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BOOK REVIEW

Jake H. O’Connell. *Jesus’ Resurrection and Apparitions: A Bayesian Analysis*. Eugene, OR: Resource, 2016. vii + 281 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-4982-2559-5. \$35.00.

The subject of Jesus’ resurrection is a perennial issue in theology, apologetics, and New Testament studies but many studies do not seek to ground their inquiry with any significant degree of epistemological rigour. This is even true of apparently philosophically-informed treatments of the subject (an example being Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010]). In *Jesus’ Resurrection and Apparitions*, Jake H. O’Connell does offer a more epistemologically rigorous effort as he seeks to accomplish two things: to test the traditional resurrection hypothesis against one particular alternative explanation (the apparition hypothesis) using Bayes’s Theorem (BT), and to explain how BT itself works. Below, I summarize the content of this book before evaluating its issues and usefulness.

In the introduction, O’Connell charts out the program of his book while briefly discussing apparition theory, Bayes’s Theorem, and some methodological considerations with respect to the New Testament evidence. As regards apparition theory, O’Connell makes the distinction that it is not to be confused with the hallucination hypothesis: the apparition hypothesis considers that the phenomena of appearances narrated in the New Testament constitute real apparitions (visions which originate externally to the percipient), rather than hallucinations (visions projected from the percipient’s mind). The apparition hypothesis is also presented as a *naturalistic* hypothesis of paranormal phenomena with no divine causation, which differentiates it from the “objective vision” theory (which is a theory that supposes God to have

supernaturally caused non-bodily apparitions of Jesus).

As regards his selection of evidence, O'Connell indicates that this is on the basis of the supposition that the Gospels are only "fairly reliable," and not "generally reliable," as this is the consensus of scholarship; this initially limits the data he examines from the Gospels (he examines more evidence in his final analysis).

Following the introduction, the book proceeds with six chapters as follows: Chapter 2 is the introduction to BT and could be read as a standalone treatment of BT for essentially non-mathematical (and non-frequentist) uses. Chapter 3 is a thorough presentation of the data which serves as evidence for most articulations of the apparition hypothesis of the resurrection, predominantly focusing on data from parapsychological literature in the modern era, while including some reference to ancient apparitions. Chapter 4 begins the analysis proper through an examination of the New Testament data on the foundation of an investigation of 1 Cor 15:3–8, before he considers what data the resurrection narratives of the Gospels offer to those who only see the Gospels as "fairly reliable."

Chapter 5 is devoted to making the case that while the *whole* of the Gospel narratives may be seen as only "fairly reliable," the resurrection narratives *within* the Gospel narratives should be accepted by all as being "generally reliable." Here, O'Connell offers a syllogism to summarize his wider argument:

1. The Gospels are fairly reliable
2. Therefore, the early church was able to accurately transmit many Jesus traditions
3. The early church would likely transmit the Jesus traditions it valued the most at least as accurately as the ones it valued less
4. The early church valued traditions of the resurrection appearances the most
5. Therefore, the traditions of the resurrection appearances were transmitted accurately (153)

He concludes "therefore the resurrection narratives of the Gospels are accurate" (153).

Chapter 6 is devoted to answering four main objections to the

view argued for in Chapter 5 that the resurrection narratives are generally reliable: (1) the argument that they are contradictory; (2) the argument that Matthew relates an obviously unhistorical tale in Matt 27:53–54; (3) the argument that the Emmaus road appearance is fictional; and (4) the argument that eyewitness testimony cannot be trusted to be generally reliable.

Chapter 7 offers a Bayesian analysis of the data which has been variously addressed mainly in Chapters 4 and 5. In this chapter, O’Connell explicates how a Bayesian analysis can proceed without reference to a prior probability (explained below), and then seeks to consider how each piece of evidence fares in support of either the hypothesis of bodily resurrection, or the apparition theory. Before doing this, however, O’Connell helpfully considers arguments usually employed on behalf of the resurrection hypothesis which he sees as actually being unhelpful and fallaciously garnered as support for belief in bodily resurrection. For example, he considers that the claim “the disciples came to believe Jesus rose from the dead,” a claim which is accepted by most, is actually no more expected on the theory that Jesus did raise bodily from the dead, than it is on another theory (that they experienced apparitions). He lists six more such problematic arguments, representing each with a “Bayesian formulation” (described below; as he does his main evidence).

Chapter 7 is effectively the conclusion of the book, after which there is an appendix wherein O’Connell considers the question of the historian and miracles. Below, I offer four criticisms before presenting what I believe to be the main usefulness for the interested reader.

Criticism 1: O’Connell at times betrays less familiarity with work in New Testament scholarship as compared to his familiarity with work done in apparition theory or his familiarity with BT. As regards his claims, for example, on p. 178, O’Connell makes the erroneous claim that that “apocalyptic language is never known to occur in the midst of an ordinary historical account” as one reason for the view that Matt 27:53–54 should not be dismissed as apocalyptic (I do not believe it should be). However, it has long been noted, and recently hypothesized with linguistic rigour, that some sections in the Gospels (such as the

Olivet discourse) do in fact bear linguistic uniqueness within their narrative context which may comport with the view that such texts are apocalyptic (See, for example, Stanley E. Porter, "A Register Analysis of Mark 13: Toward a Context of Situation," in *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice*, 219–36 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015]).

As regards documentation, O'Connell seems mostly familiar with the apologetic and anti-apologetic literature in New Testament studies. This is best exemplified in Chapter 4, wherein he presents his first footnote as offering a short bibliography on 1 Cor 15:3–8 (and to which he refers the reader back for reference in his note 16 as being a bibliography which will survey the relevant issues of the text), yet this footnote only contains works by William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas and J. P. Moreland, and Michael R. Licona. This is not to say that apologetically-focused work does not survey the issues (it may well indeed do so more than adequately for O'Connell's purposes), but exemplifies that O'Connell does not often betray familiarity with technical work done *exegeting* the primary sources or dealing with language of the text (which may have saved him from the error pointed out above).

Criticism 2: O'Connell decides to represent his final Bayesian analysis semi-quantitatively and his conclusion will be jarring to most: O'Connell quantifies the evidence as being 1 quadrillion to one in favour of the bodily resurrection hypothesis as being true. While he does not use the Bayesian formula at every step, the use of numbers as such for non-frequentist investigations will, rightly or wrongly, turn many off.

Criticism 3: while O'Connell reasons well and analytically, his last chapter seems rushed and leaves his argument open to a fairly significant criticism. The objective vision theory (which supposes God-ordained real apparitions) is not rigorously related to the bodily resurrection hypothesis. For example, O'Connell postulates that the objective vision theory *could* be "combined" with the resurrection hypothesis, but *only* in the scenario that Jesus was actually raised but *all* visions were objective visions (i.e., apparitions ordained by God). Yet one will wonder why the

hypothesis that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead, and *usually* appeared as such, but at times may have appeared as an objective vision, is not more likely than the resurrection hypothesis alone. It explains evidence which apparently supports the apparition hypothesis (which O'Connell considers) and seems to be a better explanation of at least one appearance (the appearance to Paul, which O'Connell does not consider as a possibility); this more ad hoc hypothesis could be criticized, but the fact that it is not even theorized is not in accordance with O'Connell's reasoning elsewhere.

Criticism 4: the book itself is somewhat poorly put-together. There are no indices and there is no bibliography other than what is listed in the notes. While this is sometimes done in publications, a separate bibliography would have been a helpful reference. Beyond this, while there are a handful of sub-conclusions, there are too few "signposts" at the beginning and end of each chapter reminding or explaining how what has just been covered builds upon the previous chapter and will be built upon by the chapter which follows. There is also no conclusion to the book, which would be helpful to many readers given its somewhat non-conventional approach with BT.

The main usefulness of O'Connell's work is surely his presentation of Bayes's Theorem; my criticisms here would be idiosyncratic or pedantic. O'Connell helpfully introduces BT to the non-specialist as follows:

we are always used to asking: given that we have some piece of evidence (e.g., a murder weapon) what is the probability our hypothesis is true? [that one suspect killed the victim and not another] . . . but BT tells us that to answer this question, we must turn the question around and ask two questions: Given that the hypothesis is true, what is the probability of getting the evidence we have, and given that the hypothesis is false, what is the probability of getting the evidence we have? (9)

This is the kind of "Bayesian formulation" O'Connell makes later in the work, albeit there in expanded form and particular to the evidence/claim in question. In this chapter, here, he may well achieve the high claim he makes for himself when he states that

his is the clearest introduction to BT (32n1).

Additionally, through exposition of the odds form of BT, O'Connell also shows how two people do not need to agree on how likely a hypothesis is before looking at specific evidence (i.e., a prior probability need not be set), but only need to agree as to how one hypothesis stacks up relative to another in light of some specific evidence. The usefulness of his presentation of BT is demonstrated throughout in a number of comments made prior to his final analysis in Chapter 7, where "Bayesian" comments are routinely made to interrogate claims and estimate the value to certain pieces of evidence.

A secondary usefulness of this book is the chapter devoted to apparitions. O'Connell presents compelling cases from the parapsychological literature which are useful for the person seeking to understand some of these phenomena or seeking to provide evidence to those who might dismiss any such thing as rank superstition.

Overall, this is a valuable and useful book that I think could have been helped by some more editing and a better format in terms of the inclusion of indices and other aids.

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