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Abstract Review of *Fingerprints of God: Evidences from Near-Death Studies, Scientific Research on Creation, and Mormon Theology* (1999), by Arvin S. Gibson.

BURDEN OF PROOF: A REVIEW OF
FINGERPRINTS OF GOD,
BY ARVIN S. GIBSON

Kevin Livingstone

As Alma was contending with the antichrist Korihor, he countered Korihor's request for a sign of the existence of God by affirming that "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (Alma 30:44). In this vein, Arvin Gibson's new book shows us what he feels are the "fingerprints" of God, the "evidence of God's intimate association with his earthly children, of his handiwork in the architecture of the universe and the world, and of his continuing communication with prophets" (p. 25). The majority of this evidence is provided by near-death experiences (NDEs), a recurring theme throughout the book, with selected research from the biological and physical sciences.

The unique combination of subject matter presented in the book stems from Gibson's physical science background as a nuclear engineer and his enthusiastic study of NDEs. One of Gibson's more ambitious goals for the book is to show that a bridge between science and religion may be constructed on the foundation of "the evolving science of NDEs" (p. 38). Unfortunately, Gibson's coverage of a wide breadth of

Review of Arvin S. Gibson. *Fingerprints of God: Evidences from Near-Death Studies, Scientific Research on Creation, and Mormon Theology*. Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1999. 320 pp., with index. \$19.98.

subject matter at the expense of depth, particularly in his treatment of scientific matters in which he is not an expert, may confuse readers lacking sufficient background. At times the organization and logic of the book contribute to this confusion as well. In the end, I found this book to be more about NDEs than science; I suspect your final opinion of the purported fingerprints identified in the book will depend on how you view NDEs.

Both the first section of the book and an appendix deal exclusively with NDEs, a subject that Gibson apparently started studying as the result of an NDE his father had when Gibson was a child. A brief history of NDE research is provided, along with a justification for NDE study, a description of some of the methods used in the field, rebuttals to common arguments against the veracity of NDEs, and numerous examples of NDEs. The basic position Gibson advances is that the level of rigor used in studying NDEs and the corroborative nature of some of them show that these experiences are real. According to Gibson, the validity of NDEs proves the existence of a realm inaccessible to science. Skeptics and scientists must, therefore, admit that some truths cannot be explored or explained by the laws of science. Once he has opened this floodgate, Gibson feels free to classify all areas of study that do not have firm scientific explanations as "fingerprints of God." The NDEs are then also used as sources of information about the spirit world and the laws that govern it.

Reading this book was my first exposure to the growing field of NDE research, but admittedly, I was biased against the validity of such experiences. After finishing the book, my doubts remained and to some extent were even amplified by the diversity of experiences presented. Even after allowing for the difficulty of trying to explain things that perhaps our mortal minds cannot grasp, the apparent variety inherent in NDEs suggested to me that either people were having many different experiences after death or their memories of the experiences and their ability to describe what had happened were limited. In either case, the fingerprints that depended on NDE testimony, although clear to Gibson, seemed fuzzy to me.

The next section of the book presents evidence for God's involvement in the creation of the universe and life. Gibson cites many

studies of the physical constants and measurements of different parts of the cosmos that appear to fall within a narrow range of values that allows life as we know it to exist. This apparent “fine-tuning” of the universe for conditions that permit life is another of the fingerprints that Gibson suggests. This chapter and the corresponding appendix on biology are the parts on which I am most qualified to comment, given my background in plant evolutionary genetics. I found the explanations of biological properties and processes to be, for the most part, factually correct (although DNA molecules are not composed of amino acids [p. 139]; proteins are synthesized by ribosomes, not by DNA [p. 139]; and the glossary entries for DNA, RNA, and prokaryote, to name a few, are inaccurate), but their abbreviated and incomplete nature was painfully evident. The evidence presented for God’s involvement in biological creation consists of analyses of the probability of complex life arising or evolving in a particular time frame. The chapters dealing with the creation of the universe and life both end with NDEs, but I was not able to discern how these experiences advanced Gibson’s argument nor did I find that the NDEs contributed to my understanding of how life started in the universe. For example, the chapter on biological creation ends with the experience of a woman who watched her own open-heart surgery during an out-of-body experience and who could identify a source of bleeding the doctors couldn’t see.

In identifying God’s fingerprints in the creation, Gibson recapitulates several arguments from other sources that all conclude that life is impossible to explain using Darwinism; therefore, God must have created complex living organisms in at least a rudimentary form. Gibson’s attitude is immediately evident from his oversimplified prose: for example, he repeatedly asks the reader to consider whether a lightning bolt could have hit a mud puddle billions of years ago to create the slime that eventually made your “Uncle Willie” (pp. 136, 147). The type of argument Gibson engages in is commonly known as “God of the gaps,” where holes in scientific explanations are filled by assertions of divine intervention. This reasoning also figures prominently in the discussion of the creation of the universe. The danger in basing one’s faith in such arguments is illustrated by history:

before Newton, God was invoked to explain the motion of the planets. After Newton formulated the law of gravity, it became clear that this motion was the result of interaction between the masses of heavenly bodies. Another example is the germ theory of disease: whereas historically many afflictions were ascribed to the wrath of God, we now understand their cause to be microorganisms and have developed effective treatments against them. So, while it is true that science cannot completely explain the state of the universe before the big bang or exactly how life began, the lack of explanation does not mean that the answers will never be forthcoming. New fossils are being discovered, the time line for the appearance of life is frequently revised, and new twists on the possible origins of life are constantly being found (i.e., self-catalyzing ribozymes, prions, etc.). These discoveries make basing testimonies on what seems at present impossible or inexplicable ill-advised.

In addition, Gibson's arguments in trying to assign a probability to the creation of life without God's assistance manifest several fundamental flaws that make basing faith in these types of views even more hazardous. These probabilities are all calculated based on assumptions of single events creating complex molecules in a single step. No self-respecting biologist will try to tell you that a complex extant protein arose *ex nihilo*. Under the theory of organic evolution, life is wholly conditional—the current generation depends on the previous generation, proteins made by cells depend on the genes encoded by the DNA within the cell, etc. The fallacy of arguments that use probability to show that life is “impossible” without divine intervention, such as those presented in this book, can be shown by the following vastly oversimplified example. Consider that you exist because you had a mother and father. Your mother and father also had a mother and father, and so on back to the first mother and father. Your existence depends on an unbroken chain of mothers (females) on one side and fathers (males) on the other side. Consequently, you would not exist if one of the children from your mother or father line was born the opposite gender. The probability of a child being a particular gender is about $\frac{1}{2}$. If we assume the passing of five thousand years since the first mother and father and allow twenty-five

years per generation, then the probability of your mother/father line existing intact from the first mother/father to your mother/father is $\frac{1}{2}^{200}$, or about 10^{-61} . Because your mother and father lines are independent, they can be multiplied, making the probability that you exist around 10^{-122} , give or take a factor of 10. Since this fits the definition of impossible used by Gibson (less than one chance of success in 10^{50} tries), you don't exist, and it is pointless for me to continue this review because you can't read it, and I don't exist to write it either.

This example demonstrates that we deal with "impossible" things every day and that these things are not so impossible when conditioned on prior events. The probability of your existence, given that your parents exist and had children, is considerably greater than 10^{-122} . The probability that a particular protein exists depends on myriad historical variables, not on the oversimplified hypotheses used by anti-evolutionists. The "God of the gaps" argument is, therefore, both wrong and insidious because of its implications for science. If we accept the argument that science will never be able to explain these elusive and fundamental aspects of the universe, further scientific study of the creation and evolution will be discouraged. Gibson's own career in nuclear power depended on Einstein's pushing into previously unfathomable areas to deduce that $E = mc^2$. I believe in a fine balance that both acknowledges God's creation of the universe and supports further study of evolution and creation. Brigham Young told the Saints that "when we demonstrate a truth, we demonstrate a portion of the faith, law, or power by which all intelligent beings exist, whether in heaven or on earth, consequently when we have truth in our possession we have so much of the knowledge of God."¹ Subscribing to Gibson's point of view would stifle study by LDS scientists, going against "our privilege and our duty to search all things upon the face of the earth."²

The last section in Gibson's book contains a short history of Mormonism and shows how NDEs support the doctrines of the

1. John A. Widtsoe, *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1925), 16–17, emphasis added.

2. *Ibid.*, 392.

church. NDEs are used to discuss the concept of light, demonstrate that participants come away from their experience feeling that there is a plan, and provide evidence for a premortal existence (through a particularly intriguing account of a man who apparently chose prior to his birth to have cystic fibrosis). While seeing the correspondence between these examples and LDS beliefs is gratifying, other sections of the book suggest that this activity may not always be so fruitful.

For example, I found it interesting that the NDEs varied widely with respect to factors such as how participants viewed their form during the NDE and how they described the appearance of other spirits: only 55 percent reported seeing other spirits in “human form” (p. 69). This seems to indicate that participants were having either the same experience with different memories or different experiences altogether. Either explanation would cast doubt on NDEs as a probative tool for one particular viewpoint. The introduction also clarifies that many religions and New Age philosophies use NDEs to their doctrinal advantage. Another inconsistency I noticed was that for at least some of the people interviewed, the experience did not persuade them to believe in Christ (see, for example, p. 66), again showing that interpretation of this evidence is arbitrary. On the other hand, Kenneth Ring, the author of the book’s foreword, states that his study of NDEs caused him to believe in God (see p. 18).

The use of NDEs as proof of the existence of God or correctness of any particular religion has serious theological implications on the role of faith, a point acknowledged by Gibson (see p. 104) and especially salient for Latter-day Saints (cf. Alma 32:26–43). While agreeing with most NDE researchers that NDEs cannot be taken as proof of life after death, Gibson hedges by saying that they “offer substantial evidence that there *could* be something beyond this life” (p. 105). This raises one issue I was disappointed that Gibson did not address further in the book, namely the role of scientific fact presupposing an LDS faith.

The gospel of Jesus Christ “comprehends all true science known by man”³ and “every truth that there is in heaven, on earth, or in

3. Ibid., 3.

hell.”⁴ These truths, however, seem to testify of something only once the seed of faith has started to grow within us. They do not provide a sure knowledge from which our faith may grow. My personal opinion is that we should not spend our time trying to prove the existence of God on the playing field of science but rather take the truth gained by science and examine it through the lens of our own faith. For instance, it is fact that gene mutations occur and are inherited, that chimpanzees and humans share vast stretches of identical DNA sequences, and that dinosaur fossils exist. Given these facts and my faith, interesting questions immediately come to mind. Why did God create the earth this way? Can we, in the expectation that our testimonies will increase, infer anything about the process of creation from what we can observe as we go about studying the earth and “seek[ing] . . . for wisdom . . . [that] the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto [us]” (D&C 6:7)?

Gibson closes the book with a summary of the evidence he identifies as the fingerprints of God. In addition, he includes an eclectic mix of other fingerprints—ranging from space-time and travel at the speed of light to studies of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon to the account of a man who was converted because of his NDE—and his heartfelt testimony of how his lifelong interest in these fields has brought him closer to God.

In the end, our testimonies of the existence of God cannot be based on one thing alone. Mormon said, “every thing which . . . persuade[th] to believe in Christ . . . is of God” (Moroni 7:16). This book presents an interesting portrait of how one man’s study of perhaps nontraditional subjects has brought him closer to Christ. While other books provide more than the slices and summaries of research presented by Gibson in the areas of evolution, cosmology, and NDEs, they will likely not try to relate these subjects to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Reviewing this book has, however, been in many ways a difficult personal exercise for me. While the author and I share the same religion and core set of beliefs—that God exists, that God created the universe and life, that we all existed before this life and will

4. *Ibid.*, 13.

continue our existence after death—our interpretation differs for much of the evidence presented. Since the study of these areas does not constitute an activity necessary for salvation and these are subjects that have not received much prophetic attention, I am grateful that differences of opinion can be permitted.