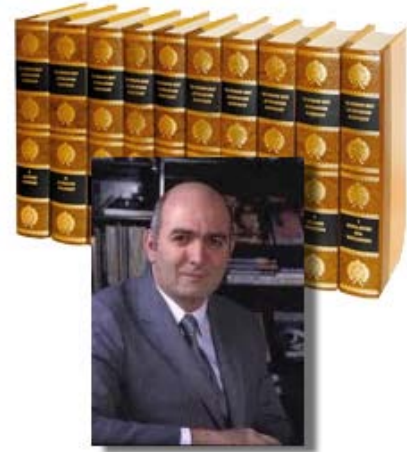


"Near Death Experiences" and the Bible

Samuele Bacchiocchi

Throughout human history, people have refused to accept the finality that death brings to life. Death brings an unacceptable, sudden interruption to one's work, plans, and relationships. Though the inscription on many tomb stones often reads "Rest in Peace," the truth of the matter is that most people do not welcome the peaceful rest of the grave. They would rather be alive and productive. Thus, it is not surprising that the subject of death and afterlife always has been a matter of intense concern and speculation. After all, the death rate is still one per person. Each of us at the appointed time will face the grim reality of death.



Today we live in a death-denying culture. People live as if death did not exist. Doctors and hospital personnel generally think that death is something that should not happen. Regardless of how miserable people may feel, they usually respond to "How are you?" with an artificial smile, saying: "Just fine." When we can no longer maintain the facade, we begin to wonder, "What is going to happen to me now?"

Even at the end of life, we tend to deny the reality of death by embalming the dead and using cosmetics to restore the corpse to a natural, healthy look. We dress the dead in suits and gowns as if they were going to a party instead of returning to dust. A special mourning color that has been prevalent in most countries, such as white or black, is gradually disappearing, because people do not want to believe that death is an intrusion that terminates their life.

"YOU WILL NOT DIE"

To set the stage for the study of spiritualism it may be well to remember that it all began with the serpent's lie, "You will not die" (Gen 3:4). This lie has lived on throughout human history to our time. The belief in some form of life after death has been held in practically every society. The need for reassurance and certainty in the light of the challenge that death poses to human life has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some form of afterlife.

In the history of Christianity, death has been defined generally as the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. This belief in the survival of the soul at the

death of the body has been expressed in various ways and given rise to such corollary doctrines as prayer for the dead, indulgences, purgatory, intercession of the saints, the eternal torment of hell, etc. Since the time of Augustine (A. D. 354-430), Christians have been taught that between death and resurrection-a period known as "the intermediate state"-the souls of the dead either enjoy the beatitude of Paradise or suffer the affliction of Purgatory or Hell. The disembodied condition of the soul is supposed to continue until the resurrection of the body which will bring completion to the salvation of the saints and to the damnation of the wicked.

During the Middle Ages, the fear of death and speculation about what happens to the soul after death gripped the imagination of people and inspired literary and theological works. Dante's *DIVINA COMMEDIA* is only a small fragment of the immense literary and artistic works which graphically depict the torments of the sinners' soul in Purgatory or Hell, and the blessedness of the saints' soul in Paradise.

The Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitious beliefs about the afterlife in Purgatory. The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe in the conscious existence of souls either in Paradise or Hell during the intermediate state. Calvin expressed this belief far more aggressively than Luther. In his treatise *PSYCHOPANNYCHIA*, which he wrote against the Anabaptists who taught that souls simply sleep between death and resurrection, Calvin argues that during the intermediate state the souls of the believers enjoy the bliss of heaven; those of the unbelievers suffer the torments of hell. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell. Since that time, this doctrine of the intermediate state has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.

By rejecting as unbiblical the popular superstitions regarding the suffering of souls in purgatory, the Reformers paved the way for a reexamination of human nature by the rationalistic philosophers of the Enlightenment. These philosophers did not immediately abandon the notion of the immortality of the soul. The first significant attack on the belief in the survival of life after death came from David Hume (A. D. 1711-1776), an English philosopher and historian. He questioned the immortality of the soul, because he believed that all knowledge comes from the sensory perceptions of the body. Since the death of the body marks the end of all sensory perception, it is impossible for the soul to have conscious existence after the death of the body.

The decline in the belief in an afterlife reached its climax by the mid-eighteenth century as atheism, skepticism, and rationalism spread in France, England, and America. The publication of Darwin's *OIGIN OF SPECIES* (1859) inflicted another blow on supernaturalism and especially on the immortality of the soul. If human life is the product of spontaneous generation, then human beings have no divine spirit or immortal soul in them. Darwin's theories challenged people to seek "scientific" evidence for supernatural phenomena, such as the survival of the soul.

SPIRITUALISM AND THE REVIVAL OF INTEREST IN THE SOUL

Public interest in the life of the soul after death was soon revived with the publication of *THE COMING RACE* (1860) by Bulmer-Lytton. This book influenced a host of writers who contributed to making occult practices fashionable in British society. In America, the public interest in communicating with the souls of the dead was ignited by the seances held by the Fox sisters who lived in Hydesdale, New York. On March 31, 1848, they conducted a seance in which the alleged spirit of a murdered man, who called himself William Duesler, informed them that if they dug in the basement, they would find his corpse. This proved to be true; a body was found.

Since the spirits of the dead at the Fox house communicated by a rapping sound on the table, "table rapping" seances became fashionable all across America and England as a way of communicating with the spirit of the dead. This phenomenon attracted the attention of numerous learned persons, who in 1882 organized the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Henry Sedgwich, a noted philosopher at Cambridge, became instrumental in gathering into the society some of the most influential people of the day, including William Gladstone (former British prime minister) and Arthur Balfour (future prime minister).

An important outcome of the SPR movement is represented by the work of Joseph Banks Rhine, who in 1930 began researching conscious life after death. Rhine was trained as a biologist at the University of Chicago and later became involved with the SPR while teaching at Harvard University. He redefined and relabeled the subjects that the SPR had researched for years by coining such terms as "extrasensory perception" (ESP), "para-normal psychology," or "parapsychology." This was designed to give scientific credibility to the study of the afterlife. Later Rhine, together with William McDougal who served as president for both the British and American SPR groups, set up a Department for Psychic Studies at Duke University. The Russians conducted their own psychic experiments. Their findings were published in a popularized form in *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder (1970).

In the late 1960s, the late Episcopal bishop James A. Pike gave new and widespread attention to the idea of communicating with the spirits of the dead by communicating on a regular basis with his deceased son. Today our society is flooded with mediums and psychics who advertise their services nationwide through TV, magazines, radio, and newspapers. Communication with the spirits of the dead is not just an American phenomenon. Surveys conducted in other countries reveal a similar high percentage of people who engage the services of mediums to communicate with the spirit of their deceased loved ones.

It is not our intent to dispute the ability of some mediums to receive and transmit messages from spirits. The question is whether such messages are from the spirits of the dead or from the spirits of Satan. We address this question later in this chapter, in conjunction with our study of King Saul's consultation of the medium of Endor (1 Sam 28:7-25). At this juncture, it suffices to note that spiritualism still plays a major role today in fostering the belief in the survival of the soul after death. People who through mediums have been able to communicate with the alleged spirits of their deceased loved ones have reason to believe in the immortality of the soul.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Another significant development of our time, which has contributed to promote belief in the survival of the soul, is the study of "near-death experiences." Such studies are based on reports from people who have been resuscitated from a close encounter with death, and from doctors and nurses who have recorded the deathbed experiences of some of their patients.

The experiences reported by persons who have had a close encounter with death often parallel what many believe to be the life of the soul in Paradise. Though no two reports are the same, some of the common characteristics are: the impression of peacefulness, the sensation of being pulled very rapidly through a dark space of some kind, floating in a weightless, spiritual body, the awareness of being in the presence of a spiritual being, an encounter with a bright light, often identified with Jesus Christ or an angel, and a vision of a city of light. Such experiences are interpreted as proof that at death the soul leaves the body and lives in a disembodied condition.

In our time, the study of near-death experiences was largely pioneered by American psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody. His two seminal books, *LIFE AFTER LIFE* (1975) and *REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AFTER LIFE* (1977) have generated a multitude of books, articles, and debates that address out-of-body experiences. "More recently, a bibliography of books and articles relevant to near-death experiences has been published, listing two and a half thousand titles."

Moody studied 150 persons who had near-death experiences and, in some cases, who clinically were dead. The question is how the data should be interpreted. Moody's publisher asserts that the reports are "actual case histories that reveal there is life after death." Moody himself, however, is far more cautious. He explicitly denies that he tried "to construct a proof of survival of bodily death," even though he regards the data as "highly significant" for such a belief.²⁰ He leaves open the possibility of conceiving of near-death experiences as intimations of immortality or merely as the result of terminal physiological events.

It is not our intent to examine the alleged probative value of near-death experiences for the belief in the survival of the soul. Our normative authority for defining human nature is not the subjective near-death experiences of people, but the objective revelation God has provided us in His Word (2 Pet 1:19). Thus, only three basic observations about near-death experiences are considered here. First, there is the problem of defining death. The editor of *Lancet*, a journal dedicated to medical research, points out that "only a deliberate use of obsolete definitions of death can enable one to claim that anybody has, under clinical conditions, returned to tell us what lies beyond death, for by working definition, periodically updated, death is just beyond the point from which anybody can return to tell us anything."²¹ Similarly, Professor Paul Kurts comments, "We have no hard evidence that the subjects had in fact died. Such a proof is not impossible to obtain: rigor mortis is one sign and brain death is another. What the accounts actually describe is 'dying process or near-death experience, not death itself.'"

Second, we need to remember, as Paul and Linda Badham observe, that "any person hovering between life and death must be suffering profound physical and psychological stress. A brain starved of oxygen, drugged by hallucinatory painkillers, or excited by fever is hardly likely to function properly and who knows what visions could be accounted for by its disturbed conditions?" Some research has shown the similarity that exists between near-death experiences and the effects caused by psychedelic drugs.

Lastly, how can it be established that near-death experiences are "real experiences," rather than the product of the patients' own mind? And why is it that nearly all the reports of near-death experiences concern happiness and heavenly fulfillment, but no glimpses of the fiery torments of hell? It is evident that when people are dying they prefer to dream about the bliss of heaven rather than the suffering of hell. But even the vision of heaven depends largely upon one's religious background.

Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson evaluated the reports of more than 1,000 deathbed experiences in the USA and India. They found that the vision of the Hindu patients was typically Indian, while that of the American was Western and

Christian. For example, one college-educated Hindu woman had the experience of being brought to heaven on a cow, while an American patient who had prayed to St. Joseph encountered her patron saint in the experience.²⁵ Such reports about afterlife experiences reflect the personal beliefs of the patients. What they experienced in the process of dying was most likely conditioned by their personal beliefs.

We should always remember that deathbed or near-death experiences are experiences of people who are still alive or whose mind have regained consciousness. Whatever they experience under such circumstances is still part of their present life and not of life after death. The Bible does report the cases of seven of people who were raised from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:25-37; Luke 7:11-15; 8:41-56; Acts 9:36-41; 20:9-11), but none of them had an afterlife experience to share.

Lazarus was brought back to life after being clinically dead for four days did not report any exciting out-of-the-body experiences. The reason is simple. Death according to the Bible is the cessation of life of the whole person, body and soul. There is no form of conscious existence between death and resurrection. The dead rest unconsciously in their tombs until Christ will call them forth on the glorious day of His coming.

NEW AGE MOVEMENT

The belief in conscious life after death is popularized today especially by the New Age Movement. Defining this popular movement is not easy, because it represents a network of organizations and individuals who share common values and a common vision. These values are derived from Eastern/occult mysticism and a pantheistic world view according to which all share in the One who is God. They envision a coming "new age" of peace and mass enlightenment, known as the "Age of Aquarius."

New Agers may differ on when and how the New Age begins, but they all agree that they can hasten the new order by becoming involved in the political, economic, social, and spiritual life. According to some social analysts, the New Age Movement has become a major cultural trend of our time. Elliot Miller defines it as "a third major social force vying with traditional Judeo-Christian religion and secular humanism for cultural dominance."

For the New Agers, the ultimate reality is a pantheistic God manifested as an impersonal, infinite consciousness, and force. Human beings are part of the divine consciousness and are separated from God only in their own consciousness. By means of specific techniques, like meditation, chanting, ecstatic dancing, and

sensory deprivations, New Agers seek to experience oneness with God. Thus, salvation for the New Ager is equated with self-realization through special spiritual techniques.

An important aspect of the New Age Movement is the alleged communication with departed human and extra-human intelligences. This phenomenon is known as "channeling," but it has been rightly called "Spiritism New Age Style."² Miller rightly notes that "spiritism has played a part historically in virtually all forms of paganism. Those who have allowed spirits to use their bodies in this way have been called a variety of names, including 'shaman,' 'witch doctor,' 'medicine man,' 'oracle,' 'fortune-teller,' and 'seer.' In our culture, the common term has been 'medium,' but in recent years it has been largely abandoned in favor of 'channel' or 'channeler,' reflecting, in part, a desire to break free from negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with mediums over the years."

A "channeler" is essentially a person who claims to be the recipient of teachings and wisdom from the great spirits of the past. The channeling business is booming in all the major American cities. According to the Los Angeles Times, in a decade the number of known professional channelers in Los Angeles has increased from two to over one thousand in a decade. This is compelling channelers to employ Madison Avenue psychology to sell their services.

The person who has played a leading role in promoting the New Age Movement, especially channeling, is the famous actress Shirley Maclaine. Her books have sold over five million copies. The *OUT ON A LIMB* mini-series sparked an unprecedented interest in channeling. Maclaine takes seriously her role as the chief evangelist of the New Age. Following her TV mini-series, she held two-day, nationwide seminars called "Connecting with the Higher Self." Later she used the proceeds from the seminars to establish a 300 acre spiritual center near Pueblo, Colorado. The purpose of the center is to provide a trusted place where people can communicate with higher Spirits.

An important factor which has contributed to the success of the New Age is its claim to connect people not only with their deceased loved ones, but also with the Great Spirits of the past. As parapsychologist and channel Alan Vaughan points out: "The thrill, the immediacy of that contact with another consciousness, may be the driving force behind the phenomenal growth of the practice of channeling."

Communicating with the spirits of the dead is based on the belief that death is not the end of life, but merely a transition to a higher plane of existence which makes it possible in time to reincarnate either on earth or elsewhere. Virginia Essene, who claims to be speaking as a channel for "Jesus," states: "Death is an automatic and nearly immediate entrance into a greater sphere of learning, growth, and service to

which you are well-accustomed already. You simply live at that higher level of purpose, joy and understanding."

In many ways, the New Age's view of death as the immediate entrance into a higher sphere of living reflects the traditional Christian belief in the conscious survival of the soul at death. Both beliefs can be traced back to the first lie uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: "You will not die" (Gen 3:4). This lie has lived on through the centuries with devastating effects on both Christian and non-Christian religions.

In his penetrating analysis of the New Age Movement, Elliot Miller keenly observes: "It has been rightly noted by many Christian observers that the core New Age/channeling doctrines, 'You can be as God,' and 'You shall not die,' were first uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:4-5). Embraced then, this 'gospel' produced all of the world's misery. Embraced now, it will make all that God has done in Christ to remedy the situation of no avail to the individual in question."

Miller is right in noting that the belief in innate immortality promoted by the New Age today makes of no avail Christ's provision of salvation, since people think they already have the resources to enter into a higher level of existence after death. Unfortunately, Miller fails to realize that the success of the New Age in promoting such a belief is largely due to the traditional Christian dualistic view of human nature. Christians who believe that the body is mortal and the soul immortal have no major difficulty in accepting the New Age view of death as the transition into a higher sphere of living. After all, the latter largely corresponds to the belief in the conscious existence of the saints' souls in the bliss of Paradise.

THE MEDIUM OF ENDOR

Spiritualists attempt to find Biblical support for communicating with the souls of the dead in the story of the Medium of Endor. In brief, this is the story. When Saul failed to receive guidance for the future from God through the channels of dreams, Urim, and the prophets (1 Sam 28:6), he sought out in desperation a woman medium at Endor, to call up for him the spirit of the deceased Samuel (1 Sam 28:7).

Disguising himself to avoid recognition, Saul came to the woman by night and asked her to bring up the deceased prophet and to elicit information for him (1 Sam 28:8). When she demurred on the ground of the royal ban against necromancy (1 Sam 28:3), Saul swore that no harm would come to her and insisted that she bring up Samuel (1 Sam 28:9-10). She obeyed and said to Saul: "I see a god [elohim] coming up out of the earth" (1 Sam 28:13). She described to Saul what she saw, namely, an old man "wrapped in a robe" (1 Sam 28:14).

From the medium's description, Saul concluded that it was Samuel and proceeded to ask him what he should do in the face of impending defeat by the Philistines. The spirit, impersonating Samuel, first chided Saul for disquieting him when the Lord had departed from the king. Then he prophesied against Saul as from the Lord. Grimly, the spirit foretold Saul's doom: "Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" (1 Sam 28:19; 1 Chron 10:13-14). Then the spirit returned to where he had come from.

Christians who believe in the immortality of the soul, find in this story one of the clearest Biblical proofs of the survival of the soul at death. In his popular and scholarly book *BODY, SOUL, AND LIFE EVERLASTING*, John Cooper, for examples derives from this story four major conclusions about the Old Testament view of the state of the dead. He writes: "First, it is clear that there is continuity of personal identity between the living and the dead. In other words, dead Samuel is still Samuel, not someone or something else. . . . Second, although this is a highly unusual occurrence, Samuel is nonetheless a typical resident of Sheol. For he expects Saul and his sons to be joining him. . . . Third, although he implies that he was resting, it was still possible for him to 'wake up' and engage in a number of acts of conscious communication. . . . Fourth, Samuel is a 'ghost' or 'shade,' not a Platonic soul or Cartesian mind. . . . His corpse was buried at Ramah (1 Sam 28:3), yet he was in Sheol and appeared at Endor in bodily form."

These attempts to utilize the "ghostly" appearance of "Samuel" at the beck and call of a medium to prove the conscious existence of disembodied souls after death ignore five important considerations. First, it ignores the definite teaching of Scripture on the nature of man and the nature of death which we have already examined thoroughly. The Biblical wholistic view of human nature envisages the cessation of life for the whole person at death and, thus precludes the conscious existence of disembodied souls.

Second, it ignores the solemn warning against consulting "familiar spirits" (Lev 19:31; Is 8:19), a transgression that was punished by death (Lev 20:6, 27). In fact, Saul himself died because "he was unfaithful to the Lord . . . and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the Lord" (1 Chron 10:13-14). The reason the death penalty was inflicted for consulting "familiar spirits" is that these were "evil spirits," or fallen angels impersonating the dead. Such a practice would eventually lead the people to worship the devil rather than God.

God hardly could have prescribed the death penalty for communicating with the spirits of deceased loved ones if such spirits existed and if such a communication were possible. There is no moral reason for God to outlaw on the pain of death, the human desire to communicate with deceased loved ones. The problem is that such

communication is impossible, because the dead are unconscious and do not communicate with the living. Any communication that occurs is not with the spirit of the dead, but with evil spirits. This is suggested also by the medium's statement, "I see a god [elohim] coming up out of the earth" (1 Sam 28:13). The plural word elohim is used in the Bible not only for the true God but also for false gods (Gen 35:2; Ex 12:12; 20:3). What the medium saw was a false god or evil spirit impersonating Samuel.

Third, such an interpretation assumes that the Lord would speak to Saul by a medium, a practice He had outlawed on the pain of death, after He had refused to communicate with Saul by legitimate means (1 Sam 28:6). A communication from Samuel, speaking as a prophet, indirectly would be a communication from God. Yet the Bible expressly states that the Lord refused to communicate with Saul (1 Sam 28:6).

Fourth, it ignores the fantastic difficulty of supposing that a spirit from the dead could appear as "an old man . . . wrapped in a robe" (1 Sam 28:14). If the spirits of the dead were disembodied souls, they obviously would not need to be wrapped around with clothes.

Fifth, it ignores the implications of the grim prediction "Tomorrow you and your son shall be with me" (1 Sam 28:19). Where was this rendezvous to take place between the king and the simulator of Samuel? Was it in sheol, as Cooper suggests? If that were true, it would mean that God's prophets and apostate kings share the same living quarters after death. This runs contrary to the popular belief that at death the saved go up to heaven and the unsaved down to sheol-hell. Furthermore, if Samuel had been in Heaven, the spirit-impersonator of Samuel would have said: "Why have you brought me down?" But he said: "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" (1 Sam 28:15). Had the location of the saved changed in the course of time from sheol beneath the earth to Heaven above the earth?

Reflections such as these give us reason to believe that the séance which occurred at Endor does not support in any way the notion of conscious existence for disembodied souls after death. It is evident that it was not the spirit of Samuel that communicated with Saul. Most likely, a demon impersonated the dead Samuel, as happens in many seances today.

The Scriptures reveal that Satan and his angels have the ability to change their appearance and to communicate with human beings (see Matt 4:1-11; 2 Cor 11:13,14). The story of the "ghostly" appearance of Samuel at Endor tells us very little about conscious existence after death, but it does reveal a great deal about the clever deceptions of Satan. It shows us that Satan has been very successful in

promoting the lie, "You will not die," by using sophisticated means such as the impersonification of the dead by his evil spirits.

Conclusion.

Satan's lie, "You shall not die" (Gen 3:4) has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time. While during the Middle Ages, belief in the afterlife was promoted through literary and artistic, superstitious representations of the bliss of the saints and the torments of the sinners, today such a belief is propagated in a more sophisticated way through mediums, psychics, "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and New Age channeling with the spirits of the past. Satan's methods have changed, but his objective is still the same: make people believe the lie that no matter what they do they will not die but become like gods by living for ever. Our only protection against such a deception is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the nature of death and the state of the dead. To these questions we now turn our attention.

(see "Immortality or Resurrection?" By Samuele Bacchiocchi