

# Review of: "God's characteristics as reported by near-death experiencers"

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## OPEN PEER REVIEW

of the article

"God's characteristics as reported by near-death experiences" by Patrizio Tressoldi and Jeffrey Long in Qeios ID: 2T11T7, <https://doi.org/10.32388/2T11T7>

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As a theologian, formally trained in biblical studies with further research interest in eschatology, spirituality, and theories of mind, and a published research record in several of these topics, my review of this article will consider

- the comparison with texts of the monotheistic religions, in particular the Bible, as well as cultural and phenomenological contexts to descriptions of God and Jesus derived from near-death experiences (§ 1)
- the place of this article in the field of studies on near-death experiences (§ 2)
- the approach used with regard to questions how representative the chosen methodology, criteria, and sample are with regard to the broader field (§ 3)
- the question whether and to which extent this article produces new insights for the fields of study of near-death experiences and of cultural analysis of descriptions of God's characteristics (§ 4)
- the question whether and in which way this article may have a broader relevance for scholarship on near-death experiences and on ideas about God and Jesus (§ 5)

## 1. Introduction

The authors present characteristics of God as derived from near-death experiences as “another source” of information, next to “official documents of each religion and spiritual tradition, such as the Bible, the Gospels, the Koran, etc.” (p. 2). In the Abstract (p. 1), the authors also refer to “the descriptions of God’s and Jesus’ characteristics as observed by 303 Near-death or Near-death-like experiencers”. Being knowledgeable in biblical studies, my comparative frame of reference for religious source texts will be limited to the Bible and the Gospels.

It should be noted that the comparison of “sources” of information is somewhat **assymetrical** in this regard, for descriptions of God and, in the Gospels, of Jesus are not limited to the liminal sphere of transition from life to death, but part of a broader spectrum of life, death and (belief in) afterlife, such as

- a. dream visions (e.g. Jacob’s ladder, Genesis 28:10-17);
- b. theophany in the broad daylight of life (e.g. Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6);
- c. prophetic visions, such as the divine throne chariot vision in Ezekiel 10 and further mystical traditions (cf. 4Q385 [4QPseudo-Ezekiel<sup>a</sup>] fragment 6).

In the New Testament, ideas about God’s and Jesus’ characteristics are embedded in the Gospel narratives, and they may be part of narratives about the moment of death and afterlife (e.g. Luke 12:20), but are not limited to that liminal sphere.

Nevertheless, the authors contribute comparative evidence to a scholarly understanding of congruence between descriptions of God’s characteristics in NDEs and in spiritual and mystical experiences (pp. 9-10).

Another **assymetrical** aspect of comparison concerns the fact that the article refers to God as well as to Jesus in the abstract and introduction, even though the title of the article, “**God’s** characteristics as reported by near-death experiencers”, suggests a focus on God. This is not to negate trinitarian belief of the oneness of God and Jesus Christ which may underlie spiritual, mystical and near-death experiences of experiencers who may be culturally determined by Christian religious traditions and popular religious images. For according to their table 1 (p. 7), the authors identify 78.2 percent as ‘religious’ and 21.5 percent as Christian, further specifying the denominational backgrounds in the supplementary table 1S (pp. 11-12). Yet according to the biblical writings, Jesus did take human form, whereas the concept of God is not ontologically contained by human form, but transcends it. In other words, the historical Jesus is a human being, but God is not a human being. The article does not make sufficiently clear whether God’s and Jesus’ characteristics should or should not be differentiated in this respect, mentioning only two examples of the **Human form characteristic** concerning Jesus and a non-specified ‘he’ (p. 6), even though their table 2 (p. 7) refers to a relatively significant 14.7 percent of the Human form characteristic. As compared with the keywords about characteristics of God and Jesus, namely Light, Love, Oneness, and Nonjudgment (p. 2), the percentages in figure 1 about “Main God’s – Jesus’s characteristics as observed by the whole sample” (p. 8) suggest a different hierarchy of importance: Light (49.8 %), Love (21.1 %), Human form (13.9 %), Oneness (10.6 %) and Nonjudgmental (2.0%). This is further specified in the supplementary table 2S (pp. 12-13). If human form characteristic ranks percentually much higher than “nonjudgment”, this latter issue of nonjudgment is perhaps overstated in the abstract and keywords, as compared with “human form

characteristic”.

Other phenomenological points of critical attention concern the embeddedness of the topic, “God’s characteristics”, in the broader phenomenon of study of NDEs. There are several issues to be considered here.

### ***The observed phenomenon vis-à-vis observed consciousness***

How does the observed phenomenon (NDE with visions of God and Jesus) relate to the observer as phenomenon, the mind of the dying and resuscitated person(s)? Several studies refer to types of consciousness in the mind/brain of a dying person (e.g. “endless consciousness” (P. van Lommel, *Eindeeloos bewustzijn*, <sup>10</sup>2008); a hidden “deeper consciousness” (S. Parnia et al., article in *Resuscitation* July 07, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resuscitation.2023.109903>). It matters for broader contextualization of the topic, descriptions of God’s characteristics, to have more reflections on this subject.

### ***Types of perception involved in the NDE***

The type of perception involved in “God’s characteristics” merits further consideration. If “Light”, “Love”, “Oneness”, “Nonjudgment” are key features derived from the sample study, this zooms in on certain visual and emotive perceptions. Yet, with the comparison with source texts of religious traditions in mind, visual perception (Light) is not the only matter under consideration. The New Testament also includes oral perception of a voice speaking to the person receiving theophany, whether as a dying person (Luke 12:20) or as a living person (Acts 10:9-16). Even apart from these source texts, other studies on NDE do also mention both “visual and auditory awareness” (Parnia et al., article in *Resuscitation* July 07, 2023).

### ***Broader contexts of the experience***

The broader context of the NDE further merits attention, in order to evaluate the embeddedness of “God’s characteristics” in the whole of the transcendent experience, such as a review of one’s life, which may also involve morality and ethics. Examples of these are not only in source texts of biblical tradition (e.g. Luke 12:16-21, 16:19-31), but also in literary classics, such as *A Christmas Carol* of Charles Dickens.

A broader context to near-death experiences is also categorized in the Dutch popular science book *Eindeeloos bewustzijn* (2008) by P. van Lommel, who differentiates no less than twelve elements: 1) unspeakableness; 2) a feeling of peace and rest; 3) awareness of death; 4) an out-of-body experience (OBE); 5a) a stay in a dark room, 5b) a tunnel experience, 5c) a fearful NDE; 6) perception of an otherworldly environment; 7) an encounter with deceased persons; 8) an encounter with bright light or a being of light; 9) a review of one’s life; 10) a ‘flash forward’; 11) perception of a boundary; 12) a conscious return to the body (pp. 44-64). Or, for instance, S. Parnia and others recently distinguish five elements in recalled experiences of death: a) “perception of separation from the body”; b) perception of heading towards a destination”; c) “undergoing a purposeful, meaningful and educational re-evaluation of life”; d) “returning to a place that felt like home”; e) “returning again” (article in *Resuscitation* July 07, 2023). The description of “God’s characteristics” may only be one part of this multifaceted experience.

It cannot be expected of a case study to go into all possible elements of an NDE, but it should be a matter of attention

whether or not this broader structure of the experience also effects the understanding of descriptions of “God’s characteristics”. For instance, when a review of life is part of the NDE or Near-Death-like experience, the question does present itself whether and how this review of life and possibly concomitant questions of a moral or ethical nature may be correlated with the experiencers’ descriptions of God’s characteristics. In that case, the phenomenon of “nonjudgment”, noted in the authors’ article, may merit reconsideration.

## 2. Comparison with Other Studies in the Field

The article clearly elaborates on previous studies in the field, since it expressly aims to replicate a prior study by J. Long and P. Perry, *God and the Afterlife* (HarperCollins 2016), but differs from it with regard to the number of analysed NDEs (303 in stead of 420) from first-hand, direct accounts of encountering God, and with regard to including near-death-like experiences “during non-life-threatening events” (p. 3). The article is grounded in a comparative framework of studies on e.g. near-death experience scales (Greyson 1983; Lange, Greyson and Houran 2004; Martial et al. 2020), literature on near-death experiences in “non-life threatening events” (Charland-Verville et al. 2014), literature on spiritual experiences (Tressoldi and Woollacott 2023; Yaden and Newberg 2022; Corneille and Luke 2021), and literature about consciousness (Josipovic 2019).

Nevertheless, the study of descriptions of “God’s characteristics” derived from NDEs is predetermined by the cognitive settings of consciousness during the near-death(-like) experiences and memory after the NDE. With regard to the aforementioned critical issues of the study of consciousness related to near-death experiences, other studies in the field also merit further consideration. Examples of other studies and media coverage include the following:

Holden, Janice Miner, Bruce Greyson, and Debbie James, eds. *The Handbook of Near-Death Experiences. Thirty Years of Investigation*. Praeger, <sup>2</sup>2009.

La Motte, Sandee. “Near-death experiences tied to brain activity after death, study says”, edition.cnn.com 14 September 2023.

Lommel, P. van. *Eindeloos bewustzijn. Een wetenschappelijke visie op bijna-dood ervaring* Kampen: Ten Have, <sup>10</sup>2008.

Parnia, Sam, Ken Spearpoint, Gabriele de Vos, Mark Farber, Bruce Greyson, Elionor R. Schoenfeld, et al. “AWARE-Awareness during Resuscitation – A prospective study”. *Resuscitation* 85/12 (2014):1799-1805. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resuscitation.2014.09.004>

Parnia, Sam, et al. “AWAREness during Resuscitation – II: A multi-center study of consciousness and awareness in cardiac arrest”. *Resuscitation* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resuscitation.2023.109903>

## 3. Methodology

This article refers to 303 NDEs, which is a more restricted number of analyzed NDEs, as compared with the 420 NDEs in the study of J. Long and P. Perry, *God and the Afterlife* (HarperCollins 2016), which this article aims to replicate in terms of a updated database and different inclusion and exclusion criteria. It is up to experts in the field of near-death experiences to evaluate whether and in which way the authors' inclusion of "near-death-like experiences", i.e. in "non-life-threatening" situations, alongside "near-death experiences" (p. 3) produces a methodologically sound result. Are surveys of brain functions and consciousness comparable or different for near-death experiences and for "near-death-like experiences" respectively? I cannot answer such questions, but the broader survey apparently does yield more descriptions of "God's characteristics" in NDE circumstances.

### **Updated database**

The authors refer to their consultation of the NDERF database ([www.nderf.org/search.htm](http://www.nderf.org/search.htm)) as searched at the end of May 2023 with keywords "God" and "Jesus", including 4640 records, as well as the 2022 Archive of NDERF with 69 records. This Near Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF) is also the institutional affiliation of one of the co-authors, Jeffrey Long.

### **Inclusion criteria**

The article differs from the 2016 publication (pp. 3-4), with regard to

- a. First-hand, no second-hand, near-death experiences
- b. Independence from any NDE score, as measured with the "Greyson NDE scale", above 7 (Greyson 1983), or with the "Near-Death Experience Content (NDE-C) scale" (Martial et al., 2020). Again, it is a matter of critical evaluation by experts in the field, how "independence from any NDE score" may be assessed, and how this effects the reproducibility for empirical research.
- c. Direct experience with specific information on God's and Jesus' characteristics.

The authors excluded more circumscribing information, such as "the Being was communicating with me through thoughts", and other examples. It is not entirely clear to me what the "exclusion criteria" for "excluded information" are exactly about, as compared to the "inclusion criteria". "Communication through thoughts" could be valuable information about how communication with the divine is perceived and thereby also characterized in a description derived from an NDE. This appears to be a grey area, what is included and what is excluded in descriptions of "God's characteristics". Sometimes narrative analysis of a more extensive body of narration may be more instructive with regard to the question of retrieving information about perception, encounter and characterization than shorter key word analysis. Yet the overall survey of "God's and Jesus' characteristics description" does provide various examples of descriptions, nine for the word "Light", four for the word "Love", three for the word "Oneness", three for the word "Nonjudgmental", and two for the word "Human form characteristic" (pp. 4-6).

## **4. Innovation**

The article elaborates on a prior study of 2016, using different inclusion criteria and a larger database. In that respect, the article may somewhat innovative with regard to the source of information for arriving at a description of “God’s characteristics”. Yet the article’s finding “that NDEs are far more likely to describe God in terms of Light, Love, Non-Judgment, and Oneness than the descriptions of God in the main monotheistic religious traditions, where perfection, ultimate reality, omnipotence, omniscience, etc., are the main characteristics” (p. 10) may not be beyond discussion.

In the Bible, the love of God for his people cannot be disentangled from biblical theology (cf. Deuteronomy 7:8; Hosea 3:1) and it also finds expression in the commandment of love of one’s neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). If we take God’s and Jesus’ characteristics together, as this article does, there are also examples from the New Testament of Paul’s Christophany on the road to Damascus in terms of a “light from heaven” (Acts 9:3-9 at v. 3), a description of religious community as being “children of light” (1 Thessalonians 5:5; Ephesians 5:8), and a digression on “nonjudgmental” properties of love (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). In sum, it depends very much on which aspects one extracts from the reading of source texts of monotheistic religions to represent religious traditions at which conclusion one arrives in the comparison between NDE descriptions of “God’s characteristics” and “descriptions of God in the main monotheistic religious traditions”. In this regard, one could also arrive at the conclusion that there may be nothing new under the sun (cf. P. van Lommel, *Eindeloos bewustzijn*, <sup>10</sup>2008, pp. 302-22). It is up to individual interpreters to assess whether and in which way they emphasize congruence or areas of tension between NDE descriptions and religious tradition descriptions of “God’s characteristics”, but the overall picture cannot exclude the idea that Light, Love, Non-Judgment and Oneness are also aspects of biblical theology.

## 5. Estimated Relevance to the Field

It is up to experts of the study of near death experiences whether and how this article has broader relevance for this field. With regard to descriptions of “God’s characteristics”, this article may have further relevance for the comparative field of spiritual, mystical and NDE experiences on the one hand and the study of religious traditions on the other. The study of the descriptions of “God’s characteristics” derived from NDEs provides an invaluable resource in its own right. Yet the comparative perspective on these descriptions and other descriptions in the texts of monotheistic religious traditions merits further refinement. It should also be noted that the existence of God and God’s characteristics are two perhaps interrelated issues. Yet as such, these are also distinct issues, which may be approached in divergent methodological ways, since the question whether God exists also concerns epistemology and ontology, but the question of God’s characteristics may be the object of biblical exegesis, literary and narrative analysis.