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**Abstract** This article suggests that contemporary near-death research casts light on several episodes in the Book of Mormon. Alma’s conversion while “nigh unto death” fits a common pattern of experience. Modern researchers have noticed distinctive aftereffects among those who have experienced a near-death experience (NDE). In the Book of Mormon, both Alma and the resurrected Christ demonstrate these aftereffects. Lehi’s dream invites comparison with the otherworld journey literature of many nations. Nephi’s interpretation of Lehi’s dream casts light on the tension between the literal and the symbolic elements of visionary experience. Finally, just as accurate out-of-body observations made by NDErs argued for the reality of their experiences, so the testable aspects of the Book of Mormon give Joseph Smith a significance apart from others who may have experienced similar visions.

## **“Nigh unto Death”: NDE Research and the Book of Mormon**

Kevin Christensen

**Abstract:** This article suggests that contemporary near-death research casts light on several episodes in the Book of Mormon. Alma's conversion while “nigh unto death” fits a common pattern of experience. Modern researchers have noticed distinctive after-effects among NDErs. In the Book of Mormon, both Alma and the resurrected Christ demonstrate these aftereffects. Lehi's dream invites comparison with the otherworld journey literature of many nations. Nephi's interpretation of Lehi's dream casts light on the tension between the literal and the symbolic elements of visionary experience. Finally, just as accurate out-of-body observations made by NDErs argued for the reality of their experiences, so the testable aspects of the Book of Mormon give Joseph Smith a significance apart from others who may have experienced similar visions.

Raymond Moody has written that the most prominent of the Western religions to accept the near-death experience (NDE) as a doorway to the spiritual world has been The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.<sup>1</sup> Craig Lundahl's studies of Mormon NDE accounts from 1838 to 1975 show that they fall into the classic Moody pattern.<sup>2</sup> Mormons who have reported and collected NDEs take the accounts almost for granted in the context of the faith. Robert Fillerup and I separately gave talks discussing ways that NDE and consciousness research may illuminate Mormon beginnings. Impressed by Lundahl and Moody, Ian Wilson observes that Mormon teachings of the afterlife are more detailed than normative Christianity and match

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Moody, *The Light Beyond* (New York: Bantam Books 1988), 88–91.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Lundahl, *A Collection of Near Death Research Readings* (Chicago: Prentice Hall, 1982), 165–78.

rather well the NDE.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in his fascinating study of children's NDEs, Dr. Melvin Morse claims that "I could find little similarity between Katie's experience [the LDS experiencer who triggered his interest] and any of her religious teachings."<sup>4</sup> Morse reports that his investigation of Mormon teachings involved "hours" of conversation with the family and conversation with a devout Mormon at the hospital. He learned that Katie had been taught to believe in an afterlife, that the spirit leaving the body was like a hand leaving a glove, and that death was "like sending someone on a long boat ride."<sup>5</sup> Morse emphasizes that no one in Katie's family expressed a belief in spirit guides, guardian angels, or tunnels to heaven. In context, Morse's report serves to distance Katie's experience from potential cultural conditional as part of his thesis that children's NDEs are less culturally polluted than adult NDEs. Unfortunately, despite his obvious affection for Katie and her family, his statement also reflects poorly on the strengths of Latter-day Saint teachings about the afterlife. We might wish belatedly that Morse had considered 1 Nephi 6:4-6, or various modern sources, before coming to his conclusion regarding Mormon teachings about spirit guides and tunnels to heaven. In fairness to both Dr. Morse and his few informants, his remark reflects more the weaknesses of current educational materials than the Mormon spiritual heritage. This study shows how NDE research can illuminate NDE episodes within the Book of Mormon.

### NDE Research and Book of Mormon NDEs

The clearest and most concentrated descriptions of the afterlife experience in the Book of Mormon come from the books of Mosiah and Alma. Appropriately, Alma's conversion appears to have occurred through an NDE. In *Otherworld Journeys*, Harvard's Carol Zaleski compares NDE narrative form to conversion accounts.

Otherworld vision stories resemble conversion narratives in two respects. Most obviously, they trace the protagonist's recovery from a condition of sin, melancholy, malaise—or from death itself, which is

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Wilson, *The After Death Experience* (New York: Morrow, 1988), 192.

<sup>4</sup> Melvin Morse, *Closer to the Light* (New York: Ivy, 1990), 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the fundamental reference point and emblem for all states of despair. . . .

The second, and more intriguing, similarity between conversion experiences and near-death visions is the way in which inner transformation colors perceptions of the outer world. . . . The chief virtue of our tendency to conceive of another world may be that it provides a sense of orientation in this world, through which we would otherwise wander without direction.<sup>6</sup>

Alma first appears as a "wicked, and idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8). While going about "to destroy the church of God," an angel appeared to Alma and four companions (Mosiah 27:10). This encounter so astonished Alma that he fell to the earth "and it was for the space of three days and three nights that I could not open my mouth, neither had I the use of my limbs" (Alma 36:10). Alma describes this period as "wandering through much tribulation, repenting *nigh unto death*" (Mosiah 27:28).

Not only does Alma declare himself as near death, but the formal response of those around him resembles the "Opening of the Mouth" rite for initiation and rebirth that was intended to "reverse the blows of death."<sup>7</sup> A religious leader called a multitude of people to gather to witness the event ritually (Mosiah 27:21). The priests assembled and fasted and prayed for two days and nights that "God would *open the mouth* of Alma, that he might speak, and also that his limbs might receive their strength" (Mosiah 27:22). Notice the word pairs in Mosiah 27:22–23, which collectively reinforce the notion of a ritual context: open the mouth—speak, limbs—strength, eyes—see and know.<sup>8</sup>

While "nigh unto death," Alma had an experience which combines aspects of both positive and negative NDEs. Alma's first report of his NDE comes as he rises on the third day of his crisis and addresses the waiting multitude.

After wading through much tribulation, repenting  
nigh unto death, the Lord in mercy hath seen fit to

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 199–201.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 106–8.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 106.

snatch me out of an everlasting burning, and I am born of God. My soul hath been redeemed from the gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity. I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the marvelous light of God. My soul was racked with eternal torment; but I am snatched, and my soul is pained no more. (Mosiah 27:28–29; cf. Alma 38)

While most reported modern NDEs lack the hellish aspects, such reports have been noted with much interest and were, according to Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys*, a typical feature of medieval Buddhist, Muslim, Zoroastrian, and Judeo-Christian accounts. P. M. H. Atwater<sup>9</sup> and Margot Grey have also shown the point-for-point antithesis between positive and negative NDEs.

In place of elation, the emotions of fear and panic; similar though less pleasant sensations of being out the body; the plunging into a totally black void instead of an end-lit tunnel; and not least, a sense of an overwhelming proximity of the forces of demonic evil.<sup>10</sup>

Stanislav and Christina Grof, in *Beyond Death*, elaborate on three themes from hellish experience that also stand out in Alma's accounts:<sup>11</sup>

- the polarities of the hellish and heavenly experience
- the subjective sense of *eternal* torment in *finite* duration
- the use of "rebirth" imagery

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<sup>9</sup> Near-death experiencer P. M. H. Atwater contrasts the two kinds of experience as follows:

**Positive**

friendly beings  
beautiful environment  
conversations  
acceptance and overwhelming  
sensation of love  
a feeling of heaven, warmth

**Negative**

lifeless apparitions  
barren or empty expanses  
threats or silence  
danger and the possibility  
of violence  
a feeling of hell, coldness

P. M. H. Atwater, *Coming Back to Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 33. For other negative accounts, see also Raymond Moody, *Reflections on Life after Life* (New York: Bantam, 1977); Moody, *The Light Beyond*; Kenneth Ring, *Life at Death* (New York: Quill, 1980); and Stanislav and Christina Grof, *Beyond Death* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, *The After Death Experience*, citing Grey, 161.

<sup>11</sup> Grof and Grof, *Beyond Death*, 14, 26–27.



In retelling his experience, Alma artfully highlights this positive/negative polarity using the reflexive pyramidal poetic form, chiasmus (Alma 36). I have indented and italicized key words to illustrate the form and inserted bracketed comments to emphasize parallels to Moody's NDE pattern.

I *fell* to the earth and I did hear no more. ["Nigh unto Death."]  
But I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins.  
Yea, I did *remember* all my sins and iniquities. [Life Review]

So great had been my *iniquities*,  
that the very thought of coming into the *presence of my God*  
did *rack* my *soul*  
with *inexpressible horror*.

Oh, thought I, that I could become *extinct*  
both *soul* and *body* that  
I might not be brought to stand in the *presence of my God*  
to be judged of my *deeds*. . . .

And it came to pass that as I was thus *racked with torment*,  
while I was *harrowed up* by the *memory* of my many *sins*,  
behold, I *remembered* also to have heard my father  
prophecy unto the people concerning the coming of one  
Jesus Christ, a Son of God,  
to atone for the *sins* of the world.

Now as my mind caught hold upon this *thought*,  
I cried within my heart:  
O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy upon me,  
who am in the gall of bitterness,  
and am encircled about  
by the everlasting chains of death.

And now, behold, when I *thought* this,  
I could *remember* my *pains* no more;  
yea, I was *harrowed up* by the *memory* of my *sins* no more.  
[Forgiveness]

And oh, what *joy*, and what *marvelous light* I did behold;  
[Light]

yea, my *soul* was filled with *joy as exceeding as was my pain*!  
[Elation]

Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing  
so exquisite and so *bitter* as were my *pains*.

Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other  
hand, there can be nothing  
so exquisite and *sweet* as was my *joy*.

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw,  
 God sitting upon his throne, [Being of Light]  
 surrounded with numberless concourses of angels  
 [Others]  
 in the attitude of singing and praising their God; [Music]  
 yea, and *my soul did long to be there* [Reluctance to Return]  
 But behold, my limbs did receive their strength again, and I  
*stood* upon my feet. [Rebirth] (Alma 36:11–23)

In the Grofs' discussion, the process of psychological death and rebirth "bears a striking similarity to the events described through the ages in shamanistic initiation, rites of passage, temple mysteries, and in the ecstatic religions of many ancient and preliterate cultures."<sup>12</sup> They identify the first of three stages as *cosmic engulfment*, related to the onset of biological delivery, beginning with "an overwhelming feeling of anxiety and an awareness of a vital threat."<sup>13</sup> This corresponds to Alma's shock at seeing the angel.

The second stage is *no exit*, related to "the second stage of delivery in which uterine contractions encroach on the foetus, but the cervix is closed." Subjectively, "the situation is inescapable and eternal. There is no hope and no way out either in space or in time."<sup>14</sup>

Notice how Alma describes a longing for annihilation while he felt "racked with eternal torment," being "encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (Alma 36:12, 18). Concerning "the ordeal of hell," the Grofs write:

The feeling that suffering is eternal is an essential experimental attribute of hell. The endlessness of this state does not consist in an extreme extension of linear time, but in its transcendence. The individual undergoes tortures beyond any imagining which at that point are the only available reality; since the sense of the linear flow of time is lost, there appears to be no way out. It is only when this situation is fully accepted that one has experienced hell, and the journey can continue.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 77.



In Alma's account of his torment, the terms "everlasting" and "eternal" do not refer to duration, but to quality. Alma reports that his "eternal torment" lasted for three days (cf. D&C 19:1-21).

The third stage is the *death-rebirth struggle*. Again, the Grofs' description illuminates Alma's experience.

The "death and rebirth" phase represents the termination and resolution of the "death-rebirth struggle." Suffering and agony culminate in an experience of total annihilation on all levels—physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and transcendental. . . . Such annihilation is often followed by visions of blinding white or golden light and a sense of liberating decompression and expansion. The universe is perceived as indescribably beautiful and radiant; subjects feel themselves cleansed and purged, and speak of redemption, salvation, *moksha*, or *samadhi*. Numerous images of emerging into light from darkness, glorious opening of the heavens, revelation of the divine . . . and the final victory of the pure religious impulse, express this state of consciousness. . . . In death and rebirth mythologies, the correspondence is with the revival and resurrection of the sacrificed god.<sup>16</sup>

### Alma's Teachings about Life after Death

Evidently, none of Alma's three accounts gave the full details of his experience. Alma associated his teachings on life after death with the angel whose appearance triggered his NDE.

Now, concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection—Behold, it has been made known unto me *by an angel*, that the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life.

And then it shall come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow.

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil—for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil. (Alma 40:11–14)

The thing to notice is that Alma teaches from experience, not from philosophy, tradition, or speculation.

### Alma and the Life Review

Alma's remarks indicate that a life review occurred during his NDE.

Yea, I did *remember* all my sins and iniquities;  
... yea, I *saw* that I had rebelled against my God.  
... I was harrowed up by the *memory* of my many  
sins. (Alma 36:13, 17)

Several of Alma's remarks resonate with modern accounts of the NDE life review. Alma conceives of life as a probation. "This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors" (Alma 34:32). NDErs often comment on timelessness in God's presence. Alma concurs, saying "all is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men" (Alma 40:8). NDErs are often told that their "time" has not yet come. Alma remarks, "God knoweth all the times which are appointed unto man" (Alma 40:10). NDErs discuss the life review in terms of self-judgment. Alma treats this theme frequently, saying, "for behold, they are their own judges, whether to do good or evil" (Alma 41:7). Those who experience the life review often discuss how they felt the effects of their good and bad acts on other people.

But when I was in that review there was no covering up. I was the very people that I hurt, and I was

the very people I helped feel good. . . . When I die I am going to have to witness every single action of mine again, only this time actually feeling the effects I've had on others.<sup>17</sup>

What occurred was, every emotion I have ever felt in my life, I felt. And my eyes were showing me the basis of how that emotion affected my life, what my life had done so far to affect other people's lives using the feeling of pure love that was surrounding me as a comparison.<sup>18</sup>

Alma's discussion of restoration is suggestive in this context:

But the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again  
evil for evil,

or carnal for carnal,

or devilish for devilish—

good for that which is good;

righteous for that which is righteous;

just for that which is just;

merciful for that which is merciful.

Therefore, my son see that you are

merciful unto your brethren;

deal justly,

judge righteously,

and do good continually;

and if ye do all these things then shall ye receive your reward;

yea, ye shall have mercy restored  
unto you again;

ye shall have justice restored unto you  
again;

ye shall have a righteous judgment restored  
unto you again;

and ye shall have good rewarded unto you again.

For that which ye send out shall return unto you again, and be restored. (Alma 41:13–15)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Moody, *The Light Beyond*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Ring, *Heading toward Omega* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 71.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. John Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in Noel Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 48.

## Other NDE Experiences in the Book of Mormon

At least three additional apparent NDEs occur in the Book of Mormon, all of them in the book of Alma. See the account of King Lamoni who "fell unto the earth, as if he were dead" (Alma 18:42), then rose on a third day to prophesy, prompting a similar experience for his wife (Alma 19:1–34). Alma 22:18–23 recounts a similar occurrence in the court of Lamoni's father.

## NDE Aftereffects in the Book of Mormon

Several researchers have commented on distinctive NDE aftereffects. As NDE survivors, both Alma and the resurrected Christ in the Book of Mormon demonstrate nearly all of these traits.<sup>20</sup>

- No fear of dying
- A sense of the importance of love
- A sense of the connection of all things<sup>21</sup> (D&C 88)
- An appreciation of learning
- A feeling of responsibility for the course of their lives
- A sense of urgency
- *Better developed spiritual side*

This last of Moody's criteria deserves a close examination. All commentators see a tendency to be less materialistic.

I trust that ye have not set your hearts upon riches and the vain things of the world. (Alma 7:6)

Moody describes tendencies for NDErs to be less doctrinaire and more tolerant.

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<sup>20</sup> Moody, *The Light Beyond*, 38–49.

<sup>21</sup> Moody claims "this is a difficult concept for [his informers] to define," and, consequently, this is the most difficult to parallel in Alma's accounts. Even so, Alma's discussion of restoration parallels the informants' explanation on page 42 of *The Light Beyond*. Christ's discussion of "... lilies of the field. . . . Solomon in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these" (3 Nephi 28–29) also resonates with Moody's informant. Mormons wanting a more precise description of this sense of interconnection can look to D&C 88:6–13, 41, astonishing passages which compare dramatically to the core NDE experiences in Ring, *Heading toward Omega*, 50–89.

*From Alma:*

Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak [with a voice of thunder] unto all the ends of the earth? For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have. (Alma 29:7–8)

*From the risen Christ:*

Neither shall there be disputations among you concerning the points of my doctrine, as there have hitherto been. . . . Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away. (3 Nephi 11:28, 30)

Six of Kenneth Ring's seven tendencies for NDE spiritual orientation<sup>22</sup> group nicely here under Moody's "better developed spiritual side." They serve to extend Moody's definition.

1. A tendency to characterize oneself as spiritual rather than religious per se [Alma 5:14–16; 3 Nephi 17:5–25].
2. A feeling of being inwardly close to God [Alma 5:46, 3 Nephi 19:23].
3. A deemphasis of the formal aspects of religious life and worship.

Ring's informants like to contrast inner religious feelings and outward, formal religious behavior.<sup>23</sup> According to Ring, they express distaste for:

- formal aspects of religious life (ritual and trappings)
- doctrinal disputes
- the layer of dogma that often encrusts the religious impulse.<sup>24</sup>

In Ring's accounts, these complaints often arise in the context of an NDErs frustrated search for a formal religious setting that speaks to their experience. One NDEr said that "what

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<sup>22</sup> Ring, *Heading toward Omega*, 146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 149–50.



[the NDE] did was propel me back into church to find one that spoke to the things I knew and I didn't find one."<sup>25</sup>

Other modern experiencers join churches or become ministers, which argues that some formal religious settings can speak to an NDEr. Medieval accounts cited in Zaleski typically favored a particular monastic order. Many of the Mormon accounts mention temple work, and therefore, explicitly endorse certain formal religious acts. Therefore, I see the specific frustrations as being more fundamental to the NDErs than the deemphasis of formal religion altogether.

Alma's reaction to the Zoramites (Alma 31:12–31, 32:9–10) conforms to the specific objections Ring's informants raise. The Zoramites gathered together weekly to pray, but otherwise never spoke of God. Their rote prayer included the phrase, "thou hast elected us to be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee" (Alma 31:17). Alma demonstrates typical NDE values in being appalled by their hypocrisy and materialism.

In his Book of Mormon ministry, notice that the resurrected Christ puts an end to the rituals of sacrifice (3 Nephi 9:19–20), criticizes doctrinal disputations (3 Nephi 11:22, 28), and limits what should be called the "doctrine of Christ" to a few simple essentials (3 Nephi 11:31–40).

4. A conviction that there is life after death, regardless of religious belief [Alma 40; 3 Nephi 26:4–5].

5. An openness to the idea of reincarnation (and a general sympathy toward Eastern religions).

Of Ring's criteria, this "openness to the idea of reincarnation" is absent in Alma and Christ. However, as Ring admits (and Ian Wilson emphasizes),<sup>26</sup> this openness to reincarnation appears not as a general response to the NDE, but a moderate tendency in NDEr beliefs when compared to the beliefs prevailing in the surrounding American society.<sup>27</sup> Ring observes that the moderate percentage who shift towards reincarnation do so (in most cases) not because of anything in their experience, but

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>26</sup> See Wilson, *The After Death Experience*; see also Ian Wilson's *Mind Out of Time?* (London: Gallancz, 1981), later published as *All in the Mind*. Wilson provides a formidable counterexplanation of reincarnation reports, especially from the context of hypnotic "regression."

<sup>27</sup> Ring, *Heading toward Omega*, 159.

as part of their life reading afterwards. Notice too that Ring includes "a sense of homecoming" in his NDE profile.<sup>28</sup> If reincarnation is the only familiar concept that accommodates this "sense of homecoming," or "premortal existence," it seems quite natural that an NDEr, knowing no other alternatives, could tilt in that direction. Ring himself demonstrates how this can happen as he remarks that "while variants of this doctrine were acceptable to and promulgated by the early Church Fathers, reincarnation was declared heretical and expunged from Christian dogma in the six century."<sup>29</sup> However, Ian Wilson points out that the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553 actually rejected Origin's belief in premortal existence, "a very different thing from successive lives."<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Alma 29 and 3 Nephi 16:1 (Christ's descriptions of his "other sheep") satisfy Ring's "sympathy to Eastern religions."

6. A belief in the essential underlying unity of all religions [Alma 29; also 2 Nephi 11:4; 26:33; 29:11; 31:3].

Note especially how Alma claims that the Lord teaches "all nations, of their own nation and tongue to teach his word, all that he seeth fit that they should have," and Jacob remarks that "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]" (2 Nephi 11:4).

7. A desire for a universal religion embracing all humanity [see Alma 29 (!) and 3 Nephi 12:43–45].

Moody, Ring, and Atwater all report that NDErs tend to say that "denominations don't matter." Surprisingly, this thought is a Book of Mormon leitmotif, where God "inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33).

All the Mormon scriptures emphasize that group membership has nothing to do with personal worthiness or righteousness (D&C 1:30–34). Alma insists that judgment occurs in relation to opportunities for improvement (including social and cul-

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>30</sup> Wilson, *The After Death Experience*, 50.

tural conditioning), not against an absolute standard (see Alma 9:14–24). Those privileged with greater knowledge are reminded that where much is given, much is expected.

### **NDE and Temple Mysteries in Book of Mormon**

Ring, Michael Grosso, and the Grofs compare the NDE to various ancient temple mysteries in Greece and Egypt. The appearance of the resurrected Christ in 3 Nephi 8–29 constitutes the spiritual climax of the Book of Mormon. The action takes place at the temple. In effect, the multitude in 3 Nephi 8–29 undergoes symbolic death and judgment, meets dead loved ones, encounters a messenger, experiences a community life review, encounters a Being of Light, and is reborn. The whole experience can be seen as a ritual equivalent to the Moody-type NDE. The Book of Mormon, therefore, anticipates current research in showing the kinship between the NDE and temple mysteries.

### **Lehi's Dream and Cultural Influence on the NDE**

The Grofs remark that “comparative studies of concepts of afterlife have revealed far reaching similarities” among different cultures.<sup>31</sup> However, Zaleski points out that “between those whose attention is captured by the discrepancies among different visions, and those who are dazzled by their similarities, there is a temperamental distance, unlikely to be bridged by logical arbitration.”<sup>32</sup> Carol Zaleski's *Otherworld Journeys* attempts a cross-cultural view of the NDE, and by so doing directly confronts the issue of the influence of culture on visionary experience.

Paul's famous uncertainty, “whether in the body or out of the body, I know not: God knows,” recurs in new forms. . . . The more telling question has become “whether in my culture or out of my culture, I know not, God knows.”<sup>33</sup>

The account of Lehi's dream emerges as the best ground for discussion of the issue of culture and revelation. Lehi's dream shows parallels both with modern and ancient otherworld journey literature. In chapter 20 of *An Approach to the Book of*

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<sup>31</sup> Grof and Grof, *Beyond Death*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 180.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

*Mormon*, Nibley demonstrated that the dream imagery is culturally specific to Lehi's desert lifestyle.<sup>34</sup> The dream is also archetypally symbolic compared to the medieval accounts discussed by Carol Zaleski, and with the cross-cultural representations of heaven and hell gathered by Stanislav and Christina Grof. For example, Zaleski's description of the guide in medieval accounts applies equally to Nephi's experience.

The guide . . . escorts the visionary from place to place, pushing the story forward and interpreting the inner significance of otherworld scenes; he thus calls attention to the symbolic character of the other world, and the need for spiritual instruction in this life and the next.<sup>35</sup>

Lehi's account of the iron rod, and many people being lost in mists of darkness, and falling into the filthy river echoes many of the medieval "Test Bridge" accounts in Zaleski.<sup>36</sup> Common motifs in the medieval visionary literature include the "river of hell, the flowery meadows of paradise, the white-clothed throngs in heaven, the test-bridge."<sup>37</sup> According to Zaleski, the test bridge of medieval vision literature "symbolizes safe passage" across the river but also "intensifies the dangers of crossing otherworld boundaries. Whoever sets foot on its narrow planks is singled out for the attention of forces seeking the soul's downfall."<sup>38</sup> The righteous "cross easily to the meadows on the opposite shore while the unjust lose their footing and fall."<sup>39</sup> The iron rod in Lehi's vision performs a symbolic function equivalent to the test bridge of medieval visions.

Combinations of symbols in some of the judgment scenes in *Beyond Death*<sup>40</sup> also invite comparison with Lehi's dream. Despite the different cultures—Aztec, medieval Christian, Haitian, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist—we recognize the filthy

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<sup>34</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed., vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 253–64.

<sup>35</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 187.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 61–69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Grof and Grof, *Beyond Death*, 42, 54–55, 78–79.



rivers as boundary and obstacle, test bridges, symbols of heaven and hell, trees of life, and the judgments of wicked and the just.

In discussing heaven and hell, the Grofs remark that "It is not always clear whether those images that are sufficiently concrete for pictorial representation were believed to be literal and accurate descriptions of the afterlife experiences, or metaphors for states of mind that cannot be captured directly by any artistic means."<sup>41</sup>

How should we understand the Book of Mormon descriptions of punishments, as prophets mention "unquenchable fires," or "the everlasting gulf of misery," or the "lake of fire and brimstone?" In several cases, such terms are express metaphors for intense shame and guilt (see Mosiah 3:25, Alma 12:17; and D&C 19). The "awful gulf" (1 Nephi 15:28) represents hell and separation from God. Nephi's brothers ask whether the symbols represent "the torment of the body in the days of probation, or doth it mean the final state of the soul after the death of the temporal body, or doth it speak of things which are temporal?" (1 Nephi 15:31).

Nephi's answer anticipates Zaleski's grand question and her thoughtful answer about NDEs. Nephi tells his brothers that the symbols refer to both temporal and spiritual things (1 Nephi 15:32). Zaleski argues that NDEs are works of a socially conditioned religious imagination, but that the symbols participate in the reality that they represent. She treats them as "socially conditioned, imaginative, and yet nonetheless real and revelatory."<sup>42</sup>

In Lehi's dream, everything is unashamedly symbolic. We accept his culturally specific symbols because we accept the source of the dream as divine, and the symbols as corresponding to reality. Far from discounting cultural influence in the revelations, Nephi insists that Isaiah, for example, cannot be understood properly without knowledge of Isaiah's Hebrew culture (2 Nephi 25:5). The Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon both claim that revelation comes to people "in their weakness, according to their language and understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3). Joseph Smith often taught that God adapted himself to our capacity to understand.<sup>43</sup> For example, during a 1909 NDE an American Catholic priest met his father "looking exactly

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>42</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 198.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 162.



as he had in the last few years of his life," wearing the "last suit of clothes he had owned."<sup>44</sup> Father Tucker wrote, "I knew that the clothes Father wore were assumed because they were familiar to me, so that I might feel no strangeness in seeing him, and that to some lesser extent, his appearance was assumed also."<sup>45</sup>

Still, if we agree with Carol Zaleski that the culturally specific and symbolic aspects of the NDE prevent us from mapping the otherworld, "the otherworld journey motif remains potent only as long as it retains at least a hint of correspondence to a sensed, dreamed, or imagined reality."<sup>46</sup>

Modern NDEs keep their potency despite culturally specific elements because NDErs often bring back testable observations of what happened around them while they claimed to be out of their bodies. Accurate out-of-body observations cannot be explained in terms of cultural symbolism, or psychology. The most striking test of the reality of out-of-body reports has been Michael Sabom's research.<sup>47</sup> He asked thirty-two patients who claimed to have watched their resuscitation to describe the medical procedure involved. None made mistakes. Then he asked a control group of twenty-five "medically savvy" patients to describe the procedure. Twenty-three of the twenty-five made major mistakes.

### Mormonism and the Validity of the NDE

From the perspective of Mormonism, can we accommodate non-Mormon NDE accounts, and non-Mormon spiritual experiences? Certainly, if we agree with the explicit teachings of the Book of Mormon. I find that Mormon spiritual experiences tend to gain validity when considered against the world context.

But how well can the world context absorb Mormonism?

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<sup>44</sup> Lundahl, *A Collection of Near Death Research Readings*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.; cf. Duane Crowther, *Life Everlasting* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965), 81, and Wilson, *The After Death Experience*, 155. This kind of experience may account for Joseph Smith's controversial impression (reported in the King Follet sermon) that we'd resurrect at the age we died. (Remember that Joseph reported seeing Alvin in heaven.) If so, this gives Joseph's controversial and questionable idea an experimental, rather than philosophical, basis. Perhaps on this minor interpretive point, he assumed more than the experience justified.

<sup>46</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 184.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Sabom, *Recollections of Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).

Theologians, as much as other intellectuals, might wish to ignore experimental claims in order to avoid having to weigh testimony that either conflicts with accepted religious or scientific principles or brings the mysteries of life, death, and the hereafter embarrassingly close. It is safer to treat the other world journey solely as a metaphor or literary motif that illustrates a psychological or moral truth. In this way, we render it harmless; we attenuate the visionary virus until it is so weak that it produces immunity instead of contagion.<sup>48</sup>

Zaleski, in passing, mentions Mormonism in an interesting context:

Otherworld journey narration is a "wave" phenomenon rather than a constant. It seems to recur . . . when the way society pictures itself and its surrounding universe is so changed as to threaten to dislocate the human being. . . . This has been the case for most categories of otherworld journey narrative, for Judeo-Christian apocalypses and Islamic *mi'raj* traditions, for *The Divine Comedy* and the Zoroastrian *Book of Arda Viraz*, and for such modern American movements as Mormonism, Shakerism, spiritualism, and the Ghost Dance religion.<sup>49</sup>

This approach attempts to explain Mormonism as a "motif," as one more variation of "visionary virus," as one more "revitalization movement."<sup>50</sup> As a common motif, rather than a unique anomaly, Mormonism becomes harmless. However, according to our scriptures, we should not expect uniqueness as a revelatory religion (D&C 1:34; Alma 13:22; Alma 29:8; and so forth). We possess something outstanding that merits us a designation as a "well-pleas[ing]" (cf. D&C 1:30) and fully authorized gathering, but we are not the only people with whom the Lord has any active concern. I believe that the "true and living" epithet has a distinct meaning (perhaps as a merismus)

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<sup>48</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 184.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> A. F. C. Wallace, cited in Lawrence Foster, "First Visions: Personal Observations on Joseph Smith's Religious Experience," *Sunstone* 8/5 (September–October 1983): 39.

that summarizes the reasons behind Joseph Smith's call.<sup>51</sup> NDE study (and other consciousness research, as Foster points out so well)<sup>52</sup> does open the question of the uniqueness of many of Joseph Smith's visionary experiences (and those of other Mormons), but nevertheless supports the plausibility of his accounts. NDE research also serves as a background against which to appreciate the uniqueness of Joseph Smith's contributions. In the current NDE literature, according to Zaleski:

There is no match here for the revelatory literature of the great religious traditions; and it seems unlikely that a Gregory the Great or a Dante will emerge to shape near death testimony into a religiously sophisticated or artistically ordered statement. Neither could the medieval visions we considered stand on their own; they thrived inasmuch as they exemplified a larger tradition.<sup>53</sup>

I would argue that the Book of Mormon matches the revelatory literature of the great traditions. Mormon NDE accounts thrived long before Moody's work appeared because of the environment created by Joseph Smith's visions and the Book of Mormon. Just as testable out-of-body observations check the power of cultural and psychological explanations of the NDE, the testable claims of the Book of Mormon check the power of sociological and psychological explanations of Mormonism. As Foster argues, the uniqueness of the Book of Mormon in particular checks the power of the current academic trend that attempts to explain Mormonism as just another movement, and Joseph as just another visionary.<sup>54</sup>

In any case, whether testing NDEs or the Book of Mormon, we can only test the plausibility of competing explanations. For anyone impressed by the possibilities embodied in the Book of Mormon, whether Mormon or non-Mormon, experimenter or seeker, skeptic or believer, Alma gives good advice.

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<sup>51</sup> I'm attempting to publish a paper which demonstrates that the biblical "true and living" imagery—(true vine, living bread, tree of life, living waters, and so forth) directly parallels what D&C 1 describes as the need for faith, revelation, authority, and ordinances, and so forth, that justifies Joseph Smith's calling and defines the Latter-day Saint charter.

<sup>52</sup> Foster, "First Visions," 40–42.

<sup>53</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 204.

<sup>54</sup> Foster, "First Visions," 43.

And now behold, is your knowledge perfect?

Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing,  
and your faith is dormant; and this because ye know,  
for ye know that [the seed] hath sprouted up,  
that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened,  
and your mind doth begin to expand.

Oh then is this not real?

I say unto you, Yea, because it is light;  
and whatsoever is light is good,  
because it is discernible,  
therefore ye must know that it is good;  
and now behold, after ye have tasted this light  
is your knowledge perfect?

I say unto you, Nay. (Alma 32:34-36)