

**Robert Garland.** *What to Expect When You're Dead: An Ancient Tour of Death and the Afterlife.* Princeton University Press 2025. 344 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover 9780691266176); \$29.95 USD (eBook 9780691268538).

In this compelling tour of death and the afterlife, Robert Garland visits many key sites of the ancient Western world, namely the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hindu, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, Early Christian, and Islamic cultures. Garland's approach in the book is to learn from a combination of three sources of information: the probable social and psychological commonalities of humans facing death across these cultures; what we can plausibly know of the beliefs, practices, and literature of ancient religions and philosophies; and the latest evidence to be gained from modern archeological studies of burial sites. The chapters work topically, considering why humans came to believe in an afterlife, how they regarded a "good" death, ideas of a liminal stage between life and afterlife, ideas of a judgement and a dualistic Heaven and Hell as well as expectations for how one "lives" in the afterlife, how the living should dispose of the body, and how and in what ways the living and the spirits of the dead might still interact. Thus, a main focal point of the book is Garland's claim that "the ancients have much to tell us about death and dying, and about facing up to the challenges that they both pose" because the modern Western world conversely fails "to confront the existential phenomenon of death head-on" (2).

Garland, a Professor Emeritus of Classics at Colgate University, comes to this topic after having written an earlier volume, *The Greek Way of Death* (Cornell University Press, 1985, 2001). The earlier book covers the Ancient Greeks from the time of Homer until the 4th century B.C.E., so *What to Expect When You're Dead* could be seen as a natural extension of his earlier scholarship, which also includes the more recent volumes *Wandering Greeks* (Princeton UP, 2014) on the mobility and displacement of Ancient Greeks and *Athens Burning* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2017) regarding the sacking of Athens and the subsequent evacuation of the city during the Greco-Persian wars. Throughout his career, Garland has attended to the lives of everyday people in the ancient world. Indeed, a central theme of this new book is how rituals surrounding the mysteries of death worked to impress upon the living the brevity and preciousness of lives that can end so easily and quickly.

The cultures and religions surveyed in *What to Expect When You're Dead* are very broad and diverse, and Garland's treatment develops many interesting conjectures about those commonalities and differences. Garland focuses both on physical questions as well as metaphysical questions that help us to understand the ancient worldview in respect to the existential questions of life, death, and the nature of existence in the broadest sense. The physical questions deal with practical issues such as preparing for one's own death, how to prepare and dispose of a dead body, and what the physical nature of the dead might be like in the afterlife. Metaphysical questions speculate on whether there is an afterlife at all, what it might be like, whether the living and the dead can affect one another's planes of existence, and how the living might propitiate the spirits of the dead.

Garland's aim is to compile evidence about these cultural and religious groups in their beliefs and treatment of death. His methodology means that the book comes across as very well



researched, as is indicated by extensive endnotes and a useful and complete bibliography for those wishing to read more on particular topics. Chapters are each based around one big thematic question and usually broken down into a number of smaller questions, each of which is then responded to with anecdotes from the different perspectives. Chapter 3, “Between Two Worlds,” for example, considers what happens in the period between death and whatever comes next with a consideration for both the deceased and the bereaved. Subsections consider the liminal nature of the deceased hovering between worlds, methods of preparing the corpse and grieving over it, the funeral or similar rituals, proscribed periods of mourning, and the spirit’s journey to the next world, which could include another transitory period in limbo, purgatory, or *Barzakh*. Under these subheadings, Garland relates relevant anecdotes from whichever cultures have applicable beliefs or rituals. The subsection on laying out the body, for example, characteristically begins by describing the modern professionalization of the death industry and then relates that to the family-oriented procedures of Ancient Greece, including a consideration of Penelope’s famous ruse of claiming to weave a burial shroud for her father-in-law for three years in Homer’s *Odyssey* and Achilles’ public and effusive mourning for Patroclus in the *Iliad*. The second half of the chapter unsurprisingly turns to Egyptian mummification and what is known of the specialized roles of the people who performed it. Also included are briefer mentions of Roman, Jewish, and Hindu procedures. A related consideration that is raised by this methodology but not fully analyzed is whether the areas of commonality between these cultures reflects mere coincidence or actual influence. Reading the material, one has the impression of having moved quite quickly through a broad diversity of contexts offering a cursory survey, and this approach may leave many readers desiring a deeper consideration.

The breadth of the book is a clear strength. For example, while many practices of Ancient Egypt are widely known, Garland also discusses cultural practices that are decidedly lesser known from the Mesopotamians and Etruscans. Indeed, the most fascinating topics are more specialized, such as the purpose of mystery cults and their effects on the early Christian development of a dualistic afterlife. Other questions consider how such ideas developed and spread and how they might have affected all the strata of society, from the elites about whom we know much as well as enslaved people about whom we know relatively little. The issue of class clearly raises problems of doubt and skepticism around death that no doubt were met by a great amount of social pressure to believe and to practice the prescribed rituals. These contrasts are striking: while there is evidence of endocannibalism and excarnation in some cultures, for example, others built elaborate cemeteries that served public and political purposes.

Notably, Garland’s approach throughout is also framed by a distinctly dry wit that makes his treatment of a generally depressing topic frequently entertaining to read. Conversely, that tone may be a drawback for some readers, so the intended audience is somewhat difficult to gauge. The tone is clearly intended to be humorous and anecdotal, which mostly works well but at other times may come across as flippant. Starting from the introduction’s opening line, “Studies prove that everybody dies eventually” (1), Garland aims to achieve a certain cheekiness. That tone does seem appropriate for a book on death, a subject that is obviously uncomfortable. Likewise, the content of

Chapter 6 “Things to Do When You’re Dead” wonders if we will have to go to the bathroom in the Afterlife, what we will do for clothing, whether or not we will we have sex, whether we will find non-human animals, and what to do if we find ourselves without a physical form at all or even reincarnated as an animal. Further, though the focus of the book is on the ancient world, Garland successfully draws multiple connections to how our own modern time can learn from the ancients’ very different treatment of death. Hence, when he notes the current price range for coffins at Costco, there is a use of humor to shed a comparative light on how we now might commodify or sanitize death.

Some readers may question Garland’s choices in covering these particular Western cultures and forms of interacting with death. These choices appear to be determined by the very large body of studies and ancient texts from which Garland draws. In this sense, the book’s strength is found in its descriptive approach, although Garland does offer some additional claims that add perspective or clarification. This approach does leave room for more depth of argument in the treatment of the chosen topics. The third chapter, for example, notes roles reserved for female family members in preparing the corpse, and the specific gendering of this role appears in several ancient contexts. Chapter 6 brings up the questions of how slaves might have been treated in relation to the deaths of the elite and the ritual of “retainer sacrifice” to provide the wealthy with slaves in the afterlife. In both cases, however, there is room for more conjecture about these meaningful social roles and duties and what they might have meant in relation to death in those contexts. Certainly, there is a paucity of evidence to ascertain more about marginalized groups in history, yet a more elaborate treatment could offer compelling arguments. In this light, several important and interesting questions quite effectively arise from Garland’s juxtaposition of these diverse ancient perspectives, and the reader will certainly have much to contemplate.

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