

The Jesus Personage in Near-Death Experiences: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis¹

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Abstract: *Objective.* The near-death experience (NDE) is an altered state of consciousness in which experiencers generally perceive that they are out of and/or away from their physical body during real or presumed life-threatening incidents and/or near-death circumstances. While this is occurring, experiencers can also sometimes encounter a presumed deity that usually relates to their cultural and/or religious background. The objective of this study was to explore such encounters with the Jesus personage as commonly occurs in Western NDEs in order to generate thematic elements and determine if such encounters are purposeful. *Method.* This study qualitatively analyzed 79 such encounters by means of a reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive approach exploring the manifestation, appearance, and function of such a personage. *Results.* Six themes were generated based on identified patterns in the data. The first theme was that the manifestation and appearance of the Jesus personage can vary greatly, whereas the other five themes were relevant to the personage function toward the experiencer, which can include interacting on a return to life, conveying an unfulfilled purpose, providing comfort and/or affection, instilling virtues, and divulging theological insight or prophetic revelation. *Conclusions.* An implication of these themes is that an encounter with the Jesus personage can result in beneficial effects by increasing the experiencers' desire to live and enhancing their psychological wellbeing. Additional research is needed to explore exactly what occurs when experiencers from different cultures and/or religious backgrounds encounter other presumed deities and personages, and whether an analysis of such encounters generate comparable themes with the possibility of similar beneficial effects.

Keywords: Jesus, near-death experience, Western culture, thematic analysis

The near-death experience (NDE) is a technical term generally understood as an altered state of consciousness in which one often has the perception that one is out of or away from one's physical body during real or presumed life-threatening and/or

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near-death circumstances. The NDE usually includes one or more other common features such as feelings of peace, an altered sense of time, the perception of darkness and/or a bright light, a life review, and an encounter with presumed NDE spirits and/or entities such as divine personages and deceased loved ones (Greyson, 1983; Greyson & Stevenson, 1980; Martial et al., 2017; Martial et al., 2020; Moody, 1976; Ring, 1980; Sabom, 1982).

When there are reports of having encountered various religious personages during NDEs, these are usually in accordance with those that one has been exposed to prior, either directly or indirectly, through one's individual background and/or culture, although some factors such as the appearance, character, or nature of religious personages might differ from what one expected in some ways. Experients are unlikely to encounter the specific deity of another culture or religion if they have not been exposed to such a personage at some point in their lives. In other words, those familiar with Western culture and religious concepts would most likely see Western religious personages. Sabom (1998) pointed out that Christians in his research more often identified the being they saw as "Jesus," "Christ," or "Lord," and that those who were just believers in God more frequently identified the being they saw as "God," "Supreme Being," or "Source" (p. 213).

This does not, however, mean that experients will always encounter the personage or ideal of God during their NDE exactly as they might have expected or that their perception will be comparable to others. For example, although one experient stated, "It was God, a supreme being, the one. He had long white, wavy hair past his shoulders. . . . He also had a long, wavy, soft white beard that went down to the middle of his chest (Long & Perry, 2016, p. 86), another described God differently, stating, "I didn't have the experience of 'God' as an old man in a white robe on a throne, though that's the most prominent image in my mind formerly. . . . I felt 'God' as the Supreme Highest Vibration and Frequency, which felt more like an essence than an old man" (Long & Perry, 2016, p. 179).

One study of NDEs in Thailand reported that instead of visions of Jesus or the Western God, there were reports of the wrathful Yama and/or Buddha, suggesting that this was based on culture-bound influences, which are frequently derived from religion (Murphy, 2001). This is also supported by an examination of the Tibetan delog NDE accounts, that also exhibit at least in part the influence of cultural and religious beliefs of the experients with visions of Hindu and/or Buddhist deities and entities (Bailey, 2001). Pasricha and Stevenson (1986) also pointed out that those in India often encounter Hindu deities and spirits, and Purkayastha and Mukherjee (2012), who examined three Hindu NDEs, reported that one of their experients went to heaven and saw the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (p. 104).

Lai et al. (2007) found that 27.5% (14) of their patients within an Asian population met supreme beings but noted that they only reported encounters with a supreme being that was part of their own religion. Also take for example the NDE of Mellen-Thomas Benedict (1996), who had studied various religions beforehand, and remarked, “I was not committed to one particular religion,” and in reference to the being of light he saw, stated, “The Light kept changing into different figures, like Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, mandalas, archetypal images and signs” (p. 42). The cultural aspect of encountering deities based on religious familiarity during NDEs is quite apparent in the research at this point.

Considering that an experient’s cultural background has an influence on the specific NDE personages that appear, it is important to better understand this by exploring what actually occurs in such encounters, and eventually determine if the functions of such personages in different cultures are similar or different. I focus here on the reports of the Jesus personage from Western culture because enough cases were available to conduct such a study. I felt this would contribute to the field of NDE research and future studies on other personages from other cultures as NDE research continues to expand and hopefully allow for adequate comparisons to see if they have similar themes or not. In doing so, I hoped that it might help us to better understand the overall ontology of NDEs. The particular questions I hoped to answer were whether or not there were important thematic consistencies in those interactions with the Jesus personage, and, if so, what they were, as well as whether or not they were somehow purposeful.

The research discussed in this paper analyzed the manifestation, appearance, and function of the Jesus personage during Western NDEs by means of a reflexive thematic analysis. After first explaining the methods and materials for this preliminary study, I will expound and explain the generated themes in some detail, followed by further discussion

Methods and Materials

The specific method of qualitative research used in this study was a reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive approach, which enables a researcher to identify specific patterns of meaning within data and generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Morgan, 2022; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). It is important to point out that in reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive approach, different researchers will not necessarily develop exactly the same qualitative themes from the same data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2021; Wæraas, 2022). It is neither a deductive study nor a quantitative one. There may also be other additional valid qualitative themes, for instance,

and the findings of a reflexive thematic analysis with an inductive approach are instead what particular researchers have inductively generated based on their observations and reflexive analysis of the data. In other words, it is not exhaustive.

Selection of Cases

In order to conduct the thematic analysis, I sought out accounts in available self-reports. I chose to focus on only two different sources for this data: (1) the Near-Death Experience Foundation website (NDERF.org), and (2) the International Association of Near-Death Experiences website (IANDS.org). Both are websites that include a huge amount of self-reported cases posted by experiencers. The advantage of using these two sources was that they both provided a self-described account and narrative of the NDE as reported by the experiencer. I conducted a search of all those self-reports on both websites by using the search terms of “Jesus” or “Christ.”

I first read through hundreds of self-reports to discover if they included an actual encounter with Jesus or were using the name or title in some other manner. I then examined those that discussed such an encounter with Jesus in more detail to make sure they met the criteria necessary for this study. It is important to point out that this study was not focused on providing any type of quantitative data on how many NDE reports include Jesus encounters for this goes beyond the scope of this qualitative study. I was simply searching for a reasonable amount of such reports to conduct an inductive thematic analysis.

In striving for the highest degree of accuracy and consistency in this analysis, there were certain specifications for the inclusion of a case in this study. Only first-hand accounts were considered and they had to meet the following four criteria:

1. The perceived encounter with a Jesus personage must have occurred during a presumed or real life-threatening incident and/or in near-death circumstances;
2. included a perceived OBE in which the experiencer had the impression of being out of or away from their physical body;
3. consisted of a presumed visual perception of a personage—or at least a portion of that personage—at some point that comprised an identifiable form or shape; and
4. was based on a reasonable belief by the experiencer during and/or afterwards that the personage they encountered was Jesus.

The first criterion was to ensure that there was a consistency in reports in which there at least appeared to be a genuine threat to life of some sort. The reason for the second was to clearly distinguish the NDE in which one has the impression of having ventured into the afterlife in contrast to what might be easily classified in the same category as a common deathbed vision. As for the third criterion, there were some people who felt they only heard and/or sensed the Jesus personage, and/or only saw a light without any type of identifiable shape or form, but these indicate more of a simple interpretation that lacked any clear presumed visual confirmation to indicate that it was in fact a personage. I chose to focus instead on cases that were better supported by presumed visual perception rather than just a feeling or an impression. This, of course, does not suggest that they were seeing through real eyes, but that they perceived the Jesus personage as if it were an identifiable and formulated visual manifestation. The fourth and final criterion ensured a consistency of cases of only those who were convinced they saw Jesus rather than including some who indicated they were not certain.

There were also some exclusion criteria to my selection. For example, if there was any indication that the experient's account was a triggered memory years after the NDE, it was not included. Furthermore, NDE accounts that occurred when the experient was under three years of age were also not included. This was based on the findings from research on childhood amnesia suggesting that most adults cannot remember—or at least have extreme difficulty in doing so—events that occur before 2 to 3 years of age (Peterson, 2021; Wang et al., 2007; Wang & Gülgöz, 2019). A few lengthy disjointed, highly confusing, and/or excessively preachy NDE accounts making it difficult to properly analyze them were also excluded. My purpose in these different types of exclusions should be interpreted as an effort to offer the best quality cases available for analysis. I sought to avoid accounts with possible issues—whether legitimate or not—that could reasonably minimize confidence in the generated themes.

All cases that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria above were accepted for this study. The final count from this selection method consisted of 73 self-reports from the NDERF website and six additional cases from the IANDS website, for a total of 79, which was sufficient for this type of qualitative analysis.

Phases of Analysis

I conducted this study using the six phases of a reflexive thematic analysis, which also entailed a recursive approach to some of those phases when necessary. It should

be pointed out here that a single coder/analyst is typical in reflexive thematic analysis and that the quality of the coding in this type of analysis is not dependent upon multiple coders and/or a consensus between them (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In this study, I first thoroughly and analytically became familiar with the 79 NDE narratives and their content by closely reading and analyzing each of those narratives without making any effort to develop any themes. Then, after carefully reading through those narratives a second time, I used different color highlights to code them with an inductive approach for features that seemed to be present regarding the presumed visual appearance of the Jesus personage and any functions reported.

Based upon this coding, I again carefully analyzed those narratives, constructing meaningful patterns and developing initial tentative themes based on those patterns. For example, in noticing that there was a function of the Jesus personage actually talking to the experiencers in most of the cases, I analyzed any patterns in those discussions regarding the subject matter and considered whether or not there seemed to be a specific objective in the subject matter discussed. This allowed me to develop a number of tentative themes that varied in their complexity. In another example, coded snippets of the Jesus personage interacting with the experiencers also included patterns of making declarations of love and/or hugging, but these actions also suggested more than these simple observations: after careful thought about the matter when analyzing those observations, a theme that the perceived personage of Jesus was providing affection and/or comfort was generated.

Once the tentative themes were developed, I reviewed them again alongside the narratives, followed by a deconstruction process of some of those themes and rebuilding new ones. For example, there were originally several tentative themes related to the manifestation and appearance of the presumed Jesus personage, but these were eventually combined into one overall prevailing theme that offered the best analysis because of the wide variations. There were also initially two themes regarding Jesus providing certain types of revelatory information that were later combined into one theme. I was eventually able to generate and define six final primary themes based on identified patterns grounded in the data of the analyzed narratives.

Results

The results of the analysis generated six themes based on meaningful patterns in the data—one theme for the manifestation and appearance of the Jesus personage and five themes related to functions:

1. Manifestation and appearance varied: The manifestation and appearance of the Jesus personage varied widely across accounts.
2. Interacting on a return to life: The Jesus personage interacted with the experi-ent about returning to physical life.
3. Conveying an unfulfilled purpose: The Jesus personage conveyed to experi-ents that they have an unfulfilled purpose on Earth.
4. Providing comfort and/or affection: The Jesus personage provided comfort and/or affection to experi-ents.
5. Instilling virtues: The Jesus personage sometimes instilled virtues such as for-giveness, loving others, and being good.
6. Divulging theological insight or prophetic revelation: On occasion, the Jesus personage divulged theological insight or offered prophetic revelation about the world.

In a reflexive thematic analysis, frequency counts are not the primary basis for the generation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Morgan, 2022). However, because frequency counts might be helpful in accentuating the generated themes, they will be mentioned below as those themes are discussed. I have also provided frequency counts for the five function themes in Table 1, which can be found in the Appendix.

Manifestation and Appearance Varied

A primary theme was that the manifestation and appearance of the Jesus personage varied widely across all accounts. These encounters occurred in the pre-sumed immediate environment of the physical body, within a void of light or darkness, within or at the end of a tunnel, in outer space, or in some type of otherworldly or par-adisiacal environment. There was simply no consistency or overall identifiable pattern regarding where experi-ents might encounter the Jesus personage.

The Jesus personage in these narratives was almost always seen with a specific shape that was similar to a human, and in at least 23 accounts it was seen as a form of light, radiating light, or surrounded by light, whereas in the other accounts there was not any such light directly associated with that personage or, as was most often the case, it was unclear. On several occasions it simply appeared as a silhouette or a transparent spirit, and in a few cases only portions of its form were seen. Again, there was no consistency in these forms of manifestation; they varied from case to case.

In the cases in which human features were observed, over a half-dozen experi-ents specifically mentioned that the Jesus personage looked similar to the images of

Jesus as generally portrayed in pictures or paintings whereas at least a couple said it looked different. Another asserted that it looked like the Jesus in the movie, “Heaven is for Real” (Missy M NDE, 2017) whereas a different experient instead insisted it resembled a painting that depicts Jesus as seen in a vision by St. Maria Faustina (Beth L NDE, 2005). However, three of the experients stated or implied that the Jesus personage they saw was similar or identical to that portrayed in the Shroud of Turin (John C NDE, 2004; *Pulmonary embolisms*, 2016; Sarah S NDE, 2019). In another case, it was seen with the face of a lion (Charles M NDE, 2005). In at least one case, there was a bit of confusion at first in which the experient stated, “At first, I thought it was my deceased father in his younger years. Then I thought it was my first husband who had passed on in 1981. Then I knew it was Jesus” (Mary L NDE, 2004).

In at least 36 cases some identifiable human facial features (eyes, lips, beard, hair, etc.) were seen, and in at least seven cases they were not, but in most of the other cases this was impossible to determine by the information provided. In fact, the absence of visual facial features on NDE personages of all sorts is quite common (Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995, pp. 203–204; King, 2023, pp. 33–37). Even when facial features were present, they were often not described by the experients. Because of this, it is difficult to identify patterns on the facial features of the Jesus personage. Nevertheless, when they were described, they varied greatly among reports. For example, four experients specifically mentioned that the Jesus personage had blue eyes, one that the eyes were green-blue, and six that they were brown, dark, or black, whereas a couple others reported that the eyes were like flames of fire.

As for the hair color of the Jesus personage, five experients mentioned that it was dark, ten brown, one blond, and three white. The hair was described as short by one experient, medium length by another, and long by 11 others—it was further indicated as down to the shoulders in five of those cases. Five experients mentioned having seen a beard. About a half-dozen described the Jesus personage as having dark or tanned skin tone whereas a couple others indicated that the skin was white. Four remarked that the Jesus personage was tall, whereas another experient described that personage as approximately 100 feet tall (JC S NDE, 2008).

The Jesus personage was reported by 18 as dressed in a robe whereas a half dozen or so others referred to its clothing simply as a gown, a tunic, a toga, or a cloak. Eight of those experients specifically indicated that the clothing was long. Sixteen of them described the color as white and eight others as either of a different color or as consisting of more than one color. One experient described the Jesus personage as wearing a black t-shirt and black jeans with holes in them (Hyacinth probable NDE, 2013). In at least eight cases the feet of the Jesus personage were seen, with five ex-

perients having mentioned seeing sandals. Some experients mentioned having seen the scars or wounds of Christ—presumably from the crucifixion. For example, close to half a dozen experients saw scars or holes in the wrist area with another indicating the hands, and a couple of them also indicated that they saw the same in its feet.

Interacting on a Return to Life

One of the most salient generated themes of this study was that the Jesus personage interacted with the experient about returning to physical life and remaining on Earth in at least 65 of the 79 cases, usually in an authoritative role, as in the following instance:

Then he [Jesus] looked me right in the eye and said, 'So Anthony. What are you going to do?' I looked Jesus right in the eye and said, 'You mean I have a choice?' Jesus replied, 'Of course you do. You were hurt pretty badly in an accident. Nobody would blame you if you stayed up here.' Then I thought, 'What will happen to those people down there I care so much about?' Then Jesus put his hand on my shoulder, turned me around, and without saying anything, told me to look down. I looked down and everybody I loved and cared about was standing all together looking so sad and lost. Then Jesus told me, 'This is what your death will do to the people you love.' (Anthony M NDE, 2005)

This interaction regarding life and death usually occurred with the Jesus personage as the primary speaker using either words or thoughts—frequently with the impression that such words or thoughts were telepathic—but on a few occasions through gestures or facial expressions with or without words or thoughts. The interaction as related to this issue was solely between the Jesus personage and the experient in 52 of such cases, whereas in the 13 other such accounts additional personages were involved in some way with that actual communication, including what were presumed to be deceased relatives, angels, and/or God as a separate entity. In two of those instances, though the Jesus personage was present in the authoritative role, it was these deceased personages who communicated the need for the experient to return, and in another one the personage of God did so.

Although at least 21 of those 65 experients just discussed reported that they were given a choice on whether to stay or return to physical life, more generally it was simply explained that they needed to return with no such choice offered, although in a few additional cases it was unclear whether or not a choice was given.

Even when a choice was clearly offered, the desire of the Jesus personage for the experient to return to physical life was generally apparent and persuasion efforts often occurred by the Jesus personage through communication and/or various forms of past, present, or prospective future visual imagery of one's life and/or loved ones; this occurred in at least 9 of those 21 accounts in which a choice was reported. This even took place in at least four instances in which it could be fairly certain from the narrative that no choice was offered. There seemed to be a preference for autonomy in the experient's will to return to life (see also King, 2022). In fact, in three cases in which the experient indicated they wanted to return—two in which a choice was offered and one in which it was not—there seemed to be an indication of approval from the Jesus personage by means of a smile (Gary D NDE, 2006; Rhea D probable NDE, 2007; Stanley S NDE, 2019). However, there were no indications of disappointment from the Jesus personage when an experient chose to return to life.

The overall pattern of the Jesus personage appeared to be to prepare and encourage experients to return to a state of somatic consciousness and life. In fact, the next generated theme seems to have been related to this function.

Conveying an Unfulfilled Purpose

Another important generated theme in this analysis was that the Jesus personage also conveyed to at least 43 of the 79 experients that there was some type of purpose or reason for them to return to earthly life. The excerpt below is indicative of the typical type of conversation that might ensue:

Jesus was calling my name. I answered him and said, 'I know I'm in heaven.' He said, 'My child, I can not let you come in.' I asked, 'Why?' I was trying to argue with him. I told him, 'I'm 77 years old. Why can't I come in?' He answered with, 'My child, I have more work on earth for you to do for me.' I asked, 'Why?' again. But that's all he said to me. He did tell me he was going to send me back to the work he had for me to do. (Genny H NDE, 2014)

Sometimes this conveyed purpose was directly pointed out to experients with comments indicating that they needed to return for the sake of family members and/or they needed to do something important for either the Jesus personage or the world. However, in close to a dozen cases the experients were simply told by the Jesus and/or other personages that it was not their time. It should be noted that in 2023 I conducted a survey of 110 people who were 18 or over from the general population in the United States (using [SurveyMonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com)) asking them how they would interpret the state-

ment “It is not your time” from a supreme being during an NDE before being sent back to continue living; 77%—but probably more (some answers were unclear)—of them indicated via an open-ended text box that they would interpret this as indicating that they still had some type of purpose to fulfill. Furthermore, it seems that this function of the Jesus personage was primarily meant to convey the concept that there was a purpose for the experient to continue living on Earth rather than necessarily designating too many specifics about what that purpose was.

Providing Comfort and/or Affection

An additional pattern in the data was that the Jesus personage tended to provide comfort and/or affection in at least 37 of the 79 accounts, as indicated in the following case:

His gaze was of acceptance, recognition, and love. His arms reached out to me and his hands were bidding me to come closer. In eagerness, I ran to him. Once I approached him, we hugged but not like a human hug. There were no bones – it was like his spirit went into me and mine into him and I was at total peace. (Roxanne H NDE, 2008)

When generating the theme about this function, I focused on comfort and/or affection provided by mannerisms and interactions from the Jesus personage such as smiling at the experient, hugging them, and/or holding their hand, as well as comments offering love, acceptance, and/or assurances. Of the 37 accounts in which this was reported, at least two dozen included a perception of actual touch.

I did not focus on “feelings” of peace, love or acceptance felt by the experient when generating this theme—which were often present—for the experient’s subjective feelings isolated from actual relevant actions of the Jesus personage during the encounter would not necessarily indicate a function of that personage, because feelings of peace and love are often associated with an NDE regardless of whether or not a Jesus personage is present (Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995, pp. 69–74; Martial et al., 2017; Ring, 1980, pp. 39–45; Royse & Badger, 2020; Sabom, 1982, pp. 206, 18).

When a perceptible intent to comfort and/or provide affection occurred, it was usually in addition to one or more of the other four functions. Furthermore, this was in many cases simply provided in relation to the preparation for the experient’s return to somatic consciousness. Nevertheless, there were some cases in which providing comfort seemed to be a primary function of the Jesus personage. For instance, in one example, the entire episode seemed to be focused primarily on the personage providing

comforting love and assurance to the experient through an extraordinary amount of affectionate touch and statements of love before the impression of sending her back to earthly life (Sarah W probable NDE, 2013).

Although reports of direct actions or words to provide comfort and/or affection were either not mentioned or unclear in a slight majority of the cases, relatedness in the sense of encountering a Jesus personage who was specifically there to individually interact with experiencers in some way should be expected to have provided some sense of comfort or love to at least some of them, and such was the case. However, there was not enough information offered from most of those experiencers on this matter to determine how often this was so. Nevertheless, even such an effect would not necessarily indicate whether this was an actual intended function of the manifestation.

Instilling Virtues

Another generated theme was that the Jesus personage seemed focused on instilling virtues in at least four cases, although this was not common in the reports. What I am referring to with regard to instilling virtues is that the personage specifically instructed experiencers to practice these virtues.

For example, in one particular account in which the experient was being assaulted by her husband (Robyn F NDE, 2014), the Jesus personage told her to forgive him. There was not any discussion about needing to return or being given a choice whether or not to stay in the presumed afterlife in this case. Furthermore, though the presence of the personage may have possibly facilitated some degree of psychological comfort in this case, there was no focus on offering comfort nor any comforting actions or words reported. However, it should be pointed out that the experient noted that the instilled virtues conveyed affected her perspective of the experience almost immediately.

In another account the Jesus personage did in fact provide comfort to an eight-year-old girl while also telling her that she needed to love and forgive others who harm her in life, including an abusive mother, and then she was specifically told that practicing this virtue was her purpose in life as she was told that she had to go back (Denise B probable NDE, 2011). In another case Jesus told the experient to be a good girl (Marilyn R NDE, 2012) and in another to simply love others (Sarah W probable NDE, 2013).

Divulging Theological Insight or Prophetic Revelation

The final function theme was that the Jesus personage divulged theological insight or offered prophetic revelation about the world in at least nine of the 79 cases. There were about a half-dozen incidents of divulging theological insight, in all but one of those incidents it was the Jesus personage simply reacting to questions, thoughts, or incidental distress of the experiencers rather than just trying to teach them spiritual truth for its own sake, such as in the following incident:

At that point my life started flashing through my mind. It sounded like flipping pages through a book. When it finished (seemed like a second), I looked up crying. Weeping actually and said, "Everything that I've done and everything that I didn't do." The man who I know was Jesus spoke and said, "What are you talking about? That doesn't exist here." When he said that the tears on my face disappeared like they had never been there to begin with (Man has reaction, 2022)

These results support Sabom's (1998, p. 217) assertion that reports of receiving religious teachings during an NDE are rare. Furthermore, there were only three cases in which prophetic revelation about the world was offered, but these were exceptionally vague and lacking anything substantial.

In all incidents of this thematic function, the encounter with the Jesus personage also included at least one or more of the other above functions. There is no indication that the personage ever manifested in any of these NDEs just for the specific purpose of revelation. It should also be pointed out that when the Jesus personage was trying to persuade experiencers to autonomously choose to return to life, they were sometimes shown presumed previews portraying the fate of their family members based on whether the experiencer were to live or die—these personal persuasion incidents were not considered as contributory to this theme.

Discussion

Based on the results of this study, the manifestation of the Jesus personage in Western NDEs can occur in various types of perceived locales, such as what is presumed to be in the immediate vicinity of the physical body, in a tunnel or an area of light, in outer space, or in a paradisiacal environment. It can appear as a being of light, as simply radiating light, as similar to a human spirit or person, or a variation of

these forms. When the Jesus personage does appear with visible human features, its appearance can vary widely from one NDE to the next.

For those who believe that these are genuine manifestations of the real Jesus it can, of course, be argued that Jesus—or an NDE personage who only manifests as Jesus—is able to appear in whatever type of setting and in any type of form with whatever features he desires, perhaps to meet the needs of each experient. However, it can also be argued that the manifestation of the Jesus personage is based on neurocognitive and/or psychological factors and conditional variables that differ for each individual experient.

A substantial number of the encounters with the Jesus personage during NDEs in this thematic analysis included interactions conveying the necessity of the experients to return to earthly life, but the manifestation of the Jesus personage in most of those cases also included an indication to experients that they had a purpose in staying alive. Whether one believes that the Jesus personage of the Western NDE is an objective being or a subjectively brain-induced one, it raises the possibility that these two functions might have a beneficial purpose.

I suggest that the primary purpose of the manifestation and interaction with the Jesus personage during many Western NDEs might be to boost the desire of an experient to live. Not only were many of them told with very specific words or gestures that they needed to go back, but they were also persuaded or encouraged in many cases to do so because their presence on Earth was important for some reason or another and so there was still something essential they needed to complete or accomplish. Such a claim from the Jesus personage would certainly contribute toward a sense of meaning, purpose, and significance in being alive. In other words, the function seemed to be psychological in nature in an attempt to boost the will of the ego to survive.

In at least one case the Jesus personage told the experient that she needed to fight in order to live (Pulmonary embolisms, 2016), in two cases it assisted the experients when there was the impression of reintegrating with their body (Bella K NDE, 2011; Sarah W probable NDE, 2013), in another it twice gave the experient a command to live (Irene A NDE, 2007; also see Charles T NDE, 2018), and in yet another there was a struggle motif to return to life after it instructed the experient by gesture to do so (Linda K NDE, 2008). These incidents suggest that one of the reasons the Jesus personage manifested—at least in these accounts—was to encourage experients to fight for life with a psychological focus toward survival.

It should be pointed out that there is some evidence to possibly support that these functions of the Jesus personage are meant to serve a psychological purpose

with an objective to boost the will to live rather than a genuine message from the beyond. There have been some reports that when people are told by NDE personages that they need to go back because it is not yet their time, they do revive for a short period but still die shortly thereafter, suggesting that such efforts are not always successful. One salient case in point consisted of a patient who was declared dead, went to heaven, saw God, and was sent back after having been told he had to continue living because he had not completed his life, only to then die two minutes later (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977, p. 156; for another example, see also Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995, pp. 72–73, 107–108).

Nevertheless, there generally seemed to be more than this immediate concern to survive in the moment, almost as if there was perhaps a multipurpose psychological objective in boosting the desire to live. For example, this effort conveying a need for the experient to remain living seemed to almost always be strategically concentrated on producing a lengthy effect for persistence of this belief over time through a salient type of ambiguity about the experient's purpose. Many individuals having the impression of having been sent back by an NDE personage with the vagueness of a purpose indicate years or decades later that they still do not know what their purpose is (King, 2022). The encounters with the Jesus personage analyzed in this study also likely supported or boosted confidence in the experients' capability to fulfill their supposed purpose because it was, after all, usually the authoritative Jesus personage who indicated that they did indeed have a purpose, on some occasions reinforced by supposed deceased relatives, angels, and even God.

Nevertheless, although the return to life with the conviction of a purpose seems to be the most common function of the Jesus personage, sometimes that personage did perform other functions. For example, sometimes this included providing some type of comfort and/or affection through touch, gesture, and/or words. There also did seem to be some rare occurrences in which the Jesus personage directly instilled virtues, sometimes without any other apparent function. For example, one can ponder why a manifestation of the Jesus personage was necessary with the focus on the forgiveness of an attacker in the instance mentioned above rather than focusing primarily on the immediate comfort of the victim. The experient in that case indicated that the inspiration of that virtue was almost immediately psychologically transforming.

Limitations. There are various limitations in this study. For example, in some of these accounts the NDE personage did not directly indicate that it was Jesus. Sometimes the experients just simply stated that they knew it was him, whereas in other accounts they mentioned that they simply recognized him from earthly photos and pictures.

Furthermore, this analysis only focused on perceptions of a Jesus personage with a visual form during the NDE, but there are also many self-reports of simply sensing its presence and/or hearing it, as well as simply seeing a light without any type of form, that are sometimes interpreted by the experient as Jesus.

Although this analysis has qualitatively identified specific functions that occur, any quantitative data provided needs to be approached with caution given the possibility that some of the self-reports were sometimes unclear or did not mention a particular function that might have occurred. Therefore, such data should be understood as indicating the minimum amount of how many cases in this study included such a function.

There is, of course, also the possibility that some of these accounts or portions thereof may have been subject to faulty memory, memory decay, recall bias, memory reconstructions, or embellishment, so these results are only as accurate as the content of such self-reports.

Conclusion. The overall implication from this study is that generally the Jesus personage in Western NDEs functioned in a respected authoritative role to prepare the experient to return to Earth, frequently by indicating that they were still needed and that it was not their time yet to die—that they still had meaning, purpose, and significance on Earth. Most often, a thorough explanation of this purpose was not given. Even when it was attributed to family, this was often vague with an unspecified amount of necessary time implied in that purpose. The reason for this might have been to deliberately leave the accomplishment of that purpose as ambiguous and open-ended so that such information would have a persistent and enduring effect that supports survival with a sense of wellbeing. It might do this by leaving the experient in a continual state of feeling that their life here is important even though they may not understand exactly why.

In some cases, the encounter with the Jesus personage seemed instead to focus on offering comfort or affection, whereas at other times such an encounter instilled virtues, both of which also might be seen as psychologically beneficial to the experient. Divulging theological insight or prophetic revelation was quite rare, and did not seem to be the primary function of the Jesus personage, and might even be seen as circumstantial in support of the other functions. Whether or not one believes that these encounters with the Jesus personage are objective or subjective, it does seem that some of these functions might increase the desire to live and help foster greater psychological health and wellbeing.

There are some prospective implications of this analysis for the broader fields of psychology as a whole. For instance, the manifestation of the Jesus personage in

Western NDEs might be an adaptive psychological response to threat of death focused on survival of the human organism with an approach that is shaped by Western culture for maximum effectiveness. Future research might focus on similar analyses on religious figures encountered in NDEs from other cultures that have not been influenced by Western thought. It would be interesting to examine generated themes in regard to the functions of those manifested personages—whether similar or different—coupled with reasonable suggestions of any possible psychological effects. Further research with similar analyses on the impression of having encountered deceased loved ones in NDEs might also be undertaken. It is my hope that this paper will encourage additional research in these directions.

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Le Personnage de Jésus dans les Expériences de Mort Imminente : Une Analyse Thématique Réflexive

Robert A. King

Résumé. *Objectif.* L'expérience de mort imminente (EMI) est un état de conscience modifié dans lequel les participants perçoivent généralement qu'ils sont hors et/ou loin de leur corps physique lors d'incidents réels ou présumés mettant leur vie en danger et/ou dans des circonstances de mort imminente. Au cours de

cette expérience, les participants peuvent aussi parfois rencontrer une divinité présumée qui correspond généralement à leur culture et/ou à leur religion. L'objectif de cette étude était d'explorer les rencontres avec le personnage de Jésus, telles qu'elles se produisent couramment dans les EMI occidentales, afin de générer des éléments thématiques et de déterminer si ces rencontres sont intentionnelles. *Méthodes*: Cette étude a analysé qualitativement 79 rencontres de ce type au moyen d'une analyse thématique réflexive avec une approche inductive explorant la manifestation, l'apparence et la fonction d'un tel personnage. *Résultats*: Six thèmes ont été générés sur la base de modèles identifiés dans les données. Le premier thème était que la manifestation et l'apparence du personnage de Jésus peuvent varier considérablement, tandis que les cinq autres thèmes concernaient la fonction du personnage envers l'expérienceur, qui peut inclure l'interaction à propos du retour à la vie, la transmission d'un but non atteint, le réconfort et/ou l'affection, l'inculcation de vertus et la divulgation d'un aperçu théologique ou d'une révélation prophétique. *Conclusions*: L'une des implications de ces thèmes est qu'une rencontre avec le personnage de Jésus peut avoir des effets bénéfiques en augmentant le désir de vivre des personnes concernées et en améliorant leur bien-être psychologique. Des recherches supplémentaires sont nécessaires pour explorer ce qui se passe exactement lorsque des personnes issues de cultures et/ou d'horizons religieux différents rencontrent d'autres divinités et personnages présumés, et pour déterminer si l'analyse de ces rencontres permet de dégager des thèmes comparables, susceptibles d'avoir des effets bénéfiques similaires.

French translation by Antoine Bioy, Ph. D.

Die Jesus-Persönlichkeit in Nahtoderfahrungen: Eine reflexive thematische Analyse

Robert A. King

Zusammenfassung: *Zielsetzung.* Die Nahtoderfahrung (NTE) ist ein veränderter Bewusstseinszustand, in dem die Betroffenen im Allgemeinen wahrnehmen, dass sie sich während tatsächlicher oder vermuteter lebensbedrohlicher Vorfälle und/oder Nahtodsituationen außerhalb und/oder entfernt ihres physischen Körpers befinden. Während dieses Vorgangs können die Betroffenen manchmal auch einer vermeintlichen Gottheit begegnen, die in der Regel mit ihrem kulturellen und/oder religiösen Hintergrund in Verbindung steht. Das Ziel dieser Studie war es, solche Begegnungen mit der Jesus-Persönlichkeit, wie sie in westlichen Nahtoderfahrungen häufig vorkommen, zu untersuchen, um thematische Elemente zu beschreiben und festzustellen, ob solche Begegnungen absichtlich erfolgen. *Methoden.* In dieser Studie wurden 79 solcher Begegnungen mittels einer reflexiven thematischen Analyse mit einem induktiven Ansatz qualitativ analysiert, um die Erscheinung, das Aussehen und die Funktion einer solchen Persönlichkeit zu untersuchen. *Ergebnisse.* Auf der Grundlage der anhand der Daten identifizierten Muster wurden sechs Themen bestimmt. Das erste Thema war, dass die Erscheinung und das Aussehen der Jesus-Persönlichkeit sehr unterschiedlich sein kön-

nen, während die anderen fünf Themen sich auf die Funktion der Persönlichkeit gegenüber dem Erlebenden bezogen, die eine Interaktion bei der Rückkehr ins Leben, die Vermittlung eines unerfüllten Zwecks, die Bereitstellung von Trost und/oder Zuneigung umfassen kann, Tugenden zu vermitteln und theologische Erkenntnisse oder prophetische Offenbarungen zu verbreiten. *Schlussfolgerungen.* Aus diesen Themen ergibt sich, dass eine Begegnung mit der Jesus-Persönlichkeit positive Auswirkungen haben kann, indem sie den Lebenswillen der Betroffenen steigert und ihr psychisches Wohlbefinden verbessert. Weitere Forschungen sind erforderlich, um zu untersuchen, was genau geschieht, wenn Menschen aus anderen Kulturen und/oder mit anderem religiösen Hintergrund anderen vermeintlichen Gottheiten und Persönlichkeiten begegnen, und ob eine Analyse solcher Begegnungen vergleichbare Themen mit der Möglichkeit ähnlicher positiver Wirkungen hervorbringt.

German translation by Eberhard Bauer, Ph. D.

A figura de Jesus em experiências de quase-morte: Uma análise temática reflexiva

Robert A. King

Resumo: *Objetivo.* A experiência de quase-morte (EQM) é um estado alterado de consciência no qual experienciadores geralmente percebem que estão fora e/ou longe de seu corpo físico durante incidentes, reais ou presumidos, de risco de vida e/ou circunstâncias de quase-morte. Enquanto isso está ocorrendo, os indivíduos também podem, por vezes, encontrar um ser compreendido como divino que, geralmente, se correlaciona com sua formação cultural e/ou religiosa. O objetivo deste estudo foi explorar os encontros com a figura de Jesus que comumente ocorrem em EQMs ocidentais, a fim de identificar elementos temáticos e determinar se tais encontros são significativos. *Métodos.* Este estudo analisou qualitativamente 79 desses encontros por meio de uma análise temática reflexiva, com abordagem indutiva, que explora a manifestação, a aparência e a função de tal personagem. *Resultados.* Seis temas foram gerados com base nos padrões identificados nos dados. O primeiro tema foi que a manifestação e a aparição da figura de Jesus podem variar muito, enquanto os outros cinco temas foram relevantes quanto a função do personagem em relação ao experienciador, o que pode incluir interagir em um retorno à vida, revelar um propósito ainda não cumprido, oferecer conforto e/ou afeto, despertar virtudes, e sugerir um insight teológico ou revelação profética. *Conclusões.* Uma implicação de tais temas é que um encontro com a figura de Jesus pode resultar em efeitos benéficos, aumentando o desejo de viver dos experienciadores e ampliando seu bem-estar psicológico. Pesquisas adicionais são necessárias para explorar exatamente o que ocorre quando experienciadores de diferentes culturas e/ou origens religiosas encontram outros personagens e entidades consideradas divinas e se uma análise de tais encontros gera temas comparáveis, com a possibilidade de efeitos benéficos semelhantes.

Portuguese translation by Antônio Lima, Ph. D.

El Personaje de Jesús en las Experiencias Cercanas a la Muerte: Un Análisis Temático Reflexivo

Robert A. King

Resumen: *Objetivo:* La experiencia cercana a la muerte (NDE) es un estado alterado de consciencia en el que los experimentadores generalmente perciben que están fuera y/o lejos de su cuerpo físico durante incidentes o circunstancias real o potencialmente mortales. Mientras esto ocurre, pueden encontrar a una supuesta deidad que suele corresponder a sus antecedentes culturales y/o religiosos. El objetivo de este estudio fue explorar encuentros con el personaje de Jesús, como ocurre comúnmente en NDE occidentales, con el fin de generar elementos temáticos y determinar si tales encuentros tienen algún propósito. *Métodos:* Este estudio analizó cualitativamente 79 de estos encuentros usando un análisis temático reflexivo con un enfoque inductivo que exploró la manifestación, apariencia, y función de dicho personaje. *Resultados:* Se generaron seis temas basados en los patrones de los datos. El primer tema fue que la manifestación y apariencia del personaje de Jesús pueden variar enormemente, mientras que los otros cinco temas son relevantes para la función del personaje para el experimentador, que puede incluir comunicar sobre un retorno a la vida, transmitir un propósito incumplido, proporcionar consuelo y/o afecto, inculcar virtudes, y divulgar una visión teológica o una revelación profética. *Conclusiones:* Una de las implicaciones de estos temas es que un encuentro con el personaje de Jesús puede tener efectos benéficos al aumentar el deseo de vivir de los experimentadores y mejorar su bienestar psicológico. Se necesita más investigación para explorar exactamente qué ocurre cuando los experimentadores de diferentes culturas y/o trasfondos religiosos encuentran a otras presuntas deidades y personajes, y si un análisis de tales encuentros genera temas comparables con la posibilidad de tener efectos benéficos similares.

Spanish translation by Etzel Cardeña, Ph. D.

Appendix

The Functions of the Jesus Personage in NDEs

All 79 NDEs in this study were closely analyzed in an effort to identify any possible meaningful patterns of function for the Jesus personage. I was able to generate five themes related to function: (1) Interacting on a return to life, (2) conveying an unfulfilled purpose, (3) providing comfort and/or affection, (4) instilling virtues, and (5) divulging theological insight or prophetic revelation. I then thoroughly re-examined all the cases several times again to provide some type of quantitative results related to these five functional themes, which are reported below in Table 1.

Table 1

Functions of the Jesus Personage (N = 79)

Functional Theme	Yes	No Mention or Unclear
Interacting on a return to life	65	14
Conveying an unfulfilled purpose	43 ^a	36
Providing comfort and/or affection	37	42
Instilling virtues	4	75
Divulging theological insight or prophetic revelation	9	70

^a*All accounts also included an interaction with the Jesus personage about returning to physical life.*