

BOOK REVIEW

B. Grant Bishop, M.D.
Bountiful, UT

Fingerprints of God: Evidences from Near-Death Studies, Scientific Research on Creation, and Mormon Theology, by Arvin S. Gibson. Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1999, 320 pp., \$19.98, hb.

Fingerprints of God is the fifth book on near-death experiences (NDEs) that Arvin Gibson has written. Like this one, the previous four (Gibson, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994) are works written from the viewpoint of Mormon theology. Unlike the previous four books, *Fingerprints of God* is not restricted to NDEs, nor is it written for the sole purpose of supporting Mormon theology. It is a book written to support a more significant idea. In Gibson's words, "This book, therefore, is my attempt to show what I have found to be true; namely, that near-death studies, scientific research on creation, and Mormon theology all serve as evidence for the existence of a living and loving God" (p. 25). What is unique about the book is how Gibson accomplishes his goal. He does not just present us with facts about science, studies on NDEs, or quotes from scriptures. Gibson accomplishes his goal by revealing his own personal struggle in finding a relationship with his God. He shares the difficulty he had as a scientist in keeping what was reasonable in science, yet accepting his experiences outside of the scientific world that support the existence of God.

He is honest in the beginning of his work to tell the reader he comes from a bias that Mormonism is true. However, *Fingerprints of God* is not just a book about a Mormon scientist who discovers God's fingerprints throughout the cosmos. It is really the story that parallels the epic hero in mythology. Like all mythic heroes, Gibson found three keys to the mystery of life in the form of a three-cornered puzzle. He then spent his

B. Grant Bishop, M.D., is Clinical Professor of Dermatology at the University of Utah School of Medicine. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Bishop at 425 Medical Drive, Suite 110A, Bountiful, UT 84010-4986; e-mail: gbishop@inconnect.com.

life trying to discover what the three keys mean and how the puzzle fits together. It is the journey itself that is important, the analysis of the three keys and the discovery that when the puzzle is finished it points to one source: God. It is this point that I think Kenneth Ring makes, in the book's foreword. "Rather it is a book that leads us back to God by helping us to see God's hand in all the domains that Arvin's own life and unique talents have enabled him to explore so deeply and thus fashion him into the expert guide for any reader who would take this journey with him" (p.23). It is really this aspect of the book that carries it from being provincial to universal. Gibson's talent is in revealing that the search for truth is the same, whether it is an Albert Einstein wondering how it would feel to ride a light beam, or a Raymond Moody pondering the significance of near-death experiences, or a Joseph Smith praying to ask God what is true. The common thread is that we all are searching for truth.

Gibson introduces his book by describing how his education at the University of California in Berkeley and his World War II experiences drew him away from his Mormon roots. What turned him back again to religion was the NDE his father had in 1922: "By late 1989 my curiosity concerning my father's experience got the best of me and I decided to find out for myself what was going on in these kinds of experiences" (p.32). It was this inquiry that helped Gibson produce his first four books. Gibson ends his introduction by sharing the one key that convinced him that the stated conflict between science and religion does not exist. By confining his investigation to the science of creation, NDEs, and Mormonism, he began to see a pattern that pointed to God. He also "found . . . that the science of the physical world, and the theology of the religious-spiritual world, tended to be bridged by the developing science of near-death studies" (p.37).

The first three chapters of the book are dedicated to NDEs, the first key. These chapters do not break new ground in near-death studies, nor are they intended to. Gibson writes as if he were in conversation with a neophyte who is just being introduced to the field of near-death studies. The position he takes is appropriate in view of the overall appeal of the book. He is the traveler who is now guiding the novice through the mystery of life. It is done in a kind way by asking questions that he probably asked himself when beginning his own search into NDEs. By introducing three new unpublished NDEs, Gibson teaches us a new reality that NDEs reveal. The new reality is then supported by quotes from his previous books.

Gibson then validates the new reality by educating his readers on near-death research. He again follows his previous pattern by asking and answering questions. “What is the status of near-death research and is it in accord with science? . . . What impact is this work having on various branches of science—and on the religious community? . . . If the stories really do represent reality, what are the implications?” (p.84). Following a nice history lesson on near-death studies, he writes, “*All* of those [researchers] that I have become acquainted with agree that God is the author of much of what we find in the course of our research” (p.96). For him, the implication is huge because it is an example of how science and religion can be congruent.

The last chapter of this section answers some of the more common questions asked about NDEs. Do those who have an NDE always tell the truth? What is the motivation for telling about an NDE? Which people have NDEs? Why such varied experiences? What about the bizarre happenings in some NDE? Are all NDEs pleasant? Are they proof of life after death? What about repentance and judgment? Are angels a part of the NDE? What about encounters with deity? Again he guides us through the answers by using NDEs and telling of his own research. The first section on NDEs has 66 references, with about one-third of those coming from Gibson’s previous works.

To address secular explanations of NDEs, Gibson includes Appendix A, “Other Attempts to Explain the NDE” (pp.222–229). Appendix A is well documented with 57 references. He explains several “failed explanations” of NDEs. After explaining why reincarnation is so appealing to near-death researchers he then discounts both reincarnation and hypnotic regression therapy by revealing several cases of claimed reincarnation as inauthentic. He also reminds us of the hazards of hypnosis for retrieving historical facts.

The second key of Gibson’s three-cornered puzzle is science, specifically the creation and the probability of life. This section is the most difficult to read and Gibson is astute enough to know it. He therefore gives the reader the choice to read his condensed version, which includes chapters four and five, or his more complete version, which includes Appendices B, C, and D. Those who have explained science for the general public know how difficult it is to relay their message without losing the reader in mathematics or obtuse ideas. Gibson’s idea to split his discussion into simple and difficult versions helps to solve this problem.

How Gibson presents his case that God is the creator of the cosmos is to show that the science of creation is compatible with the religious view of the creation. He therefore begins his science section by quoting the first five verses of Genesis, and then discusses how difficult it must have been for Moses to put in words what he saw in vision. To illustrate the difficulty, Gibson makes the point dramatically by writing the same five verses of Genesis as if a modern physicist were assigned by God to write them. The result is overwhelming. One would have to have a degree in physics to know what is being said, just as one would have to have a degree in ancient languages to know what the Hebrew in Genesis is saying. What is important is to see that both accounts are correct.

Gibson relies heavily on the writings of Gerald Schroeder (1990, 1998) who, after receiving his Ph.D. in physics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, studied Biblical research in Israel. Schroeder's writings are unique and easy to read and they support Gibson's idea that science and religion are not in conflict. Gibson writes of Schroeder that "his conclusion is that the events of the billions of years that cosmologists say followed the big bang and those of the first six days described in Genesis are, in fact, one and the same—identical realities described in vastly different terms" (p.121).

Gibson describes the fine tuning of the universe and presents it as evidence supporting a life-oriented universe. The fine tuning includes the age, correct speed of expansion, and density of stars that allow night not to be overwhelmed by star light. It also includes the correct balance of the basic four forces of the universe allowing life to proceed. A reader who does not understand such terms as *weak nuclear force*, *strong nuclear force*, *electromagnetism*, *gravity*, *fusion*, *proton*, *neutron*, *deuteron*, *quark*, and *antimatter* might have to refer to the excellent glossary in the back.

There is then a section on scientists' view of the creation, which is a chronology from the big bang to the present, 15 billion years later. This is a nice summary but requires a knowledge of scientific notation. Gibson does supply readers with a discussion on large and small numbers, but it is at the end of the introduction some 90 pages before they need it.

The next question Gibson asks is "who or what arranged this mighty cauldron and triggered the release of such prodigious amounts of energy?" (p.127). He turns again to NDEs to support that it was the power of God that created the universe and he supplements his idea with scripture.

This is a difficult chapter and Gibson wisely summarizes where he has been and what we should have learned. Scientists write in their

own language of mathematics, premises, and conclusions on how the universe was birthed. Their language is beautiful and correct from their perspective. But prophets and those who have had NDEs write in a different language, which is also beautiful, describing what they saw of the same event. The fact that the two groups speak in different languages does not mean they are incompatible, or that one supports a God and the other one does not.

Appendix B, which correlates with the chapter on creation, does define the fundamental forces of the universe. It also describes various scientific theories of how the universe began without the hand of God. It teaches us how stars are born and die, and how the age of the earth and the universe is determined. Appendix B is a very good supplement to the chapter on creation, written well and clearly. Gibson adds Appendix D, discussing the nature of matter, relativity, and scientists' current concept of the cosmos, for "completeness." This is an excellent summary of what cosmology is all about and, I thought, the best section on science. If one is not familiar with quantum physics or the science of matter and relativity, reading this section would be helpful before reading the general science section in the book.

The second chapter on science, Chapter 8, "The Probability of Life," addresses the question, "What is the probability of the spontaneous creation of life?" This chapter is written to support the previous chapter on the creation, but expands the discussion to include the creation of life. The reader needs again to know about scientific notation, but Gibson does tell us the significance of the numbers he quotes. His argument begins with the chance of a happenstance universe, goes to the miracle of life that includes carbon and DNA, and ends with the problem of evolution, the conditions necessary for life, fossil evidence of early life, and the probabilities of different life forms developing. This section is well documented and then supplemented in Appendix C, which goes deeper into the mathematics of probabilities and into other possibilities for the origin of life.

The final key to the three-piece puzzle of the existence of God is Mormonism. Gibson treats Mormonism like the previous two sections on NDEs and science: here is the history and the evidence, and here are NDEs that which support the doctrine. Gibson sees common threads between the history of Mormons and NDEs:

One cannot read [Mormon] Church history without seeing parallels between what is recorded there and what in recent years has been recorded in accounts of near-death experiences. The parallels and the frequency of their occurrence are so obvious that comparisons become

inevitable. Moreover, these parallels are not restricted to early Mormon Church leaders. Such experiences were and are ubiquitous among the members. (p. 150)

Readers are referred to a more detailed account of historic Mormon NDEs in the work of Duane Crowther (1997).

Gibson relates a very nice but short history of the Mormon church's beginning, centered on the life, visions, and death of Joseph Smith, the church's founding prophet. Relaying the epiphanies of Joseph Smith is important not only because Gibson draws on them to support his point that Joseph's visions are similar to near-death experiences, but also because the questions and answers are also similar. The chapter on the history of Mormonism ends with a lengthy quote from the non-Mormon humanities professor Harold Bloom, who wrote, "I also do not find it possible to doubt that Joseph Smith was an authentic prophet" (p. 165).

The final chapter on Mormonism is centered on comparing NDEs to Mormon doctrine. This is an area in which Gibson has excelled, having written four books on the subject. In fact most of the NDE accounts are taken from his previous works. Near-death experiences are intertwined with Mormon doctrine on God's light and glory, the plan of salvation, premortal life, agency, families, knowledge, and the life review. Keeping with the spirit of the book, Gibson ends this chapter by writing, "These case studies have been presented to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions about the evidence presented. Admittedly, the evidence is incomplete, but it should provide a picture where similarities and parallels between [Mormon] doctrine and NDE events can be considered" (p. 191).

The last chapter of the book is a summary of what Gibson has presented. It is the best part of the book, and would have made a wonderful introduction. Gibson goes through several "fingerprints" of God that support His existence and His role in creating the universe and life, and writes:

God! His fingerprints are everywhere we look. Yet many of us stumble through life blindly groping for some meaning in what we see. And when the evidence displays itself and cries for our recognition the scales on our eyes further blind us to the truth. We ask again, Pilate's question of Christ, "What is Truth?" And since our anchors for truth have long since been discarded in the name of "Science," we drift aimlessly through a morass of ever changing relativism. (p.192)

Near-death studies are generally centered on listening to hundreds of accounts and then hunting for patterns that tie those accounts together,

supporting their authenticity. The leaders in any field of study are those who have the insight to see the common motifs that connect all the data. Using that insight, Gibson transcends the one discipline of near-death studies, using it as a stepping stone to find common patterns relating science to religion, which then support the existence of God.

Gibson shares his path and his discoveries. He did not rely on one key to solve his puzzle. Gibson teaches us that difficult puzzles must be solved by discovering patterns that flow through all their pieces. Hopefully, those who read *Fingerprints of God* will use Gibson's mythic journey to move themselves onto their individualized paths to find their own puzzles and the keys that will complete their journeys.

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