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**HOW DOES INCREASING KNOWLEDGE
ABOUT FUTURE TIMES
IMPACT UPON
THE ART OF PROPHECY?¹**

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Humans learn from the past - and, sometimes, they gain immediate and urgent knowledge in the present too. But they cannot learn directly from the future that has not yet unfolded. That reality has not, however, prevented people from trying hard to look ahead. They can forecast; they can predict; they can prophecy; they can forewarn; and, yes, they can also calculate.²

The future, after all, is far from completely unknowable in broad outline. Thus, as long as the current cosmos survives, it will contain deep continuities (the basic principles of science will continue to hold) as well as gradual changes (animal species will continue their slow evolution), alongside drastic upheavals (volcanoes will erupt; earthquakes shake the ground; tsunamis sweep across

seas and land; avalanches crash downhill; violent hurricanes and tornadoes spread devastation).

More specifically, too, various scientific experts can make detailed predictions. For example, astronomers predict the return into view from Planet Earth of some (though not all) interplanetary comets. Thus Halley's Comet, which humans could last see in 1986, is predicted to become visible again in mid-2061, given that its orbit brings it relatively close to Earth approximately every 75-77 years.³ And, as for forecasting near-at-hand solar and lunar eclipses, well, astronomers can do that without even breaking sweat.

Deep-Space scientists also track the approach of asteroids. With their help, Earthlings will, hopefully, get good notice before the advent of the next big strike and can take preventive action. In that way, they can avoid the fate of the dinosaurs, when an asteroid strike 66 million years ago hit the Yucatan Peninsula - immediately annihilating many dinosaurs and then fatally devastating their habitats.⁴

Demographers meanwhile can calculate changes in the mean expectation of life among humans - with detailed breakdowns for people living in different regions of the globe. They also confirm that, while in healthy, well-fed societies, very many people today are living into ripe old age, there is a biological limit. A number of people been validated as living past the age of 110 years; but only one to date has survived past the age of 120. (She was Jeanne Calment of France, who died at the age of 122 years and 164 days).⁵ Certainly impressive. However, at the same time, demographers agree that it is unlikely that human lifespans will rise at all significantly beyond that boundary - even with the latest technological aids. We are mortals, with a distinctly finite lifespan.

Added to those examples, there are other fields where good, reliable data from the past can help people to make informed predictions about the future. In economics, analysts can make predictions about what will be the likely impact of (say) tax cuts; or tariff wars. Similarly, doctors make informed assessments

of the progress of a patient's illness. Meteorologists study past weather patterns in order to issue daily weather forecasts. Some bold scientists predict how developing technology will impact upon people's future lives one hundred years hence.⁶ And so forth.

These forecasts are not always right, down to the very last detail. Sometimes, indeed - though not very often - informed predictions can turn out to be completely wrong. Yet together all these assessments and calculations mean that the future is not completely unknown territory. People can make their own judgements on these forecasts, and plan accordingly.

Prophets therefore risk getting crowded out of the field. The men and women, who gaze intently into the future to make predictions, are not projecting their thoughts onto a blank canvas. Future times are studded with scientifically predicted events. A prophet's audience today will not gape with wonder, as an equivalent audience might have done two thousand years ago - or even more so two million years ago. Prophecy today is at a discount.

Take future sporting events. People like to know or guess who will triumph. But today there's no need to call upon the services of a prophet or soothsayer. There are racing tipsters galore; as well as countless sporting commentators who give informed advice.

Or take passing examinations. It would be nice to know the result in advance. But it's not hard to realise that the best way to do well is to revise seriously, rather than to run round the corner to consult a prophet. (And for those examination candidates who don't grasp that truth, there are plenty of earnest tutors to tell them - repeatedly).

And then there's success in matters of the heart. It can be exciting to be told by an exotic lady, gazing into a crystal ball, that you are about to be courted by a tall, dark and handsome stranger. Yet it's also well to recall that there are many permutations to courtship. The handsome stranger might be a passionate

lover ... or a deceitful love-rat ... or a wily financial scammer with eyes for nothing but your money. Love by all means - but keep your wits about you!

So what about the really big deal: prophecies about the end of the world ... or at least the end of Planet Earth? These have by no means disappeared.⁷ Currently one Christian theologian predicts the end of Planet Earth in 2026, as the result of a collision with a giant asteroid. However, another theologian, this time an Islamist, declares that the end will not come before 2129.⁸ But these days such announcements do not command mass attention.

By contrast, there was in the early 1840s an extensive (though not universal) panic about the imminent End among sundry Christian communities in Britain and the USA. It was triggered by a prophetic warning from the American William Miller, a charismatic Baptist preacher. He used not only sermons but also posters and newsletters to announce that Christ's Second Coming was due between March 1843 and March 1844. Nothing then happened. So Miller switched the date to 22 October 1844. Such specificity had impact. Numerous families in the USA sold up their homes and businesses, retreating to the mountains and stocking up with food to survive the coming Apocalypse.

What followed, however, was termed 'the Great Disappointment'. Christ did not re-appear. Most followers were disillusioned. Yet a small number of true believers founded the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which is now a flourishing international community. Its members consider that, even if one specific prediction was wrong, the core prophecy remains true - meaning that it is still vital to be spiritually prepared.⁹

Since then, no End-of-World prophecy has had anything like that impact. As already noted, such forecasts still continue. Yet today they remain culturally niche, not mainstream. Immediately, there is the climate crisis which threatens the life of humans (and of numerous other species) on Planet Earth, rather than the survival of the entire cosmos. That should be enough to concentrate attention in the here-and-now. As for the very long term, there's still a lot of Time to

unfold. Scientists calculate that locally our sun has at least 5 billion years to continue shining.¹⁰ So if End-Time prophets don't want to disillusion their followers, they should choose a cosmic end-date in the suitably far distant future. Meanwhile, today's Earthlings already have a big planet-sized problem to resolve together.

ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ Another BLOG in my 2025 series, to mark publication of PJC, *Time-Space: We Are All in it Together* (Austin Macauley: London, 2025).
 - ² With thanks to Martina Cali and all the lively and thoughtful participants at the Antwerp Conference on Time on 15 November 2024, and especially to the organiser Jeroen Puttevils.
 - ³ P. Lancaster-Brown, *Halley and his Comet* (1985); D.K. Yeomans, *Comets: A Chronological History, of Observation, Science, Myth and Folklore* (1991).
 - ⁴ See variously A. Milne, *Fate of the Dinosaurs: New Perspectives in Evolution and Extinction* (1991); D. Preston, 'The Day the Dinosaurs Died', in *The New Yorker* (2019): <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/08/the-day-the-dinosaurs-died>.
 - ⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_verified_oldest_people (viewed 24 May 2025).
 - ⁶ M. Kaku. *Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100* (2011).
 - ⁷ See e.g. S. Browne, *The Other Side and Back: A Psychic's Guide to Our World and Beyond* (1999); idem, *Prophecy: What the Future Holds for You* (2004); and idem, *End of Days: Predictions and Prophecies about the End of the World* (2008).
 - ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events (viewed 25 May 2025).
 - ⁹ E.R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (1978); R.L. Numbers and J.M. Butler (eds), *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (1993); and D.L. Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* (2008).
 - ¹⁰ G. Gamow. *The Birth and Death of the Sun* (1940; revised 1952).