PRESCIENCE AND AN EARLY DEATH

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Death's inevitability is not in question, but its mystery is one that is equally unavoidable and the questions we are likely to have about what then unanswerable. Traditionally we have tended to be concerned with what – if anything – might happen to us personally after we pass away, but that is not our question here. Rather we wish to contemplate what a knowledge of what will happen to the others in our lives may do to us while we are yet living. If we could know before we die the events that will befall our loved ones and/or our communities how might we react? Would that knowing be a comfort or a curse? Moreover, what might our contemplation on this query teach us about death more generally? Such is our concern in the discussion below.

A Verse, a Question, an Experiment

We know that we will die. We might even suspect that we will die soon, or we might worry that whenever we do die it will feel like it is 'too soon'. We might have certain goals that we would like to meet before we die, we might have expectations, desires, dreams, wishes. We might care about what will happen to our bodies or our work after we are dead, and we are even more likely to care about what will happen to our loved ones once we are no longer able to look after them. Yet die we shall, and in the thought of that we recognize our terrible powerlessness to affect anything at all post mortem (unless, of course, we believe both in some form of personal continuation and also that the gap between that form and this physical world is a

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bridgeable and therefore influenceable one). All these we take to be facts, and irrefutable ones at that. What makes it all tolerable, at least in the midst of the day-to-day busyness that more than anything else pushes the awareness of mortality towards a default acceptability via providing pleasant distractions from it, is the mystery of not knowing *when* and – importantly – thereafter *what*.

Yet what might happen if we did know? What kind of intuitions would be raised in us by such an insight? What could we feel and how might we think? How ought we to think? These are the issues that I find myself concerned with as a result of a chance textual encounter, and they are issues that I believe worth considering, at least for a short while. My central question, the one that (hopefully) pins it all together, is this: how really comforting would prescience about the events following one's own death be? By this I want to ask: if we could know while alive what will happen in the world in the time that follows our deaths, what would we make of it? Specifically, what would we make of that knowledge rather than of the events? Would that knowing be a boon? A bane? Both, neither? Further, in reflecting on such, what might it teach us about death and in turn about life? The encounter I mentioned comes from the Hebrew Bible, and I hope no readers will be offended if I quote from it; for regardless of any presence or absence of views on the sanctity of that collection of documents such human literary legacies have a great deal to offer and, I think, always will.

Here then is the verse:

> 'Assuredly, I will gather you to your fathers and you will be laid in your tomb in peace. Your eyes shall not see all the disaster which I will bring upon this place.' So they brought back the reply to the king. (II Kings 22:20)[1]

To fill in the necessary context, the speaker here is a prophetess called Huldah (and her being a prophetess

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raises interesting side questions about gender roles in ancient Near Eastern societies), while the 'they' – those being addressed – are the high priest Hilkiah and four of the king's servants/advisers, and the 'you' subject is none other than the king himself: Josiah.[2] As background to this pronouncement Hilkiah had recently discovered a scroll 'of the Law' (biblical scholars do not think this is a reference to the entire Torah[3]) in the Temple during a period of its refurbishing, and upon taking the document to the king and reading it to him, Josiah – in great grief at the realization of how utterly the community had failed to keep the ordained strictures – ordered the priest and select servants to go and 'inquire of the LORD on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that has been found'.[4] The answer received was the above-quoted verse, that judgment was indeed coming to the nation but that owing to his righteous contrition Josiah would be dead before the (retaliatory? necessarily resultant?) disaster struck. How might this have been taken? That of course is our concern here; stated again: how really comforting would prescience about the events following one's own death be? Given this framework let us seek some responses to our question by putting ourselves in Josiah's sandals.

Being the King

Firstly here we should acknowledge that whatever we are working with in this text we are not working with a history book in the modern sense of the term. Josiah may have existed, he may not have (there are no extra-biblical sources on him,[5] but that fact alone does not necessarily rule out his actuality); for our purposes it does not matter. Nor, indeed, do many of the details surrounding his recorded life and times really matter; what we are after is how the message he received – which he believed to be true, and that belief is significant for our study – would have or could have affected him psychologically, and

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therefore taking the case of this foreknowledge as a model for how we might think such prescience could affect us and drawing what conclusions we might.

One (purported) aspect of Josiah's life that is relevant is that his kingdom was at peace during his reign and was enjoying a period of self-rule that for small nations like Judah (this being after Israel had already split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah) was a rarity and a luxury at the time. The era was marked by being in a condition standing between Near Eastern empires, and thus for Judah in between foreign governance.[6] This facet is of note because it impacts on how Josiah would have heard the phrase uttered by Huldah that, 'you will be laid in your tomb in peace'. Given the socio-political conditions Josiah might well have assumed that meant he would die pleasantly, perhaps of old age, and that at his time of death the country would be free from the kinds of sticky messiness that seems to have been the norm in the ancient world. (Incidentally, II Kings 23 states that Josiah was killed in a battle with the Egyptian pharaoh Neco, who was on his way to meet the Assyrian army and passing through Judean lands when Josiah decided to confront him. His body, however, was successfully returned to Jerusalem and properly buried.[7]) Thinking thusly would no doubt have been a great comfort to him.

Or would it? Let us return to the prophecy. Josiah was told that, 'Assuredly, I will gather you to your fathers and you will be laid in your tomb in peace. Your eyes shall not see all the disaster which I will bring upon this place.' What is of most interest here is not the first sentence but the second: 'Your eyes shall not see all the disaster which I will bring upon this place.' What place? The entire kingdom, Josiah's realm, the nation for which he, as king, was ultimately responsible all the days of his life, however peacefully or (as it apparently happened) violently such a life might end. Surely a message like that would be shocking and disturbing for anyone who was not psychopathically disengaged from the people around him, let alone for a leader

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who would presumably have felt deeply involved in the welfare of those under his charge. 'All the disaster' – in what form? How severe? Lasting for how long? Number of lives lost? Physical damage? Resultant ramifications? The questions would add up, none of which would be remotely pleasing. Considering his social role as king we can guess that all of these queries and more would have plagued Josiah, for while it is of course possible for a political leader to be uncaringly detached from her or his subjects, Josiah does not seem to fit this category given the simple fact that he enquired of the prophetess after the welfare 'of the people' and 'of all Judah' (this if nothing else; the text does additionally appraise him as a very good king and at multiple points lists positively phrased reforms he enacted): Josiah cared, and in that caring the knowledge he received would clearly be torturous. His demonstrated values were not only for himself but for his community, as they (almost certainly) are for you and for me. This is a critical point, and so to this issue of values we must now give further scrutiny because here we will find much that is applicable to our central question.

Values, Now and Then

Samuel Scheffler has argued that in attaching value to something such value must be directed towards the future.[8] We have established that Josiah valued his community, his nation, and we might – with good reason – think too that he also identified with his ethnic group and his sociohistorical background and setting; he probably took much that was meaningful to him personally from the definitional facts of his being a Judean among Judeans, of his being one individual in a long line of ancestors who lived and died on the same soil that he was living and would die on. It is of course thus for many of us too, and the identitarian matters involved will be familiar and forthright to many readers. Even for those of us (like myself) who have spent a large

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and ongoing portion of their adult lives abroad the same call of 'home' has a certain emotional ring to it that cannot be denied (although in some cases it may be denigrated). This appears to be a core human trait, and all the good and bad that come with the tribalism of this sort is an issue continually deserving of thought and discussion. Again, Josiah cared, and in that caring he was future-caring, as it were, his was a mind that (like ours) wanted to know what would happen to those he loved and wanted to be reassured that all would be well. Yet the assurance given to Josiah was that all would emphatically *not* be well. Not at all well. We must conclude again that Josiah's prescience, the prophecy he believed and accepted on its face, would be a burden, a weight, a source of constant concern and worry. In that we might think as well that no matter the physical cause of his death he would most probably not be 'laid in [his] tomb in peace'. In re-reading those words from this perspective we find that the prophetess's phrasing seems to imply a focus solely on care for oneself – was this a failing of the message or the messenger? The question might approach blasphemy for some, but it can be asked.

Here then is the real crux of our query: unless we are psychopathic it seems impossible to separate out apprehension for one's specific welfare from that for the general welfare of the community (or at least circle(s)) to which one belongs. There is a dual value investment between self and community that seems inevitable, an inextricability of self from community, and so if in our analysis we approach the problem of a prescience regarding personal death only from the point of view of *my* death we come up against exactly the kind of obstacle to thought Edith Stein signalled when she wrote, 'If we take the self as the standard, we lock ourselves into the prison of our individuality. Others become riddles for us, or still worse, we remodel them into our image and so falsify historical truth.'[9] I cannot really be removed from my social setting: there is no being that could be successfully extracted, set aside, set up, placed

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on a pedestal of singular consideration, and still have that being make any kind of rational sense given the type of being it is. To put this simply, one cannot take a human out of humanity, and we intuitively know this because it is reflected in our instinctual care for others, a care that reflects heavily on ourselves. In contemplating his death – something forced on him by the foreknowledge of it, a point we will return to – Josiah would automatically have thought too about the continued lives of those who would survive him. What would happen to them? On hearing that disaster was both on its way and completely unavoidable comfort would be the last emotion such a message would impart.

Yet just the opposite could be true as well. Think again of Edith Stein. She was born into a German Jewish family in 1891, studied under no less a personage than Edmund Husserl, converted to Roman Catholicism in her young adulthood, became a Discalced Carmelite nun, and was murdered at Auschwitz in 1942.[10] If she could have known, through whatever method, that Hitler's eventual defeat and the complete downfall of Nazism would come, would that not have brought at least some measure of reassurance to her? Would not knowing that the Nazi storm would pass also bring ease even to those purely mental and passive opponents of the Third Reich who died 'peacefully', naturally, in their homes in the midst of occupied Europe? We must think that it would. Is it better then to know? Not to know? Everything depends on the outcome of the events present in one's current embedded context and the perspective(s) one holds on those events. Yet when it comes to the future many of us have a strong desire to know, to at least have some hint of what might be – the yearning for foresight can appear irresistible. If put into words they might, I suspect, more often than not take the form of 'What will happen to me?', but the implied tag '... and my loved ones?' hovers irrepressibly in the background. Perhaps, if this were possible, an exclusively personal knowledge of one's death might be beneficial (e.g. only the first sentence of Josiah's prophecy), but even that seems

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fraught, for once one learns of one's end the intertwining of self and others means that the mind turns unhesitatingly to its fellows. All prescience carries baggage.

Finitude, and the Nuance Here of 'Early'

The real hardship of being human is the awareness we carry of just that – of being human, of being mortal, of our own frailty, finality, finiteness. We know that we will die and throughout life we constantly try not to remember that. Albert Camus put it this way: 'We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking. In that race which daily hastens us towards death, the body maintains its irreparable lead.'[11] Whatever meaning Josiah may have found in and for his life personally considered, being told of his death – even in the purportedly (as the text presents it) reassuring manner he was – would have disrupted that by its highlighting of his impending doom; and not only that but even more grievously the disaster that would befall the kingdom he led. If a life's meaning is to be found in coming to terms with (or answering) its limitedness, as Simon Critchley has written,[12] then considering Josiah's position, place, and cultural setting this most likely would have been mentally situated for him in the context of national thriving. What then would be the response?

We have already seen Josiah's demonstrated anxiety over the wellness of the people and provinces under his political control, and the wracking regret he showed when he was read the discovered (relocated) scroll 'of the Law' by the high priest Hilkiah, all of which points not only to his placing of his life's purpose within the context of a group but also to the covenantal thinking that characterizes much religious thought and especially traditional Jewish ethics: if one does right by God then God will do right by one, and if not... We know where that ellipsis ends, and it is exactly the transactional theology against which Jesus spoke. Yet Josiah's time was not one where either grace or mercy was

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often taught, and the prophecy he received would not have helped in any case. On this point especially his prescience would have been debilitating. Even if he accepted his own finitude and had managed to come to terms with it he was nevertheless confronted by the knowledge that not only would he die (and therefore too the reminder of the unavoidability of death) but that his whole ethnic group would suffer terribly. It would be very easy, and probably natural, for him to read 'soon' into both sides of that equation: I will (soon) be laid in my tomb (with the caveat of 'in peace' attached) and therefore not see the (soon) coming national catastrophe (with no caveat attached – simply the bald and horrifying fact of it). Having to dwell mentally on that, being forced into confronting it through the shocking sequence of events of the Temple scroll's discovery, the message of the prophetess, and the acceptance of the validity of that message, would almost certainly have added up to a psychological burden that plagued Josiah, a daily reminder of death and disaster, and in that sense his perishing can, I think, arguably be considered 'early' however long or short the interval (II Kings informs us that eleven years passed in between).

Face/About-Face

What though for us? If we confront death during the regular course of our lives might that force the issue in a comparably real and worry-generating manner that it would have for Josiah? Would that also make our own deaths seem 'early' in the same or a similar way? Would we too take no real comfort in the prescience of it? For we must acknowledge that there is a prescience here, a foresight of absolutely certain doom, of the finish, the slamming shut and closed of the totality of all that we know and love. Or might this rather bring relief, a welcome sigh in the recognition of the cessation of the labours we have undertaken, a placidity that says 'yes' to the mode of creaturehood we

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have, a 'thank you' for the time allotted – or a 'no thank you' and an embrace of the end? That, of course, is up to each of us, though our cultures may help or hinder along the way. It is interesting in this regard to consider the medieval European Christian tradition of *memento mori* reflection (Latin for 'Remember that you must die') and how that has mutated in modern times into 'dark tourism' packages where visitors are guided to ossuaries replete with attached gift shops, photo opportunities, air conditioning, and all the rest. Death here is commercialized, it has become a commodity,[13] and – we might think – like every other product we surround ourselves with it too is disposable. This is folly, most obviously so, for what could be more 'disposable' than these very mortal meat-sacks we call ourselves? There is a certain tendency, perhaps more pronounced in our era than previously, to retreat from the facts of death and decay into an abstraction of such, a (inherent?) refusal to accept the human ability to engage in an extended cognizance of one's own demise. This capacity though is indeed a kind of future knowing – and an accurate one – let there be no doubt about that. How are we dealing with it? If the aforementioned tourist practices are any indication, through the facilitation of the minimizing and compartmentalizing of death, through trying to make of it a 'clean' break, a sales point, a spooky distraction or entertaining jaunt away from one's daily working life, one event among the many in a two-week vacation.

Our query though was not about death *per se*, it was rather about how comforting (or not) a prescience about the events after one's death might be. In answer to that we found that everything depended on the elements of one's embeddedness and the attitude taken towards those elements, for there can be no untwining of self from situatedness and a concern for one's community is simply unavoidable. We might be able to face the fact of our own deaths, but can we actually face up to it? Can we take it as a true and real aspect of the life we have now and not simply an abstracted piece of it? In other words, can we

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take our death and the decay, rot, disintegration, and disappearance of this very body reading these words to heart? Can we make that a reality of our day-to-day life? If we can, then given the assumed future orientation of our values (if we agree with Scheffler, and considering the naturalness with which we care for the well-being of others in our lives I think at least some measure of agreeing with Scheffler is called for) how might we respond to the insight of 'all things shall pass' that is a part of this prescience? That, and nothing less, is the real question here, the better question, and it can have no answer but the one I give it today, and tomorrow's 'today', and the day after's. My death, my loved ones', my community's, that of the whole human saga, hangs there waiting. I know this – and so?

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Notes

[1] *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 607.

[2] While I believe we must take such things with a large grain of salt, the dates given for King Josiah's life are *c*. 649-609 BCE, and the years for his reign are listed as 641/640 to 610/609 BCE; see 'Josiah', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josiah> [accessed 25 July 2018].

[3] For some details, see ibid.

[4] *Tanakh*, II Kings 22:13, p. 606.

[5] 'Josiah'.

[6] Ibid.

[7] *Tanakh*, II Kings 23:29-30, p. 609.

[8] Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, ed. and intro. Niko Kolodny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[9] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 3rd rev. edn, trans. and intro. Waltraut Stein (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989), p. 116.

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[10] Her *Wikipedia* page can be found here: 'Edith Stein', *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Stein> [accessed 13 August 2018].

[11] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton-Penguin Books, 1955/2005), p. 6.

[12] Simon Critchley, *Very Little… Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[13] Cyril Schäfer with Ruth McManus, 'Memento Mori and Tourist Encounters with Authentic Death in European Ossuaries' and Shingo Iitaka, 'Tourism of Darkness and Light: Japanese Commemorative Tourism to Paradise', in Adam Kaul and Jonathan Skinner (eds) *Leisure and Death: An Anthropological Tour of Risk, Death, and Dying* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2018), pp. 163-89 and 141-59, respectively.

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