



Near-Death-Experiences of the Ancients

Jim Willis

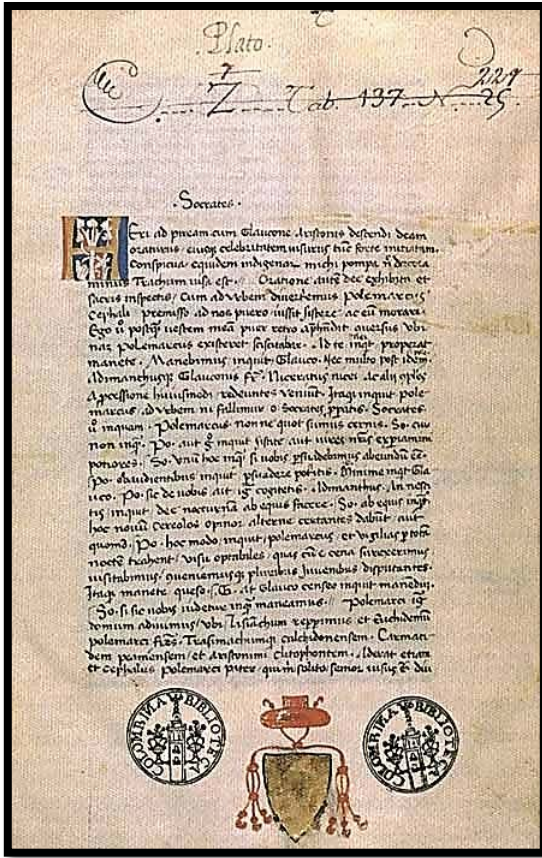
Socrates, Plato and Aristotle formed a trio toward the middle of the fourth century BC in ancient Greece to become the most well-known philosophers who ever lived. They were the founders of the present-day discipline. Any philosophers who lived before them are called “pre-Socratics.” Most people, even if they know nothing about the field of philosophy, recognize the names of Socrates, his pupil Plato, and Plato’s pupil, Aristotle, who went on to become the private tutor of Alexander the Great.

An elder Plato walks alongside a younger Aristotle, detail of Raphael’s School of Athens (1509 -1511) (Public Domain)



Er the Pamphylian

In Plato’s *Republic*, he mentions a speech by Socrates, in which Socrates remembers the near-death experience of a “warrior bold” who went by the name of Er the Pamphylian. According to Socrates, Er was killed in battle. Tradition has it that his body was placed on a funeral pyre after a period of some 12 days. Before the fires were lit, however, Er came to life with quite a story to tell. His “soul went forth from his body” and “journeyed with a great company” to “a mysterious region where there were two openings side by side in the earth.” He observed disembodied people traveling up and down in space, depending on the kinds of lives they had lived. After seven days they were told they must journey on, and after another four days they saw “a straight light like a pillar, most nearly resembling the rainbow, but brighter and purer.”



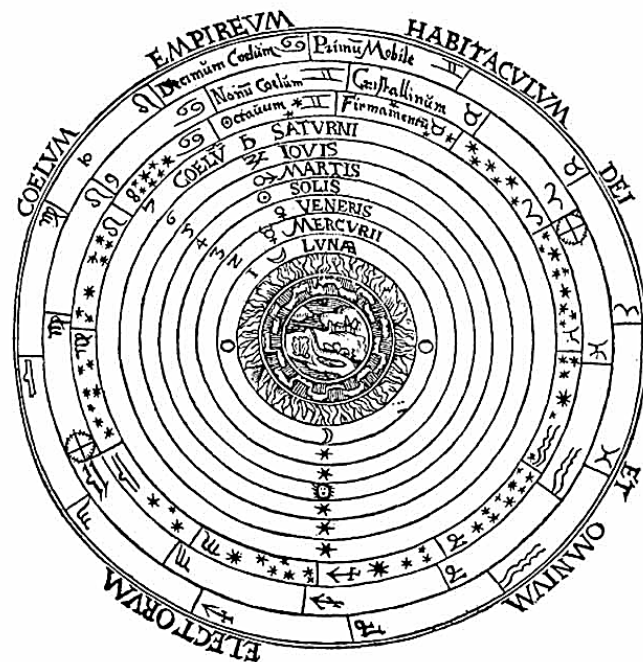
A Renaissance manuscript Latin translation of Plato's 'The Republic' (Public Domain)

This pillar seemed to serve as a kind of hinge or pivot for the entire cosmos. The movements of the stars and planets, as well as the fates of all living beings, revolved around this central pivot. In the words of Socrates, it was if the central pivot was the shaft of a spindle that “turned on the knees of Ananke,” a goddess who was assisted in her duties by the three Fates; Clotho, Atropos, and Lachesis.

As Er watched, many souls who had died prepared to reincarnate to another life on earth. One man, for instance, had died before experiencing any of the terrors of the Underground. Because he had been rewarded

in heaven, he decided to live his next life in complete opposition to his previous one, so he chose to be a powerful dictator. When he studied the implications of his choice, however, he discovered that among the atrocities he had chosen to commit, one was that he was to eat his own children.

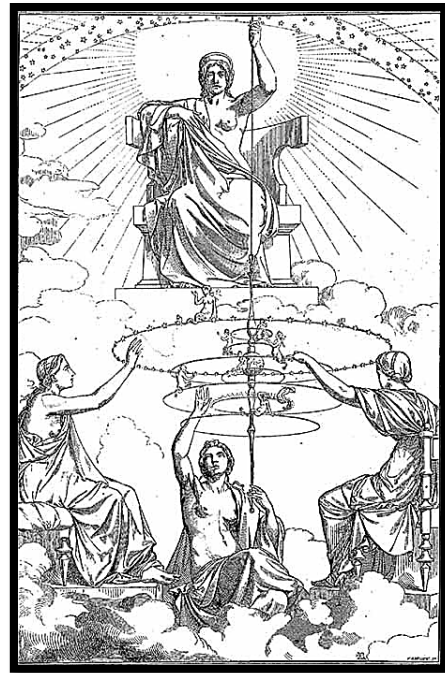
Schema huius praeiudicis diuisionis Sphaerarum.



Ptolemaic system of the Classical Heavens: The empyrean (fiery) heaven, dwelling of God and of all the selected · 10 Tenth heaven, first cause · 9 Ninth heaven, crystalline · 8 Eighth heaven of the firmament · 7 Heaven of Saturn · 6 Jupiter · 5 Mars · 4 Sun · 3 Venus · 2 Mercury · 1 Moon (Public Domain)

Er learned that this often happened. People who were punished for their past sins often chose a better life next time. But those who had lived good lives wanted to experience something different, so they chose evil. Animals were even part of the process. Most chose to return as humans, while humans often chose the apparently easier lives of animals.

Ananke the personification of Necessity, above the Moirai, the Fates, by Edmond Lechevallier-Chevignard in a passage in the Myth of Er by Plato (Public Domain)



After making a choice about how to live their next life, each soul was assigned a guardian spirit to help them in their next life. They then passed before the throne of Ananke, also called Lady Necessity, before journeying to the Plain of Oblivion, through which flowed the river Lethe, or the River of Forgetfulness. There, each soul was required to drink some of the water, after which they forgot everything about their past lives and what had happened in the Afterlife. After drinking the water, they laid down at night to sleep. During the night, they were lifted up and carried in various directions to begin their new life.

Er, however, was suddenly drawn back to his body before he had a chance to drink any water, therefore returning to life with his memory intact. He recovered his sight in time to see his body laid out on a funeral pyre. Thus, he was able to sit up and draw attention to himself before being burned to death, and he told those gathered for his funeral what he had experienced.



The Death of Socrates, by Jacques-Louis David (1787) (Public Domain)

It is a fascinating story, to be sure. Most professors teach their students that this is merely a story invented by Plato and attributed to Socrates, similar to his even more famous myth about the lost continent of Atlantis. Its purpose, so they claim, is to teach students about the importance of living a good, moral life, and to explain why evil exists in the world.

This may, indeed, be true. But the problem encountered with this explanation is the same as that surrounding the legend of Atlantis. Plato presents more detail than is necessary to make his point. Yes, the story of Er the Pamphylian is an entertaining way to teach the importance of living a good, ethical life, just as the story of Atlantis is an entertaining allegory about human hubris.

Plato's Academy mosaic, from the Villa of T. Siminius Stephanus in Pompeii. (Public Domain)



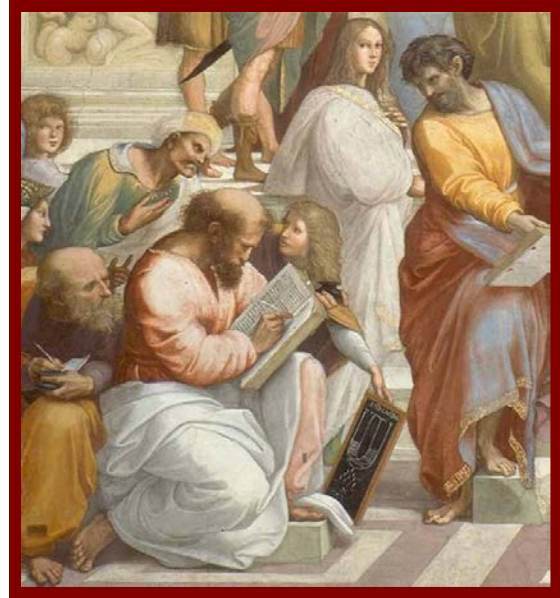
But Plato nowhere declares this to be only allegory. Could it be based on the experience of an actual person, just as Atlantis might be based on a historical incident? At the very least, the story illustrates the fact that even more than 2,300 years ago, the Greeks were familiar with the typical aspects of a modern Near-Death-Experience. Er, the hero of the story, experiences an out of body sensation, a landscape foreign to normal human experience, judgement involving a life review, and a sudden return to earthly life. These are all aspects of a classic Near-Death-Experience. Plato either must have been aware of the stages of the process to utilize them in this fashion, or he somehow made up a series of events which would later become standard all around the world.

Pythagoras' Metempsychosis or Reincarnation

One often associates the concept of reincarnation with India, but there was a fully-formed example of the doctrine also in ancient Greece. Pythagoras, who lived before Plato and coined the term "philosophy," had been teaching his students about reincarnation (metempsychosis) as a matter of course. He claimed to have remembered eight previous lives himself, and taught his pupils techniques whereby they could recall their own past lives.

Democritus, who invented the term "atom," meaning "uncuttable," in 400 BC, believed that all matter was reducible down to small particles he called atomos. Obviously, the Greeks knew as much about the material aspects of life as is known today.

Pythagoras shown writing in a book as a young man presents him with a tablet showing a diagrammatic representation of a lyre above a drawing of the sacred tetractys, in Raphael's School of Athens (Public Domain)



Plato even dealt with the idea of forgetting the details of past lives. He used the phrase “event boundary.” His definition is somewhat akin to someone today going to the kitchen to get something out of the refrigerator, and then forgetting what it was that prompted the trip. He believed that all of life was a choice. His story about Er suggests this very belief. Did he make this up, or did he hear it from people who had undergone a Near-Death-Experience? His teaching is so matter-of-fact that it seems obvious he felt he did not need to go into a lot of explanation, implying his students were already familiar with the process.

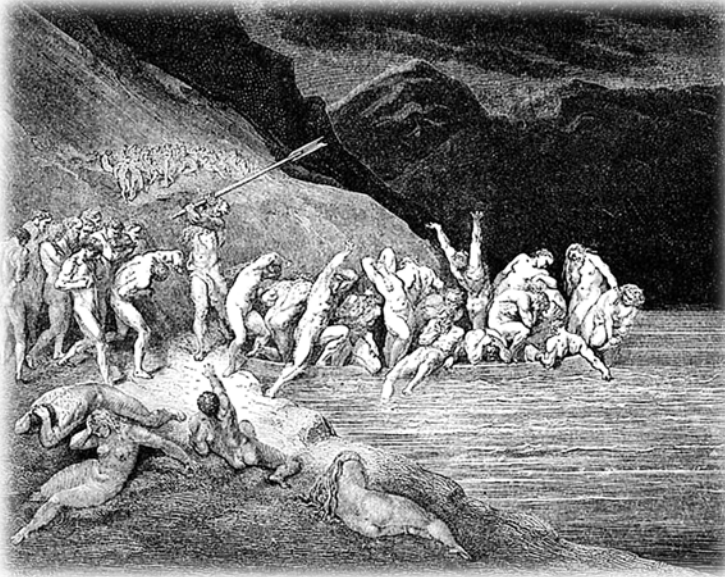


A scene from Plato's Symposium, by Anselm Feuerbach (1873) (Public Domain)

Thespesius Sojourn to the Other World

Another example can be found in the works of Plutarch, who lived some 400 years after Plato. In his work, *The Divine Vengeance*, he tells the story of a man from Cilicia originally named Aidraeus, but whose name was changed to Thespesius after his brief sojourn in the “other world.” Thespesius, it seems, had fallen from a great height and sustained a concussion, killing him instantly. On the third day after the accident, at his funeral, he came back from the dead, and related a strange story of having a sensation of his “*intelligence being driven from his body.*” He claimed he could see in all directions, “*as if his soul was a single eye.*”

This is a common testimony of people today who experienced a Near-Death-Experience. They claim to see in a complete 360-degree ark. It took him a while to get used to what his new body could do in terms of movement and awareness, but when he did, he *“recognized one soul, that of a kinsman, though not distinctly, as he was but a child when the kinsman died. It drew near and said: ‘Greetings, Thespesius’.*” The kinsman became a guide to help Thespesius view the various regions of the Afterlife.



This account is very similar to testimonies today, when people claim that after death, they are met by long lost relatives who usher them into their new experience.

The Doomed Souls embarking to cross the Acheron by Gustave Doré (Public Domain)

The guide showed Thespesius *“a great chasm extending all the way down called the place of Lethe and another deep chasm in the ambient which was a large crater with streams pouring into it, one whiter than sea-foam or snow, another like the violet of the rainbow, and others of different tints, each, when seen from afar, having a luster of its own. These regions were the abode of “those who were suffering punishment.”*

The *“final spectacle of his vision”* was a view of *“souls returning to a second birth, as they were forcibly bent to fit all manner of living things and altered in shape by the framers of these.”* There he met a woman who suddenly pulled him away with a cord. He felt a *“strong and violent gust of wind upon his body,”* opened his eyes, and found he was back in his body at his grave site.

There is, obviously, no way to interview these people. They died a few thousand years ago, so one cannot enter the minds of Plato and Plutarch to see what they were thinking. But at the very least, their words illustrate that even back then people were familiar with typical Near-Death-Experiences which show an uncanny similarity to those found down through the ages and into today.

Paul the Apostle

Another good source of material about Near-Death-Experience that, although it dates back a long way, it is probably more familiar to most people who have never studied ancient philosophical texts, and who might even consider it a more reputable source of information. It consists of letters written by a man who came to be known as Paul the Apostle.

Three times in the *Hebrew Scriptures*, that portion of the Bible Christians call the *Old Testament*, and seven times in the *New Testament*, people were said to be raised from the dead. The stories about Elijah and Elisha performing this feat are told in the books *First Kings* and *Second Kings*. The story of Jesus coming back from the dead is well known thanks to the accounts given in the gospels. Those same books tell that Jesus himself, during his earthly life, brought people back from the dead. Both Peter and Paul were said to have accomplished the same feat.

The Apostle Paul, by Rembrandt (1657) (Public Domain)



But arguably the most detailed account of this happening is found in the story of the Apostle Paul. Just 12 miles (20 km) inland from the Mediterranean Sea lies the Adana-Mersin metropolitan area of Turkey. With a current population of some three million people, it comprises the modern country's fourth-largest city. Yet, 2,000 years ago, it was already a major trade center called Tarsus, a city in eastern Cilicia which was part of the Roman province of Syria. It has become famous for one of its most important citizens, a man named Saul. His parents, being devout Jews, named him after the first great king of Israel, no doubt hoping he would grow into such an august moniker. He did just that, but at the height of his fame and power he changed his name to Paul, which means "little, small" or "tiny."

Young Saul wanted to be a Jewish scholar, but prudently developed a day job that he could fall back on. In his own words from one of his letters (*1 Corinthians 4:12*), he worked "*with his own hands*" at the tent making trade. Even after his famous conversion to Christianity he continued his occupation at least part-time. He traveled with a few leather-working tools so he could set up shop anywhere to help support himself.

He seems to have been born into a middle-class family who managed to provide him with an excellent education. He traveled to Jerusalem to study with the famous Pharisee/Scholar, Gamaliel, and emerged from his schooling as an esteemed member of the Pharisees. In his own words Saul was "*the best Jew and the best Pharisee of his generation*" (*Philippians 3:4–6; Galatians 1:13–14*). He sought to make his teachers proud by persecuting the early Christian Jesus cult that had sprung up throughout the area. While on a journey of about 135 miles (218 km) from Jerusalem to Damascus, he had an encounter that changed not only his life, but the future of the whole world.



*The Conversion of Saint Paul,
by Luca Giordano (1690)
Museum of Fine Arts of Nancy
(Public Domain)*

Saul went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

(Acts 9: 1-19)

Ananias Restoring the Sight of St. Paul, by Pietro da Cortona (c. 1631) (Public Domain)



Ever after, Saul was known as the Apostle Paul. Because he was converted after Jesus had died, and only met him in vision after the resurrection, he identified himself as being somewhat different from the disciples who followed Jesus in life: "and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

In other words, Paul came to his faith by a different road. These verses do not specifically say that Paul's experience was a Near-Death-Experience, but one can assume it was because of something he said 14 years later when he wrote his second letter to the Christian church which met at Corinth. "I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know - God knows. And I know that this man - whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows - was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell." (2nd Corinthians 12:2-4). It is possible that in this passage Paul was remembering another time he was left for dead.

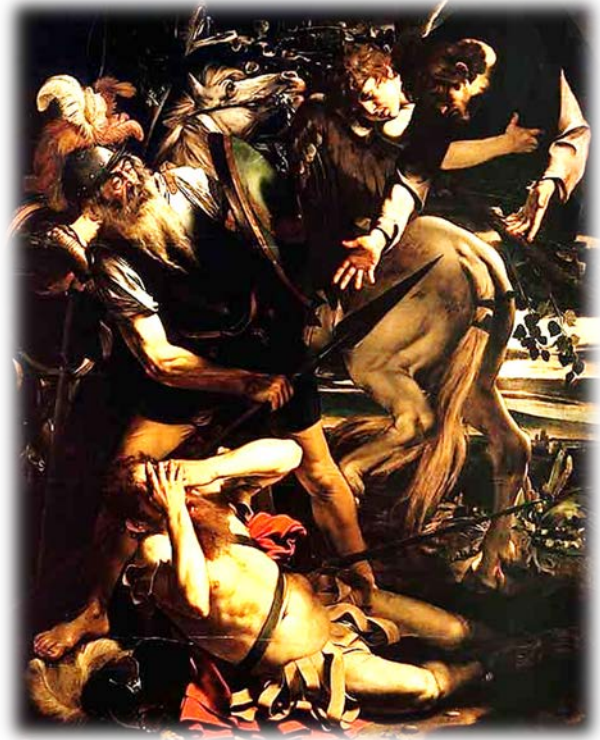


Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. (Acts 14:19-20)

Paul on trial before Agrippa (Acts 26), as pictured by Nikolai Bodarevsky (1875) (Public Domain)

Although the time frame seems to indicate that he was referring back to his initial experience on the road to Damascus, *when* it happened is not as important as *what* happened. What makes his letter to the Corinthians so important is that Paul apparently underwent a Near-Death-Experience that changed his life. He waited for 14 years to reveal it. That is common tendency for those who have such an experience. They often wait for the passage of time before they are ready to tell the story. His testimony involves a bright light, an out-of-body experience, a meeting with a being of light, and a return, complete with his discovery that language is inappropriate for a real description of what he experienced. These are all classic, indeed, common recollections of even a modern Near-Death-Experience.

Paul was left with physical scars from this experience. He apparently lost much of his vision, a fact that he might be referring to when he much later called it *“a thorn in the flesh.”* *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12)*



The Conversion of Saint Paul holding his eyes, by Caravaggio (1600) (Public Domain)

What this infirmity consisted of is a matter of debate. The best guess is that he was left partially blind. He freely admits that he had to dictate his letters, and when he signed them himself to verify their authenticity, he often remarked about the big letters he was forced to use: *“See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!” (Galatians 6:11).*

The religious implications of this story are not as important as a fact often overlooked when theologians explore these texts. They are, by their very nature, religious scholars, so they quite reasonably look for spiritual lessons behind them. But in doing so they miss something very important. Paul's story may seem highly significant, couched as it is in words straight from the Bible. But what people often overlook is that when compared to the vast storehouse of Near-Death-Experiences now on record, it is very ordinary. It encompasses the various steps in the account:

- A man was involved in what, up until then, was his usual, daily activity.
- He underwent a violent episode of some kind. In Saul's case, he fell from his horse, probably bringing about some kind of physical trauma that his companions did not immediately understand. The head trauma left him blind, and he seemed to have been in a coma that lasted for three days during which he "did not eat or drink anything."
- He encountered a great light and heard a loud voice.
- In the midst of this experience, he saw a being of light that somehow communicated with him. In Saul's case, he asked what now seems like a very silly question: "*Who is it?*" The question is comical because Saul answered it himself even before the final question mark: "*Who is it, Lord?*"
- He later was unable to find words that described what he had experienced; "*[I] heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.*"
- Upon regaining his senses, Saul's life and belief system was so radically altered that he even changed his name from Saul to Paul – from a rather grandiose name to one that signifies humbleness. It is hard to think that St. Paul's nickname was "tiny," but that is exactly what happened.
- He came back from his Near-Death-Experience with a changed attitude and a changed life. From a theology of exclusion and hatred he became a missionary of inclusion and love.

All this is to say that his experience followed the pattern of a rather typical Near-Death-Experience. And it comes not from the pages of modern books and YouTube videos. It has been there for 2,000 years, available to anyone who opens a Bible. As one reads these experiences of the ancients, which were written down at least 2,000 years ago, it is tempting to wonder if they were familiar with something now forgotten. Perhaps they still have much to teach.

Top Image: Fresco of Paul's Conversion, by Michelangelo (1542-45) in the Vatican Cappella Paolina (Public Domain)