

# Reflections on scholarly interpretations of the nature and reality of Jesus resurrected body

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## 1 Introduction

Anthropologists often struggle with a double problem: taking literal statements for metaphorical ones (because that is the only way they make sense to them), and taking other peoples metaphors for literal statements (and thus producing fanciful and exotic metaphysical systems based on them). They know very well that it is wrong to see metaphors (or literal statements) where there are none, just as it is wrong not to see them where there are (see Sandor 1986). The acknowledgement of genuine differences between cultures is backed up by the avoidance of ethnocentrism which implies the attribution of meaning to texts with the assumption that others are all like us. The twin brother of ethnocentrism is the lack of establishing the genuine differences between people. As Wax (1962:180) reminds us: If the first sin of the social scientist is the belief that the practices of his own people are superior to all, the second sin is the failure to distinguish genuine differences among people. Taking statements in other cultures literally means taking them culturally seriously.

In such a situation it is useful to realise that it is belief that determines what is and what is not a literal statement about reality; what reality is and what it is not (Sandor 1986:113). The double challenge therefore consists of establishing what is taken as literal statements (or metaphors) and as reality by others before translating or interpreting them. When reading the following slogans,\* it is remarkable that both the terms *reality* and *literal* are used: *Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God;\* without a literal resurrection, the Christian faith is worthless.\** It is widely accepted that there were no early traditions containing any narrative or eyewitness account of Jesus actual resurrection (see Ldemann 1995:52-55). Traditionally the evidence for Jesus resurrection is based on three other lines of argument: the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances of Jesus and the origin of the disciples

faith in his resurrection (see Craig 1995:146). Of these the postmortem appearances are not only the most important in the debate, but also the most difficult to understand.

The aim of this paper is to engage in the discussion of the postmortem appearances of Jesus and, therefore, belongs to the rhetoric of inquiry. It is not concerned with an analysis of the resurrection stories themselves but focuses on scholarly interpretations of *seeing* Jesus' resurrected body and therefore directly with only one strand of evidence for claims about Jesus resurrection. The question is, how do scholars move from the data in the texts to their viewpoints regarding Jesus' resurrected body?

The present debate about the nature of Jesus resurrected body is still caught up in two rationalist responses: the secular rationalist reaction is to declare the resurrection stories fraudulent while for the fundamentalistic rationalists they represent unique, divine events. These two responses represent the twin sides of the same (rationalist) coin: one side said they could never happen, the other side said they happened only once (Crossan 1999:32). The embeddedness in this rationalist philosophy can be demonstrated by means of at least three components: views on Jesus' resurrected body, views on *seeing* as well as the understanding of *reality* involved. The deadlock in the debate can, in my view, be broken not by forcing all to accept the same viewpoint, but by acknowledging that different scholars arrive at these viewpoints in very similar fashion. In fact, it is to be suggested that what is taken as Jesus' resurrected body in the different viewpoints are directly dependent on what is understood by *seeing* and the accompanied view of reality.

## **2 On the nature of Jesus resurrected body in New Testament scholarship**

It is widely accepted among New Testament scholars that the disciples did see appearances of Jesus after his death (see Craig 1995:156). What is not at all agreed upon is what is to be understood by these appearances. Apparently, the audiences of the two main sources, Paul and Luke, were less confused than us, modern people, about the nature of Jesus' resurrected body or about his appearances to his followers. After giving a list of all those to whom Jesus has appeared, Paul simply states that Jesus was raised in a *spiritual body* (*soma pneumatikon*) (1 Cor 15:5-8, 42-54). It seems furthermore clear that for Paul, the appearances happening to him were of the same kind as that experienced by the other apostles. Luke, the other main witness about the appearances, emphasises that in the resurrected body, Jesus could appear and disappear at random he could eat, drink and talk but was not immediately recognisable (Lk 24:15, 31, 36; Ac 1:3). Unlike first-century Mediterranean people for whom no explanations are given about this resurrected body or the visionary appearances, modern Western readers and scholars are far less clear on what these authors were talking about. This is attested by the

variety of ways in which Jesus' resurrected body is construed in scholarly circles. Besides being very diverse, an analysis of these positions will reveal other fascinating features.

## 2.1 Only physical bodies can be seen

What was the nature of Jesus' resurrected body? Despite the variety of answers to this question, they share a common element: if Jesus was **seen** after his death, he must have occupied a **material physical body**.

Probably the most common conception among ordinary people is that Jesus resurrection meant that his corpse was resuscitated.\* As Brown (1973:73) says: It is probably true that a great number of Christians who believe in the resurrection of Jesus have confused this resurrection with the resuscitation of a corpse (although Davis 1997:133 ascribes it only to some unlettered Christian folk). A recent suggestion by two scholars (Lloyd Davies and Lloyd Davies 1991:168) offers a hypothesis based on the medical analysis of the passion stories in which it is suggested that the abuse meted out to Jesus in the Praetorium led to his collapse and early removal from the Cross, and to resuscitation. Behind these arguments lies the assumption that if Jesus was *seen* by his followers, his body must have been resuscitated because only physical, material bodies can be seen by human beings.

The resuscitation of clinical dead or nearly clinical dead people happens quite frequently in hospitals today and the ancients knew that well from a number of stories.\* The major feature of such bodies is that they must die a second time and that would then be permanent.\* Therefore, most scholars agree that Jesus resurrection was no resuscitation. As Brown (1973:73) says, the NT evidence is lucidly clear that Jesus was not restored to ordinary life; his risen existence is glorious and eschatological, transported beyond the limitations of space and time; and he will not die again. While New Testament scholars generally agree that it was no resuscitated body, they do not agree what kind of body it was.

The most popular viewpoint among conservative and evangelical scholars is that something mysterious has happened to Jesus body after his death. As Wright (1999:120) says:

The resurrection body is thus not identical with the original body; it has not, that is, merely been resuscitated; it is, rather, the *transformation* of the existing body into a new mode of physicality .... It is ... a *transformed* physicality, with new properties and attributes but still concrete and physical.

Also, according to Davis (see 1997:133, 139-140, 142), Jesus' resurrected body was a material object which took up space, occupied a certain location and could be seen. OCollins (1978:11) refers to a "consensus viewpoint" which states that Jesus was translated at his

resurrection into an entirely new mode of existence .... According to him, Jesus occupied a glorious body after the resurrection (see 1978:49) while Craig (1995:157) describes it as an immortal, powerful, glorious, Spirit-directed body, suitable for inhabiting a renewed creation.

The question that immediately arises is what on earth is a glorious, an eschatological or a body of transformed physicality? Just as interesting as what they think the resurrected body actually was are the reasons that they think this kind of body was indeed a physical, material one. These arguments will be traced by looking at what is understood by *seeing* in these circles.

## **2.2 Seeing is believing**

This aspect of the debate about *seeing* Jesus' resurrected body is dominated by two ways of understanding the human ability to *see*: normal *seeing* and the distinction between objective and subjective visions.

Normal vision refers to what is ordinarily taken as the perceptual processes of visual sight and the seeing of a material object. It includes the normal working of eyes and brain and a material object present to be projected onto a retina. This kind of seeing can be replaced by a camera which can take a picture of the object (see Davis 1997:126-127).

If Jesus body was resuscitated, the assumption is that "normal vision (*seeing*) was involved. It is also the kind of seeing assumed by many who maintain that Jesus resurrected body was some kind of glorious or eschatological physical, material body (the fundamentalistic rationalists) . For example, on the question whether a video camera would have recorded the event of Jesus resurrection, Wright (1999:125) responds: "Assuming that a camera would pick up what most human eyes would have seen (by no means a safe assumption), my guess is that cameras would sometimes have seen Jesus and sometimes not". Davis (1997:142) is even more blunt: "I feel no sense of embarrassment whatsoever in holding that a camera could have taken a snapshot of the raised Jesus, say, feeding the seven disciples beside the Sea of Tiberias (John 21: 1-14).

While the secular rationalists for obvious reasons do not speculate about the nature of Jesus' resurrected body (they do not think it happened), they operate with the same notion of *seeing*. If a video camera could not have recorded anything on film during one of Jesus appearances (which it could not according to these sentiments), it obviously was no historical event (see, eg Ldemann 1995:134. and Funk 1996:258, 273). The implication should be clear: since Jesus could not be seen "normally" according to them, the resurrection was not a real historical event.

The one group says it was a historical event because it would have been possible to take a photograph while the other group says Jesus could not be seen normally (or be photographed)

and therefore it was no historical event. In both instances the same assumption is visible: if the resurrection of Jesus was not a physical event (and if Jesus' resurrected body was not a material, physical body) which could have been photographed, it was not a real historical event.

One of the common (and very old) distinctions used in this debate is that between "objective" and "subjective" visions. A *subjective vision* is when someone claims to have seen something that no one else can see because the item purportedly seen is not real or objectively there while an *objective vision* is when someone sincerely claims to see something that no one else can see because God enables that person to see the real and objective presence of a thing. Subjective vision equals hallucination (in the sense of delusion) while objective vision equals normal vision because of God's grace. Therefore the latter is also called *grace-assisted vision* or *grace seeing* and it contains images which can be photographed (see Davis 1997:127). According to these definitions, objective visions and normal seeing are of the same kind the only difference is that in the latter case a person is individually picked to see something which others cannot see.

In the debate about Jesus' resurrected body, this distinction is obviously closely connected to the kind of body that is involved. Craig (see 1995:158), for example, demonstrates the above distinction by arguing that there are no traces of "nonphysical visions in the traditions" (which he calls "heavenly visions"). If there were, they would not have been about a physical body because heavenly visions are not about material bodies. The assumption should be clear: subjective or heavenly visions produce only nonphysical (hallucinatory) bodies while objective or physical visions produce genuine physical bodies. And since Jesus appeared in a "bodily" form, these were all at least objective, physical visions if not normal seeing.

According to this line of argument, a vision is either an illusion (hallucination) or it is the ability to see objective material things by the grace of God. What is not always explicitly stated (as is, for example, done by Davis 1997:147), but implicitly assumed, is that it is only the privileged few who are/were granted the grace of objective visions. It should also come as no surprise that in conservative and fundamentalistic circles they go to great lengths to discredit the idea of "subjective" visions (see, eg Pannenberg 1968:96-105 Du Toit 1989:324-326).

There are at least four (to my mind, fallacious) assumptions in these arguments which are not supported by (scientific) evidence. I shall return to these shortly.

### **2.3 What is *reality* like?**

The third aspect, which is widely acknowledged but poorly understood in the traditional debate about Jesus' resurrected body, is the role that world-view elements or one's understanding of reality plays in these questions. The answer to the kind of body Jesus occupied after the resurrection depends "on your worldview: on what you believe about God, the world, yourself

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and a host of other things", Wright (1999:124) says. Or as Geivett (1995:180) clearly puts it: "What we believe about God and his relationship to the world sets the conditions for what it is both psychologically possible and rationally permissible for us to believe about Jesus. But what are the practical implications of these remarks on the debate?"

At this point the two rationalistic responses mentioned above find their sharpest expression. From both sides in this debate, it is clearly acknowledged that the main difference is between proponents supporting *naturalism* and those supporting *supernaturalism* as world-view.

Naturalists (secular rationalists) believe that every effect in the world is brought about by causes which are themselves part of the natural world. In other words, there is no place for supernatural events or causes, and deities and demons are excluded as agents in human and natural affairs (see Funk, Hoover and The Jesus Seminar 1993:2). The same conviction is expressed by Ldemann (1995:135) in a very different way: "With the revolution in the scientific view of the world, the statements about the resurrection of Jesus have irrevocably lost their literal meaning". In short, what cannot be seen, is not real.

Supernaturalists (fundamentalist rationalists), on the other hand, explicitly and consciously claim belief in the supernatural and accept the reality of supernatural events (in some cases). As Habermas (1995:126) states: Naturalists are "mistaken if they think that the advances of science make supernatural belief obsolete" (see also Wilkins and Moreland 1995:10; Craig 1995:144-146 for similar claims). As indicated in the quote from Crossan above, it is not so much belief in *supernaturalism*, but the belief that in the specific case of Jesus of Nazareth supernatural events have to be accepted. This kind of fundamentalism is at least admitted by Wright (1999:124) who says: "Any real scientist will tell you that science observes what normally happens; the Christian case is precisely that what happened to Jesus is not what normally happens". Elsewhere I have argued about historical Jesus research in general that the difference between these two trends is not that some scholars ascribe to a scientific (naturalistic) world-view and others to a supernaturalistic world-view. It is rather the case that in some instances supernatural elements are added onto the naturalistic world-view shared by both groups (see Craffert 2001b:16-19). Thus, both sides doubt whether virgins can give birth in one instance the exception is made in that Mary of Nazareth allegedly conceived while still being a virgin; both sides doubt whether dead people actually rise from their tombs but in one instance an exception is made.

Let us put up front what is logically up front in the arguments of fundamentalistic rationalists: a transcendent God who made heaven and earth can do whatever he likes (such as the impossible by raising the dead; see Du Toit 1989:326). The bottom line is that in this view of reality God is omnipotent and free to do whatever he wants and therefore, he could raise Jesus

from the tomb.\* To be sure, what distinguishes the so-called supernaturalists from the naturalists is only the acceptance that in a specific case (Jesus of Nazareth) supernatural events occurred in a perfectly natural universe.

Within such a view of reality (or construct of the world), it is easy to entertain the existence of a *glorified body* with special properties as well as the granting of special visionary abilities to some individuals. For that matter, within such a framework, Jesus could have been born from a human male (not a female) after 9 weeks (not 9 months) of pregnancy and he can re-appear and disappear every so often. Where this assumption about the world is maintained, no evidence is for any case needed in order to affirm the belief.

## **2.4 Concluding remarks**

Given this analysis, the often repeated claim that the texts actually show that Jesus' resurrected body was indeed a physical, material body\* as well as the suggestion that the relevant body of textual data (the "authentic material") confirms the bodily resurrection, are extremely ironic.\* What is the point in arguing about Jesus resurrected body, whether it was a resuscitated body, a material physical body or any other kind of body, if it can be assume that God can intervene and create any kind of body he likes? If one lives with a picture of a God who can do whatever he wants and whenever he wants to, and in a world where "glorified" bodies of transformed physicality can be called into being and where some people can be granted special visionary abilities to see what no-one else can see, no historical evidence is needed for such claims. Let us be clear about this: within such an understanding of reality it does not matter whether there are two or two hundred sources testifying to a bodily appearance of Jesus.\* It is neither the data nor the texts which show what the nature of Jesus' resurrected body was but the researchers definition of seeing and his/her understanding of reality. If only that much can be admitted in the debate, progress can be made.

What is, to my mind, very clear in this debate is that the glorified body or the body of transformed physicality is really *seen* into being by means of researchers picture of reality. But they are not the only ones who effectively see a body into being by means of the models they use: it was literally also true of the visionary experiences of Jesus first followers.

## **3 Visioning Jesus body into being**

An alternative way of looking at the resurrection appearances and Jesus' resurrected body has been around for a very long time: that of visionary experiences. Instead of going into the detail of any of these proposals, the aim will be to show what kind of *resurrection body* is produced by this kind of *seeing* and what kind of world-view is presupposed. One example will suffice to

illustrate that not only does this viewpoint do justice to the literal meaning of the sources within their own cultural system, but it also has the support of research in the neurosciences and transpersonal anthropology. It will be argued that insights from these sciences not only support this interpretation of the biblical texts, but they also undermine the assumptions and certainties which characterise the current rationalist debate.

### **3.1 Visions, culture and reality**

Pilch (1998) has shown that the appearances of the resurrected Jesus can be seen as typical and normal experiences in alternate states of consciousness. Within the cultural system of the ancient Mediterranean world, it was customary and common to have visionary experiences of a variety of kinds. The experiences of Jesus after his death belong to these phenomena. Within such an explanation, Jesus' resurrected body is seen as a *visionary body* and the idea of *resurrection* does not necessarily involve anything to have happened to his physical body. In the words of Borg (1999:131): 'Resurrection does not refer to the resumption of protoplasmic or corpuscular existence...resurrection could involve something happening to a corpse, namely the transformation of a corpse; but it need not'. Therefore, even if the skeletal remains of Jesus were to be found, it would pose no problem to this view because Jesus' resurrected body was a visionary body. From this point of view it is natural to accept that Jesus' resurrected body was seen into being by the visionary experiences of his first followers.

The main reason is that for biblical people visions, dreams, apparitions and the like were literal and real experiences which belonged to their understanding of reality (see, eg Pilch 1995:54-57). It is because first-century Mediterranean people lived in what can be called a *polyphasic* culture as opposed to a *monophasic* culture (that of modern rationalists). A pattern of monophasic consciousness refers to the enculturation of people in Western cultures which give dominance to ego-consciousness. Within such a culture the only real world experienced is that unfolding in the sensorium during the normal waking phase ... and is thus the only phase appropriate to the accrual of information about self and world. Ethnographic literature, however, demonstrates that most societies operate psychologically within the context of a cosmos composed of multiple realities .... And these realities are frequently coded as experiential (Laughlin, McManus and dAquila 1990:155). Such cultures also provide the rituals and prescriptions for the how, when and where of these experiences. Different cultures, therefore, offer particular frameworks within which these phenomena are experienced as real.

What is described here is very different from the "supernatural" world-view described above which is still based on ego-consciousness. Polyphasic cultures accept multiple experiences of

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reality as real and therefore multiple realities as normal while the "supernatural" world-view merely added supernatural phenomena to their existing rational (ego-consciousness) system.

An understanding of the way in which the brain and mind assemble what we experience as reality, shows that what we think of as reality is only a rendition of reality that is created by the brain (this is true for us and it is probably true for first-century Mediterranean people who we can be fairly certain, shared the same kind of brain and central nervous system with us). A SPECT brain scan would show visionary experiences and all other sensory experiences in the same way in the brain. As Newberg, dAquila and Rause (2001:146-147) clearly show with such experiments:

All perceptions exist in the mind. The earth beneath your feet, the chair you're sitting in, the book you hold in your hands may all seem unquestionably solid and real, but they are known to you only as secondhand neurological perceptions, as blips and flashes racing along the neural pathways inside your skull. If you were to dismiss spiritual experience as mere neurological activities, you would also have to distrust all of your own brain's perceptions of the material world. On the other hand, if we do trust our perceptions of the physical world, we have no rational reason to declare that spiritual experience is a fiction that is only in the mind.

What they say about spiritual experiences applies to all alternate states of consciousness (ASC) including visions and hallucinations. What is taken as real is created in a cycle of meaning or reality system where the sensorium, interpretation, world-view and mythic expressions form a unity (see Craffert 2001a for further detail).\* It is a fallacy to think that humans take for real that what is based on or provided by the senses. In other words, humans do not see reality as it is it is not simply a matter of seeing is believing. Not only are sense perceptions often corrected by other senses (what looks like powdered sugar can be flour and sight can be corrected by other senses; see Shinn 1978:14) in that perceiving becomes believing, but it is also the case that believing often is perceiving (see the examples provided by Leach 1978:558-559 that humans cannot simply rely on the evidence of their senses for knowing reality). Humans also see what they are trained to see.

Therefore, *seeing* Jesus' resurrected body in a vision or a dream, was for first-century Mediterranean people part of their "reality". They could seriously believe that when seeing Jesus' resurrected body in a vision, they were experiencing "reality" and therefore, experiencing the resurrected Jesus. An appreciation of these accounts is not dependent on either the data in the sources or the number of (authentic) sources carrying the stories about Jesus' resurrection but on accepting the reality of such visions in other cultures.

With the above description an explanation has been given for rejecting the positivistic framework of psychiatry (also adopted in the above distinction between subjective and objective visions) which sees the term "hallucination" (or visions), as a "false sensory perception in the absence of an actual external stimulus" (Siegel 1977:132 and see Martin 1993:211). Visions or visual (or sound and tactile) "hallucinations" can indeed be based on sensory perceptions in the absence of an actual external stimulus but that does not make them "false" perceptions. What neuroscientific research shows is that whether a hallucination (visual, tactile or sound) is called a delusion cannot be determined on the basis of the experience itself but is given by the social circumstances or cultural system. Lenz (see 1983), for example, shows that it is practically impossible to distinguish belief and delusion in their initial phases. It is only in the life and future development that such a distinction can be made. Ultimately it is within the cultural system that the decision and prescription is to be found whether a vision is true or false, whether it belongs to reality or not.\*

What should also be rejected is the notion that only that what can be seen or photographed, can be real. Seeing, as described above, is a much more complicated human activity that assumed by the notion of "normal seeing" or by the idea of an image projected onto a retina or camera lens as if everybody are always *seeing* the same thing.

### **3.2 The content of visions as normal and natural human phenomena**

It should be realised that all people who enter certain alternate states of consciousness (ASC),\* no matter what their cultural background, are liable to perceive visual hallucinations. That is, visual images or sensations which have no stimulus outside the optical or nervous system.

Different phases in both trance experiences (ASCs) and visual hallucinations have been identified.\* For the purpose of this study it is sufficient to make the basic distinction between constant forms of images (*entoptics*) and more complex images containing faces, objects or landscapes. *Entoptics* refers to visual sensations derived from the structure of the optic system anywhere from the eyeball to the cortex (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988:202). Despite the great variety in ways in which visual hallucinations can be induced, they display a great deal of commonality: because of the underlying mechanism of the central nervous system, these images contain geometric forms, a spectrum of colours and often with a bright light in the middle (see Siegel 1977:133-134). The patterns produced by subjects under experimental conditions are, for example, remarkably similar to the engravings and patterns produced by the shamans in Bushmen rock art (see Lewis-Williams and Dowson 2000:61).

The more complex images, however, are derived from memory and are often associated with powerful emotional experiences or come from scenes associated with childhood memories. In other words, they are informed by cultural sources and do not depend on the structure of the nervous system for their content. Much of the content of these images can, for example, be influenced by environmental stimuli (see Siegel 1977:136; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 2000:66). This makes it perfectly clear why people who have recently experienced some traumatic event, would see the faces of those who were involved in the trauma.

Therefore, visions or apparitions do not need physical or material bodies to begin with, but often involve seeing or visioning from memory bodies performing normal bodily activities. One of the reasons that some scholars find it difficult to let go of the notion of a material, physical body is because Jesus were seen eating with his disciples, he occupied a location and he could be touched.\* Human brains do not need external stimuli in order to create physical or material visionary bodies. Therefore, the fact that his followers could identify him and that they experienced him in bodily form as eating, speaking and walking is no argument in favour of any physical, material body.

This distinction also provides a possible explanation for the remarks in the reports that Jesus was not immediately recognised in many of the appearances (eg Lk 24:31, Jn 20:14). The content and meaning of such experiences are not usually immediately self-evident (see Pilch 1998:58 ).

#### **4 Concluding remarks**

Du Toit (1989:326) is absolutely correct in urging New Testament scholars "to trust the testimony of the eyewitnesses". He is mistaken in thinking that their testimony can only be understood in terms of the rationalism and "supernatural" world-view present in the current New Testament debate. It is beyond dispute that these visionary texts can be read within a cultural setting where they can be treated as literal stories and reports within that setting (a polyphasic setting). It is, to my mind, also beyond dispute that such a setting applies to the world of the New Testament. Therefore, their testimony should not only be trusted, it should also be taken literally that is, literally in terms of the reality and cultural system within which it has been given. In my view, it is not a matter of accepting or rejecting the historical or textual data provided in the sources, but of understanding what they are evidence for. It is about understanding the various ways of *seeing* and about the kind of *body* that could have been implied in the sources. It is about whether what we take for granted about *seeing* and for a "resurrected body" are appropriate for understanding those texts in their setting. That is what the debate should be about to begin with.

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It has been argued that in each case, what is taken in the research to be the nature of Jesus resurrected body, depends not so much on what the sources say or what the possible differences between them are, but on what is understood by *seeing* the resurrected body of Jesus as well as the understanding of reality (world-view) which the specific researcher ascribes to. In other words, in all cases, what kind of a body it was, depends firstly on what kind of seeing was involved and secondly on what kind of world-view is presupposed. It is not only those who ascribe to a visionary theory of seeing who literally see Jesus' resurrected body into being, but it is a feature of all approaches. Without specific reality systems or views on seeing, the *soma pneumatikon* of Paul can neither be turned into a *glorified body of transformed physicality* nor into a visionary body without materiality.\* Are we not producing fanciful and exotic metaphysical solutions in New Testament studies because we take their statements literally in the wrong sense; that is, literally for us and not for them?

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