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Title Evidence?

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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.

EVIDENCE?

Philip D. LaFleur

Arvin S. Gibson's introduction makes the purpose of his book clear: "This book . . . 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 a loving God" (p. 25). I am more than willing to accept that the theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is essential to understanding the relationship of man to his Heavenly Father and to the Savior, but I believe that this understanding comes through the testimony of the Spirit whispering to man's spirit rather than through what the world might accept as "evidentiary." The term *evidence* is stronger than is justified. *Indications* might be a better term, since so much is still unknown about near-death studies and creation science.

Sincere men can (and do) use arguments of "evidence" to indicate that a Master Planner created and directs the universe. However, other sincere men have used similar, if not identical, "evidences," viewed from a decidedly different vantage point, to propose that everything in the universe, including man and his earth, is the result of random processes.

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.

Gibson argues that a firm application of statistical principles refutes the premise of an evolutionary beginning to life. Since other reviewers discuss the statistical issues,¹ I will not mention them further, except to say that statistical arguments for or against the random creation of life often assume that the conditions with which we are familiar on the earth today applied millions of years ago when creation—random or otherwise—took place. We really have only a vague idea of what conditions were like on earth when it was created or of how different conditions might have helped (or hindered) the coming forth of life.

My biggest concern with this book is its overreliance on near-death experiences (NDEs). That NDEs happen seems certain. Why and how they happen and what, if anything, they really mean are other issues that have yet to be resolved. The NDE literature varies from the purely neurological approach² to the metaphysical.³

Craig R. Lundahl has written an interesting paper in the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* that suggests some overlap between NDEs and other “religious” experiences.⁴ Lundahl compares the experiences of the children in Medjugorje (in the former Yugoslavia) who have reported daily visitations by the Virgin Mary and have been transported to what Dante referred to as paradise, purgatory, and hell, to those who have NDEs. Lundahl seems to validate both.

While I do not have a great deal of experience in studying NDEs, some things seem unanswered: for example, why are NDEs not experienced more widely by people who have clinically “died”? and why are NDE experiences so varied? In the section on the plan of salvation in chapter 7, “Mormonism—the Doctrine,” Gibson recounts the

1. See the reviews by Kevin Livingstone and G. Bruce Schaalje in this issue, pp. 77–89.

2. See, for example, Juan C. Saavedra-Aguilar and Juan S. Gómez-Jeria, “A Neurobiological Model for Near-Death Experiences,” *Journal of Near-Death Studies* (hereafter *JNDS*) 7/4 (1989): 205–22; and George E. Wettach, “The Near-Death Experience as a Product of Isolated Subcortical Brain Function,” *JNDS* 19/2 (2000): 71–90.

3. See, for example, Gracia F. Ellwood, “Religious Experience, Religious Worldviews, and Near-Death Studies,” *JNDS* 19/1 (2000): 5–21; and Kenneth Ring and Evelyn E. Valarino, *Lessons from the Light: What We Can Learn from the Near-Death Experience* (New York: Insight Books, 1998).

4. Craig R. Lundahl, “A Comparison of Other World Perceptions by Near-Death Experiencers and by the Marian Visionaries of Medjugorje,” *JNDS* 19/1 (2000): 45–52.

story of a man with cystic fibrosis who, during his NDE, was told that he had “volunteered” for the disease in the premortal existence as a way to rapidly undergo the “necessary” suffering on this earth (pp. 175–78). I worry that this is a pretty slippery theological slope to climb. Does this experience, therefore, mean that everyone with a congenital physical or mental disease or everyone who dies young from a painful illness such as cancer “volunteered” for that trial in life?

Gibson’s scientific arguments for the existence of God are generally adequate and are subscribed to by a number of scientists.⁵

Finally, a little closer editing would have been valuable. Some things could (and probably should) have been left out of the book. The section on quantum quandaries in chapter 8, “The Evidence,” adds nothing at all to the thrust of the book. Another example that may seem trivial but shows a lack of careful preparation occurs in the same chapter. Page 204 has a discussion on dates in which eras are referred to as b.c.e and a.c.e. The usual abbreviation for “before the common era” is B.C.E. (in small caps). The abbreviation a.c.e. is incorrect; we are presently in the “common era,” represented by the abbreviation C.E.

Although I admire the amount of effort and personal research that went into the book, I believe that the book’s weaknesses overpower its strengths.

5. See, for example, Frank J. Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God, and the Resurrection* (New York: Anchor Books–Doubleday, 1994), and David L. Clark, ed., *Of Heaven and Earth: Reconciling Scientific Thought with LDS Theology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998).