

Letters to the Editor

Was Jesus Christ's descent into hell a near-death experience?

To the Editor:

I want to draw your attention to some passages in the New Testament where we do find mention of the experiences and deeds of Jesus Christ in the time between his death on the cross and his resurrection. These texts can be interpreted as references to an NDE of Jesus that meets very strict criteria of (near-?) death.

In earlier editions of this *Journal*, authors have attempted to find descriptions of, or allusions to, NDEs in the Bible. For example, Roger Cook (1992) claimed that Jesus, while hanging on the cross, went into coma, an acknowledged circumstance of NDEs, and that his resurrection should not be viewed as a physical event but as an NDE. In another article, Dov Steinmetz (1993) considered Moses's revelatory experience of God in the burning bush on Mount Horeb as "a near-death or near-death-like experience" (p. 199). I find these "solutions" somewhat artificial. Much more plausible – as NDE – would be texts or stories of an experience during Jesus's (near-?) death, when hanging on the cross or when his body was entombed and stayed in the sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea until its resurrection.

The good news is that indeed some evidence to that effect can be found in the Bible. The indications of an NDE of Jesus are most clearly expressed in *The First Epistle of Peter*:

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a-preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. (1 Peter 3: 18–20)

For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the Spirit. (1 Peter 4: 6)

According to these texts Jesus would have brought the gospel to the “spirits in prison,” respectively “them that are dead.” From this brief announcement in the Epistle it appears that the recipients of Christ’s preaching were the spirits of disobedient people who had perished in the great Flood and since had stayed in the underworld, named the “prison.” Other, more scanty referrals to this episode can be found in Matthew 12: 38–41, Acts 2: 22–32, Romans 10: 7, and Ephesians 4: 7–10.

In parts of the apocryphal books, early Christian documents that were not included in the Bible, *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (4th Century) and *The Gospel of Bartholomew* (5th Century) contain the succinct Biblical indications about Jesus’s NDE spun out to extremely colorful stories. In *The Gospel of Nicodemus* (Nicodemus, 1886), the story of Jesus’s experiences and deeds during his descent into hell is expressed through the mouths of two deceased men, the two sons of Simeon described in Chapter 2 of *The Gospel of Luke*. According to this story, Jesus liberated them from the underworld and they came back to physical life with him. Next, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and others went to see them so as to hear from them the story of their liberation and resurrection, which, as a consequence, is a story about their own NDE as well as about the one of Jesus as seen from their perspective. Traces of the story element that together with Jesus others were resurrected, which appear in both apocryphal gospels, can also be found in Matthew 27: 51–53. In *The Gospel of Bartholomew* (Bartholomew, 1963) this story is conveyed from a dialogue between the apostle Bartholomew and the resurrected Jesus. Except for this knowledge by notification, it appears that Bartholomew himself had heard and seen certain parts of Jesus’s descent into, and ascent from, the underworld. Some NDE researchers refer to this phenomenon in which a living person simultaneously experiences another person’s NDE as an “empathic NDE.” The apocryphal literature contains only succinct further references to the descent into the underworld, as in *The Ascension of Isaiah*.

Also, in the Apostles’ Creed a reflection of these ancient stories can be found, such as in the phrase, “He descended into hell.” Within the context of the Creed, this latter phrase comes after “[He] was crucified,

dead, and buried," and before: "On the third day he rose again from the dead," and thus clearly alludes to the time between Jesus's death and his resurrection. "Descended into hell" does not necessarily imply a hellish type of distressing NDE (Greyson & Bush, 1992). In the modern Creed, "hell" is a late early-medieval name, probably based on and colored by the then-popular ideas about the nature of this place. However, in the original Greek version of the Apostles' Creed the designation "the deepest" is used, which is more in accordance with the "Hades" or "underworld" of the apocryphal texts. This "Hades" or "underworld" was a place of oblivion, roaming, and a bleak dead-end situation – possibly more like the "void" type of distressing NDE – whereas the Christian "hell" was a place of eternal punishment and torture of sinful, unfaithful souls.

It would surely be interesting, but I leave it to others, to examine Jesus's NDE with reference to the various elements, phases, or components of NDEs discerned in current research literature and to compare the texts and stories about his NDE with other antique (see Platthy, 1992), medieval, and modern NDE stories (see Zaleski, 1987).

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Population-based Prevalence Studies of NDEs

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to the recent *Journal* article regarding the prevalence of near-death experience (NDE) in India (Pasricha, 2008). While applauding her work from the Indian subcontinent, I would like to iterate that population-based prevalence studies are available from other countries. In perhaps the first, albeit limited, study, Gallup and Proctor (1982) reported that 15% of the U.S. population had an NDE. By comparison, Knoblauch, Schmied, and Schnettler (2001) reported a prevalence rate of 4% from Germany. In a more extensive and in depth study from Australia, Perera, Padmasekara, and Belanti (2005) noted a rate of 8%. Greyson (1998) noted a prevalence range of 9–18% in selected cohorts of patients.

These rates are much higher than the prevalence of 0.04% that Pasricha (2008) reported in her current study and 0.1% in her previous study (Pasricha, 1995). The relatively low prevalence in both of Pasricha's studies is likely due to the methodology she used in case finding, that is, questioning those who may have known of someone who had reported an NDE. I am of the view that population based studies are important to assess the occurrence of the phenomenon. Such studies are best approached by the use of standardized measures administered directly to individuals by the personnel of organizations that have the expertise to carry out population-based surveys.

I agree with Pasricha that NDEs are phenomena with core features but that the expression of some phenomena are influenced by external factors (Belanti, Jagadheesan, & Perera, 2008); hence the requirement of an integrated approach (Paulson, 1999).

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