



***Paranormal:
A New Testament Scholar Looks at the Afterlife***

Valerie A. Abrahamsen

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Review by Carol Rizzolo.

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From our earliest written record, humans have wondered about life after death. The questions raised and the speculation regarding what becomes of what one might call our *essence* after our body has reached the end of life has been the subject of many artistic explorations. In the end, it would appear that millions of people over thousands of years have wondered about, written about, and explored the mystery of an afterlife.

Dr. Valerie Abrahamsen is a Harvard University educated New Testament Scholar and, as her prior publication record demonstrates, she is well trained in the ways of presenting a scholarly argument. In this work, the author argues that there is now scientific evidence of a life after death. With her academic background, one would expect to read a balanced and scholarly analysis of the paranormal. Unfortunately, that is not what the reader will find.

In the early chapters, Abrahamsen demonstrates the sociologic fascination with the afterlife. The author adds her voice to the frequently spirited debate regarding the possibility of *a life beyond*. She notes that many successful television shows have launched claiming to contact the souls of the dead, and that these shows have long run times and large audiences. Abrahamsen claims that the *scientific method* being used and the popularity of these shows is further proof of the validity of life after death. She ignores the

possibility that this very popularity reflects a human fascination with paranormal phenomenon rather than anything scientific.

Actual scientific method is defined by rigorously designed experiments, open inquiry by those who consider the question at hand from a variety of scientific angles, and then challenge by other trained scientists to explore alternative interpretations of the results of the findings. Scholarly debate ensues and new hypotheses are developed. All of that is required for one to claim scientific proof, but that is notably missing in this work.

References used consist of writings from of a small group of individuals who cite them-selves or cite others who believe in similar ways. These citations are not from journals that are scientific peer reviewed works nor are they cited in major scientific data bases such as PubMed. The author cites secondary and tertiary sources such as Wikipedia, which is not what one would expect from a scholarly work.

One of the difficulties that I have with this work is Abrahamsen's repeated phrase of *skeptics and deniers* or *skeptics and critics*. The author uses these phrases to describe those who don't agree with her assertion of the existence of an afterlife. She explains that "very reliable psychics and mediums," have no reason to fabricate contact with the beyond. It is not clear how Abrahamsen can ascribe such motives with

such certainty, but she does so repeatedly. Scientists and scholars do not divide their colleagues into deniers and believers. That is the language of religiosity, and by using such language the author undercuts her expressed desire to shed a scholarly light on the topic.

Some of Abrahamsen's assertions I find to be troubling. One example describes the tragic death of three young men in a car accident. In contacting a medium, she claims that it was learned that while serving in the military these three men had caused the deaths of an innocent family. She writes that the deaths of the men were the direct result of bad karma which they had generated during the war. The medium went on to explain that the men were now at peace because their karmic debt had been paid off. The idea that a medium or psychic can claim to know how a karmic debt is repaid is not only a misapplication of the concept of Karma but is indeed, a very slippery slope. We regularly hear "they deserved to die" from religious extremists who disagree with the way one is living their life. The unintended consequences of such assertions can cause a great deal of harm to those seeking to find peace after the loss of a loved one.

Sympathetic as I am to the book's theme, I am troubled by the lack of scholarship and the potential for harm to victims of trauma and loss. While the author is impassioned, I think the idea of a life after death is still open for scholarly debate. Readers with the same interest may want to judge it for themselves.

CAROL RIZZOLO

Carol Rizzolo is a cultural mythologist, having earned a PhD in Mythological Studies with an Emphasis in Depth Psychology. She was a Lay Minister for the Unitarian Society, edited the D.I.R.E.C.T Ezine Reading Committee, Depth Psychology Alliance, and chaired the 2013 Proposal Review Committee of New England/Maritimes Region of the American Academy of Religion.

Author's Response

Valerie A. Abrahamsen

I am grateful to the NCIS reviewer of my book for taking the time to read and comment on it, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond.

I am surprised at the brevity of the review – only 700 words and eight paragraphs to comment on a volume of 306 pages, seven chapters, 650 footnotes and three appendices. The main premise of the book (which is not explicitly described by the reviewer) is that four types of evidence strongly point to the survival of the individual soul after death. The four types are scientific instruments and techniques, near-death experiences, reputable psychics and mediums, and out-of-body experiences, yet the reviewer gives only

scant attention to two of the four: science and mediums.

The reviewer criticizes *Paranormal's* discussion of current television shows about paranormal research yet makes no mention of the electronic and technological tools in wide use in that research, tools developed by scientists and engineers. The reviewer further makes no mention of the 14-page appendix in *Paranormal* that complements the chapter on the history of paranormal research, both of which extensively discuss the scholarship and work of over a dozen eminent investigators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who risked their careers in

support of this research. Nor does she mention the dozens of examples of Electronic Voice Phenomena and instrumental transcommunication or the medical and scientific analyses of near-death experiences by best-selling author Eben Alexander and medical researcher Jeffrey Long.

The reviewer cites only one of the many examples of mediums' readings offered in *Paranormal* (which itself constitutes only a small sampling of the thousands given by any number of reputable mediums) and argues that it leads to the dangerous trope that tragedy is "God's will." This is puzzling, since the perspective of *Paranormal* vis-à-vis karma, the law of cause and effect, reincarnation, etc. decidedly and repeatedly argues against this; most Christian fundamentalists would find *Paranormal* quite heretical. Moreover, the reviewer seems not to be familiar with the hundreds of cases where it is the paranormal evidence, not traditional Christianity or modern secularism, which provides comfort in tragedy.

The reviewer's comment about the use of Wikipedia articles is well-taken, but she fails to mention the dozens of books and peer-reviewed articles extensively cited (and listed in two separate bibliographies for the convenience of the reader).

Furthermore, because of the bias of mainstream science against paranormal research (which, of course, also vexed the nineteenth-century investigators), Wikipedia ends up being one of the few accessible online sources for some of the more obscure but important figures, groups and concepts in the area of paranormal phenomena. When available, other reliable resources in addition to Wikipedia were always consulted in *Paranormal*.

The reviewer objects to the frequency of the phrase "skeptics and deniers" and the argument that mediums "have no reason to fabricate contact with the beyond." She remains silent about the sources of this conviction, including but not limited to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's monumental two-volume work, *A History of Spiritualism*, and more recent treatments of mediums, seers and other gifted practitioners. It is unclear that the reviewer has any familiarity with these resources.

Reading this review gives the impression that *Paranormal* is yet another treatment of the afterlife that merely offers readers false hope or, worse, panders to religious extremism. That is truly unfortunate. I do agree with the reviewer's final sentence, however: "Readers with the same interest [in the book's theme] may want to judge it for themselves."

VALERIE ABRAHAMSEN