

Near Death Experiences and Gnostic Christianity: Parallels in Antiquity

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ABSTRACT: Long considered to be heretical, ancient Gnostic Christian texts unearthed this century display compelling similarities between Gnostic conceptions of life and death and modern NDEs. The Gnostic texts devoted extensive tracts to what readers could expect to encounter when they died. Other passages make numerous allusions to NDE-like experiences that can be realized in this life, most notably the human encounter with a Divine Light. The Gnostic Christian literature gives us one more example of NDEs and similar experiences in the ancient world.

Gnostic Christianity provides us with some striking parallels with modern accounts of near death experiences (NDEs), including not only an account of what we can expect to encounter when we die, but also frequent reference to a Divine Light. This source adds yet another voice to the chorus of scholars who have found similar parallels in other historical literature.

The Gnostic tradition is one of many branches of early Christianity labelled as heretical by the early Church fathers. The term "gnostic" is derived from the Greek *gnosis*, meaning "to know." Gnostic Christians, then, were a group who claimed to have special divine knowledge, restricted to a privileged few. This elitist nature of Gnosticism necessarily restricted the number of possible adherents; in contrast, the very term "Catholic" means "universal," implying that anyone could become a member of the Church by adhering to certain precepts and practices, as opposed to acquiring special knowledge.

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Gnostic Christians differed from the larger Catholic tradition in many respects. Many Gnostic texts referred to the God of the Old Testament as evil, as opposed to the benevolent Christ. Sometimes a multiplicity of gods was mentioned, including female ones, including "God the Mother." Gnostics also generally referred both to the resurrection of Christ and to "life after death" as spiritual rather than physical events.

Historians have known about the existence of Gnostic Christians for centuries. However, the beliefs of that group were received secondhand, largely through the writings of the Catholic Church fathers. Not until 1945, with the discovery of Gnostic texts hidden in a jar and buried in the Nag Hammadi region of Upper Egypt, did we discover what the Gnostic Christians themselves had to say; and in these texts we find some intriguing parallels to the modern NDE phenomenon.

Several such parallels have already been found in other ancient texts. Raymond Moody (1975) noted the similarities between NDEs and the vision of St. Paul, Plato's story of Er, and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Frederick Holck (1978) cited comparisons to Plato and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as the Hindu *Upanishads*, and Babylonian, Egyptian, and Zoroastrian records. Paul and Linda Badham (1987) edited a collection of essays dealing with death and the afterlife among Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Africans. Carol Zaleski (1987) added similar comparisons with medieval Christian accounts in the form of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, the Vision of Drythelm, and the Treatise on the Purgatory of St. Patrick. Carl Becker (1981, 1984a, 1984b) found distinct similarities between NDEs and the Pure Land Buddhist tradition.

The Gnostic texts resemble the books of the New Testament in many ways, and were undoubtedly regarded as authoritative scripture by Gnostic Christians. Dating the texts is difficult, but most of the Nag Hammadi collection can be dated between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D. As Elaine Pagels (1981) pointed out, however, these same texts might very well have had roots in an older oral tradition. Helmut Koester (1988) agreed, and argued that the origin of the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* might very well date from the first century.

In the same vein, Koester and Pagels (1988) argued that the Gnostic text entitled *The Dialogue of the Savior* likely had its origin before the end of the 1st century, and the extant Greek version was likely composed in the 2nd. As the title suggests, the text represents a dialogue between the Savior (the name Jesus was not mentioned) and

his disciples. One of the most inquisitive of the disciples was Matthew, who asked of the Savior.

. . . "Lord, I want [to see] that place of life [. . .] where there is no wickedness, [but rather] there is pure [light]!"

The Lord said, "Brother [Matthew], you will not be able to see it [as long as you are] carrying flesh around."

[Matthew] said, "Lord, [even if I will] not [be able] to see it, let me [know it]!" (Robinson, 1988, p. 249)

After a brief discourse, the Savior responded that "the good [will] be taken up to the light. . . .When you rid yourselves of jealousy, then you will clothe yourselves in light and enter the bridal chamber" (Robinson, pp. 251-252). For his own part, the Savior remarked that "His [the Father's] light has poured [down] upon me!" (Robinson, p. 252).

Curious about the role of death in this scheme of things, Matthew then asked,

. . . "Tell me, Lord, how the dead die [and] how the living live."

The [Lord] said, ". . . I say to you that when what invigorates a man is removed, he will be called 'dead.' And when what is alive leaves what is dead, what is alive will be called upon."

Judas said, "Why else, for the sake of truth, do they [die] and live?"

The Lord said, "Whatever is born of truth does not die. Whatever is born of woman dies." (Robinson, p. 252)

Apparently, however, one does not actually have to die in order to have this kind of out-of-body experience. Another Gnostic text, called *Zostrianos*, recounted the journey of a troubled man, *Zostrianos*, who was on the verge of suicide. *Zostrianos* was deeply disturbed about metaphysical problems, such as "how do those who exist . . . [come] from an invisible, undivided, and self-begotten spirit? . . . What is that one's place? What is his origin?" (Robinson, p. 404).

Having received no answers *Zostrianos* wrote: ". . . as I was deeply troubled and gloomy because of the discouragement which encompassed me, I dared to . . . deliver myself to the wild beasts of the desert for a violent death" (Robinson, p. 404). Then, suddenly,

There stood before me the angel of knowledge of eternal light. He said to me, "*Zostrianos*, why have you gone mad as if you were ignorant of the great eternal who are above? . . ."

. . . I very quickly and very gladly went up with him to a great light-cloud. I cast my body upon the earth . . . (Robinson, pp. 404-405)

After going on a considerably long journey through the various levels in the heavens, Zostrianos “came down to the perceptible world and put on [his] image” (Robinson, p. 430). His parting words in the tract advise us to “Look at the Light. Flee the Darkness,” as the latter might lead to our destruction (Robinson, p. 430).

Other Gnostic texts made it clear that one does not necessarily have to have been near death in order to have the kinds of impressions that NDErs have of the afterlife. This is particularly true when it comes to Gnostic descriptions of a Divine Light. In *The Apocalypse of Paul*, which purported to detail the voyage of the Apostle through the heavens, we read that in the “sixth heaven” Paul “gazed up on high and saw a great light shining down” (Robinson, p. 259). According to *The Concept of Great Power*, we find that those who know the Great [Divine] Power “will enter into the immeasurable light” (Robinson, p. 316). *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* similarly referred to God as an “intellectual light” (Robinson, p. 329). In *The Paraphrase of Shem* we read about the origins of the “exalted, infinite Light” and the “universal Light,” and how it went about fashioning the universe (Robinson, p. 343).

The *Apocryphon of John* asserted that God, the “Father of everything,” is “pure light into which no eye can look . . . [immeasurable light] which is pure, holy [and immaculate]” (Robinson, p. 106). *The Gospel of the Egyptians* referred to the Father as the “infinite light” as well as the “great invisible [Spirit]” (Robinson, p. 209). In *The Thought of Norea*, the father was referred to as “the Light . . . above the [regions] below, Light dwelling [in the] heights” (Robinson, p. 446). *The Interpretation of Knowledge* asserted that the Father is “the light of the world” (Robinson, p. 475).

Jesus Christ, according to *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, “resembles a great angel of light” (Robinson, p. 222). This same Savior “came from Infinite Light” (Robinson, p. 223). According to *The Gospel of Thomas*, “Jesus said, ‘It is I who am the light which is above them all’” (Robinson, p. 135). In *The Teachings of Silvanus*, Christ was “the true light” who “gives light to all the parts” of the soul (Robinson, p. 387); he was “the Light which is shining undefiled” (Robinson, p. 388) and readers were enjoined to “Enlighten your mind with the light of heaven” (Robinson, p. 388) and “Light the light within you” (Robinson, p. 389). *The Letter of Peter to Philip* referred to Jesus Christ as the “Son of immortality who is in the light” (Robinson, p. 434). Likewise, in *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the Son “is a Light,” and together with the Father was “[the Incomprehensible One] . . . [a

Light] dwelling in Light" (Robinson, p. 514). According to this text the Divine Light is not only "exalted, perfect Light," but also "a hidden Light . . . invisible" (Robinson, p. 519). Nonetheless, the Son was "an immeasurable Light . . . the Light that illumines the All" (Robinson, p. 520).

The Gnostic Christian material therefore provides us with yet another parallel between modern NDE reports and the views of a group in antiquity. Together with other works, this shows that NDEs and similar experiences span generations and cultures. The exact viewpoint or description might differ somewhat from individual to individual and from society to society, but the similarities are far too striking to dismiss.

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