

Peer Review

Review of: "The Current Impasse in Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus: An Attempt to Clear the Undergrowth"

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prepared for: *Qeios*

Running head: Jesus

Quantum Jesus

Commentary on 'The current impasse in scholarship on the resurrection of Jesus:

An attempt to clear the undergrowth' by Stephen Smith

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2,217 words of text

excluding references

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Keywords: Jesus, miracles, epistemology, burden of proof

Smith's target article can be found as a preprint on the Qeios website: <https://www.qeios.com/read/O5P2M4>.

It may be affirmed that thenceforth whoever does not believe in the carnal resurrection of Christ may [. . .] not [be] strictly speaking a Christian.

– Miguel de Unamuno (1912/1972, p. 70)

Stephen Smith's "The Current Impasse in Scholarship on the Resurrection of Jesus: An attempt to clear the Undergrowth," published here on Qeios (2025), is stimulating reading. Smith taps into what is arguably the strangest and deepest mythological tale told and widely believed in the Western world and beyond. God became man, died at the hand of man with God withholding intervention at that time, and, thanks to divine intervention, rose from the dead three days later. Neither Moses nor Mohammed, the other two Abrahamic mythagogues, dared to attempt such a feat. Texts written a generation after Jesus, and canonized later still, assure us that there were witnesses vouching for the physical reality of the event in order to lock in its spiritual relevance. In time, acceptance of this extraordinary tale became the cornerstone of Christian belief. Take it away, and the whole thing falls down.

I recall that as a youth, I had to memorize and recite the Lutheran articles of faith, with the resurrection of Jesus standing out as the big one, and how my fourteen-year-old mind bridled at the bizarreness of the claim. My personal faith collapsed at that moment, though I dutifully recited the words. This happened, after all, in the context of a culture of obedience, but that's another story.

Smith notes that among those who believe the story and those who do not, there are those who take the time to argue their case in the theater of science and scholarship. The "Evangelicals" argue that the resurrection of Jesus was a real, one-time, natural-law-scoffing miracle. The "Rationalists" argue that this is not so. In this debate, the Evangelicals play defense, seeking to disarm the Rationalists' challenges. Smith's diagnosis is that this debate has come to an impasse, with each side preaching to its own choir, as it were, and with many of their arguments being fallible, incomplete, or illogical. Smith sets out to "clear the undergrowth," and we should ask whether he has succeeded in raising the debate to a higher level.

It is not clear that he has. One might have expected him to stay out of the fray and present a set of guidelines both camps can agree on so that they no longer talk past each other. Instead, it seems that

Smith's goal is to deliver additional ammunition to the Rationalists in their myth-busting quest. Smith introduces the bereavement hypothesis, which states that when a beloved person dies, it is not unheard of that some of the mourners see, hear, smell, or sense the presence of the deceased days after the time of death. These experiences may not qualify as full-blown hallucinations, but they can be subjectively strong enough for the experiencers to accept a notion they would rationally reject. If there is more than one experiencer, the forces of social contagion (Allport, 1924), dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957), persuasion (Cialdini, 2001), and propaganda (Bernays, 1928) do the rest so that a generation later a full-blown mythology is in place. In short, Smith's argument falls within the rationalist narrative.

The genesis of myths and false beliefs is no mystery to science (Forgas, 2025). This still leaves the question of whether a particular miracle actually occurred, and that the storytelling us about this alleged miracle is not a myth but a statement of historical fact. Smith may have added an arrow to the rationalist quiver, but the debate between the Evangelicals and the Rationalists remains as deadlocked as it has ever been. Reading Smith, few Evangelicals will be moved to surrender their core belief. It is indeed surprising that there still is a debate in scholarly publications. The impasse is a long-standing one; no breakthrough has occurred in two millennia, and I see no reason that this will change.

Rationalists will point to David Hume's (1748/1985) influential essay in which he argued that common sense and basic inductive reasoning do not offer sufficient grounds for accepting a putative miracle as fact. In order to do that, Hume says, the falsity of the witnesses' account would have to be even more miraculous than the miracle itself. In other words, the probability of the witnesses being mistaken would have to be smaller than the *a priori* probability of the miracle actually occurring. The resurrection of Jesus is particularly intriguing because it guts the probability argument. Jesus may have raised Lazarus, but his own resurrection as God and in God is perceived by the faithful as a unique, one-time event. There must not be other miraculous resurrections of man-gods. This is critical because it contrasts with the efforts of advocates of other types of "weird shit" (to use Chris French's, 2024, evocative phrase), who attempt to persuade by enumerating supportive evidence. Ufologists, for example, may hope that with the accumulation of ever more witness reports, they will eventually overwhelm the skeptics' inert minds.

Not so with Jesus. His signature miracle must remain unique and irreproducible. There shall be no other prophet who claims (or is claimed) to have risen. Orthodoxy would condemn this prophet as a false one – with consequences to be suffered! Other miracles within the Catholic context are less

demanding. Additional sightings of the virgin may fortify faith. More Jesuses being born, killed, and resurrected, however, would risk devolving the Santa Fé into a carnival side show. The resurrection must remain a miraculous event in a category populated by this one single instance.

The result of the resurrection's uniqueness is that anyone trying to debate it using ordinary tools of probability, induction, refutation, and critical analysis is barking up the wrong tree (Unamuno, 1912/1972). You either believe the myth or you don't. The cognitive-emotional processes involved in belief formation and change are legitimate subjects of science, but science can also, the rationalists will say, declare that certain things did not happen because they could not happen. This is an argument rationalists can only trade among themselves. True believers, like Tertullian or Unamuno, cheerfully declare that they believe *this* myth precisely because it is so absurd and irrational. Once a belief is accepted and once it takes its position in the center of a web of beliefs, its removal in response to evidence or logical argument would be catastrophic for the entire network (Unamuno would consider this "tragic"). With the resurrection gone, the Eucharist, the Holy Ghost, and the immaculate conception would be reduced to mere playthings. They could be thrown out as they cannot support the great game on their own.

Of course, rationalists must confront the same brutal logic. When Bem (2011) published his vaudevillian account of backward induction, a claim that made "ordinary" clairvoyance and psychokinesis look like small potatoes, some of us asserted that his claims ought to be rejected because if they were true, science as we know it would come crashing down. Myriad axioms, theorems, laws, and empirical facts would become moot, and it would be unclear what should replace them. This would be, we felt, too high a price to pay (Fiedler & Krueger, 2013). Still, it took a host of unsuccessful attempts at replicating Bem's findings to reassure scientists that they could put Bem out of their minds. This should not have been necessary, but that's how it goes in the sociology of knowledge. Many scientists lack the courage of their own convictions.

Which brings me to the burden of proof. Smith describes quite clearly, but does not seem to be bothered by, the fact that Evangelicals and Rationalists seem to have agreed on some common ground favoring the Evangelicals. Why should it be the case that an exceptional claim can be made with the burden of proof being placed squarely on the skeptics? Why should it be on the skeptics to show a claim's falsity? Why would the skeptics/rationalists agree to this? Most scholars and people in the street understand that the burden of proof lies with those who make an extraordinary claim (Pigliucci, & Boudry, 2014). The claim of the resurrection of Jesus ignores this reasonable framework. By

claiming divine intervention, the event is rendered metaphysical and is thus removed, *per definitionem*, from proof and refutation (Ayer, 1936). Rationalists who nevertheless accept this burden of (dis)proof have surrendered before the debate has begun.

The debate is not so much at an impasse as it is an exercise in shadow-boxing. Rationalists, like Smith, generate plausible explanations for how the event in question could have come about through normal channels (e.g., the twin brother hypothesis, or the Jesus-was-not-really-dead hypothesis) or how the witnesses might have not only fooled their community but also themselves. Evangelicals can easily, and *ad nauseam*, declare that these considerations fall short. And they do declare this. If you cannot prove that we are wrong, they tell the rationalists, you must agree that we are right.

In Tertullian's world, where people believe "weird shit" (French, 2024; Krueger, 2024), precisely just because it is so weird, scholarly debates about the true merits of the claim seem beside the point, even foolish. What is one to make, for example, of the fact that Evangelicals resort to witness accounts at all? Introducing witnesses into the story invites critical examinations of the evidence, and deadlocked debates are the result. What if the same claim (i.e., the resurrection) were confidently asserted without any reference to witnesses at all? The claim is already bizarre with witnesses; how much more bizarre could it be without them? The Mormon religion flourishes without being able to name any witnesses who have seen the sacred tablets. John Smith made sure there weren't any. In the Christian domain, the virginity of Mary is expected to be believed without witnesses being introduced into evidence.

As to Jesus, one might argue that someone had to see him *post mortem*, or claim to have seen him. Not so. If a witness can be a victim of hallucination, so can witnesses themselves be hallucinated by later storytellers. Homer never saw Achilles or anyone who had seen him; in fact, we don't know of anyone who saw Homer. Nevertheless, thousands of Greeks for hundreds of years took the reality of the two very seriously.

Do rationalists have any other recourse besides trying to chip away at the credibility of alleged witnesses 2,000 years later? I think the rationalists might try to turn the tables (*katastreya*) on the Evangelicals and ask them if indeed they want to argue in the currency of evidence, then what would be the data they'd require to change their minds (Krueger, 2016; Schopenhauer, 1831/2004). When such evidence is unimaginable to them, this is an outcome favoring the rationalists, and the debate can move to more fruitful topics. At the logical level, rationalists might want to ask how the Evangelicals justify calling on God as the source of intervention to explain the resurrection of Jesus, while at the same time justifying their belief in God by pointing to the resurrection. How can the

resurrection both be the thing to be explained by God and the thing that explains God? The *explanans* and the *explanandum* ought to be kept separate (Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948).

When all is said and done, one wonders why it is that a patently fruitless debate keeps going. Some incremental points can be added, as we see, for example, in Smith's paper, but that is a long way from seeing any light at the end of the tunnel. Both Evangelicals and Rationalists presumably have their own set of motives for carrying on. Let me take a stab in the dark here. As to the Rationalists, it is likely the case that many of them find it simply infuriating that some intelligent people scoff at logic, evidence, and the art of argumentation. It is particularly galling to see mythology and mysticism dressed up in the language of rational discourse. As to the Evangelicals, I think that Miguel de Unamuno, himself an unapologetically irrational Catholic, had the right instinct. In his masterwork "*The tragic sense of life in men and nations*", Unamuno (1912/1972) explores the clash of the instinctual with the rational. He sees the tragedy of faith in that it "does not feel secure either with consensus or with tradition or with authority. It seeks the support of its enemy, reason." It's a losing proposition (see also Dawkins, 2006).

Whence this insecurity? A candidate explanation is the fear of death. Death is certain; the remedy is highly uncertain. People engage in a variety of (mostly symbolic) immortality projects to keep the terror mortis at bay (Becker, 1973). What better way to deny death than to assert that resurrection in the flesh is not only possible, but certain, and that the concept has been proven by God themselves? A crass way of putting this is that the Evangelicals do not really care about the resurrection of Jesus but about what it allows them to believe to be in store for themselves. This is not a bad idea because it can never be disproven. A million years may go by, but our resurrection might just be on the Almighty's agenda for tomorrow.

We'll have to learn to live with uncertainty. Quantum Jesus: Now you see him (resurrected) – now you don't!

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Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.