: 61; Lüdemann 2012: 555; 2004: 163 (Lüdemann's reference to the Parkes study with no page number is in his 2004 work; in 2012 he gives no reference at all).

In one of the largest population surveys ever on hallucinations, Henry Sidgwick found that only 23% of the visual hallucinations of dead people had words spoken by the hallucination, only 5% had a tactile component, and only 4% had both words spoken and a tactile component.<sup>25</sup> The same approximate ratio has been found in psychiatric patients who experience visual hallucinations: “Few participants had hallucinations in other modalities simultaneously with their vision; voices were present in 20%, and tactile hallucinations in 5%” (Gauntlett-Gilbert and Kuipers 2003: 204). Sidgwick also notes that 51% of vocal auditory hallucinations of dead people involve just the percipient’s name being called out or unintelligible voices, and Sidgwick implies the remaining 49% typically have just one or two sentences spoken.<sup>26</sup> Sidgwick further indicates that tactile hallucinations usually involve only one brief touch (1894: 131-133). Sidgwick identifies the following as a “typical instance” of an apparition of the dead, from which I have removed the very realistic visual imagery so just the level of *interaction* can be seen:

I was writing in my sitting-room...I looked up and saw my father coming in...[and] expecting him to speak...[I] half rose to push across to him the chair he liked to use – when there was just nothing...I think he did speak, but if so, it was only to call my name...on entering the room. (1894: 73, 74)

Most bereavement visions are like the one above, where the encounter is very brief, there is no tactile interaction with the percipient, and the vision says nothing or very little to the percipient, usually something along the lines of hello, I’m okay, and don’t worry.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Sidgwick et al. 1894: Column 2 in Table II on pg. 40 (44/191=23%, 9/191=5%, 7/191=4%, where 191 is the total number of phantasms of the dead that had a “visual” component (see the leftmost column of the table), and the word “vocal” means words spoken, as opposed to just sounds, like the sound of a door opening or footsteps (see pg. 180-181 for clarification)).

<sup>26</sup> Henry Sidgwick et al. 1894: second of four columns in Table VII on pg. 46 (56/109=51%, 53/109=49%, with further clarification and examples referenced on pg. 131. The number 56 comes from adding 13+19+6+5+10+3 in the table, and the number 53 comes from adding 33+20 in the table.)

<sup>27</sup> See for example the following firsthand accounts from Sidgwick’s Chapter XVII “Phantasms of the Dead”: 368-369 (case no. 196.4), 370-371 (case no. 656.26), 374-375 (case no. 461.25), 378 (case no. 573.20), 382 (case no. 425.12), 211-213, cf. 367 (case no. 425.12), 217-218, cf. 367 (case no. 362.21), 225-226, cf. 367 (case no. 379.24), 237, cf. 367 (case no. 725.6), 237-238, cf. 367 (case no. 571.14), 239, cf. 367 (case no. 385.20), 169-170, cf. 382 (case no. 453.3), 213-214, cf. 371 n. 1 (case no. 442.17), 371-373 (case no. 442.15; note that the additional experience related at the end of this narrative is not firsthand), and 383-385 (case no. 726.14; note that there are two separate experiences in this account occurring in two separate rooms, one tactile with no image, the other an image with a simple verbal comment; the claim that both occurred at the same time is not considered here). When looking at these Sidgwick accounts, it is important to keep in mind that Sidgwick was trying to find “continuity of psychical life and the possibility of communication from the dead” (Sidgwick 1894: 392, cf. 367). Because of this psychical interest of the Sidgwick study, the vast majority of these accounts of phantasms of the dead involve apparitions that occurred after death but were *claimed* by the percipient to have occurred *before* they knew of the deceased’s death. The psychical conclusions from the Sidgwick study were long ago rejected by experts, but one can easily imagine mistakes being made by the percipient on when they knew about the deceased’s death, or anticipation of the deceased’s death causing nearly the same conditions as bereavement after death, so these accounts seem reasonably legitimate examples of bereavement visions. For more examples of minimally interactive bereavement visions, see the following firsthand accounts from Guggenheim 1995 Chapters 6-8, which cover partial body and translucent appearances, solid looking full body appearances, and movie screen like visions and mental imagery: 77 (Phyllis), 79 (Marie), 79 (Pam), 80 (Wayne), 81 (Consuelo), 82-83 (Cindy), 84 (Rita), 85 (Ben), 86 (Hal), 87 (John), 88 (Trudy), 89 (Billie), 89-90 (Anita), 90-91 (Marcia), 95 (Joanna), 95-96 (Eileen), 96-97 (Anne), 97-98 (Molly), 98-99 (Stuart), 99 (Virginia), 99-100 (Gordon), 100-101 (Paula), 113 (Patty), 114 (Rachael), 117-118 (Trish), 118-119 (Katie), 121 (Ross), 122 (Toni), 123 (Gary), 123-124 (Elaine), 124-125 (Wendy), 126-127 (Claire). See too Sacks 2012: 233, 235; Green and McCreery 1975: 188-191 (seven visual accounts); Grimby 1998: 69-70 (three visual accounts); and Rees 2001: 269 (four visual accounts, not counting the one involving a hand shake, which I include in the more interactive examples that I will give below).

On the other side of the spectrum, one of the most highly interactive bereavement visions I am aware of looks like this, again with the very realistic visual imagery removed so just the level of interaction can be seen:

I sat in the chair in the front room. I was thinking about Mother [deceased]....Suddenly, I saw her walk into the room!...[She] sat on the arm of the overstuffed chair. She put her arm across my shoulder and said, “Hannah, darling, you have been like an angel to me. Don’t feel sad. Don’t grieve for me.”...Then Mother got up and walked around to the other side of the chair. She said, “Don’t worry about me. Just remember I’m happy.” Then she kissed me on the cheek and left. It was so very real – I felt the touch of Mother’s arm on my shoulder and the press of her lips on my cheek.<sup>28</sup>

According to Lüdemann, Peter had “an auditory and visual experience of Jesus alive and in heavenly glory” (2012: 552), so Lüdemann seems to have in mind something more than a typical bereavement vision of Jesus, but one cannot tell by how much. More detail would be helpful in order to get a feel for the probability of such a bereavement vision occurring. Bart Ehrman, another proponent of the bereavement vision hypothesis (2014: 203-204), refers his readers only

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<sup>28</sup> Guggenheim 1995: 105 (Hannah). For more examples of moderately to highly interactive bereavement visions, see the following firsthand accounts from Guggenheim 1995 Chapters 6-8, which cover partial body and translucent appearances, solid looking full body appearances, and movie screen like visions and mental imagery, and Chapter 22 “The Best of the Best After-Death Communications”: 78 (Edna), 83 (Kurt), 91-92 (Dale), 92-93 (Carolyn), 101-102 (George), 102-103 (Eve), 103-104 (Helen), 104 (Sonia), 106 (Richard), 107 (Deborah; includes hugging with an externally projected vision), 108 (Edward), 109 (Tanya), 110-111 (Leonard; includes hugging with an externally projected vision), 114-115 (Clara), 115-116 (Allen), 116-117 (Edie), 119-120 (Gay), 125-126 (Faith), 342-343 (Laura), 345-346 (Randall), 346-347 (Mary Lou), 353-354 (Scott; includes hugging with an externally projected vision), 356-357 (Jennifer), 357-358 (Diana), 365-366 (Lewis), 366-367 (Grace), 368-371 (Daniel; includes mental imagery with eyes open or closed once a day for four days, large amounts of extended conversation, and the percipient is able to step into the vision), 371 (Rosalyn), 372-373 (Glen). It is worth noting that the Guggenheims only published 353 of the 3300 reports they received (back cover of the book), and they were motivated by a desire to find evidence of after-death communication (pgs. 9-10, 13, 15), so it is possible that this book disproportionately favors the more highly interactive bereavement visions from their main database. Since the Guggenheims actively solicited people to contact them with their experiences (pg. 17), it is also possible that the 3300 reports they received were already skewed toward more dramatic accounts than would be found in a random survey of the general population. None of this is meant to diminish any of these experiences; I am merely pointing out that this book might have a disproportionate number of more interactive bereavement visions than would be found in the general population. A similar bias appears to have occurred in the Sidgwick study. As noted earlier in this article, Sidgwick’s tabular data reported only 4% of 191 visual phantasms of the dead had triple modality (visual, verbal, and tactile interaction), but three times that amount (12%, 3 out of the 25 accounts given in English) were included as representative cases in the “Phantasms of the Dead” chapter (the three cases with triple modality are on pgs. 214-216, cf. 367 (case no. 381.4), 380-382 (case no. 464.15), and 385-387 (case no. 402.19)). Even if you include the seven other accounts in this chapter that are not in English and assume they are all low in interactivity, the percentage is still too high and the bias is still present. For other firsthand accounts of moderately to highly interactive bereavement visions from Sidgwick’s Chapter XVII “Phantasms of the Dead” see: 364 (case no. 418.5), 373-374 (case no. 740.9), 141-142, cf. 365 (case no. 733.18), 224-225, cf. 367 (case no. 215.9), 233-234, cf. 367 (case no. 645.11), 234-235, cf. 367 (case no. 450.18), 238-239, cf. 367 (case no. 452.10). See too Sacks 2012: 234 and Rees 2001: 269 (the one account referring to shaking hands with the vision). These last two accounts are the only moderate to highly interactive bereavement visions I am aware of in literature without an expressed interest in finding evidence of after-death communication. Sacks calls the account he provides a “particularly vivid, multisensory experience”, so it is probably near the upper bounds of what has been reported to him: “I heard the squeaking of the wheels of her walker in the hallway. She walked into the room...and sat down on the bed next to me. I could feel her sit down on the mattress....[She said] something about checking in with me....I could feel her there and it was frightening but also comforting.” For those interested, I have included *all* of the visions from Sidgwick’s Chapter XVII (in English) and the Guggenheim’s Chapters 6-8 in this footnote or the previous footnote.

generally to a source book for bereavement visions (Ehrman, 2014: 196; Guggenheim 1995), so he seems to think that even a typical bereavement vision of Jesus could have led to the resurrection belief.

Whatever level of interaction one proposes for a bereavement vision of Jesus, and whether one proposes the vision was projected into external space or was a case of mental imagery, the conclusion that Jesus was still the Messiah despite his death and had been bodily resurrected from the dead up to heaven would have had to compete with two other explanations for the vision. One of these competing explanations would have been that Jesus' non-Messiah spirit had just visited from the dead, like so many other people throughout history have concluded from these experiences of lost loved ones. The other competing explanation, which is often missed by critics of the bereavement vision hypothesis, would have been that the vision was just a figment of the imagination. As hallucination expert Jan Blom points out, "Bereavement hallucinations often have a highly realistic appearance. However, individuals in possession of proper reality monitoring skills tend to recognize these quite easily as non-sensory percepts" (2010: 63). Dr. Peter McKellar notes the same thing about bereavement hallucinations, referring to people who "prefer to interpret them naturalistically" (1968: 120). And Richard Bentall writes, "An individual who grows to adulthood in a society that recognizes the existence of ghosts, or that values spiritual experiences, is more likely to attribute reality to the image of a deceased relative than a person who reaches maturity in a materialistic, scientifically oriented society" (2014: 123). Of course, Jesus' followers were not living in a "scientifically oriented society", but if for whatever reason they did not think a vision of Jesus was his non-Messiah spirit paying them a brief visit from the dead, the next logical choice would have been that the experience was just a figment of the imagination, not that Jesus was still the Messiah despite his death and had been bodily resurrected from the dead up to heaven. Sidgwick explains the thought process involved:

[T]he percipient is usually deceived for the moment into thinking it as real as they. The conviction that it is not real is due, not to a difference in the hallucinatory percept, but to an exercise of the reflective judgment. The mode of appearance and disappearance, the appeal to another sense, the impossibility that a real person should have been there – points, in short, which are only apprehended by reflection – are the considerations on which the judgment depends. (1894: 75-76)

The bereavement vision hypothesis is also not helped by the fact that many Jews of the time were surely aware of the phenomena of visits by dead people, so it is not like Jesus' followers were experiencing something new that they, or others who they told about their experiences, had never heard about before and could not provide a ready explanation for (like one of the two explanations offered above). Also, the more interactive bereavement visions frequently occur in bed on the edge of sleep or just after being awoken in the middle of the night, creating a hurdle for convincing others that it was not just a dream.

My point in all of the analysis above is that unless one proposes an extraordinarily unusual bereavement vision like the scene in Lk. 24.36-51, which would essentially compel a person to believe in Jesus' resurrection, some amount of rationalizing *must* be present even in the bereavement vision hypothesis.<sup>29</sup> Cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization provides an excellent model for explaining this rationalizing. Advocates of the bereavement vision

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<sup>29</sup> This would be true for dreams of Jesus as well, for Jesus' followers must have known that dreams often have no connection to reality. One way around this would be to propose that Jesus and his followers practiced ecstatic dream states before Jesus' death and were used to treating them as divine revelations, but as far as I know this is not a mainstream position of the bereavement vision hypothesis.



hypothesis may already assume cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization is part of their hypothesis, but this could be made much clearer.

However, once one integrates cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization into the bereavement vision hypothesis, the question posed by this article logically follows: Is a vision of Jesus even necessary for the rise of the resurrection belief? In my view the answer is no. If a vision of Jesus did coincide with the rise of the resurrection belief, it was just the final nudge releasing a creative rationalization of Jesus' death that likely would have happened anyway. It is also a real possibility in my view that a resurrection rationalization would have had an *easier* time emerging from an unhindered Jewish imagination that did not at the same time have to make sense of a brief and minimally interactive Jesus who had nothing to say about the cataclysmic events of his own crucifixion or where the movement was supposed to go from there. Making sense of a brief and minimally interactive Jesus would have been easier *after* Jesus was thought of as an exalted heavenly figure, just like brief and minimally interactive visions of the Virgin Mary pose no problem for those who view her as an exalted heavenly figure today.

Michael Goulder circumvents somewhat the typically low interactivity of bereavement visions by proposing a more interactive "conversion-vision" of Jesus (1996: 48-52; 2000: 86-96; 2005: 193-194). Goulder's primary conversion-vision model is a vision of Jesus experienced by Charles Manson murder accomplice Susan Atkins while in prison. In her account, she is trying to decide what to do with her life, including considering suicide. She then says, "I could choose the road many people had been pressing on me. I could follow Jesus," and then she reports the following vision:

As plainly as daylight came the words, "You have to decide. Behold, I stand at the door and knock." Did I hear someone say that? I assume I spoke in my thoughts, but I'm not certain, "What door?" "You know what door and where it is Susan. Just turn around and open it, and I will come in." Suddenly, as though on a movie screen, there in my thoughts was a door. It had a handle. I took hold of it and pulled. It opened. The whitest, most brilliant light I had ever seen poured over me. In the center of the flood of brightness was an even brighter light. Vaguely, there was the form of a man. I knew it was Jesus. He spoke to me – literally, plainly, matter-of-factly spoke to me in my 9-by-11 prison cell: "Susan, I am really coming into your heart to stay." I was distinctly aware that I inhaled deeply, and then, just as fully, exhaled. There was no more guilt! It was gone. (Goulder 1996: 49; 2000: 87-88; 2005: 194 n. 5)

The problem with the Atkins model is that a heavenly Jesus and the Christian theology of forgiveness were *already* well-developed concepts when Atkins had her vision, and Atkins had many people "pressing" her to accept these ideas. In the case of Peter's vision (or whoever had the first vision of Jesus), the resurrection belief was not yet even born, let alone was anyone pressing the resurrection belief on them. The Atkins model might have some applicability to Paul's vision, but it does not have much application for the emergence of a *new* and *innovative* belief.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there may be no way to objectively adjudicate which came first, the resurrection belief or a vision of Jesus, but either way the concept of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization has a lot to offer. The concept of cognitive-dissonance-induced rationalization could be used to significantly improve the explanatory power of the bereavement vision hypothesis, or the rationalization hypothesis could be used to explain the rise of the resurrection belief without any vision at all.

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