



# Visions and Voices: Jesus' Resurrection and a New Socio-Scientific Epistemology

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## Abstract

This article appraises current resurrection research methodology in South African New Testament scholarship while suggesting a new epistemology for understanding resurrection appearances. In this paper I critique the traditional/confessional and historical-critical methodologies to expose inherent flaws within them. I then propose that the only type of epistemology that considers the fundamental cultural differences between the western 21<sup>st</sup> century and ancient Mediterranean where the resurrection visions are concerned is the social-scientific historiography. Notwithstanding the value of social-scientific methodology in general, I contend that there are at least two orientations within the social-scientific epistemologies, one of which is crucial to the understanding of resurrection visions reported by the early church and discourses that they claimed to have had with the resurrected Jesus. My conclusion is that the social-scientific version, which utilizes fieldwork in general and participant observation in particular as envisioned by John Pilch, is the most useful tool in understanding post-resurrection visions. Otherwise, with the current socio-scientific method, resurrection visions and discourses of the post-mortem Jesus remain an alien other, even where ethnocentrism is actively guarded against.

**Keywords:** Resurrection; altered/alternate states of consciousness (ASC); out of body experience (OBE) near-death experience (NDE) post-resurrection visions.

## Introduction

The importance of the concept “resurrection” (and, more specifically, the “resurrection of Jesus”) is determined by its central position in Christian belief and theology. Without the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christian faith would lose its essence (Wedderburn 1991:1). Resurrection is the bodily raising of the dead to life in space and time, never to die again. What is at issue is the interpretation of two “events” in the history of Jesus, namely the claims of the empty tomb and the “resurrection visions” (Mark 16:1-8, Matthew 28:17, Luke 24:13-35, John 20:11-29).

The resurrection debate can be summarised as containing two opposing views, with some affirming and others denying a literal, physical and bodily resurrection of Jesus. There are scholars who insist that the historical truth of Jesus' resurrection can be confirmed by historical inquiry, while others are critical or sceptical, arguing that the gospel accounts should be seen as mythical or legendary creations with little connection to any historical reality (Craffert, 2009:127). While the empty tomb hypothesis can be explained in different ways, it is the post-resurrection sightings and conversations that Jesus apparently had with his followers after death that seem to have consistently defied explanation. As far as these post-resurrection appearances and dialogues are concerned, the last two hundred years have seen different viewpoints being put to the fore. This article will attempt to reappraise these views with the aim of proffering an alternative epistemology which makes sense of



how one can still “see” and “talk” with the dead. To this end, I will make use of different interpretive methods and then suggest that a degree of situatedness in comparative cultures is essential to understanding the resurrection of Jesus (Shoko, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

### **Viewpoints on resurrection appearances and conversations**

At least four orientations relative to Jesus’ post-mortem appearances and conversations can be distilled from secondary literature available on the resurrection debate. Firstly, the resurrection narratives in the Gospels, Acts and sections of the epistles were thought of as depicting real events in time and space<sup>2</sup>. This perspective is connected to the reading of the Bible in a confessional way, and has been associated with Flavian Josephus’ canonization theory that still finds expression, albeit in a different form, in contemporary fundamentalism<sup>3</sup>. Christian fundamentalism is a distinct theological movement that developed in the 1910s and 1920s, defending the authority of the Bible and supernatural elements of the New Testament. Fundamentalism defends the virgin birth of Jesus, his miracles and his bodily resurrection (Hardesty, 2003:2). In fundamentalism the idea of the inerrancy of scriptures underlies the belief that biblical events are literal events. This orientation thus became known as the literalistic view. Most fundamentalists, however, are adamant in their rejection of modern miracles, arguing that miracles were confined to biblical times and served only to authenticate God’s prophets, Jesus Christ and the apostles. It is therefore not surprising that Michael R Licona dismisses social-scientific historiography, which admits the possibility of modern-day miracles. The Southern Baptist institution for whom Licona works has officially adopted a more fundamentalist theology in recent decades (Hardesty, 2003:2).

A second orientation, known as the illusory view, interprets resurrection narratives as reflecting the signs of a troubled and traumatised mind on the part of the first followers of Jesus. The disciples are believed to have been hallucinating the return of Jesus to earthly life as a means of coping with his gruesome death. This perspective is also known as the hallucination hypothesis. The major criticism levelled against this theory is that scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot presume to go back in time to the first century and psychoanalyse the witnesses of the resurrection. At best, this method would be speculative and such speculative theorizing would hardly help move this debate forward. Moreover, it has been shown that hallucinations may be associated with pathology, although in contemporary cases of visionary experiences one’s life is can be enriched by the experience (if the element of pathology is excluded).

A third perspective sees resurrection narratives as figures of speech and not literal events. Interpreters in this fold view resurrection as a symbolic act. The texts that are cited to buttress this view include Isaiah 26:19 and Ezekiel 37:1-14.

In the last 40 years, a fourth methodology has come to the fore which seeks to explain the resurrection debate in terms of what has become known as Alternate States of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on Shoko, N. 2019. *The Resurrection Debate among South African New Testament Scholars: Insights from Social-Scientific Historiography*, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Johannesburg.

<sup>2</sup> Matt 28:1, Mark 16:1, John 20:1, Acts 9:1-7, Acts 22:12, Acts 26:12-18, 1 Cor 15:5

<sup>3</sup> Josephus had argued that the Bible reflected authentic writings and this authenticity hinged on the integrity of the authors.



Consciousness (ASCs). This is referred to as the social-scientific interpretation, and is the methodology on which this article mainly draws.

The only type of historiography that takes adequate account of the fundamental cultural differences between the western 21<sup>st</sup> century and the ancient Mediterranean contexts, where the resurrection visions and discourses are concerned, is the social-scientific historiography. There are at least two orientations within the social-scientific methodology, one of which is crucial to the understanding of resurrection visions. This is the assumption of the position of an insider so that we then desist from labelling resurrection visions and appearances as alien events.

### **Social-scientific perspective**

Craffert describes the social-scientific perspective as that approach informed by historical consciousness and the affirmation of multiple cultural realities (Craffert, 2008). In social-scientific methodology, meanings are derived from social systems and present-day readers, in order to become considerate first-century readers, have to learn the scenarios of the documents' original readers (Malina, 1996:79-81). Social-scientific scholars argue that they use appropriate concepts and models from sociology and anthropology in an attempt to explain ancient Israelite and early Christian developments (Du Rand, 2005:183-184). Almost all socio-scientific interpreters hitherto have looked at the strange resurrection phenomena from the perspective of outsiders and strangers. They make no attempt to understand phenomena from the vantage point of participants.

An important concept in the socio-scientific study of resurrection is what is known as Altered or Alternate States of Consciousness (ASC). In some reality systems, a variety of experiences, which can be called Alternate States of Consciousness, ASCs provide knowledge of what people take to be reliable information about the world (Malina & Pilch, 2008:185). Anthropologists studying cross-cultural psychology define Altered or Alternate States of Consciousness as conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are altered (Craffert, 2008:23).

The epistemology of Alternate States of Consciousness presupposes the existence of alternate reality, and alternate reality includes that dimension of reality in which nonhuman personages (such as spirits or deities) reside. This is a realm which human beings from culturally "normal" reality can sometimes visit in ecstatic trance, and to which people are said to go when they die (Malina & Pilch, 2008:185). Craffert argues that, "such states are characterized by changes in sensing, perceiving, thinking and feeling" (Craffert, 2008:23). "When a person is in such a state, the experience modifies the relation of the individual to the self, the body, one's sense of identity, and the environment of time and space" (Craffert, 2008:23). This is in contradistinction to culturally 'normal' or consensual reality, which is that aspect or dimension of reality of which a person is most commonly aware most of the time (Malina & Pilch, 2008:185). Furthermore, in trance or in any other Alternate States of Consciousness, a person encounters (indeed enters) another level or aspect of reality (Malina & Pilch, 2008:185). According to this perspective, when Jesus of Nazareth dies, he joins beings in this realm. In this case the only way in which one could have "seen" and "spoken" with Jesus is by having visited this alternate reality.

Paul apparently ascribes the visions of the resurrected Jesus to such alternate states of experiences (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). Those who claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus have, according to social-scientific interpretation, seen him while in ecstatic trances. Social-scientific interpreters argue that the setting of both the appearing of Jesus and his apprehension by the first century disciples is in the realm of the supra-mundane, or alternate



reality. Seeing the resurrected Jesus was no different to seeing angels. Jesus' appearance to Cleopas and his companion in the Emmaus story demonstrates remarkable aspects of the seeing; apart from the fact that Jesus suddenly appears, he was not immediately recognized (Luke 24:13-35). Guijarro argues that Jesus would have taught his disciples to access ASC by means of visions they may have learned to re-enact (Guijarro, 2017:395). This is borne out by the Transfiguration story in which Elijah and Moses, people from a bygone era and long dead, are seen conversing with Jesus in what is now accepted to be an ASC experience (Guijarro, 2017:395). From this point of view, Pilch argues that the textual data on the visionary encounters are taken as evidence for the reality of Jesus' resurrection as a cultural event, but without claiming universal validity (Pilch, 2004:11).

Under the topic of ASC, psychologists talk also of "out of body experiences" (OBE) and "near-death experiences" (NDE). An OBE can be defined as an experience where you felt that your mind or awareness was separated from your physical body (Twenlow, Gabbard & Jones, 1982:450). In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 Paul recounts an event in which he went into heaven where he saw the ineffable. Suzan Blackmore defines out of body experiences as "those experiences in which the person seems to have left the body and to be looking at the world from a location outside it" (Blackmore, 2005:108). In other words, out of body experiences describe experiences by modern-day people which are similar to the heavenly journeys or soul flights in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The experience of being out of one's body can happen under numerous circumstances, and represents a variety of discrete phenomena. It can be caused by illness or brain injury, it can be artificially induced by means of an electrical stimulation of the brain, or by means of visual manipulation or ritual actions, it can result from sleep disturbances or occur during close encounters with death and bodily trauma, and it can be induced by drugs or ideas and often occurs during extreme sport or sensory overload or deprivation, and can even happen spontaneously. People who test high on the hypnosis scale can be taught to experience OBEs at will (Craffert, 2008:185). Some of these conditions are considered pathological, while others can be seen as psychological adaptations (Pilch, 2004). There is a continuous and growing stream of OBEs related to the increase in resuscitated patients in intensive care units and subject to high-care medical technologies (Pilch, 2004). Even larger numbers of patients return from clinical near-death situations, and a certain percentage of such patients claim to have experienced OBEs. What is clear is that OBEs are normal and a natural potential of the human brain, which under the right circumstances can be induced in anyone.

In an OBE people feel that their self or centre of awareness is located outside of the physical body (Alvarado, 2000:183). One of the common features of OBEs and NDEs is that experiencers regard such experiences as real, maybe even more real than everyday reality and experiences and more than veridical. The importance of these states is that, according to studies done in OBEs and NDEs, in these states people can tune into and be able to interact with those who have died or with spiritual beings. Now that Jesus has died, he is believed to inhabit that realm, and only those who can tune themselves in through certain rituals can experience interaction with the resurrected Jesus.

### **Holy Man or Woman**

Intimately linked to the notions of living people traversing spiritual realms is the notion of holy men or women. A holy person is one who has direct contact or communication with the realm of God by means of alternate states of consciousness (Pilch, 2004:16-17). Such persons know what is going on in the unseen realm of spirits, demons and angels. They can travel through the spirit or demon world, and they can readily make contact with the realm of God. Cultures that identify holy men or women ("shamans") describe two characteristics:



easy access to the realm of the deity, and the ability to broker gifts (information, healing) from that realm to this world (Pilch, 2004:16).

Within the context of alternate reality, is the distinction between monophasic and polyphasic consciousness. A pattern of monophasic consciousness refers to the enculturation of people in western cultures that give dominance to ego-consciousness. Within such a culture, “the only real, experienced is that unfolding in the sensorium during ‘normal’ waking phase... and is thus the only phase appropriate to the accrual of information about self and the world” (Pilch, 2004:17). Most people, however, accept and experience what is called polyphasic consciousness: many more states of consciousness (such as visions or dreams) which are taken as real and are often experienced. One implication is that it is no longer possible to assume that everyone is talking from and about the same consensus reality. Therefore, some anthropologists adopt a position beyond the objectively there or the subjectively primitive position. First of all, this means an avoidance of the myth of realism – that is the belief that accounts or texts refer to realities in *the* or in *our* world (Craffert, 2008:17).

### **The Mediterranean human body**

1 Corinthians 15:3-8, which many scholars consider to be the earliest source on the resurrection, does not specify the nature of the post-resurrection appearances. Indeed, Paul seems to have envisaged resurrection to have been somewhat “bodily”, yet he insinuates that this kind of body would not be gross physical body (1 Corinthians 15:44). Firstly, Jesus can appear one moment and the next moment vanish seemingly into thin air. Even though the body of Jesus may have been material enough for him to eat fish and to allow Thomas to put his fingers into the prints of his wounds, yet it was a body that could move into locked spaces (John 21:12ff; Luke 24:31). In response to the Sadducees’ question on possible post-resurrection marriages, Jesus makes it clear that resurrected beings would not be getting married because they would be like angels (Luke 20:36). In other words, resurrection translates one into angel-like existence and transfers them into the realm of God. Paul also speaks about glorified bodies after resurrection, insisting that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50). This then raised the question as to what kind of body the resurrected Jesus had.

There seem to have been at least three conceptions of the human constitution in the ancient Mediterranean. Firstly, whatever first century people believed about the human body, it never was the kind of body found in ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ (Craffert, 2008). As Martin points out, within the conception of early Christians, as for their contemporaries, all things, including the variety of forms of life, were seen as various compounds of four basic elements: air (*pneuma*), earth, water and fire (Martin, 2002:32). Materiality consisted of a spectrum of more or fewer of these elements, and could not have been seen in a dichotomy with non-matter. Human beings, visible in whichever bodily format as souls, spirits or living beings, were configurations of these components and thus, in their terms, material and real.

A resurrected body would have been neither a physical material body of the kind found in Grey’s Anatomy, nor a mutation of such a body. This means that Jesus would have been resurrected in a first century constituted body composed of the same stuff which made up bodies in their world, and would have displayed the features ascribed to such bodies (Craffert, 2008).



## The Christian Bible and the human body

Smith identifies two contrasting strands of tradition in the first century church concerning the form of Jesus' resurrection: 1) Jesus' bodily resurrection was a spiritual one, which might have been translated directly to heaven after his death, rather in the manner of some Old Testament worthies (Genesis 5:24, 2 Kings 2:11); and 2) That his body retained its original physical nature, albeit with some unusual features (Luke 24: 16, 31, 36-37, John 20:14, 19, 26, 21:4) (Smith, 2019:54).

On the other hand, the Christian Bible seems to portray the human constitution as tripartite: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole **spirit, soul and body** be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23). Genesis 2:7 records that the human being is formed from the dust (**body**), and God breathes into the body out of his spirit (**spirit**), and then the human becomes a living **soul**. Pentecostalism teaches that the body is world-conscious, the soul self-conscious, while the spirit is God-conscious. It stands to reason therefore that anything that takes place within the realm of God can be apprehended by the spirit. Any resurrected body would have belonged to this spectrum of bodily conceptions.

Besides the ingredients provided by first-century Mediterranean people's culture, images of Jesus' resurrected body would have been constituted by means of the culturally recognized faculties of the day, such as visions and visionary appearances. These faculties necessitate a special epistemology. Craffert observes that people lived in a polyphasic world where dreams, visions, revelations and other bodily experiences such as heaven-travel experiences underlay this special epistemology (Craffert, 2008).

The death and resurrection narratives are full of visionary experiences and figures encountered in these visions which seem to perfectly fit the logic in Paul's answer about the reality of Jesus' resurrection. For him and his audience, visionary appearances arguably constituted legitimate and sufficient evidence for Jesus' resurrection. In these people's world, visions were legitimate ways of obtaining knowledge: they were neither objective seeing nor hallucinatory in nature, but were culturally real. These altered states of consciousness allow a person to glimpse dimensions of alternate reality either not usually available in ordinary consciousness, or in the case of western cultures deliberately blocked from the total potential of human consciousness" (Pilch, 2004:16).

## The Nature of reality

Socio-scientific interpretation has inevitable implications for the nature of reality itself. The idea of an "objective" resurrection is something that has increasingly come under serious scrutiny in recent years. Social-scientific scholarship has argued that to talk about "objectivity" in historical Jesus research as something out there and amenable to empirical historiography, is to miss the point altogether. They would rather use "reality" as the more acceptable term. A fundamental question in such a discourse is the question of what constitutes reality. It is clear from cultural observations that reality has many dimensions beyond that of which human beings are routinely aware (Pilch, 2004:17). From a critical realist perspective, it is accepted that there also exists a reality totally independent from any human representations (Craffert, 2008:29). Searle adds to this argument that different presentations and different demarcations or constructions presuppose external reality (Searle, 1995:166).



In an ethnographical study that a typical westerner did in an African village, the concept of consensus reality is brought to the fore. Grindal was an anthropologist working in Ghana in the 1980s. It is clear that Grindal's experience of participating in death divination did not happen out of the blue, but resulted from induction into Sisala culture and was accompanied by very specific local circumstances (Grindal, 1983:61). Grindal could enter the consensual reality of the Sisala through a long process of on-site learning. This would be akin to the initiation in classical civilizations.

What gave the conviction of the resurrection of Jesus to not only the disciples of Jesus but to subsequent generations of believers seems to be the advent of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1ff. The Holy Spirit then made the resurrection real to the first disciples and to subsequent converts. The reception of the Holy Spirit with its concomitant *glossolalia* is clearly behind the boldness and the conviction of the disciples. Jesus is on record as telling his disciples not to depart from Jerusalem until the advent of the Spirit: "And behold I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high" (Acts 24:49); "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you and ye shall be **witnesses** unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8 KJV).

There hasn't been any satisfactory theory to account for the exponential growth of Christianity, either in the first century or the early 1900s. The farewell discourses (John 14-17), however, are very clear about how Christianity would grow. Potential converts would never need to be convinced about the reality of the resurrection. The conviction would come through the agency of the Holy Spirit: "And when he comes, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness and of judgement. But when the Comforter comes, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" (John 16:8, 15:26). This is why this gift is not just for the apostles who were alive at the advent of the Holy Spirit: "For the promise is unto you and to your children and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39).

In addition to the above-mentioned evidence, there are both Paul's and Luke's accounts (Acts 9:14 & 22) of Paul's visionary experience. What Luke offers as Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus can be described in anthropological and neuroscientific terms as ecstatic trance or an altered state of consciousness (Pilch, 2004:25-40). Similarly, the women who are reported to have seen the resurrected Jesus are reported to also have seen angels (or in the Lucan version, Luke 24:4, two men in dazzling apparel). When referring to the women's experience, Luke explicitly says that they "saw" a vision of angels" (24:23). There is no reason to think that seeing Jesus was any different to seeing the angels. And at least the vision of angels is another instance in the NT narrative account that in a normal way relates a visionary experience. Jesus's appearance to Cleopas in the Emmaus story also demonstrates remarkable aspects of the encounter because apart from the fact that Jesus suddenly appears, he was not immediately recognised and appeared and disappeared randomly (Luke 24:13-35). According to the Markan (16:2) account, he appeared to them "in another form" – a feature associated with visionary experiences (Pilch, 1998:58, Craffert, 2002:101).

Socio-scientists are of the view that such a consensual reality can be historically analysed and its impact can be interpreted, but it cannot be proven, historically or otherwise. Craffert concurs with this observation because he believes that while visionary experiences can be seen as real, the contents thereof remain outside the purview of biblical scholars (Craffert, 2008:181).



Pilch has a different point of view, maintaining that the human physiology and nervous system can be trained to enter into the experiences of ASC participants.

Central to the foregoing debate are notions of the ontology of being. Without particular notions about human beings and the human body, afterlife ideas cannot exist. A dualist notion of the human self is essential for these beliefs. The idea that the self can exist independently from the body is a prerequisite for any kind of afterlife existence, and therefore in the Israelite tradition (as in many others) afterlife beliefs are closely connected to a variety of ASC experiences. Out of body experiences such as travelling experiences, visionary experiences of deceased ancestors (seeing or encountering the deceased) and near-death experiences are all connected to notions of the afterlife and historically linked to the development of such ideas (Craffert, 2008:174ff). Be that as it may, it cannot be forgotten that the ideal of a “bodily” resurrection is central to Christian eschatology. Further research relative to the ontology of Jesus’ resurrected body needs to be done.

### **Divergence within the socio-scientific approach**

From the foregoing, it is not difficult to appreciate how invaluable the socio-scientific historiography is to the historical Jesus quest. What is clear from a historical-critical perspective is that our reason and our senses are the sole sources of our knowledge. However, socio-scientific historiography also makes it clear that there is more to reality than what meets the eye. The future for socio-scientific historiography will have to deal with phenomena in the realm of God, or what African traditional religions call the “living dead”.

Many socio-scientific interpreters labour under a misapprehension that “seeing” into the alternate realm was not only common but pervasive in ancient Mediterranean. This misapprehension is further extended to argue that in more than 90 percent of the cultures, this phenomenon is common and prevalent. Nothing could be further from the truth. The text of the New Testament is couched in the language of classical civilizations. Words such as “mystery”, “hidden” and so forth abound in Pauline literature. These words communicate the idea that such phenomena were hidden from the average person. In a sense, knowledge obtained through alternate states of consciousness could be described as esoteric, hence the need for those participating in ancient rituals to be initiated. This observation is reminiscent of the remark by the author of 1 Samuel that “... in those days the word of the Lord was rare and there were not many visions” (1 Samuel 3:1).

When the disciples saw Jesus in his post-resurrection form, “they worshipped him but **some doubted**” (emphasis mine) (Matthew 28:17). Another case in point is when the disciples see Jesus walking on the sea and then remark, “**what manner of man is this?**” (emphasis mine). Such observations are important to highlight the fact that though the phenomenon of beings inhabiting alternate reality are portrayed as easily traversing ordinary reality, such observation needs to be qualified so that those who are incredulous of the experiences can also be understood. While Mediterranean believers were more likely to interpret an altered state of consciousness experience as an encounter with someone from the realm of God, a scientifically sophisticated western believer may be inclined to interpret such an experience as a “hallucination”, that is as something pathological. By studying comparative societies and psychological adaptive methods, we can learn how to visit the alternative realm (Pilch, 2004:3). This observation is a corrective of Craffert who maintains that what is experienced in alternate states of consciousness is cultural or consensus reality. For Craffert, though he believes that contemporary models can be juxtaposed to New Testament phenomena, he is unable to reach a level of situatedness in these cultures so as to be able to pronounce on the contents of alternate states of consciousness.



Conversely Pilch argues that “trance experiences which are one of the many levels of awareness available to human beings can be spontaneous or induced” (Pilch, 2004:8). Intentionally induced trance ordinarily occurs in the context of a rite (Pilch, 2004:8). Examples of rites are prayer (Acts 2:1-4, 13:2), and sensory deprivation through fasting etc. (Pilch, 2004:9). The authors of the early Christian texts agree that after his crucifixion and burial, Jesus was seen alive (see Luke 24:5, 23, Acts 1:3) by different people on more than one occasion and this has been shown to have involved in an altered state of consciousness. These people truly saw the risen Jesus, while in altered states of consciousness. They are then witnesses of his having been raised from the dead (Pilch, 2004:14). A contemporary westerner can be trained to tune into alternative realities so that similar experiences can be known.

“Social scientists call behaviour dealing with social line crossing a ‘rite’. Since an ASC experience deals with moving across the metaphorical boundary separating the dimension of normal reality from alternate reality, such transition entails a rite” (Pilch, 2004:171). The ancients *a priori* believed that the seen and the unseen realms interacted with each other. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament encourage hospitality to anyone because one never knows whom they serve, it may just be an angel (Hebrews 13: 2, Genesis 18: 1). What is crucial to understand is that these experiences are not simply spontaneous, but can also be learned and induced.

It has to be remembered that our ancestors in faith did not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. That distinction first emerged with Origen in the third century CE. Prior to Origen, the realm of God, together with all other disembodied beings, was part of the total environment in which human beings lived. This was the totality of reality (Pilch, 2004:41). There was unrestricted interaction between the spirit world and that of humans, and social line-crossing between the two realms was not unheard of (Genesis 18:1). This social line-crossing was primarily the prerogative of “holy persons” who could mediate gifts from God for ordinary people. This is why it is not surprising for modern Jews to traverse back and forth between mundane and sacred spaces. They can alternate between praying and conversing with others seemingly seamlessly (Pilch, 2004: 41). This is also conspicuous within cultures in which people are apt to experience alternate states of consciousness, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Pilch, 2004:41). Where entrance into alternate states of consciousness is deliberate and therefore induced, the body requires a specific tuning or orientation in order to experience this state (Pilch 2004:172).

From the socio-scientific perspective, the question of whether indeed Jesus Christ was resurrected can be answered in the affirmative, but this answer has to be qualified to indicate that it was in alternate states of consciousness, in another realm of reality.

A historical-critical interpretation that is based on the western scientific world view ineluctably reaches the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth was not raised from the dead; he could not have been raised given the scientific world-view into which we are socialised, and associated beliefs about natural laws and the ontology of the human body. Nevertheless, as exposure to other world views reveals, there is more to reality than what can be apprehended by the senses. For this reason, socio-scientific historiography is the best option, but there are two main orientations within the socio-scientific interpretive methods.

The main strand is the one represented by Pieter Craffert, which ends with acknowledging the post-resurrection sightings as real to the observers involved. However, the fact that this version of socio-scientific interpretation shies away from examining the actual contents of contemporary altered states of consciousness makes it inadequate, especially where



implications for contemporary South African Christian praxis is concerned. This is why the inclination of the present study is towards John Pilch's socio-scientific methodology. Having established that all human beings are the same in terms of their biological and neurological make-up, Pilch goes on to prescribe methods by which the researcher can psychologically position him or herself in order to experience altered states of consciousness.

The criticism levelled against John Pilch by Pieter Craffert would seem unfair, although at first Craffert seems right to criticize Pilch for being too absolute about his conclusions. We may remember the words of Theissen and Merz in their foreword, that "scholars do not say, 'That's what it was', but 'it could have been like that on the basis of the sources'" (Theissen, & Merz 1998: Foreword). Smith also, is of the view that few professionals would regard any event of the past (especially the distant past) as "historically secure" (Smith, 2019:57); it should be enough to prove a case on a preponderance of probability. As has been shown, it is increasingly apparent that there is more to reality than what meets the eye, and contemporary studies on out of body experiences and near-death experiences give us a window into the contents of these phenomena.

## Conclusion

The biggest problem with researchers such as Pieter Craffert is their exclusive reliance on secondary data. This is surprising given that socio-scientific criticism claims to appropriate social science methodology in its investigations. One stock-in-trade method is participant observation of contemporary phenomena similar to those depicted in ancient Mediterranean. Notwithstanding the richness of South Africa in terms of cultural phenomena resembling first-century scenarios, participant observation of those belief communities is conspicuous by its absence in South African New Testament scholarship.

African traditional religions and the Pentecostal and charismatic communities, some of whom have claimed the ability to raise people from the dead, abound with phenomena that mimic biblical social systems. These should therefore be studied ethnographically so as to compare their practices with early Christian phenomena. Craffert is right when he points out that scholars of Judaism and Christianity are not the only ones encountering heavenly journeys in their texts. Craffert goes on to assert that the phenomenon of "soul flights" is such a widespread phenomenon in religious and cultural traditions that it can almost be seen as a human universal (Craffert, 2015:386). The implication is that New Testament scholars in South Africa should remain open to new ideas and methods that help us better understand resurrection narratives. Du Rand is of the opinion that the miracle narratives in the Bible should no longer be rationalised to fit positivistic natural explanations. We can no longer ignore the fact of our multireligious context in South Africa (Du Rand, 2005:100). "Indeed, the potential to shift, voluntarily or involuntarily between different states of consciousness is a function of the universal human nervous system" (Pilch, 2004:30). Even though the term OBEs is used for all the above instances, it is important to note that there are at least two distinct research traditions: The question that remains open is whether one should take the events experienced in altered states of consciousness as extra-corporeal or as neurocultural experiences of extra-corporeality? (Pilch, 2004:16). While Newberg et al (2006) from Pennsylvania University has detected peculiar brain activity during ecstatic experiences such as *glossolalia*, the above question has yet to be decided upon.

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