

What "Live Unknown" means to me (Lathe Biosas)

Post by "Don" of March 7, 2020 at 11:12 PM

Fragment 551 famously reads λάθε βιώσας and is usually translated as "Live unknown." It could also be translated as "Live hidden," "Live unnoticed," or "Live while escaping notice."

But how do we square this coming from Epicurus who is known two thousand years after he died. Did he live by this maxim? We can't say Epicurus was even unknown during his life. So how are we to understand λάθε βιώσας as it pertains to him and ourselves?

Epicurus encouraged people to shun the world of politics and the public life. Attracting notice to yourself in politics or in pursuit of power was a dangerous path and didn't lead to pleasure, nor aponia, nor ataraxia. This appears to have direct applicability to Epicureans in general.

"Keep your head down!" might be a more appropriate way of paraphrasing this Fragment. Or even better maybe "Don't be obtrusive" or "Don't get in people's faces."

Epicurus certainly advocated helping people find their way to ataraxia. Why else would he have written letters and epitomes, have founded the Garden, and have insisted that we cultivate friendships one-on-one. Epicurus didn't say "live unknown to all of existence." He didn't say "go live as a hermit." He was known to close friends and those who had an interest in listening to his philosophy and deciding which pleasures to choose and which to reject. He even made a point of arguing his case against his detractors and those he found espousing unsound doctrine. He didn't "live unknown." You could find him *if* you wanted to. He just didn't teach in the agora or in the stoas. You came to him. "Hey, you know where to find me. It's not hard. But I'm not going to get in your face or make you listen to me if you don't want to. But you could really use my help."

Look at Diogenes of Oenoanda. He put up a solid stone wall that's stood the test of time, albeit in a ruined state. He made Epicureanism available to the masses, but you could walk by his wall and not read it if you wanted to. He lived unknown again in the sense that "I'm going to undertake building this wall, but I can't make you read it. But you could really use my help."

We need to be *willing* to live unknown to the masses, not to go looking for celebrity, but to be available to our friends and those who may seek our advice. Don't go looking for your name in lights or your face on the cover of TIME magazine. If it *happens,* roll with it. But don't seek it out. However, you can have meaningful conversations. You can form the bonds of friendship. You can even make plans for your funerals and write your wills just as Epicurus did! Just know that there are no guarantees once you die that you'll be known... and learn to be okay with that. It's nothing to us. We can make ourselves available to the curious, but we don't need to stand on the street corner like some itinerant preacher handing out tracts and screaming at passers-by.

To get a more nuanced idea of λάθε, consider VS 7: *It is easy to commit an injustice undetected, but impossible to be sure that you have escaped detection.* ἀδικοῦντα λαθεῖν μὲν δύσκολον, πίστιν δὲ λαβεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ λαθεῖν ἀδύνατον. This "undetected" connotation sheds another light on λάθε βιώσας. It appears to be saying that we can think we're "undetected" or unnoticed, but chances are that somehow we're going to be found out sooner or later. If we take Fragment 551 and VS 7 in tandem, both can seem to inform the other. Consider if we would say "It is easy to attempt to live undetected, but impossible to be sure that you have escaped detection." I'm not saying that's entirely legitimate but indulge it as a thought experiment and it expands the meaning of both.

This is how I'm beginning to understand the meaning of λάθε βιώσας.

I'm curious to read how others interpret this well-known fragment and how they believe it may be applicable (or not) to an Epicurean practice.