

Medieval Near-Death Experiences

Accounts of visionary episodes are found in European late-medieval literature that bear striking similarities to modern near-death experiences (NDEs), as well as marked differences. They have been summarized by religious scholar Carol Zaleski in her comprehensively-researched book *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, from which much of the information in this introductory article is drawn



Background

Accounts of people apparently dying, returning to life and recounting journeys in the 'other world' while unconscious can be found in folklore and religious literature worldwide. In Europe, they particularly flourished between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, sometimes in works of novel-length, then declined during the Reformation. Religious historian Carol Zaleski identifies various literary influences in this late-medieval trend: Bible, apocalyptic tales of late antiquity, classical works such as Vergil's *Aeneid* and Plutarch's *Moralia*, and the earlier medieval writings summarized in the next section.

Earlier Medieval Writings

The Vision of Saint Paul

Zaleski names St Paul as 'the pioneer of Christian otherworld journeying',^[1] based on his Biblical attestation of having gained a glimpse of heaven.^[2] A later text purporting to recount his journey appeared in the third century and was subsequently presented in many influential versions. In the narrative, Paul witnesses the fates of three souls: a just man is accompanied to the heavenly court by shining angels and welcomed by God; an evil man is dragged out of his body by merciless angels, claimed by evil powers and exiled to the outer darkness; and a second wicked man is convicted when his guardian angel produces a record of all his sins and calls to the stand the souls of those he murdered or betrayed. This 'review of deeds', exposure of secrets and encounter with one's true self, Zaleski argues, set the pattern for subsequent medieval NDE accounts. However, God's justice is tempered with mercy, overlooking youthful indiscretions and forgiving those who in life repented.

Long versions of the Vision feature a journey to paradise, the promised land, the city of Christ, and hell; the latter received particular emphasis in abridged versions. As Zaleski describes, 'Sinners swing by their ears from flaming trees, revolve like Ixion on a fiery wheel, and stand immersed in an infernal river where their flesh is nibbled by monstrous creatures; those beyond hope suffer confinement in the dark pit "sealed with seven seals" ...'^[3] Paul is charged with the task of reporting these punishments to the living as warning.

Dialogues of Gregory the Great

The sixth-century pope Gregory the Great included three NDE tales in the fourth book of his *Dialogues*. In the first, a hermit who revives from death reports that he visited hell, where he saw powerful men dangling in fire and found himself being dragged in before being rescued by an angel, who told him to 'consider carefully how you will live from now on'. The hermit is transformed, undertaking fasts and vigils.

The second concerns a businessman named Stephen who does not believe in hell but is forced to change his view when he temporarily dies and sees it for himself. It appears that this is a case of mistaken identity, the intended victim having been 'Stephen the blacksmith'. The death at the same hour of a blacksmith named Stephen is given as evidence of veridicality.

In the third anecdote, a soldier struck by plague in Rome recounts:

[T]here was a bridge, under which ran a black, gloomy river which breathed forth an intolerably foul-smelling vapor. But across the bridge there were delightful meadows carpeted with green grass and sweet smelling flowers... meeting places for people clothed in white... If any unjust person wished to cross, he slipped and fell into the dark and stinking water. But the just, who were not blocked by guilt, freely and easily made their way across to the region of delight.

He recognizes Stephen the businessman, whose foot slips on the bridge; as he dangles, good spirits try to raise him by the arms and evil spirits try to drag him down by the hips, symbolizing respectively his generosity in alms-giving and his carnal vices.^[4]

The Vision of Drythelm

The eighth-century Anglo-Saxon monk Bede included this story in his historical work. Drythelm, a pious Northumbrian man, dies of an illness but revives the next morning and describes to his wife the extended vision he has experienced. A man of 'shining countenance' leads him to an enormous valley with flames on one side and hail and snow on the other; countless souls are tossed between. The guide explains that they can be saved if the living undertake pious actions on their behalf. Drythelm and his guide visit hell, a bottomless, stinking pit from which tongues of fire send up, like sparks, souls who fall helplessly back in. They then travel to a realm of clear light, and at the top of a vast wall, find a flowery meadow—not heaven, as it turns out, but an antechamber for the almost-perfect. In the kingdom of heaven, Drythelm enjoys sights, fragrances and beautiful singing. Despite his yearning to stay, he is sent back to life, transformed. He gives away his property and retires to an ascetic life in a monastery.

Saint Patrick's Purgatory and the Knight Owen

A small island in the red waters of a lake in northwestern Ireland once held a cave which, according to legend, led to the other world. St Patrick is said to have used it to convert the pagan Irish in the fifth century. In the late Middle Ages, thousands of pilgrims travelled there to be laid out inside the cave as if they were dead, given last rites and locked in, in the hope of visiting the other world. Though the cave was destroyed in the eighteenth century, the site still draws thousands of pilgrims and tourists annually.^[5]

The pre-eminent account of this pilgrimage is the *Treatise on the Purgatory of St Patrick*, written by an English Cistercian monk, H of Sawtry, near the end of the twelfth century, and translated into nearly every European language. Its protagonist is a knight and crusader named Owen.

Returning to his native Ireland after a successful crusade, Owen is suddenly seized with remorse for having devoted his life to violence and plunder and undertakes St Patrick's Purgatory as penance. Making his way along a dark passageway, he meets twelve white-clothed men who instruct him to use the name of Christ as a protective prayer throughout his travels. They vanish, and he hears a sound as if every living creature were screaming all at once, then sees sinners eaten by dragons, attacked by snakes and toads, cooked in furnaces and cauldrons and so forth. He comes to a well of flames that shoot up naked souls like sparks; the demons guiding him tell him this is the mouth of hell, then throw him in. He falls endlessly, forgetting to call on Christ, until divinely reminded and lifted to safety.

Owen then travels to a river of fire spanned by a narrow, slippery bridge he must cross; as he goes the bridge gets wider, as his sins have been cleansed by his infernal tour. On the other side he passes through a jeweled gate into a land of dazzling light, where he meets a procession of holy men singing in unearthly harmony. He is given a tour of beautiful meadows whose flowers release fragrances on which, he feels, he could subsist forever. This is only the earthly paradise, he is told, where purified souls await God's call to heaven. Two archbishops bring Owen to the top of a mountain, where the sky is the colour of molten gold. A flame descends, entering and nourishing each person with heavenly sweetness.

Owen feels he wants to stay forever, then is told he must go back, but will return to this place if he lives well. Locked out of the jeweled gate, he retraces his steps more easily and reaches the door of the Purgatory at dawn, just in time to be released. A transformed man, Owen goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and then takes up the religious life, serving the Cistercian order.

Accounts 900-1200

Vision of Alberic

Alberic of Settefrati, a monk born circa 1100, apparently had a vision at the age of 10 during a nine-day illness during which he lay as if dead. He related it to a priest, and in later life made corrections to the account which he said had been adulterated with extraneous material.

Guided by St Peter and two angels, young Alberic visits Hell first, finding different locations, each devoted to a particular type of sinner, and a river of purgatory. He is given a tour of the seven heavens and the land beyond, of which he is forbidden to speak, then shown the 51 provinces of Earth. As he returns to his body, St Peter adjures him to make an

annual offering at his church.^[6]

Vision of Adamnan

This short work in two parts is untypically told in third person. In the other world, Adamnan's guardian angel gives him a tour of heaven, where he sees the Glorious One upon a throne enveloped in music and fragrance within the seven-walled heavenly city. There is a second city inhabited by those not yet ready for heaven, who are tested at its six doors. Some are sent back for more preparation. Others are sent to hell, where they are punished in different ways; further on is a fiery wall beyond which only devils live, but which will be opened to humans on the Day of Judgment. Adamnan revisits heaven but is sent back to earth to tell the living what he has seen.^[7]

Vision of Tundale

Written in 1149 by an Irish monk, this work contains the most vivid and detailed description of hell extant before the appearance of Dante's *Inferno*. Tundale, an Irish knight and egregious sinner, becomes ill and apparently dies. His guardian angel leads him through sections of hell that hold a variety of punishments, of increasing severity and appropriate for particular transgressions. He is tortured by demons, eaten by savage beasts, impregnated by a monster, dismembered, burned to nothingness and tormented by Lucifer himself, each time being healed by the angel from each one only to suffer the next.

Tundale's journey eventually proceeds upwards, to fields and pavilions which contain successively purer souls. Finally, among priceless riches, he meets St Patrick. He begs the angel to let him stay, but is sent back as punishment for disbelieving the words of Scripture, and adjured to abstain from sin. He awakens a changed man, gives his property to the poor and preaches the word of God for the rest of his life.^[8]

Vision of the Monk of Evesham

This account was written in 1197 by Adam, brother of Edmund, the Benedictine monk who reported the vision. Believing he is about to die, the monk (whose name is never mentioned) asks to be shown the afterlife first. His fellow monks take him for dead on Good Friday, but he revives at midnight before Easter and, after some coaxing, tells his story.

Guided by St Nicholas, he is taken to the places of punishment, one of which is a stinking body of water; we are told the sins and punishments are matched, but not shown how. The sinners who receive the most severe punishments are those who were most honoured in life, especially judges and prelates. The worst punishment is designated for a certain sexual sin that the monk refuses to reveal, saying he did not know of its existence. He singles out a lawyer who robbed his clients and neglected to repent before dying, and identifies the souls of other people he knows.

Next, the monk is shown the Heavenly Jerusalem and Christ on the cross. He is taught that one may work one's way through punishment to reward, no matter how heinous the sin; no one is eternally damned.^[9]

Vision of Thurkill

This vision is said to have been reported in October 1206 by a humble labourer named Thurkill. His sin is insufficient tithing, for which his punishment is to smell the stench of a certain fire. With St Julian as his guide, he visits a purgatorial fire, a cold and salty lake and a bridge with thorns and stakes. He sees St Paul and a devil using a weigh-scale to decide the fate of souls. The place of punishment is a theatre, whose seats inflict pain on the penitent audience; on stage, the sinners re-enact their sins and are tortured by devils. They include a priest who did not perform his duties, a soldier who killed and robbed, a lawyer who took bribes, adulterers, slanderers and others.

Thurkill meets several saints, two apostles, an archangel and even Adam, the first man. He sees a devil riding a recently-deceased English nobleman like a horse. Heaven appears to be constructed as a giant church, called the Congregation of the Saints. On returning to Earth, Thurkill is reluctant to tell his story, but he is told in a second vision that he was given the first so that people could learn from it.^[10]

Comparison of Medieval and Modern NDE Accounts

Zaleski observes the following similarities between medieval and modern NDE accounts:

- apparent physical death and revival

- the spirit departs from the body, hovering overhead
- one or more spiritual entities as guides
- motifs of visionary travel (paths, valleys, tunnels)
- life review
- paradise containing meadows, gardens, shining edifices, heavenly cities
- comprehensive vision of all things
- return to life against the visionary's will
- spiritual transformation

Differences noted by Zaleski are as follows:

- medieval accounts focus on hell, suffering, obstacles, tests, and doom generally; modern accounts more rarely contain scenes hell and are much more optimistic, assuming progress
- medieval life-review is more punitive, modern more educational
- death is viewed more positively in modern than medieval accounts
- the guide in medieval accounts is an authority figure, but in modern ones more often a deceased relative or friend
- medieval accounts promote penitential actions and institutions; modern accounts advocate the renunciation of fear and embracing of love and service

Genuine Experience or Artefact?

Arguing from the comparison that NDEs are strongly shaped by cultural influences, Zaleski concludes that they cannot therefore accurately represent what occurs after death. This view has influenced other commentators,^[11] and reinforces the perception prevalent among many sceptics that the phenomenon is an artefact of neurological and psychological factors, shaped by culture.

An opposing view, suggested independently by reincarnation and mediumistic research, is that aspects of mentality held in the subconscious mind, such as emotions, skills, preferences and habits, carry over from one life to the next. Reincarnation researcher James G Matlock writes:

Subconscious processing also allows cultural and individual ideas and expectations to influence material presented to conscious awareness. This I think explains variations in NDE and IE phenomenology, in particular why supernatural beings in similar roles are perceived in dissimilar, but culturally-appropriate, ways, by different experiencers.^[12]

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Zeleski, p. 25.
- 2.^ 2 Cor. 12:1-4.
- 3.^ Zaleski, p. 27.
- 4.^ Zaleski, pp. 29-30.
- 5.^ Website: <https://www.loughderg.org/>

6.^ Gardiner (1993) p. 31.

7.^ Gardiner (1993) p. 23.

8.^ Gardiner (1989). Location 1978 (57%); notes: Location 3178 (91%).

9.^ Gardiner (1989). Location 2520 (72%); notes: Location 3201 (92%).

10.^ Gardiner (1989). Location 2764 (79%); notes: Location 3224 (92%).

11.^ See for instance Fox (2002).

12.^ Matlock, p. 236.