

BOOK REVIEW

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Glimpses of Eternity: New Near-Death Experiences Examined, by Arvin S. Gibson. Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1992. 322 pp., \$18.95.

The near-death experience (NDE) is gaining increasing scientific respectability and some scientists are beginning to study near-death accounts seriously. Arvin Gibson is one of these individuals. His scientific credentials are impressive and have conditioned him to approach any problem with an open and questioning mind. He has an engineering degree from the University of California at Berkeley and has worked for many years as a nuclear engineer. He has also done postgraduate work at the International School of Nuclear Science and Engineering, the University of California at Los Angeles, General Electric, and the Edison Electric Institute.

Gibson's book follows in the footsteps of the work Craig Lundahl and I published on Mormon NDEs a decade ago (Lundahl and Widdison, 1983a, 1983b). Given the author's stated objectives, it is surprising that he made no attempt to integrate this earlier research into his book. Though *Glimpses of Eternity* is written primarily for a Mormon or Latter Day Saints (LDS) audience, it is a rich source of NDE cases. In reading this book, it appears that the author was attempting to write to both an LDS lay audience and a scientific or professional audience. It is difficult to write for both in the same volume.

Gibson's father had had an NDE in 1922, but it was not until Gibson read books on the NDE by Raymond Moody (1975) and George Ritchie (Ritchie and Sherrill, 1978) on the NDE that his interest in the subject was aroused:

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[D]espite the fact that NDEs are spiritual by their very nature, few authors have attempted to correlate the experience with Christian and Jewish religious teachings and literature. . . .

I wrote this book, then, to fulfill a perceived need by relating new NDEs to LDS scripture and literature. In doing so I hasten to explain that I do not, and cannot, speak for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. . . . Rather, I speak as a person who has spent a lifetime as a member of the Church.

The book has two major objectives:

(1) To offer new accounts of NDEs and other analogous experiences, and to present the data as it was received during interviews with the people who had these unusual experiences.

(2) To attempt to provide meaning to and understanding of the new experiences detailed in this book, and some others from the literature, by reviewing the events in the light of LDS scriptures and teachings.

Gibson noted that Duane Crowther had written a book in 1967, eight years before Moody's book, that documented many NDEs of members of the LDS Church over many years. Crowther attempted to correlate these NDEs with Mormon doctrine. His NDEs tended to be abstracted segments of much longer accounts, as are those of many NDE authors. Gibson, on the other hand, included complete accounts as reported to him without editorializing. In reporting how the research was conducted, Gibson noted:

Three types of research were conducted for this book: 1) seeking and obtaining first-hand (and in some instances second-hand) accounts from individuals who had undergone NDEs; 2) reviewing much of the available literature on NDEs; and 3) reviewing and comparing events from NDEs with LDS scripture and teachings. . . . I screened out, ahead of time, those individuals who did not proceed from an NDE into an out-of-body, or as minimum, an unusual spiritual experience.

In soliciting candidates to interview, no attempt was made to screen for religious or non-religious beliefs. The only criterion that had to be met was that the candidate had undergone some type of NDE which led to an out-of-body or related spiritual event. By reason of the location of the interviews — the Greater Salt Lake City region — most of those interviewed (71%) professed allegiance to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saint (Mormon Church).

All the interviews were taped, later typed, and then forwarded in draft form to the respondent. The respondents then made any corrections that they felt were appropriate to make the written accounts correspond precisely to their memory of what happened.

Regardless of the reasons why Gibson wrote this book, it contains detailed unedited first-person accounts that can be used by any other near-death researchers. A growing data base will enable researchers to compare across borders and religions. Groups such as the Mormons represent a gold mine for near-death research because they encourage the recording of significant events that occur in the lives of their members.

Mormon accounts of their experience with the "other side" were analyzed previously by Crowther (1967). Though his intention was to demonstrate that official Mormon theology was supported by near-death experiences, the accounts are detailed enough that they can be examined and evaluated by contemporary researchers. I am not aware of any other systematic attempt to collect, preserve, and make detailed NDE accounts available to researchers. Occasionally accounts are published in various professional journals, usually to make some point because of some unique aspect. These accounts are intriguing, but only hint at the vast untapped potential that exists. Because the NDE meshes so closely with Mormon theology, some Mormon authors collect them as supportive evidence of their religious beliefs.

Regardless of why books describing NDEs are written, they contribute to a growing body of data that is then available for examination and evaluation by other near-death researchers. The attempt to use NDE accounts as proof of the validity of their unique theological belief, or in more scholarly terms, place them in some theoretical context, is no different from other researchers' attempts to hypothesize how and where they fit in the overall scheme of things, as Kenneth Ring did in *Heading Toward Omega* (1984). It would be interesting and informative to compare and contrast NDE accounts collected from individuals from radically different religious perspectives for their similarities and differences. I am aware of recent books containing accounts of Mormon NDEs written by Crowther (1967), Joseph Heinerman (1978), Michele Sorensen and David Willmore (1988), and Lee Nelson (1988, 1989, 1990).

Glimpses of Eternity, the latest collection of Mormon NDEs, is divided into two major parts. Part I is a verbatim account of all the NDEs. Gibson presents each experience just as it was recounted to him, reserving his analysis until Part II. He clusters the accounts under common themes, such as "Unusual Healings," "A Majestic Being," "Fear Not Death," "The Importance of Children," "Family Ties," "Suicide," "Evil Spirits," "People Meeting People," "Being on Trial,"

and "Personal Revelation." He makes no attempt to measure the depth of the NDE, and in some sections of the book makes no clear distinction between NDEs, out-of-body experiences, and visions.

Part II represents Gibson's attempt to relate these NDEs to the larger body of NDE accounts, to each other, and to Mormon theology. He clusters his analysis according to major elements and common themes discovered by other near-death researchers and in the accounts he collected, such as the light, life's purpose, spirit bodies and physical bodies, the other world, evil spirits, the power of God, judgment and revelation, and deity. Gibson concludes with a discussion of various interpretations of human destiny.

In his analysis, Gibson excerpts from the accounts illustrative examples and relates them to Mormon doctrine. He then looks at the reports of other near-death researchers for similarities. When accounts were encountered that do not fit the "traditional NDE" or his personal beliefs, he reports them anyway, identifying their unique qualities and discussing what they would seem to suggest about near-death phenomena. This is particularly true in his section on evil spirits, the other world, and the power of God.

Most people experiencing an NDE report very positive feelings and experiences, but Gibson discovered that some encountered a Dark Side. While these unpleasant experiences are not totally new, they do contribute to the literature on the subject. One respondent told about seeing "a giant geometric shape in space." This respondent, unlike others, reported that he "did not believe in God or had great doubts about life after death." This report puzzled Gibson in that it did not fit anything he had read in the near-death literature. It was not until he read Phyllis Atwater's account (1988) of one of her experiences that he found any similarities.

One thing that impressed me about Gibson's accounts and other Mormon NDEs is the extensive detail reporting of what the respondents saw and did. In chapter 16, for example, Gibson relates two separate incidents in which individuals experienced what they believed was a trial. They found themselves the subject of a discussion or debate between deceased relatives and others as to whether they should return to this world or stay in the spirit world. The deciding factor was the probability of their actually doing the things it was important for them to accomplish on earth.

Gibson does not argue that the accounts he and others have collected prove there is life after death. But he does show that their features correlate very closely with Mormon religious belief. It would be quite informative if individuals from different religions also collected NDE accounts from their members and reported them in their entirety. This could help researchers study the extent to which religious perceptions impact on the accounts reported.

Glimpses of Eternity represents an objective attempt to look at contemporary NDEs and judge how well they fit existing theoretical or theological models. The accounts are complete enough to allow researchers to do further analysis in areas such as the conditions under which the NDEs occur, the relationship between the circumstances leading up to the NDE and the nature of the NDE, the purpose of the NDE as perceived by the individual NDEr, what the NDE would seem to reveal about what occurs at death, what the afterlife is like, what activities or relationships exist in the afterlife, and the impact that NDEs have on NDErs themselves.

Melvin Morse has attempted to address this last point in his most recent book (Morse and Perry, 1992), and Lundahl and I have analyzed the existing Mormon literature for what the afterlife is like (Widdison and Lundahl, 1993) and for activities and relationships in the afterlife (Lundahl and Widdison, 1993). The other areas of study listed above have been mentioned by various researchers but mainly as side issues. More systematic research is needed to address these points.

George Gallup's poll taken in 1980-81 estimated that at least 8 million Americans have had an NDE (Gallup and Proctor, 1982). If this figure is typical of other nations then the NDE would appear to be a common part of the human experience and, if this is true, then there is no reason why NDEs should not be a subject of serious scientific inquiry. There seems to be no question but that NDEs are real experiences and that they have a significant and permanent effect on those who have them. The scientific community is still not in agreement, however, as to what NDEs are or what they represent. Nevertheless, the overall consistency in the nature and content of NDEs is intriguing and merits the same objective and unbiased scientific inquiry as any other recurring phenomenon.

Glimpses of Eternity poses interesting hypotheses as to what the experience represents and a theological theoretical framework con-

sistent with both Mormon and non-Mormon experiences. It should definitely be added to the library of any student of the near-death experience.

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