

# Intimations of Mortality

We have been here before. The coronavirus pandemic has many precedents. Over the centuries various plagues have swept over our world. Many millions of people have died before their time. From 1347 to 1351 the Black Death killed about 30 million people in Medieval Europe: over a third of the population. From 1918 to 1920 the Great Influenza killed about 50 million people: about 2.5% of the world's population. Each of these pandemics was as deadly as World War I (about 20 million) or World War II (about 70 million). Pandemics are more worrisome than wars: we cannot sue for peace with a virus. Most of us survived even the worst of past infections. Our systems of immunity will likely once again become victorious in this present pandemic. But just like after a war, we shall be severely chastened. How close we will have come to death will change the way we think. Everything will be seen through the mirror of our own mortality and the transience of our species. The nearness of an ending will distort our thinking. We shall have strange dreams and frightening visions.

## John of Patmos

Such dreams and visions came to a man named John almost two millennia ago. In the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, the Christians of the Roman Empire were severely persecuted, the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the Roman Empire was shaken by attacks from without and rebellions from within. There was no pandemic but life was just as uncertain.

On the island of Patmos just off the west coast of what is now Turkey, a Christian named John experienced disturbing visions of the future. He described these in a manuscript that began with the word *apokalypsis* (Greek for “unveiling”). This became *Revelation*, the last book in the Christian New Testament (Koester, 2014; Quispel, 1979). The illustration on the right, from the *Bamberg Apocalypse*, an illuminated manuscript from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, shows an angel telling John what he should write:



The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John (Revelation 1:1)

For many years, Christian scholars assumed that John the Apostle, the youngest of Christ’s disciples, was the author of *Revelation*, the Gospel of John and the three Epistles of John. Most modern scholars consider it unlikely that he wrote any of these works. They suggest three separate authors one for the gospel, one for the three epistles, and one for the apocalypse. One telling point is that each author describes the end-times very differently. For example, the Antichrist is mentioned in the epistles (e.g. 1 John 2:18), but not in the apocalypse. The author of *Revelation* was probably a Jewish-Christian prophet living in Asia Minor – John of Patmos. He may have written the book over many years. One suggestion is that he began writing as a Jew and later converted to

Christianity (Koester, 2014, pp 68-71).

The visions described by John are stunning in their force and detail. The Whore of Babylon, the Seven-Headed Beast, and the Four Horsemen have become part of our collective consciousness.

*Revelation* is the most interpreted and least understood book of the Christian Bible (Quispel, 1979; Koester, 2014). Some have interpreted the visions as describing the troubled time in which they were experienced. The Seven-Headed Beast could then represent Rome (with its seven hills, or its seven emperors), and the Rider on the White Horse could represent the Parthians who threatened the peace of the Middle East. Others have considered the visions as prophesying the later history of the Christian Church. The Whore of Babylon was the papacy of Rome for Protestants and the heresies of the Reformation for Catholics. Others believe that Revelation foretells the Last Days, that are yet to come, when Christ will judge both the quick and the dead.

John's first vision was of the Lord seated upon a throne in Heaven. This is illustrated below in the 11<sup>th</sup>-Century Bamberg Apocalypse, and in the 1498 woodcut by Albrecht Dürer. Around the throne were four beasts in the form of Man, Lion, Ox and Eagle, probably representing the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Around them were four and twenty elders, clothed in white and wearing crowns of gold. In the Lord's right hand was a book "sealed with seven seals." The structure of this book is not clear. Perhaps it is made up of seven scrolls one rolled up within the other (Quispel, 1979, p 51). A mystical lamb appears and proceeds to open each of the seals.



## The Four Horsemen

As the first four seals are opened four horsemen appear:

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of

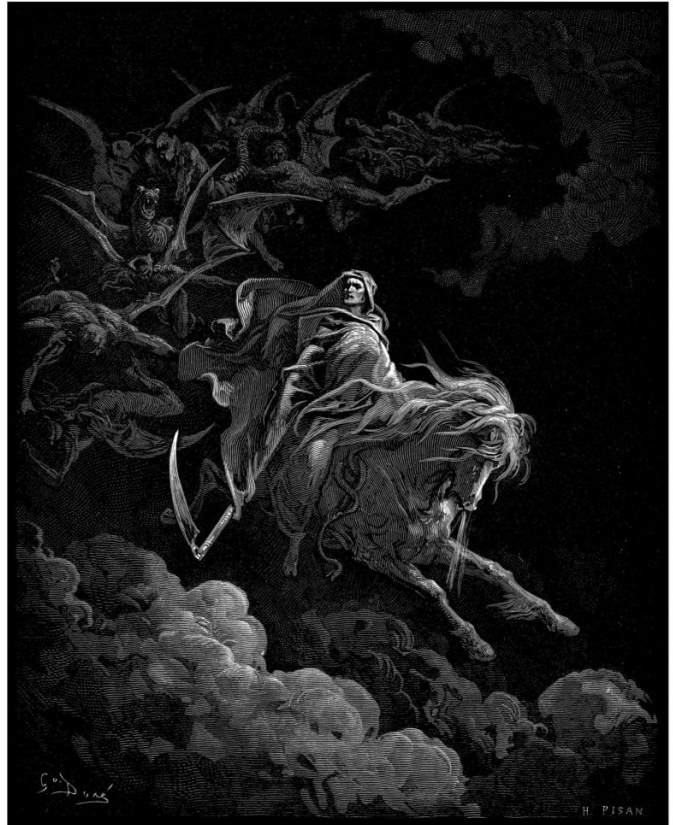
the fourth beast say, Come and see.

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth. (Revelation 6:1-8)

Only the fourth horseman is clearly identified by John as Death. The color of his horse has been interpreted as "pale," although the Greek *chloros* is actually better translated as "green." Perhaps John envisioned a sickly pale green color. The identity of the other three is unknown (reviewed by Koester, 2014, pp 392-398; and in Wikipedia). The rider of the black horse with his scales for weighing and pricing food was almost certainly Famine. The rider of the Red Horse was probably War. The first horsemen has been interpreted in many ways. Perhaps he is Christ, perhaps the Antichrist. Some have considered him as Conquest though this seems to overlap with the rider of the Red Horse. Pestilence or plague seems the most reasonable interpretation. His arrows could then represent the transmission of infection.



The most famous depiction of the Four Horsemen is the 1498 woodcut of Albrecht Dürer, illustrated on the right. The first three horsemen look like mercenary warriors from the Hundred Year War. Death is a skeletal figure riding an emaciated horse. He clears the world of those who die from pestilence, war and famine.



The 1865 wood-engraving by Héliodore Pelan based on a drawing by Gustave Doré gives Death a more majestic appearance, and grants him the scythe that has become his symbol. The scythe refers to the apocalyptic passages in the Gospels that consider the final harvest of human souls. Doré also depicts the dark shades of Hades that John saw following after Death.

## **Pale Horse, Pale Rider**

In 1918 Katherine Anne Porter almost died from the Great Influenza while she was in Denver working as a journalist (Barry, 1963). In 1939 she published *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* a short novel about that experience. In the novel she calls herself Miranda (from the Latin, "to be wondered at"). *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* was published together with two other stories – *Old Mortality* and *Noon Wine* – and gave its title to the collection.

The novel opens with a dream. Miranda is about to go riding, but she cannot decide which horse to borrow for a journey she does not wish to take. She decides against Miss Lucy "with the long nose and the wicked eye," and Fiddler "who can jump ditches in the dark," and chooses Graylie "because he is not afraid of bridges." These horses are those that were ridden long ago by Amy, the wife of Miranda's Uncle Gabriel. Amy was a beautiful and spirited young woman, who committed suicide before Miranda was born. Her story was told in *Old Mortality*, one of several Miranda stories.

In the dream Miranda must go riding with a stranger who has been hanging about the place. She mounts Graylie, and urges him on. They fly off, over the hedge and the ditch and down the lane:

The stranger rode beside her, easily, lightly, his reins loose in his half-closed hand, straight and elegant in dark shabby garments that flapped upon his bones. (Porter, 1939, p 181)

Suddenly, she pulls Graylie up, the stranger rides on, and Miranda wakes up.

She remembers the events of the day before, particularly her visit to the infirmary at the army camp, and her tryst with her new boyfriend Adam, a young and handsome soldier about to be sent to France. She is not feeling well, but goes to work



and once again meets Adam.

The next day she feels quite ill, and is seen by a doctor who prescribes some medications and says he will check on her later. Adam comes to see her and comforts her. They talk of their love for each other, about the war and about old songs they had heard when they were younger. One of these is a spiritual that began "Pale horse, pale rider, done taken my lover away." The doctor returns and arranges for Miranda to be admitted to hospital. She has contracted influenza, perhaps from her visit to the infirmary.

While in hospital Miranda comes close to death but survives

Silenced she sank easily through deeps under deeps of darkness until she lay like a stone at the farthest bottom of life, knowing herself to be blind, deaf, speechless, no longer aware of the members of her own body, entirely withdrawn from all human concerns, yet alive with a peculiar lucidity and coherence; all notions of the mind, the reasonable inquiries of doubt, all ties of blood and the desires of the heart, dissolved and fell away from her, and there remained of her only a minute fiercely burning particle of being that knew itself alone, that relied upon nothing beyond itself for its strength; not susceptible to any appeal or inducement, being itself composed entirely of one single motive, the stubborn will to live. This fiery motionless particle set itself unaided to resist destruction, to survive and to be in its own madness of being, motiveless and planless beyond that one essential end. (pp 252-3).

She has a vision of a place reached by crossing a rainbow bridge. Graylie was not afraid of bridges. There Miranda sees in the shimmering air "a great company of human beings," all the people she had known in life. From this apparent heaven she returns to the reality of the hospital. She has miraculously comeback from the dead. She lives up to her name

– someone to be wondered at.

In her convalescence she learns that Adam had also become ill, probably having caught the disease from her. However, though Miranda had survived, Adam had died.

Outside the bells are ringing to celebrate the end of the war. As Miranda prepares to leave the hospital, she requests some essentials to begin her new life:

One lipstick, medium, one ounce flask Bois d'Hiver perfume, one pair gray suede gauntlets without straps, two pairs gray sheer stockings without clocks ... one walking stick of silvery wood with a silver knob. (p 262).

She will be pale and elegant like the rider she dreamed about at the beginning of her illness, the rider that done take her love away. She has been irretrievably marked by death. As she leaves the hospital Miranda thinks

No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything. (p 264)

Life is now defined by what it is not – no war, no plague, no noise, no light. Porter's words recall Wilfred Owen's 1917 poem *Anthem for Doomed Youth* which begins with the "monstrous anger of the guns" and ends with "each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds" (Owen, 1985, p 76). Much poetry was written about the terrible loss of life in the Great War. Very little is concerned with the great epidemic of influenza that marked its ending (Crosby, 1989; Fisher, 2012).

Miranda's final claim "Now there would be time for everything" is the tragedy of the book. She is now free to do as she wishes but there is nothing that she wishes to do.

Porter spent many years before she fully recovered from her experience in Denver. She did not publish her first stories until 1930, and *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* did not come out until 1939. Some sense of Miranda's feelings at the end of that book is perhaps present in the 1942 portrait drawing of Porter by Paul Cadmus.



## **The Great Influenza**

The influenza that almost killed Katherine Anne Porter swept across the world between 1918 and 1921 (Barry, 2004; Crosby, 1989; Spinney, 2017; Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). No one is sure where it began. The first cases were seen in Kansas, and the disease spread rapidly through the US army camps where young men were being trained before going to fight in France.

The following is the iconic image of the epidemic: the makeshift infirmary at Camp Funston, Kansas. The photograph is strangely still. It should be accompanied by the sound of intermittent coughing. The light rakes across the camp cots,

randomly selecting one soldier or another, much as the disease would select those who would die. There was no treatment: oxygen would not be used for pneumonia until after the war (Heffner, 2013). About a quarter of the young men in this photo likely died of influenza. More US soldiers died of influenza than during battle.



The disease quickly spread to the battlefields of Europe. None of the combatant-countries wished to acknowledge that their troops were ill. Since the first officially reported cases occurred when the disease spread to Spain, the pandemic was thereafter miscalled the Spanish Flu. In this posting it is called the Great Influenza.

The 1918 pandemic was unusual in that it the young and healthy were more susceptible to the disease than the elderly. This may have been related to the close quartering of the young soldiers. Or it might have been caused by an overly reactive immune system.

Coronavirus COVID-19 acts similarly to the influenza virus in terms of its spread through airborne droplets, and in terms of how its major morbidity is due to a viral pneumonia. The

coronavirus differs from the Great Influenza in that it affects the elderly more than the young. Nevertheless, we should look to the Great Influenza in terms of what might happen in our current pandemic.

A pandemic is characterized by two main parameters. The contagiousness of the disease is measured by the basic reproduction number ( $R_0$ ). This is the number of new people that will become infected from one individual patient. If  $R_0$  is less than 1 the disease dies out; if it is greater than 1 the disease spreads exponentially through the population. The virulence of the disease is assessed by the case fatality rate (CFR). This measures the proportion of infected patients that die.

For the Great Influenza  $R_0$  was about 2 (Ferguson et al. 2006), and the CFR was about 2.5% (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). We do not yet know for sure how the present coronavirus COVID-19 compares. Early data from China suggest that  $R_0$  is about 2, and the CFR about 5% (Wu et al., 2020). Since we have not yet done sufficient testing to be sure of the number of cases in the population, the CFR is likely overestimated. Most of the tested cases are patients who have been severely symptomatic. If there is a significant number of asymptomatic (and untested) cases, the CFR will be lower (discussed extensively on the World in Data website). It might approach the CFR estimated for the Great Influenza, but it will be at least an order of magnitude greater than seasonal flu ( $<0.1\%$ ).

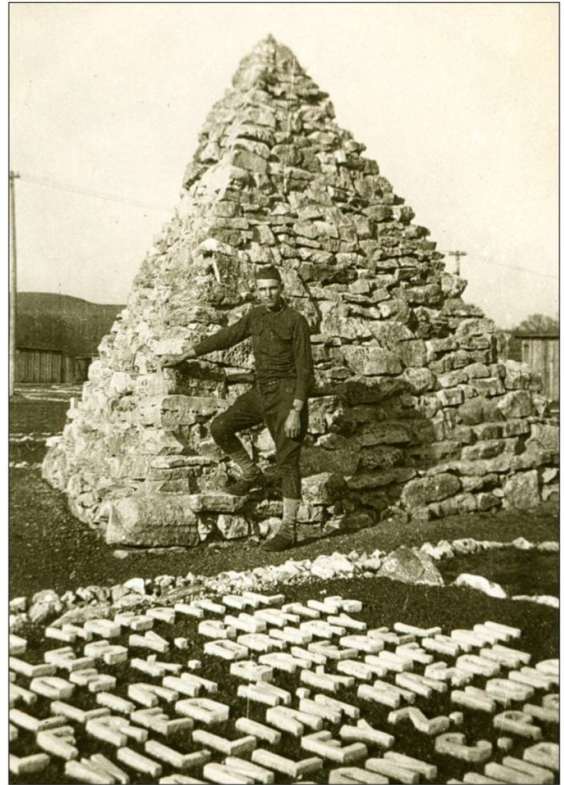
For those who wish to consider all the other great epidemics of human history, Wikipedia has listed their estimated values for  $R_0$  and CFR.

The numbers for COVID-19 Pandemic indicate we must be extremely cautious so as not to endure a repeat of the Great Influenza. Since stories are often more convincing than numbers, we can briefly consider the effect of the

Philadelphia's Liberty Loan Parade on September 23, 1918. Despite warnings about the influenza, the city went ahead with a huge parade to drum up support for the US war effort. A few days after the parade, hundreds of people became ill. Soon the number of ill patients increased. Hospitals rapidly became overcrowded and unable to take new cases. By the end of the year the number of cases exceeded 100,000 and the number of dead approached 13,000, over 1% of the city's population (Barry, 2004, pp 220-227; Kopp & McGovern, 2018)). In contrast after the first recorded cases of influenza in St Louis, that city quickly instituted measures against the spread of the disease, such as closing schools and banning public gatherings. The number of deaths in St Louis per 100,000 population during the epidemic was less than half that in Philadelphia (Hatchett et al, 2007).

In Philadelphia and across the world morticians and gravediggers rapidly became overwhelmed and bodies began to pile up in the streets. In Rio de Janeiro, Jamanta, a famous carnival reveller, commandeered a tram and a luggage car and swept through the city picking up bodies and delivering them to the cemetery (Spinney, 2017, p. 54-55).

Despite its death toll, the Great Influenza was largely ignored by historians until the possibility of new influenza pandemics became real toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Thousands of monuments memorializing those who died in the Great War exist all over the world. Monuments to those who died of influenza are scarce, even though those who died of the disease outnumbered those who died in battle. The soldiers at Camp Fenton erected their own memorial to their colleagues who had died of the influenza (illustrated on the right, with its designer Henry Hardy). The monument was a simple pyramid of piled up stones with the names of the victims written in smaller stones on the grass. The camp and its monument have been long ago abandoned.



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One of the reasons for the lack of attention that the Great Influenza received may have been that it did not fit with any overarching narrative. Though many died, they did not die for some noble cause. The disease was largely random in its killing.

## **The Black Death**

Even though it did not kill so many, the Black Death had a far greater impact on our history. It shattered the society of the Middle Ages, disrupting the feudal system, and questioning the power of the Church. Part of this impact was due to the Bubonic Plague being far more virulent than either the influenza or the coronavirus. The Case Fatality Rate during the Black Death was over 30%. The disease was caused by a

bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which is endemic in rats and transmitted to human beings by fleas. The infected rats and their fleas came to Europe from the East on merchant ships. The plague began in port cities such as Naples, Venice and Genoa, and rapidly spread throughout Europe (McMillen, 2016; Snowden, 2019).

Nowadays we have antibiotics that can kill the bacteria that causes the Bubonic Plague. Furthermore, we understand how it is transmitted and can prevent this by controlling human exposure to rats and fleas. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century there was nothing to do but flee. This flight actually increased the spread of the disease, which was carried by the fleas on all those who ran away.



The Black Death bequeathed us with our most potent image of death as a skeletal figure, often clad in a shroud or black cloak and carrying scythe – the “grim reaper.” Such figures were often portrayed leading various people from all stations of life in a “dance of death.” The statue illustrated on the right is from the tomb in Trier Cathedral of Johann Philipp von Wallerdorff who died in 1768.



Many considered the Black Death as God’s punishment for humanity’s sins, and decided that a great return to God was necessary. Yet the plague had randomly killed both saint and sinner. Others thought that the plague was God’s demonstration that the Church had gone astray and needed to be reformed. Yet both priests and parishioners were equally affected.

And so, a few came to the idea that perhaps there was no God. The only justice in the world was at the hand of human beings. And their only recourse was themselves. And if they could ultimately survive the plague, they could perhaps settle on a different world, where reason ruled instead of faith.

## The Seventh Seal

In *Revelation* after the four horsemen, the fifth and sixth seals are opened. These bring forth to John a vision of the Christian Martyrs, and then a vision of all those who had been saved by faith in Christ. Finally, the last seal is opened:

And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. (Revelation 8:1)

Christians interpret the silence as representing the awe that occurs when one realizes the greatness of God and his program for the future. Ingmar Bergman considered it differently. Much of his work is concerned with the silence of God. All our prayers no matter how fervent are met with silence. He made this the subject of a trilogy of films: *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1963) and *The Silence* (1963).

The idea is also at the heart of his earlier 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*. The quotation from Revelation about the opening of the seventh seal and the silence in heaven begins the film. A knight Antonius Block (Max von Sydow) has just returned to Sweden from the Crusades. He has brought with him a game of chess that he learned in Palestine. All of Europe is in the grip of the Black Death. On a beach Antonius prays to God. After his prayer, Death (Bengt Ekerot) appears. Antonius challenges Death to a game of Chess to decide his fate. The following is a clip from the movie. The sound of the waves goes silent when Death appears.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/7thseal-chess-x.mp4>

Bergman based the idea of the game of chess from a 1480 fresco (right) painted by Albertus Pictor in the Täby Church near Stockholm. As the film proceeds, Death ultimately wins the game, and leads Antonius and his family off in a dance of death. The film is not accurate historically: the crusades ended long before the Black Death. However, it is one of our most vivid depictions of human mortality.



### **Playing Chess with Death**

Death is now among us. Not in as the dark figure portrayed by Bengt Ekerot, but in the form of a coronavirus epidemic. The disease is not as virulent as the Black Death. However, it is likely just as contagious and just as virulent as the virus that caused the Great Influenza. How do we prevent what happened in 1918 when Death took millions of people before

their time?

How do we play our game of chess with Death? We still have no specific treatment, and there is as yet no vaccine. Unlike in 1918, however, we now have oxygen therapy and, if necessary, artificial ventilation. These procedures can help patients with pneumonia survive until their immune systems can finally destroy the virus. Furthermore, we have monitors such as finger oximeters that can determine when oxygen therapy is needed.

What is most important is to inhibit the spread of the disease in the population. The most powerful means to do this involves identifying all patients with the disease, tracing all people who have come in contact with these patients, testing these contacts, and quarantining both the patients and their contacts (whether or not they are infected) until they are no longer contagious. Since we have tests that are reasonably specific for the virus, this approach is definitely possible, and is being used successfully in China and in South Korea.

In the absence of contact tracing, we can limit the spread of the disease by staying away from our fellows beyond the distance that airborne drops can travel: "physical distancing" (a more appropriate term than "social distancing"). Physical distancing can certainly slow down the spread of the disease so that hospital facilities for treating those patients that develop pneumonia do not become overwhelmed. However, it will ultimately have to be replaced with contact tracing. Or the Dance of Death will continue.

Despite our best efforts many people will die in the pandemic. Though we know we have to die sometime, we generally believe that this will not be tomorrow. Nowadays death is closer. We need to come to terms with it. Through whatever stories, dreams and visions we can muster. We cannot play chess well without equanimity.

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## Vanity of Vanity

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 2:1-2)

Thus begins *Ecclesiastes*, the most unusual book in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Unlike the rest of the Bible, this book claims that the nature of the world is neither revealed to us nor accessible to reason. The universe and its Creator pay us

no particular regard. Man is not special. Heretical though these thoughts might be, *Ecclesiastes* contains some of the world's most widely quoted verses of scripture. The words of the Preacher resonate through the seasons of our lives. This post comments on several selections from the book.

## **Qohelet**

The author of the book is called *Qohelet* (קוהלת in Hebrew). This word derives from a root meaning to “assemble” or “bring people together.” The name suggests a sage who teaches a group of disciples. The translators have taken it to mean someone who preaches in a church (Latin, *ecclesia*). Yet Qohelet was clearly neither priest nor preacher. He was a rich man, a master of estates and an owner of palaces. The title *Ecclesiastes* is inappropriate. As pointed out by Lessing (1998),

thus do the living springs of knowledge, of wisdom, become captured by institutions, and by churches of various kinds.

According to the first line of the book, its author was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. However, although Qohelet may have been a descendant of David, linguistic evidence (reviewed in Bundvad, 2015, pp 5-9) indicates that he wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE during the Hellenistic period (323-63 BCE), some seven hundred years after Solomon. Other scholars have suggested that the author may have written several centuries earlier during the Persian period (539-323 BCE), but this would still be long after Solomon (10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE).

The first line of the book may have been added by a later editor who wished this scripture to partake of Solomon's fame. More likely, it is original, indicating that *Ecclesiastes* is a fictional testament: an imagined description of what Solomon might have thought (see discussion in Batholomew, 2009, pp

43-54). However, the book is ambiguous in terms of its narration. As the book progresses Qohelet becomes clearly distinguished from Solomon. And even Qohelet vacillates between two minds: that of a Jewish believer and that of a Greek philosopher (Bartholomew, 2009, p. 78).



Ben Shahn (1971) imagines Qohelet as a simple teacher. Though once rich and powerful, his thoughts have led him to withdraw from high society. Although dismayed that he has not been able to understand its meaning, he still enjoys the life he has been granted.



## Vanity



Qohelet's summary of his philosophy is that "All is vanity." Shahn (1971) presents the beginning of the second verse in calligraphy:

The full verse and its transliteration follows. Note that the Hebrew goes from right to left whereas the transliteration goes from left to right (As Qohelet later says, "The wind goeth toward the south and turneth about unto the north"):

הבלים אמר קהלת הבלים אמר קהלת

havel havolim amar kohelet, havel havolim hakkol havel.

The sound of the Hebrew follows (just in case you wish to denounce the world's latest frivolity out loud):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-1-2.mp3>

The key Hebrew word is *havel* (הבל). This

indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air (Alter, 2010, p 340)

The word can be directly translated as “vapor” or “breath.” Alter translates *havel havelim* as “mere breath.” It denotes something without material substance or temporal persistence. Many translators have characterized it in abstract terms: meaningless, transient, empty, useless, absurd, futile, enigmatic, illusory.

The word *havel* has the same letters as the name of Abel, the second son of Adam, slain by his brother Cain. Qohelet was likely aware of this association (Bundvad, 2015, pp 79-80). Abel was the first man to die. His life was fleeting and uncertain, his death unjust, his person only faintly remembered.

The King James Version of the Bible (1611) translates *havel* as “vanity.” This word comes from the Latin *vanus* meaning empty. The translators used “vanity” to denote a lack of meaning, value or purpose. The secondary, now more common, meaning for the word – self-admiration, excessive pride (the opposite of humility) – may have come about as a particular example of worthless activity.

At the time of the King James Version, the term *vanitas* was also used to denote a type of painting became popular in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The example below is by Pieter Claesz (1628). These paintings arrange objects to show the transience of life, the limits of understanding and the inevitability of death. Despite their meaning, the paintings are imbued with sensual beauty:

The appeal of the *vanitas* painting tradition lies in its successful capture of the subtle balance between transient and joyful modes of living, so vociferously endorsed by Qoheleth. (Christianson, 2007, p 122).



## Benefit

After introducing himself and summarizing his message, Qohelet poses the main question of the book:

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes, 1:3)

The word translated as “profit” is *yitron* (יִטְרוֹן). This word is only found in the Bible in *Ecclesiastes*. Perhaps “benefit” might be a better translation (Bartholomew, 2009, pp 107-108). The “labour” involves both physical and mental work. The idea is how best we should lead our lives.

The answer begins with the glorious poem

One generation passeth away,  
and another generation cometh:  
but the earth abideth for ever.

The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down,  
and hasteth to his place where he arose.

The wind goeth toward the south,  
and turneth about unto the north;  
it whirleth about continually,  
and the wind returneth again

according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full;  
unto the place from whence the rivers come,  
thither they return again.

All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it:  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;  
and that which is done is that which shall be done:  
and there is no new thing under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 1: 3-9).

The poetry is beautiful but there is no profit in it. Human beings come and go. The human mind cannot gain sufficient knowledge of the world to understand its workings or to change it in any significant way. The world is as frustrating as it is beautiful. The more one knows, the more one is convinced of one's transience:

For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1: 18)

Qohelet realizes that life can nevertheless be enjoyable.

There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2: 24)

This is the old man's version of the Andrew Marvel's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The sentiment is perhaps as old as poetry. The Roman poet Catullus in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE also wrote how the sun arises after it goes down but man does not:

*soles occidere et redire possunt;*

*nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux  
nox est perpetua una dormienda.  
da mi basia mille, deinde centum*

Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World* (1614) translated this as

The Sunne may set and rise  
But we contrariwise  
Sleepe after our short light  
One everlasting night.

Raleigh does not translate the continuation of the poem wherein Catullus goes on to request a compensatory thousand kisses from his lover Lesbia.

## **Time**

Qohelet has been considering the passage of time. The word used for time in Ecclesiastes – *eth* (עֵת) – generally refers to a moment of time. The other Hebrew word for time is *olam* (עוֹלָם) which takes all of time into account and is usually translated as “for ever” (as in Ecclesiastes 1:4). In the first chapter Qohelet contrasted world time with human time.

In Chapter 3, he considers a different aspect of time. God has ensured that events occur at their appropriate time. Eternity has been arranged in its proper sequence.

To every thing there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up  
that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones,  
and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace,  
and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time of war, and a time of peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)



Ben Shahn (1971) portrays the essence of these lines with a wheat field at harvest time:

These verses can be interpreted in two main ways. The first proposes that time has been pre-ordained to work out the purposes of God, that we cannot change these things, and that we should be resigned to what happens. Everything is for the best. The other interpretation uses these words to justify one's actions. Martin Luther quoted these verses when the time had come to speak out against the Catholic Church (Christianson, 2007, p 166). Thus are human actions divinely justified. Luther believed in predestination. He spoke out not by choice but because he had no choice: he could not do otherwise.

These verses were set to music by the folksinger Pete Seeger in the late 1950s. His lyrics directly quote the King James Version using the first verse with the addition of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" as the refrain. After "a time of peace" Seeger added "I swear it's not too late." The song became an anthem of the peace movement. The following is an excerpt:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/seeger-second-half.mp3>

Qohelet recognizes the beauty of God's time. Yet he is frustrated that he can never understand it:

I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

(Ecclesiastes 3: 14-15)

This idea of time as divinely ordered but incomprehensible to the human mind pervades T. S. Eliots' *Burnt Norton* (1935) which begins:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.

Qohelet goes on to state that since we cannot understand we are no different from other animals. We live, we die.

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts;  
even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth  
the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath  
no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.  
All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to  
dust again.  
(Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)

These statements go against all previous Jewish teachings.  
Qohelet's book

amounts to a denial of divine revelation, and of the belief  
that man was created as an almost divine being, to care for  
and exercise dominion over the other creatures and all the  
works of God's hands. ... In the final analysis man is like  
the animals rather than superior to them (Scott, 1965, p.  
205)

Johannes Brahms was devastated when his friend Clara Schumann  
suffered a stroke in 1895 and was close to death. During this  
time, he composed his *Four Serious Songs Opus 121*. The first  
song is uses Luther's translation of *Ecclesiastes 3: 19-22*.  
The following is the beginning (up to *wird wieder zu Staub*  
"turn to dust again") as sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/brahms-4-serious-songs-1-fischer-dieskau.mp3>



Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh; wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch; und haben alle einerlei Odem; und der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn das Vieh: denn es ist alles eitel. Es fährt alles an einen Ort; es ist alles von Staub gemacht, und wird wieder zu Staub.

This first song is desolate – we die like beasts, our life is empty, we are made of dust. The later songs in the series progress from deep sadness to quiet resignation. The final song sets verses from the New Testament, among them

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (I Corinthians 13:12)

Brahms called his songs “serious” (*ernst*) rather than “sacred.” This is a fitting description of the book *Ecclesiastes*.

## **Justice**

After considering the inevitability of death, Qohelet turns to evaluate the course of human life. He finds that success does not necessarily reward those who most deserve it:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

(Ecclesiastes 9:11)

A brief adaptation of this verse was included in the posthumously published *Last Poems* of D. H. Lawrence (1932). The poem *Race and Battle* is notable for its image of the “streaked pansy of the heart” which recalls the title of his earlier book *Pansies*, itself a pun on Pascal’s *Pensées*. Lawrence attempts to explain how to accept that life may be unfair and preserve a personal sense of justice.

The race is not to the swift  
but to those that can sit still  
and let the waves go over them.

The battle is not to the strong  
but to the frail, who know best  
how to efface themselves  
to save the streaked pansy of the heart from  
being trampled to mud.

Lawrence's poem adds to Qohelet's resignation some of the later teachings of Jesus – Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God (Matthew 5: 5,8).

### **Instruction**

Qohelet's search for wisdom has led him to dismay. Death is inevitable and unpredictable. Life is without justice. Nevertheless, Qohelet urges us to enjoy our life:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.

Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

(Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

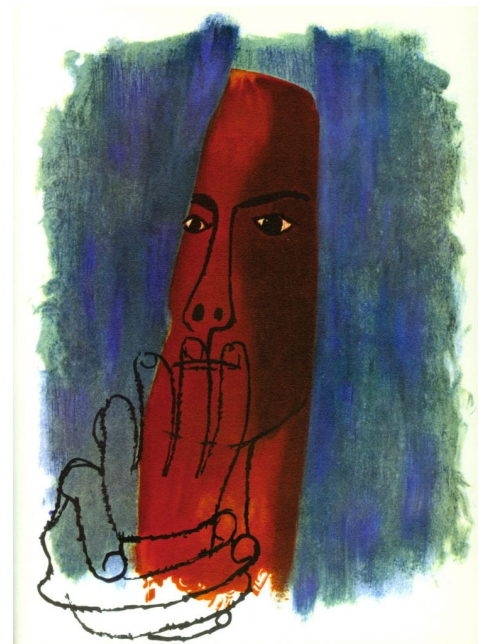
White clothes are worn for festive occasions. Their whiteness contrasts with the black of mourning. Anointing one's hair with oil is another sign of gladness. Yet the most important of Qohelet's injunctions is to work at whatever needs to be

done.

Qohelet's advice is related to the philosophies of Epicurus (341-270 BCE) in its enjoyment of life and of the stoic Zeno (334-262 BCE) in its promotion of right action. If, as most scholars now believe, Qohelet wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, he could have been influenced by such Greek philosophies. He certainly based his search for truth on reason rather than on revelation. Yet his philosophy is his own. It is religious rather than materialist.

Scott (1965, p 206) summarizes Qohelet's reasoning:

Thus the good of life is in the living of it. The profit of work is in the doing of it, not in any profit or residue which a man can exhibit as his achievement or pass on to his descendants. The fruit of wisdom is not the accumulation of all knowledge and the understanding of all mysteries. It lies rather in recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and power. Man is not the measure of all things. He is the master neither of life nor of death. He can find serenity only in coming to terms with the unalterable conditions of his existence, and in enjoying its real but limited satisfactions.



Ben Shahn presents the thoughts of Qohelet as balanced between his inability to understand and his realization that life can nevertheless be enjoyed:

Qohelet has much in common with the existentialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Albert Camus remarks in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942):

*Je ne sais pas si ce monde a un sens qui le dépasse. Mais je sais que je ne connais pas ce sens et qu'il m'est impossible pour le moment de le connaître.* [I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I cannot grasp that meaning and that it is impossible now for me to grasp it.]

Camus is much more tentative than Qohelet in his conclusion that we should nevertheless enjoy our life. He retells the myth of Sisyphus who was condemned by the Gods because he had tried to cheat death. He was made to roll an immense boulder up to the summit of a mountain, but every time he reached the top, the rock would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to begin his task again.

*La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme; il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.* [The very struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. ]

## **Bread upon the Waters**

Qohelet presents us with multiple proverbial injunctions about

how one should live one's life. Perhaps the most quoted of these is:

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

(Ecclesiastes 11: 1-2)

The verses have been interpreted in many ways. Merchants have considered them in terms of overseas trade. Christians have proposed that it means to spread the teachings of Christ throughout the world. This idea derives from Christ's statement that he was the "bread of life" (John 6:35). Qohelet had neither of these ideas in mind. He was encouraging us to be generous, to provide for our fellows. He was suggesting that such human charity could compensate for life's injustice.

In his own old age, the wise Richard Wilbur (2010) wrote a poem about these verses

We must *cast our bread*  
*Upon the waters*, as the  
Ancient preacher said,

Trusting that it may  
Amplify be restored to us  
*After many a day*.

That old metaphor,  
Drawn from rice farming on the  
River's flooded shore,

Helps us to believe  
That it's no great sin to give,  
Hoping to receive.

Therefore I shall throw  
Broken bread, this sullen day,

Out across the snow,

Betting crust and crumb

That birds will gather, and that

One more spring will come.



## Light and Dark

Qohelet reminds us that life brings both enjoyment and dismay. The verses are illustrated by Ben Shahn on the left.

Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:

But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many.

(Ecclesiastes 11: 7-8)

## Remember Now

The last chapter of *Ecclesiastes* contains its most famous poetry. Qohelet, who has become old and wise, advises his youthful followers. He tells them to rejoice in their youth for life is beautiful. Yet they must always bear in mind that they must grow old and die:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,  
while the evil days come not,  
nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say,  
I have no pleasure in them;

While the sun, or the light, or the moon,  
or the stars, be not darkened,  
nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble,  
and the strong men shall bow themselves,  
and the grinders cease because they are few,  
and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

And the doors shall be shut in the streets,  
when the sound of the grinding is low,  
and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,  
and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high,  
and fears shall be in the way,  
and the almond tree shall flourish,  
and the grasshopper shall be a burden,  
and desire shall fail:  
because man goeth to his long home,  
and the mourners go about the streets:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed,  
or the golden bowl be broken,  
or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,  
or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:

and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8)

Qohelet refers to God as the Creator (*borador*, בוראדור). This is the only time he uses this term; elsewhere he uses *Elohim* (אלהים). Qohelet is here invoking Genesis: we must view the end of an individual life in relation to the beginning of all life. Some commentators (Rashi; Scott, 1965, p. 255) have remarked on the relations of this word to *bor* (בור) which occurs in the 7<sup>th</sup> verse. This means “pit,” in the sense of either a “grave” or a “cistern.” This verbal association also brings the end of life back to its source.

The poem is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. The initial verse of the poem clearly states that it is concerned with human mortality. Yet how the images relate to old age and death is as uncertain as the breath that ceases. And the poem ends on the words that began the book – all is vanity, merest breath.

A literal interpretation is that the poem describes a village or estate in mourning for a once-great person lately fallen on hard times. Perhaps Qohelet is foreseeing his own death. The windows of the house are darkened, the mill is quiet as the workers remember their late master, the mourners go about the streets, and finally dust is scattered over the body as it is buried.

A long tradition has provided allegorical interpretations of the images, relating them to the physical and mental decline that attends old age. The underlying idea is that the aging body is like a house in decay. For example, the commentary of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish rabbi Rashi suggests

the keepers of the house: *These are the ribs and the flanks,*  
*which protect* *the entire*



*body cavity*

the mighty men: *These are the legs, upon which the body supports itself*

and the grinders cease: *These are the teeth*

since they have become few: *In old age, most of his teeth fall out*

and those who look out of the windows: *These are the eyes.*

And the doors shall be shut: *These are his orifices.*

when the sound of the mill is low: *the sound of the mill grinding the food in his intestines, and that is the stomach*

The problem with such specific allegories is that different commentators provide different meanings. Do the doors that shut denote the eyelids or the lips?

Other interpretations are more abstract. Does the pitcher broken at the fountain represent the bladder or the loss of the life force? Is the silver cord the spinal column or the genealogical tree that ends at the death of a person with no heirs?

Some Hebrew interpretations consider these verses as representing the desolation of Israel following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The image of the golden bowl might then represent the broken lamp that no longer lit the sanctuary.

Some Christian interpretations see the imagery as a vision of the end times that will precede the final judgment. This fits with the epilogue that follows the poem.

No single interpretation conveys the sense of the poem. All meanings overlap. The poem is better listened to than imagined. The following is by the YouTube reader who goes by the name of Tom O'Bedlam

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tom-o-bedlam-ecclesiastes-12.mp3>

## Judgment

The book concludes with an epilogue that many take to be the words of a later editor. However, it rings true to Qohelet:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14)

Why else should one remember one's Creator? Why else should one bear in mind one's ultimate old age and death? The sentiment is similar to Marcus Aurelius (167 CE):

Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.

(Meditations IV:17)

Qohelet is also proposing that to be good is to be truly human – “the whole duty of man.” Any judgment of us as human beings must rest on whether we have done good or ill. Qohelet's instruction derives from man as much as from God.

The following presents the Hebrew (in Ben Shahn's calligraphy) together with its transliteration and an audio version of Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

סֵף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְרָא וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו שָׁמֹר כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאֵמֶן:

sovf dabar hakkol nishma eth ha'elohim yera eth mitzvotav  
shemovr ki zeh kol ha'adam.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-12-13.mp3>

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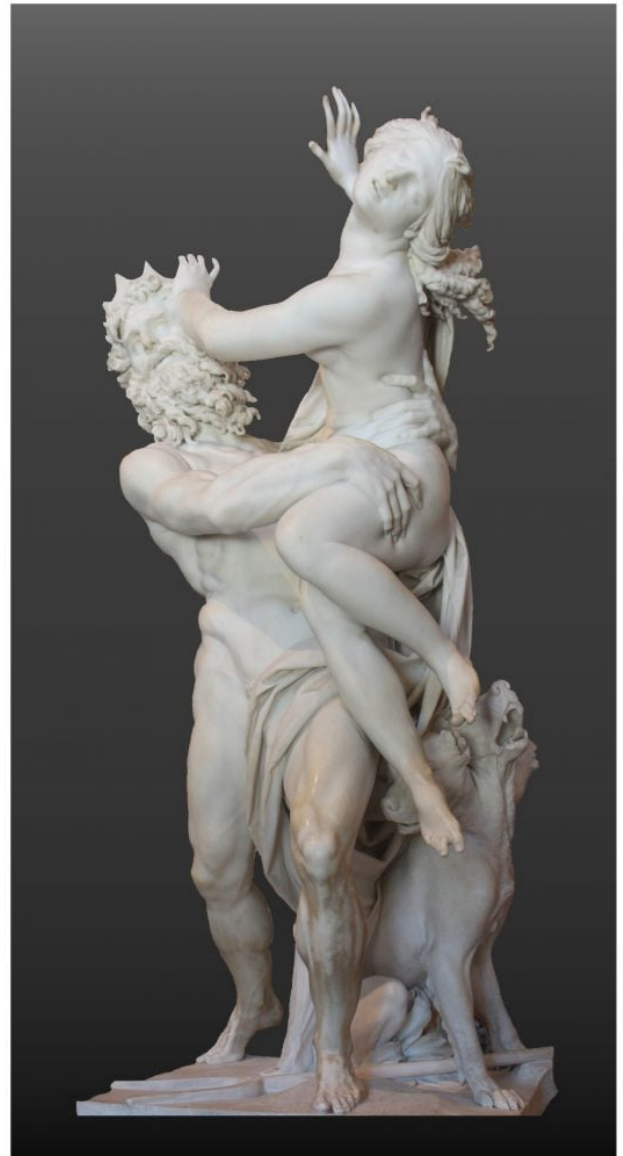
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# The Mysteries

For over a millennium the Mysteries were celebrated at Eleusis, about 18 km northwest of Athens. The main buildings in the temple precinct were built in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, but earlier buildings were present in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, and evidence of cult-activity at the site goes back to the Mycenaean period before 1100 BCE (Mylonas, 1961, Chapter II). The Mysteries continued through the Hellenistic and Roman ages until their demise in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE when Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

What happened during the Mysteries is unknown. Those who were initiated into the Mysteries were instructed not to reveal their secrets. All we know is that they provided their initiates with a vision of the divine and a way to cope with death.

## Myth



The Mysteries at Eleusis were based upon Demeter and Persephone (also known as *Kore*, the maiden). The earliest recorded version of their story is in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE (Lawton, 1898, pp. 154-179). Persephone was the daughter of Demeter (the Goddess of the Harvest) and Zeus. She was carried off by Hades to rule with him as Queen of the Underworld. While in the realm of the dead, Persephone sometimes assumed the name of Thea, and the Underworld later became known by the name of its king. Bernini's 1622 sculpture of the *Rape of Persephone* is the most famous representation of the myth.



On the left is shown a 5<sup>th</sup>-Century BCE votive tablet found in Southern Italy. The King and Queen of the Underworld sit together: Persephone holds a hen and a spray of wheat stems, and Hades displays a libation dish and a fully leaved tree-branch. Despite the fact that they rule over the dead, they are concerned with life.

Back on Earth, Demeter was grief-stricken. She wandered far and wide in search of her daughter. Ultimately she arrived at Eleusis and accepted the hospitality of its king, Celeus, and his family.

Demeter was the God of fruitfulness, and in her grief the Earth had become infertile:

The Earth did not send up any seed.

Demeter, she with the beautiful garlands in her hair, kept the seeds covered underground.

Many a curved plough was dragged along the fields by many an ox—all in vain.

Many a bright grain of wheat fell into the earth—all for

naught.

(*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Nagy 1914 translation, ll 306-309)

Zeus decided that this barrenness should not persist. After much negotiation with Demeter and with Hades, he arranged that Persephone could return periodically to her mother:

Zeus assented that her daughter, every time the season came round,  
would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist underneath,  
and the other two thirds in the company of her mother and the other immortals. (ll 464-465)

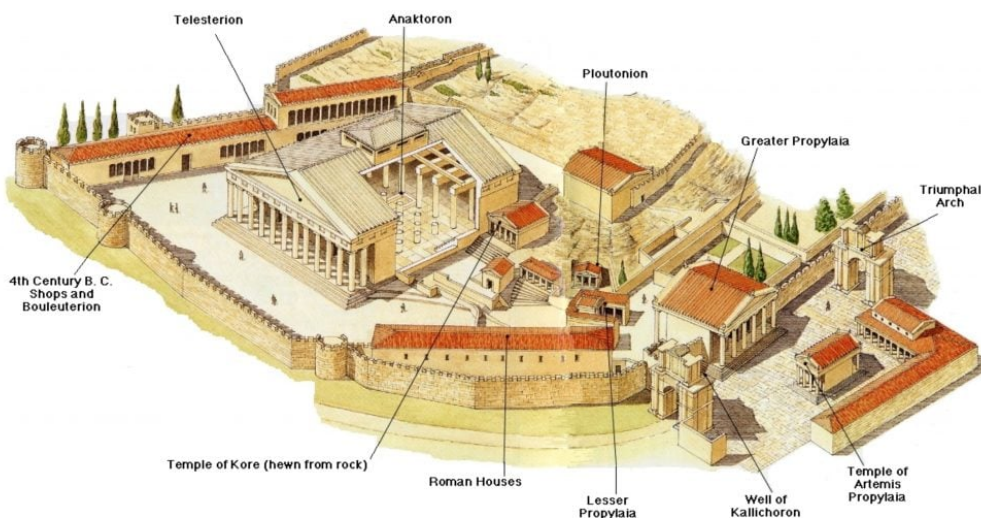


Thus the land returned to cyclic fruitfulness. The thankful Demeter taught Triptolemus, Celeus' son, all the secrets of agriculture. One interpretation of the Eleusinian relief at the National Archeological Museum in Athens shows Demeter (on the left) presenting wheat stems (no longer visible) to the young Triptolemus. Persephone lays her hand upon his head in blessing.

In celebration of the return of Persephone, Demeter also proposed that the Mysteries be conducted annually at Eleusis. These rites occurred each autumn just before the wheat was planted. The climate of Greece is such that nothing grows in the summer, ploughing and seeding occur in the fall, and the grain is harvested in spring (Cartwright, 2016).

## **Initiation**

After a large procession from Athens to Eleusis, a group of several hundred people were initiated each year into the Mysteries. Much more is known about the procession than the actual rites which occurred within the sanctuary, though these are far more important. The rites at Eleusis lasted for two days. What happened during this time is not known since the initiates (*mystai* or *telestai*) were sworn to secrecy. We can only speculate based on scattered references and representations from the time. The following narrative combines elements from Mylonas (1961, pp 224-285) Kerényi (1967, pp 67-102), Clinton (1992, 1993) and Bremmer (2014). A reconstruction of the temple buildings is illustrated below:



The first day was spent in fasting and purification. Outside



of the main gate was a well which provided water for cleansing the body. The illustration on the Roman Lovatelli Urn (from 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE) shows an attendant holding a winnowing fan (*lyknon*) over the head of a veiled initiate. A winnowing fan is used to separate the chaff from the wheat. It therefore symbolizes both harvesting and purification. In this particular representation, the initiate is Heracles (as seen from the lion skin of the Nemean Lion on which he sits).

At the end of the day the initiates were given a special non-alcoholic drink called *kykeon*. This was likely made from grain, honey, and herbs. Wasson et al. (1978) have suggested that it may have contained hallucinogens (also called "entheogens" – drugs that promote the experience of the divine), although it is doubtful that the dose could have been adjusted properly for such a large number of people.

As the night came on, the initiates were ushered by Iacchus into the Sanctuary through the main gate (*Propylaia*) and then through the narrower lesser gate. In the area now called the *Ploutonion* they could look into cave in the hillside. Clinton suggests that here they might have seen a representation of Demeter in her grief, seated upon the *agelastos petra* (mirthless rock).

Then the initiates spent the night in inner regions of the sanctuary. There was likely music and prayers. Perhaps the initiates wandered around, trying to help Demeter find Persephone. There was much confusion due to the darkness, the veils, the fasting, and the *kykeon*.

Later that night the initiates entered the central Telesterion. Again this was likely dark. After a while a large gong was sounded and the central platform Anaktoron became suddenly lit up with blazing torches. The initiates then saw Persephone brought back from the Underworld by the herald Euboulos to be re-united with Demeter.

Following this, and perhaps only to those in their second year of initiation, various sacred objects were revealed by the special attendant known as the hierophant (from *hieros*, sacred and *phainein*, show). Most experts think that these may have been representations of the wheat and the harvest. Others (e.g. Kerényi) have suggested that Persephone was shown giving birth to a son.

The dawn brought the second day, which was enjoyed in feasting and music.

### **Ninnion Tablet**



The only definite contemporary representation of the Eleusinian Mysteries is the Ninnion Tablet found at the Eleusis, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE and now in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (Mylonas, 1961, pp 213-221;

Clinton, 1992, pp 73-75). The tablet has been interpreted in several ways. The writing suggests that the initiate's name was Niinnion, but most now accept that that the double-i is a mistake.

The lower and upper sections of the tablet can be interpreted as showing two stages of the Mysteries. In the lower half Iacchus, holding torches, ushers the female initiate (one assumes this is Ninnion) and her bearded male companion toward the Goddess Demeter on the right. Ninnion is bearing a vessel on her head, the contents of which will likely be used as a libation to sanctify the Telesterion. Her right hand is raised in greeting and in wonder. Demeter is seated beside an open seat for her lost daughter.

The upper half of the tablet shows the second stage of the rites. The bearded man, a young boy and Ninnion are now approaching another vision. On the right Persephone holding two torches becomes reunited with her mother. Demeter's pale complexion in the lower representation has become suffused in the upper with the red of happiness.

Most consider the Mysteries to involve two stages: *myesis* and *epopteia*. These may related to the two different visions seen during the rites at Eleusis. Others have interpreted the stages differently. *Myesis* was one of the words used to denote the mysteries. It may have derived from a simpler word meaning "to close." This itself may have alluded to the secrecy of the proceedings, the closed eyes of the initiates before the revelations or the mental closure that happened after the revelations. In the last sense, it was similar to another word for the mysteries – *teletai*, which came from the root *telos* (goal) and meant something accomplished or finished. The second stage was *epopteia*, which meant "revelation" or "vision," deriving from *ops*, eye. Though many agree that there were two stages to the Mysteries, exactly how they occurred remains unknown. Some have suggested that the *myesis* may have involved "lesser mysteries" that occurred in Athens prior to

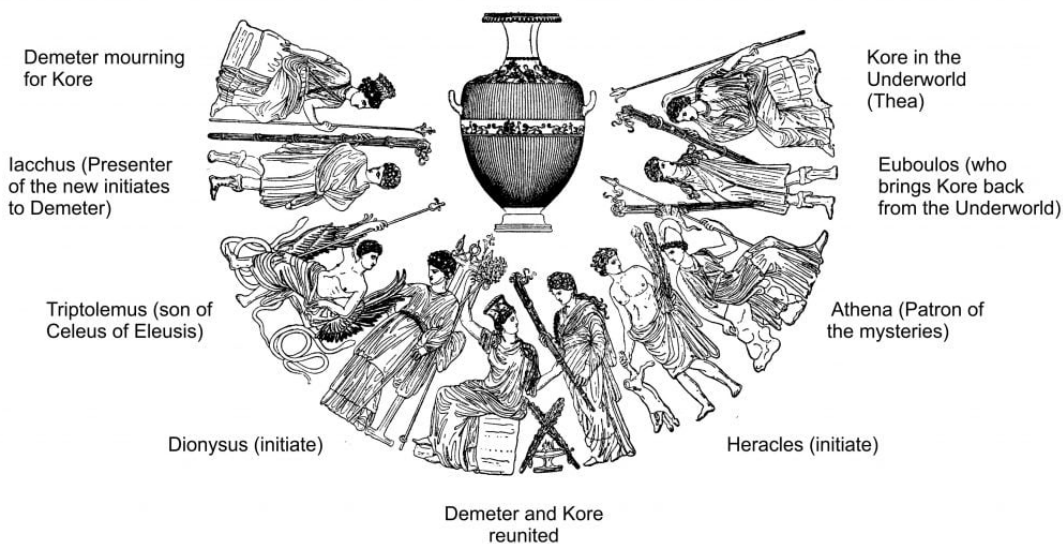
the initiates going to Eleusis for the “greater mysteries.” The two stages may also have required attendance at the Eleusinian Mysteries on two successive years.

### **Regina Vasorum**

The story of Demeter and Kore was intertwined with several other Greek myths. The Hermitage museum has a beautifully crafted *hydria* (water carrier) adorned around its shoulder with relief representations of the various divinities associated with Eleusis. This *Regina Vasorum* (Queen of the Vases) was found in Southern Italy and dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. The following illustration shows the hydria and that section of the decoration representing the reunited Demeter and Kore.



The following diagram identifies the various divinities. Both Heracles and Dionysus, though heroes of their own myths, also participated in the Mysteries and became initiates. Athena is present since the Mysteries were conducted under the auspices of the city of Athens. Triptolemus is there to represent Eleusis, and perhaps also to be a symbol of normal human beings. Demeter and Kore are portrayed twice – apart and then reunited.



## Other Mysteries

The Eleusinian Mysteries were but one of many different mystery-cults in the Ancient World (Burkert, 1987; Bowden, 2010; Bremmer, 2014). Each of the cults provided initiation ceremonies. Each was based on its own set of myths.

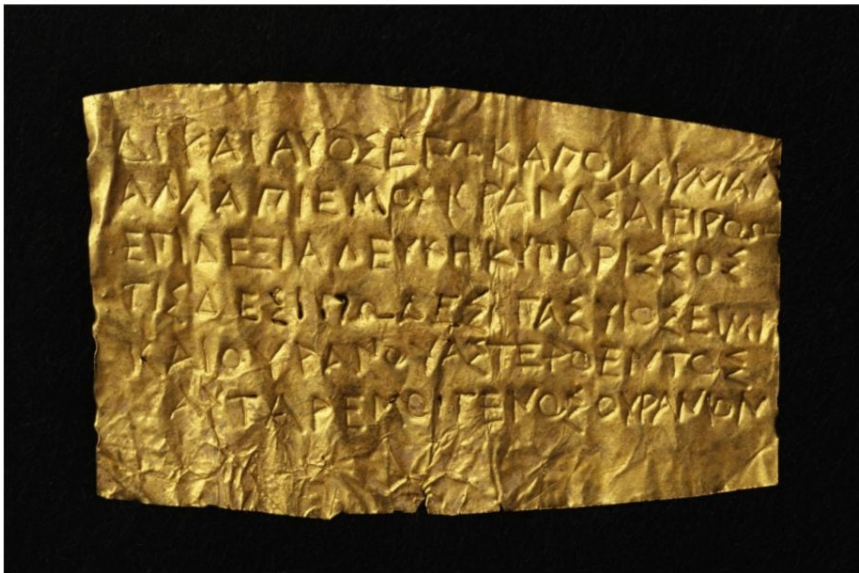
The cult of Dionysus/Bacchus centered on the life and actions of the God of Wine. Celebrations of this cult – *bacchanalia* – involved intoxication with wine and frenzied dancing. Most of the celebrants were female; in their ecstasy these were called *maenads*. The Orphic rites derived from the story of Orpheus who tried to reclaim his wife from Hades. The myths and cults of Orpheus and Dionysus were closely related. Some stories tell of the death of Orpheus from being torn apart by *maenads* celebrating the rites of Dionysus.

The cult of Isis came from Egypt but was widely celebrated in the Roman Empire. Isis was a Goddess of fertility similar in nature to Demeter. Her life was a search for the dismembered body of her brother/husband Osiris. The rites of *Magna Mater* (“great mother”, also called *Cybele*) originated in Anatolia (where the Romans believed they might have originated – as the descendants of Aeneas). Priestesses in her cult, called Sibyls, provided advice and prophecy in early Rome. In later Roman times, the Persian God Mithra was widely celebrated in

secret temples.

The foundational myths of the different mysteries have many similarities. Many involve a journey to Hades and/or the return of someone from the Underworld. Dionysus journeyed to Hades to rescue his mother Semele, who had died when her lover Zeus revealed himself in all his glory. Orpheus sought to rescue his wife from the Underworld. Osiris was finally brought back to life and became the god of regeneration on the earth and the judge of all who enter the Underworld. The world has known many cults that revolve around the death and resurrection of a God (Frazer, 1923)

Some of the mysteries (particularly those related to Dionysus, and Orpheus) may have provided the initiates with small gold tablets (Bowden 2010, Chapter 7). These were buried along with the deceased in various areas of Greece. The tablets were inscribed with what are apparently instructions about what to do when the initiate dies. The most important instruction was to drink the water from the Pool of Memory (*Mnemosyne*) rather than from the River of Forgetting (*Lethe*). Several tablets indicate that Mnemosyne is to the right near a white cypress tree. Once refreshed, the newly dead could “go on the great Sacred Way along which the other famed *mystai* and *bakkhoi* make their way” (Bowden, 2010, p 149). The following is a 4<sup>th</sup>-Century BCE tablet (approximately 2 by 4 inches) from Thessaly (now in the J. P. Getty Museum in California)



The cryptic inscription requests a drink from the Spring of Memory and identifies the bearer according to some prescribed format likely learned from the Mysteries:

I am parched with thirst and am dying; but grant me to drink from the ever-flowing spring. On the right is a white cypress.

'Who are you? Where are you from?' I am a son of Earth and starry sky.

But my race is heavenly.

The Mysteries were thus one way that the Ancients came to grips with the idea of death. Burkert describes the mysteries as "a form of personal religion, depending on a private decision, and aiming at some form of salvation through closeness to the divine." (1987, p 12). He quotes Cicero who said that those who underwent the initiations at Eleusis learned "how to live in joy, and how to die with better hopes." (*Laws*, II, 36).

### **Literary Allusions to the Mysteries**

Two striking allusions to the Mysteries occur in the ancient literature. The first from Plato's *Phaedrus* highlights the revelations that came from participating in the Mysteries. For

Plato supreme understanding came from recognizing the eternal forms upon which transient individual things were based. In *Phaedrus* Socrates likens the mind of man to a charioteer which has to control two winged horses, one striving toward the good and one falling away toward evil. If the mind can control the horses and get the chariot to rise up it might reach the outside of heaven and behold

justice, and temperance, and knowledge absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but knowledge absolute in existence absolute (Jowett translation, Section 247)

Before it assumed mortal form the soul understood truth and beauty for which it now has only a faint memory. Sometimes through love or through philosophy this knowledge can be regained. Socrates likens the understanding of the absolute to what happens when one is initiated into the Mysteries:

For there is no light of justice or temperance or any of the higher ideas which are precious to souls in the earthly copies of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few who, going to the images, behold in them the realities, and these only with difficulty. There was a time when with the rest of the happy band they saw beauty shining in brightness,—we philosophers following in the train of Zeus, others in company with other gods; and then we beheld the beatific vision and were initiated into a mystery which may be truly called most blessed, celebrated by us in our state of innocence, before we had any experience of evils to come, when we were admitted to the sight of apparitions innocent and simple and calm and happy, which we beheld shining in pure light, pure ourselves and not yet enshrined in that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell. (Section 250).\*

The second allusion to the Mysteries is by Plutarch, who in



his essay *On the Soul* likens the experience of the soul at death to what happens during the initiation into the Mysteries:

Thus we say that the soul that has passed thither is dead, having regard to its complete change and conversion. In this world it is without knowledge, except when it is already at the point of death; but when that time comes, it has an experience like that of men who are undergoing initiation into great mysteries; and so the verbs *teleutan* (die) and *teleisthai* (be initiated), and the actions they denote, have a similarity. In the beginning there is straying and wandering, the weariness of running this way and that, and nervous journeys through darkness that reach no goal, and then immediately before the consummation every possible terror, shivering and trembling and sweating and amazement. But after this a marvellous light meets the wanderer, and open country and meadow lands welcome him; and in that place there are voices and dancing and the solemn majesty of sacred music and holy visions. And amidst these, he walks at large in new freedom, now perfect and fully initiated, celebrating the sacred rites, a garland upon his head, and converses with pure and holy men; he surveys the uninitiated, unpurified mob here on earth, the mob of living men who, herded together in mirk and deep mire, trample one another down and in their fear of death cling to their ills, since they disbelieve in the blessings of the other world. For the soul's entanglement with the body and confinement in it are against nature, as you may discern from this. (Plutarch from the fragment *On the Soul*, Sandbach translation, 1969, pp 317-319).

These two mentions of the Mysteries in the ancient literature bring out the two main aspects of the rites: the attainment of understanding through a vision of the divine, and the provision of some way of coping with death.

## **Relations to Christianity**

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE during the reign of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, taking over from the various mystery cults. How much Christianity assimilated from these earlier belief systems is difficult to assess.

Christianity differed significantly from the Mysteries. A primary difference was the lack of secrecy. Christianity was based on set doctrines that were promulgated by the faithful and delineated in scriptural texts. The teachings of the Mysteries were far less dogmatic and heresy was unknown. In addition, Christianity was communal. Believers did not just attend the mysteries once or twice in their lives – they worshipped together weekly and acted on their beliefs daily. A third main difference was the lack of any clear moral teaching in the Mysteries.



The early Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexander (2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, icon on the right) both decried the Mysteries as superstition and promoted Christian beliefs as the greatest of the mysteries:

O truly sacred mysteries! O stainless light! My way is lighted with torches, and I survey the heavens and God; I become holy while I am initiated. The Lord is the hierophant, and seals while illuminating him who is initiated, and presents to the Father him who believes, to be kept safe for ever. Such are the reveries of my mysteries. (*Protrepticus* Chapter 12).

Clement proposed that Christianity was the “mystery of the Word (*logos*),” the divine truth that was manifest in the story of Christ’s death and resurrection. Clement was using *logos* in its meaning as “truth.” However, Christianity also differed from the Mysteries in virtue of the other meaning of *logos* as “word.” Christianity followed scripture; the Mysteries were based on secrets.

The sacraments of Christianity (Baptism, Eucharist, etc.) are often referred to as the Mysteries of Faith. These transcendent rites cannot be understood by reason. The Catholic existentialist philosopher Maritain (1962, First Lecture) differentiated two modes of human thinking. One uses reason to solve problems. The other uses intuition to understand mysteries. Knowledge involves both.

The main story underlying the Christian mysteries is that of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The climax of the story comes with Christ’s statement on the cross as he nears death: *tetelestai* – “It is finished” (John 19:30). The word is similar to those used in the Mysteries.

The Mysteries dealt with coming face to face with divinity and coping with death. Christianity was more certain of its ability to provide salvation:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,  
In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump:  
for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised

incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?  
(I Corinthians 15 51-55)

What happens to consciousness after death is the great mystery of human life. In the Ancient World this question was addressed by the various Mysteries. As Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire, the story of Christ provided the most widely believed answer. "I have met the gods and am prepared for death" changed to "I believe in Christ and have been granted salvation."

## **Tetelestai**

Human experience is not random. Because of memory we recognize when events repeat and discover the laws whereby they recur. Most importantly we find a self or soul at the point where events become experience.

Every morning when we awaken we quickly reassemble this soul and the world in which it lives. Surely we tell ourselves that death will be no different. Just as the world proceeds from winter into spring, the soul will return to life.

We tell stories of what will happen then, when the body dies and the soul survives. The stories are intricate and beautiful. They provide us with hope for ourselves and comfort for those we leave behind.

Yet we all die. Though the stories and the stones of Eleusis survive, the initiates all vanished long ago. There is no golden ticket to heaven. We are born. We tell stories. Some are true and some fanciful. In the end it is finished, and we

are buried in the earth beneath the starry sky.

## Note

\* The words “through a glass dimly” immediately recall “through a glass darkly” in I Corinthians 13:11 (“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”) The idea is similar to that expressed in *Phaedrus*, and Paul was undoubtedly aware of Plato’s work. However, it is not a direct quotation – though the translations are similar, the original Greek words are different.

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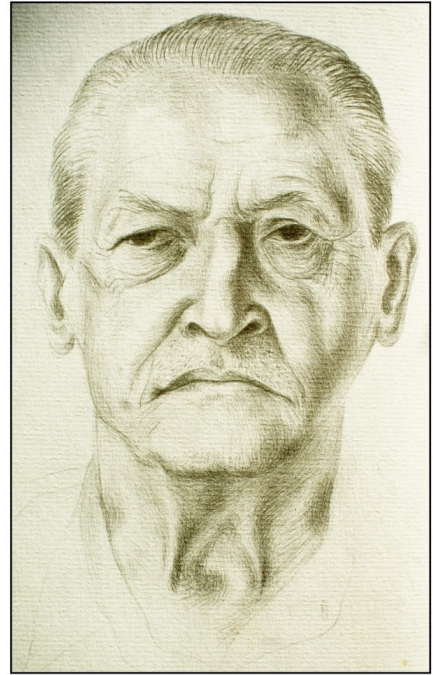
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## Death Speaks



W. Somerset Maugham,  
silverpoint by Bernard  
Perlin, 1946

Somerset Maugham's last play *Sheppey* (1933/1997) tells the story of a barber Joseph Miller, who was nicknamed Sheppey after his birthplace in Kent. Sheppey wins one of the Irish Sweepstakes prizes and decides to use the money to help the poor. He is quickly considered crazy. His doctor states:

It's quite obvious that a sane man is not going to give all his money away to the poor. A sane man takes money away from the poor ... The normal man is selfish, grasping, destructive, vain and sensual. What is generally termed morality is forced upon him by the herd, and the obligation that he is under to repress his natural instincts is undoubtedly the cause of many of the disorders of the mind.

The idea of the play harkens back to one of Maugham's early short stories, *A Bad Example*, published in 1899. Neither the story nor the play were very successful. However, one brief speech from the play has become one of the most renowned texts of 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature.

At the end of the play, Sheppey is visited by Death in female form. She will take him away before he is certified insane. Sheppey wonders whether he should have fulfilled one of his dreams and gone to a cottage on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. Perhaps Death would not have thought of looking for him there. Death tells him it would not have mattered.

There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

This is an old Arabian story. Maugham's source was probably the Sufi parable *When Death Came to Baghdad* from the *Hikayat-I-Naqshia* ("Tales formed according to a design") by Fudail ibn Ayad who lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century CE (Shah, 1967, p 191; Ross, 2010). Samarra is a city about 125 km north of Baghdad, and home of the Al 'Askarī Shrine, one of the holiest sites of Shīa Islam.

The Mishnah of the Babylonian Talmud from around 200 CE has an even older version of the story in Sukkah 53a. One day King Solomon asked the Angel of Death why he was sad. The angel replied that he soon had to take two of Solomon's favorite



Ethiopian attendants. In order to forestall this, Solomon sent his attendants to the city of Luz, where the Angel of Death had no power. However, they died just before arriving at the gates of Luz. The next day Solomon asked why the angel was so cheerful. Death replied that Solomon had sent his attendants to the exact place where it was decreed that they should die.

The Maugham story has been retold many times. John O'Hara used it as the epigraph for his 1934 novel *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), which described the rapid, alcohol-fuelled decline of Julian English beginning on Christmas Eve in 1930 and ending with his suicide two days later. Jeffrey Archer quoted Maugham's tale as the first story (*Death Speaks*) in his collection *To Cut a Long Story Short* (2000).



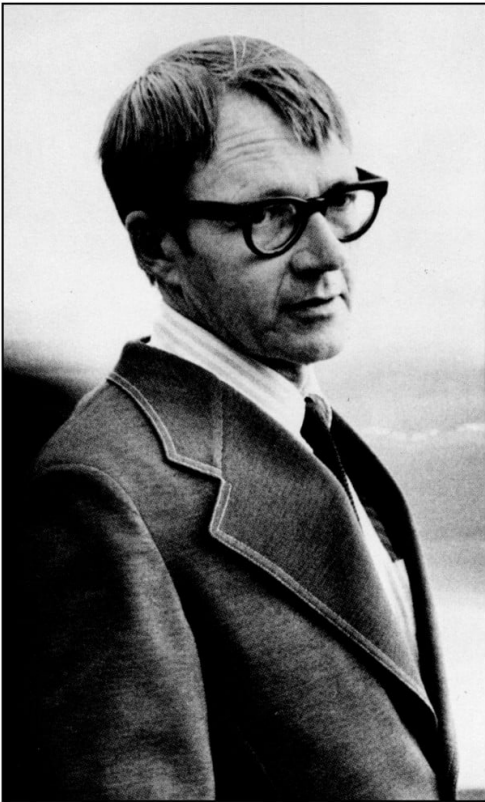
Boris Karloff told the story in the 1968 movie *Targets*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich. Karloff played an elderly horror-film actor who suggested to an interviewer that he tell the story rather than answer foolish questions. The audio is below. A movie clip of the entire scene is available at Turner Classic Movies.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/karloff-samarra.mp3>

The Maugham story was converted into rhyming verse by F. L. Lucas in *The Destined Hour* (1953). The poem ends with Abou Seyd meeting Death in the market.

Loud swarmed the buyers round each booth and stall;  
But there by Omar's Mosque, at the market's end,  
Watched one shape like a shadow, gaunt and tall.  
Then drawing near, said Abou Seyd, "My friend,  
Why threaten my poor slave – so wantonly –  
That harmed thee not at all?  
In my hot youth I might have threatened thee,  
Forgetting Allah, Lord of all men's days."

Then that dark face upon him bent such eyes,  
The scar upon Seyd's cheek grew grey with fear.  
"I threatened not thy servant, Abou Seyd.  
But in surprise  
I raised my hand, to see him standing near.  
For this same night God bids my hand be laid  
Upon him at Samarra, far from here.  
Yet Allah is the Lord of all men's ways."



Donald Justice, photograph  
by Thomas Victor (Howard,  
1974)

The American poet Donald Justice used the story as the basis  
for his 1967 poem *Incident in a Rose Garden*:

The gardener came running,  
An old man, out of breath.  
Fear had given him legs.  
*Sir, I encountered Death  
Just now among the roses.  
Thin as a scythe he stood there.  
I knew him by his pictures.  
He had his black coat on,  
Black gloves, and a broad black hat.  
I think he would have spoken,  
Seeing his mouth stood open.  
Big it was, with white teeth.  
As soon as he beckoned, I ran.  
I ran until I found you.*

*Sir, I am quitting my job.  
I want to see my sons  
Once more before I die.  
I want to see California.  
We shook hands; he was off.*

And there stood Death in the garden,  
Dressed like a Spanish waiter.  
He had the air of someone  
Who because he likes arriving  
At all appointments early  
Learns to think himself patient.  
I watched him pinch one bloom off  
And hold it to his nose –  
A connoisseur of roses –  
One bloom and then another.  
They strewed the earth around him.  
*Sir, you must be that stranger  
Who threatened my gardener.  
This is my property, sir.  
I welcome only friends here.*  
Death grinned, and his eyes lit up  
With the pale glow of those lanterns  
That workmen carry sometimes  
To light their way through the dusk.  
Now with great care he slid  
The glove from his right hand  
And held that out in greeting,  
A little cage of bone.  
*Sir, I knew your father,  
And we were friends at the end.  
As for your gardener,  
I did not threaten him.  
Old men mistake my gestures.  
I only meant to ask him*

*To show me to his master.*

*I take it you are he?*

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/justice-incident-in-rose-garden-2.mp3>

(Author's reading of the poem 1982).

We have personified death in many ways. Our most common image is the Grim Reaper, an emaciated or skeletal man dressed in black and carrying a scythe. This likely derives from Christ's parable of the harvest: after the reaping the wheat is gathered into the barn but the tares are separated out and burnt (Matthew 13:24-30). This was one of the few parables that Christ explained to his disciples:

...the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.

As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world.

The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity;

And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:39-42).

The skeletal nature of the Grim Reaper probably comes from the representations of the Dance of Death in many medieval churches. Skeletons conduct the sinners, be they rich or poor, young or old, powerful or weak, to their assigned places in Hell. As well as the scythe, the skeletons also carried hour-glasses to signify the running out of time, or musical instruments to maintain the rhythm of damnation.

Another image of Death has him riding a pale horse. This comes from the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelations. At the opening of each of the first four seals, one of the horsemen appears. The last rider is the only one directly named: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name

that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him” (Revelations 6:8). The other three riders are variously identified, most commonly as war, pestilence and famine. Sometimes, as in the Tarot pack, the rider of the pale horse is portrayed as a knight.

In some cultures, Death can be a woman rather than a man (Guthke, 1999). This may in part be related to grammatical gender – in French *la Mort* is feminine and in German *der Tod* is masculine – though this effect is slight. In the Maugham story Death is female, whereas in the Justice poem he has become male.

Death can evoke longing as well as fear. Sometimes death releases the dying from their suffering. Sometimes death can have erotic overtones. Many are the tales of lovers who come together through a shared death. In the stories of Death and the Maiden, Death is considered as a lover either kind or lecherous. And for the young man, Death can be the Dark Lady.

In many stories, Death may be questioned. However, this can only delay the end, not change it. In Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*, a knight (Max von Sydow), just returned to Sweden from the Crusade, meets Death (Bengt Ekerot) upon a cold northern beach and challenges him to a game of chess before he dies. The outcome of the game is not in doubt. Yet perhaps others might escape.



The film is an essay about the distance between man and God

(Bragg, 1998). The knight asks why it is “so cruelly inconceivable to grasp God with the senses? Why should He hide himself in a mist of half-spoken promises and unseen miracles?” The title of the film comes from Revelations 8:1 “And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” God answers our questions with silence.

Death is both unpredictable and inevitable. We can neither foretell the time nor alter it. This is the main point of the Maugham story. And the reason for Marcus Aurelius’ teaching in *Meditations* VII:69.

To live each day as though one’s last, never flustered, never apathetic, never attitudinising – here is perfection of character (Staniforth translation). (Alternate: Perfection is to live each day as if it were the last, without agitation, without apathy and without pretence)

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