# ANALYSING A POSSIBLE NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE OF JESUS USING GREYSON'S SCALE

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#### Abstract

Jesus gave many statements in the Gospels where He told about His view on God and the afterlife. On the other hand, numerous Near-Death Experiences are documented, and Greyson developed a scale that measures the depth of a Near-Death Experience. When analysing the Gospels before Jesus' resurrection and comparing them with Greyson's scale, matches in many criteria are found. This leads to the conclusion that Jesus had a very deep Near-Death Experience.

Keywords: Near-Death Experience, Jesus, Gospels, Greyson's scale

# 1. Introduction

Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) are scientifically unexplained phenomena, their origin is unknown and their interpretation is controversial; but it is proven that they happen for thousands of years to many people. Analysing texts of several ancient cultures show "that the NDE influenced conceptions of the afterlife experience in early civilizations" [1]. It is shown that already early civilizations knew about this phenomenon. "Despite temporal and geographical separation, lack of significant cultural contact, and contextual differences between the genres of texts in which afterlife descriptions appear, a consistent set of thematic elements has been found to be similar across the traditions. The correspondence of this set to the core elements of cross-cultural history and modern NDEs demonstrate a connection between the NDE and the conceptions as described in ancient texts." [1, p. 193] As one of the first historic authors, Plato directly described around 408/407 B.C. a very detailed Near-Death Experience of a warrior: "He was slain in battle, and ten days afterwards, when the bodies of the dead were taken up already in a state of corruption, his body was found unaffected by decay, and carried away home to be buried. And on the twelfth day, as he was lying on the funeral pile, he returned to life and told them what he had seen in the other world. ... He drew near, and they told him that he was to be the messenger who would carry the report of the other world to men, and they bade him hear and see all that was to be heard and seen in that place." [Plato, The Republic, Book X, English translation, The Project Gutenberg, 2008,

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www.gutenberg.org] Early texts prove that NDEs already happened during this time when Jesus lived. Jesus appeared out of the darkness of history, missioned for about one year [2] and dedicated His life with all consequences to His mission. He focused on divine love and had an extremely consequent own way to achieve His goals. These are all similarities to the changes in peoples' lives after NDEs. Therefore, a detailed analysis of Jesus' statements regarding to Greyson's scale criteria are made in this article. This is one out of many possibilities, how the Gospels can be analysed and Jesus' life can be interpreted.

In the next section, the Gospels are analysed by using the criteria of Greyson's scale, which give an indication if a NDE happened. After that, the resulting points on Greyson's scale are added up and conclusions are drawn.

#### 2. Applying Greyson's Scale to the Gospels

Greyson developed a list of 16 criteria to measure the depth of a NDE [3, 4]. These are grouped into four categories: 'Cognitive Components', 'Affective Components', 'Paranormal Components' and 'Transcendental Components'. Each criterion is evaluated from 0 to 2 points depending on the strength of this effect during the NDE. Greyson defined that a NDE happened when at least 7 points are reached with a more detailed and deeper experience for a higher sum.

There is no direct report from Jesus confessing if he had a NDE. Therefore, the probability of a NDE can only be deduced from His programmatic statements and His deeds. It is also clear that not all aspects of a NDE are mentioned in the Gospels due to their scope on Jesus' life and confessions. When analysing the Gospels before His resurrection for the criteria of Greyson's scale the following indications can be seen.

#### 2.1. Cognitive components

#### 2.1.1. Did time seem to speed up?

No clear statement from Jesus of a different time speed impression in connection with the Other World can be found in the Gospels. Due to the missing evidence, 0 points are given.

#### 2.1.2. Were your thoughts speeded up?

Jesus asked the right questions and gave brilliant answers to discover the deficits of existing religious traditions, which guided people to a new understanding of God. This could lead to the assumption that his thoughts were speeded up. However, Jesus gave no statement and therefore it leads to 0 points.

#### 2.1.3. Did scenes from your past come back to you?

One central aspect in many NDEs is the flashback. Scenes from peoples' own lives appear again and they understand all consequences of their deeds for themselves and for other people. They often feel judged by this life review but with endless love and without condemnation. "As a result, life reviews are often one of the most transformative elements of the NDE. Those who have powerful life reviews tend to revere both knowledge and love after their NDE." [5] "All of the people who go through this come away believing that the most important thing in their life is love." [6]

No direct statement from Jesus regarding a life review is found in the Gospels but He repeated many times the importance of love and forgiveness. As one of His central authentic words, Jesus preached in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.43-45 (and also in Luke 6.27-28) to love enemies to be a child of Heaven [7]: "43 'You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in Heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." This statement is opposite to the usual impulse of people, the common thinking in the Greco-Roman culture of this time [8] and contrary to the Old Testament encouragement to hate enemies [9]. Jesus' confession to love also enemies is far beyond the "eye for eye" in Exodus 21.23-25 that uses the concept of 'lex talionis' [10] to balance society. Material advantage is not the reason for generosity but love is seen to be the most important aspect in life. Jesus goes far beyond the view in the Old Testament [11] that we should love as God loves [12]. Jesus had a radical new precept to love also enemies [11, p. 225] beyond the widely established culture in that time where Romans occupied the country [9, p. 161-162].

Another indication is found in Matthew 6.6 where Jesus told not to pray for demonstrating belief in God: "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." It expresses that God sees things which are hidden from human eyes [13] and Chrysostom says "[God] who is present everywhere, who hears even before they speak and who knows already the secrets of the heart" [14]. The reason for praying should not be to obtain advantages in this world but to be rewarded in the afterlife [15]. Praying and fasting in public were recognized practices to show the belief in God [16]. Jesus pointed out in Matthew 6.16-18 that God sees secrets and rewards accordingly. These statements of Jesus regarding God's love, praying and fasting are in line with life review where people experience that all secrets are visible to God who shows scenes from the individual past and evaluates them. Comparing these propositions of Jesus with Greyson's scale, "past flashed before me, out of my control" matches best and leads to 2 points.

#### 2.1.4. Did you suddenly seem to understand everything?

There are several verses in the Gospels where Jesus claimed to know the truth, for example in John 8.31-32: "To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". Jesus revealed divine truth [17], Jesus "is full of truth and grace" [18]. The only possible source of this truth is God alone and therefore it is necessary that Jesus was in direct contact with God Father who told Him secrets of the world. Jesus directly declared in Matthew 11.25-27 (and also in Luke 10.21-22) that God told Him all secrets, which are hidden from the world: "25 At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. 26 Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. 27 All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." It is assumed that V 25f is an original word from Jesus with a commentary in V 27 by early Christians [19], which is usually interpreted that God handed over knowledge and wisdom to Jesus [19, p. 210] on a mutual basis [8, p. 472-473]. These verses tell a "uniquely close relationship of Jesus to his Father" [11, p. 441].

Knowledge 'about the Universe' in Greyson's scale is equal to Jesus' statements that all hidden knowledge was handed over to Him by God. Therefore, 2 points on Greyson's scale are given.

# 2.2. Affective components

#### 2.2.1. Did you have a feeling of peace or pleasantness?

Peace is one of the central elements in Jesus' worldview; He rejected any form of violence in Matthew 5.9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God". "Peacemakers 'will be called God's children' [the passive probably implies that God himself will recognize them as true children] on the basis that God's children reflect God's character (Matthew 5.44-45), and God is the ultimate peacemaker" [11, p. 169]. Peacefulness is regarded as an important part of God's character and Jesus experienced it.

In his first farewell discourse in John 14.27, Jesus described that He is the one who gives peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid". This is "real peace, 'peace, such as the world cannot give'" [16, p. 367]. It shows the direct connection between Jesus and God, Jesus directly experienced God's peace and transferred it to the world.

Also in his second farewell discourse, which presumes the first discourse and interprets several topics [17, p. 552], Jesus told in John 16.33 about His victory and the connected peace that is not from this world: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world".

Peace is mentioned in several verses in the Gospels and is therefore one of the central parts of Jesus' way of living. This leads to the conclusion that Jesus has experienced 'incredible peace or pleasantness' which is equal to 2 points on Greyson's scale.

# 2.2.2. Did you have a feeling of joy?

There is only one statement where Jesus described joy in the Other World, which is written in the ninth beatitude in Matthew 5.11-12 (and also in Luke 6.22-23): "11 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Jesus' disciples should be joyful for expecting a great but unspecified reward that will be granted in Heaven [11, p. 173]. The most probable conclusion is that joy is this described reward in the presence of God, which Jesus has experienced. The feeling of joy is mentioned here but not as a central part of Jesus' sermon on the mountain. Therefore, 1 point, which equals 'happiness', is given.

#### 2.2.3. Did you feel a sense of harmony or unity with the Universe?

Jesus told in Matthew 6.24-34 that you should not care too much about your welfare in this life. "Anxiety about the concrete necessities of life is incompatible with the all-encompassing nature of the claims of the Kingdom of God." [8, p. 307] He explained using several examples that people should centre their lives not to earthly problems but they should look for the Kingdom of Heaven. One famous example is His comparison with lilies in Matthew 6.28-29: "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these." This illustration using flowers can be interpreted as Jesus' close connection to nature. He also had a great compassion and mercy for other people in Matthew 15.32 when He took care of people who followed Him to send them back healthy [20]: "Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

These are indications that Jesus had a special sense for harmony with nature and other people but His statements are too general; they could be also the result of His general worldview. Therefore, it is no clear evidence for a NDE and 0 points are assigned.

#### 2.2.4. Did you see or feel surrounded by a brilliant light?

Jesus often used the expression 'light' in connection with God, Himself and the Other World. In John 3.19-21 says: "19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." "We should probably give it [light] a twofold meaning in this verse. There is the usual metaphorical meaning whereby 'light' stands for 'good' over against 'darkness', which means 'evil'. But in this Gospel Christ is the light ([John] 1:9; 8:12; 9:5), and John is here speaking of Christ's coming to the world." [21]

There had to be a very serious reason why Jesus insisted many times, "I am the light of the world" and it is very likely that Jesus had a strong personal experience that led Him to give this essential message to His disciples.

In the sixth discourse in John 8.12, Jesus spoke about Himself as the 'light of the world": "When Jesus spoke again to the people, He said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."" "John refers to Jesus as the light because Jesus referred to Himself as the light." [22]

His followers will also have the 'light of life', which is obviously not from this world as Jesus often refers to the life in the Other World. This leads to the conclusion that Jesus experienced a light from the Other World, which addressed Him. In John 9.5 He transfers this light from the Other World to this world as long as he is here: "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world". The closest relation with the Gospel of John is in Matthew 5.14 where Jesus stated that God's people are the light of the world [23]: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden." Jesus expected that also His disciples will have the same experience as He had.

Jesus used the picture of the eternal light very often to describe Himself, the presence of God and the characteristics of the Other World the conclusion is that he saw a 'light clearly of mystical or otherworldly origin' and 2 points on Greyson's scale are given.

#### 2.3. Paranormal components

#### 2.3.1. Were your senses more vivid than usual?

Several people state that their senses remained vivid for a long time after their NDE. In the story where Jesus healed a woman from perpetual uncleanness, extraordinary vivid senses of Jesus are described in Matthew 9.20-22: "Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed'. Jesus turned and saw her. 'Take heart, daughter', he said, 'your faith has healed you'. And the woman was healed at that moment."

This miracle was interpreted in ancient and medieval times as an allegory within the history of salvation. In a personal interpretation, this woman is an example for belief against all hope [19, p. 55-56]. It is not only a story about a miracle, but it is a report about a woman with perpetual uncleanness as a role model for faith [13, p. 183]. If this was a historic occurrence, it would be unclear where Jesus' vivid senses came from. Therefore, 0 points are given on Greyson's scale.

# 2.3.2. Did you seem to be aware of things going on elsewhere, as if by extrasensory perception?

This is an effect, which occurs during NDEs; but usually, this phenomenon is over after returning to this world. Jesus gave no direct expression of an own NDE and no evidence of extrasensory perception can be found within the Gospels. Therefore, 0 points on Greyson's scale are given.

#### 2.3.3. Did scenes from the future come to you?

Jesus predicted His own death for three times with the first announcement in Matthew 16.21 (see also Mark 8.31-33 and Luke 9.21-22): "21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." The second announcement can be found in Matthew 17.22-23, Mark 9.30-32 and Luke 9.43-45 and the third announcement in Matthew 20.17-19, Mark 10.32-34 and Luke 18.31-34. "But while we can have no confidence in identifying a plurality of distinct Passion predictions (...), and while there has probable been expansion in the process of transmission, the case for Jesus' having anticipated rejection and that would lead to his death, and also subsequent vindication by God, remains strong." [8, p. 685] Jesus prepared His disciples for His absence with several prophetic words. He predicted in Matthew 26.21 (see also Mark 14.18, Luke 22.21 and John 13.21) the betrayal by Judas during the last Pesach Meal: "21 And while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."" "It is harder to trace it with confidence to the historical Jesus than is the case for some of the Son of Man sayings, but at the same time it has nothing in it that the historical Jesus could not have been said. ... There seems to be no adequate reason for denying to the historical Jesus a saying about anticipating denial from among his own intimate band." [8, p. 1064] A linked prediction is the denial by Peter in Matthew 26.34 (see also Mark 14.30, Luke 22.34 and John 13.38): "34 'Truly I tell you', Jesus answered, 'this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times". "Jesus' prediction that His disciples would desert Him is of a piece with his prediction of betraval. Its primary historicity has been variously evaluated but can be asserted with reasonable confidence." [8, p. 1087] It is said in the Gospels that Jesus did not only foretell his personal future but also predicted the temple destruction in Matthew 24.1-2 (see also Mark 13.1-2 and Luke 21.5-6): "1 Jesus left the temple and was walking away when His disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. 2 'Do you see all these things?' He asked. 'Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.'" "There is every likelihood that a core of Mk. 13 and related materials goes back to the historical Jesus." [8, p. 957]

When interpreting the Gospels, it leads to the conclusion that Jesus had a vision of his personal future and of the world's future. This leads to 2 points on Greyson's scale.

#### 2.3.4. Did you feel separated from your physical body?

Jesus had His focus on peoples' souls, which were for Him the central part of human being. The material world was nearly insignificant for Him and it was clear that "God is spiritual rather that a material being" [24] and obviously not from this world, as Jesus said in John 4.24: "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth". Although the discussion of Jesus with the Samaritan woman in John 4.1-42 is historically difficult to trace, it expresses the spirit of Jesus [23, p. 307]. "Genuine worship is spiritual. It is not dependent on places and things." [21, p. 236] Flesh is of no importance for God and in the Other World, spirit gives live as described in John 6.63: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you - they are full of the Spirit and life." "The Jesus who feeds others is a person who belongs to Heaven, and whose real nature is therefore spirit." [16, p. 335] As a logic result, He warned in Matthew 10.28 from people who can destroy the soul, which has eternal consequences: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell." This is interpreted as "the body/soul contrast, when used in relation to execution, presupposes that there is a true life which goes beyond mere physical existence, so that the real 'self' is untouched by the death of the body alone" [11, p. 403].

These numerous clear statements of Jesus about the contrary characteristics of body and soul lead to the interpretation that He could have experienced the separation of soul and body and therefore realized the importance of peoples' souls. His experience is equal to Greyson's scale criteria 'clearly left the body and existed outside it' and gives 2 points.

#### 2.4. Transcendental components

#### 2.4.1. Did you seem to enter some other, unearthly world?

Many statements of Jesus show that His philosophy was strongly oriented on the Other World. In the verses for seeking the Kingdom of God in Matthew 6.19-34, it was essential for Him to collect treasures in Heaven and not

on Earth. He stated in Matthew 6.19-21 (and also similar in Luke 12.33-34): "19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on Earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus developed this already known Jewish idea of treasures in Heaven further to a sharp dualistic contrast between treasures in this world and the Other World [8, p. 299]. "The focus of this saying is on priorities: Heaven rather than Earth (for these two contrasting spheres cf. 6:10; 16:19; 18:18; 23:9)." [11, p. 259] He directed the view not to God's judgement but to peoples' hearts that should be with God [20, p. 69]. This challenge is especially difficult for wealthy people who are fully focused onto this world, as he told in Matthew 19.21 (and also in Mark 10.21 and Luke 18.22): "21 Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven. Then come, follow me."" This is interpreted that treasures on Earth and treasures in Heaven exclude each other [25]. This sentence is qualitatively more that the pharisaic command to give alms [13, p. 339].

During the investigation by Pilate, Jesus said one of His most famous statements in John 18.36, which clearly tells that Jesus felt at the Other World at home: "Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." Even when Jesus did not say this sentence literally, it brings His overall behaviour to the final point [2, p. 563-564]. Jesus is sure to be a king, He owns a kingdom and this is located in the Other World [26].

These verses in the Gospels are indications that Jesus had seen the Other World as a real phenomenon. This was not an unfamiliar and strange place that led to anxiety or indifferent feelings but it was obviously a 'clearly mystical or unearthly realm' which leads to 2 points.

# 2.4.2. Did you seem to encounter a mystical presence or being?

In the Gospel of John within the third discourse about the Divine Son, Jesus described the connection between God and Himself. He said in John 5.37-38 that He saw the Father and heard His voice: "And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent." "This is the witness that means so much to Jesus. Because He has the witness of God He is not troubled by opposition of people." [21, p. 291] It gives Jesus the absolute confidence to say God's words.

In the fourth discourse in the Gospel of John 6.46 about Christ and the Bread of Life, Jesus also stated that He has seen God: "No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father." "Only Jesus *has seen the Father*; no-one has seen God *except the one who is from God* ([John] *cf*. 1:18; 3:13; 14:7ff.). Jesus himself is the mediator of such knowledge: he is the one who 'narrates' God (*cf*. 1:18; 12:45)." [18, p. 294] Jesus believed to be the

only person who ever saw the Father. He described in Luke 10.22 (and also in Matthew 11.27) that he felt a close connection to this mystical being and he interpreted this as a father to son relationship: "22 'All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.""

Luke 10.21-24 is the theological core of the Gospels; God stands behind Jesus and both are united [27]. God Father made Jesus to be a participator of universal reign and His representative [28]. This implies that Jesus was sure of this fact due to His direct contact with God. In the sixth disclosure in John 8.54-55 about the Light of the World in the Gospel of John, Jesus again emphasized the close connection to God: "Jesus replied, 'If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word." This glorification of Jesus comes not from Himself but from the Father, He knows the Father and "He acts in accordance with all that God has revealed of Himself" [21, p. 417].

These multiple similar statements in the Gospels lead to the conclusion that Jesus was very sure about His direct connection with God. When comparing these citations with Greyson's scale it is probable that Jesus experienced a 'definite being, or voice clearly of mystical or otherworldly origin'. Jesus had an intense contact to God and therefore 2 points are given on Greyson's scale.

# 2.4.3. Did you see deceased spirits or religious figures?

Many people report that they have seen ghosts during their NDEs, who are identified as deceased relatives or important religious persons. In the Gospels, there is a report in Luke 13.28-29 (and also in Matthew 8.11-12) about people in the Other World who are invited into or excluded from the Kingdom of God: "28 'There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. 29 People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.""

This is very similar to the NDE report written by Plato. However, it is assumed that Jesus did not author this text, but early Christians wrote it [29] and therefore 0 points are given on Greyson's scale.

# 2.4.4. Did you come to a border or point of no return?

After a NDE, many people see a clear sense in their life. Everything happens for a reason like it is reported in several examples [30, 31]. The main reason for this is that people are sent back to life for completing a job in this world: "I have come back from the other side of life ... God sent (me) back, it was not (my) time-(I) had many things to do ..." [31, p. 1803]. Jesus used similar

words for many times during His life. He was fully convinced that God sent him to Earth for completing His mission, like He told in Matthew 10.40 (and also in Luke 10.16, Mark 9.37 and John 13.20): "40 Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me". With high probability, these words were said by Jesus [13, p. 206; 19, p. 150]. He got clear instructions for a successful completion of his mission. There are several similar statements of Jesus in the Gospels where He emphasized the importance that He does nothing on His behalf but God sent Him to fulfil His mission. This is a clear similarity to reported NDEs where people were also sent back to fulfil an individual mission on Earth. Even without any direct statement of Jesus about His NDE, it is plausible that He saw a "barrier I was not permitted to cross; or 'sent back' to life involuntarily", which is Greyson's scale definition for 2 points.

#### 3. Conclusion

Numerous statements of Jesus are found in the Gospels that are in line with the criteria of Greyson's scale, only the most important quotations from the Gospels are mentioned in this article. After summarizing all Greyson's criteria that are clearly stated in the Gospels, there are 19 out of 32 possible points. The lower limit for an occurred NDE is 7 points with a deeper NDE when reaching more points. This leads to the conclusion that Jesus experienced a very deep Near-Death Experience. This is one feasible consistent explanation for His motivation to live His dedicated life for the glory of God.

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