

*What is the meaning of the passage "Let us put wood on his bread and cut him off from the land of the living" (Jer. xi, 19).*

The quotation is the Douay version rendering of the Latin: "Mittamus lignum in panem eius et eradamus eum de terra viventium." Priests will be familiar with the passage, since it is recited as the Little Chapter at Lauds in Passiontide and as a Responsory at Matins for Maundy Thursday. It is a passage which cannot fail to attract and puzzle. As regards the general sense and application of the text there is no special difficulty. In the book of the prophet Jeremias it refers to the people of Anathoth, the native place of the prophet, who are plotting to kill him and so rid themselves of one whose utterances are highly irksome to them. Evidently a close parallel can be drawn between Jeremias and Christ and between their respective enemies. The parallel is seen even more strikingly if we note the first part of the verse from which our passage is taken: "And I was as a meek lamb that is carried to be a victim." St. Jerome says that the Church understands this of Christ: "Omnium ecclesiarum iste est consensus, ut sub persona Jeremiæ, a Christo haec dici intelligant." The application to Christ does not depend on any disputed word or doubtful reading.

Our immediate problem lies in the first part of the text quoted, namely: "Let us put wood on his bread." The Massoretic Hebrew text here is obscure. It certainly has the words for "wood" and "bread" but the verb is "Let us destroy." St. Jerome follows the Greek Septuagint ἐμβάλωμεν (which doubtless represents a variant Hebrew reading), and translates "mittamus." In his commentary, he writes: "*mittamus lignum in panem eius* crucem videlicet in corpus salvatoris. Ipse est enim qui ait: Ego sum panis qui de cælo descendi, Jn. vi, 51."

In this interpretation St. Jerome is following Tertullian and others. Indeed, given the general Messianic sense of the passage, which of course interested the Fathers far more than any Old Testament application, it is a very natural rendering to adopt. But it is less easy to see how this could be applied to Jeremias in the first instance, as seems to be demanded by the context. In later times therefore other solutions have been sought. The Authorized Version and (surprisingly enough) the Revised Version both translated: "Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof." The word for "wood" can certainly mean "tree" but it may be doubted, apart from other difficulties, whether the word for "bread" could in this context mean "fruit." More recent authors propose a slight alteration of the Hebrew text—the omission of one letter (m) in the unpointed text. They read *b'leho* in place of *b'lahmo*, and translate "Let us destroy the tree *in its prime* (vigour)." Such an emendation seems reasonable enough, and as a figure of speech may with equal suitability be applied to both Jeremias and Christ.

The inclusion of this obscure text in the Liturgy need occasion no surprise. The general application of the whole passage to the Passion

of Christ has always been recognized. That one part is obscure is no reason why it should be left out. Indeed it might be argued that the Fathers did not find the text obscure but regarded it rather as a striking prophecy of Christ. Today, on a point of detail, we prefer a different interpretation, which equally strikingly foretells Christ. The point of divergence is small. In any case many texts are included in the Liturgy on account of a dominant idea or one particular part of it, while there are other ideas or other parts which are definitely not applicable. *Omnis similitudo claudicat.*

R. C. FULLER.

*What is a curse? What was in the mind of the prophet Eliseus when he cursed the children of Bethel, IV Kings ii, 24?*

A curse is a promise or threat of punishment, just as a blessing is a promise of benefit. But there is this difference—that whereas a curse, used lawfully, only follows evil conduct, a blessing need not necessarily presuppose meritorious conduct. In other words God never punishes unless it is deserved, but He often bestows benefits on those who have done nothing to merit them. God chose Israel and gave them the Promised Land out of His infinite goodness and love for them and not because they deserved those benefits, cf. Deut. vii–ix. But He was not prepared to continue His gifts without good conduct on their part, and in Deut. xxviii we have a series of blessings and curses pronounced upon Israel. The fulfilment of course was to be conditional on Israel's conduct. If they obey God's law, they will prosper—if they disobey, disaster will overtake them. We note that the rewards and punishments are all of this world, as generally in the Old Testament. Knowledge of the future life was too shadowy to allow of any adequate sanction for conduct on that basis. To persuade Israel to be faithful it was necessary to promise them prosperity, or alternatively to threaten disaster, if they were unfaithful.

Sometimes the punishment seems excessive as on the numerous occasions in the Old Testament where people are struck dead or killed by the hand of other men at God's command, for having transgressed His Word. Yet perhaps our surprise is occasioned largely by the fact that it does not happen nowadays. If we remember that the people thus struck down had been guilty of grave sin against God, that they had in many instances been thus guilty over a long period of time and had rejected many invitations to repent, why should we be surprised that God's hand falls upon them at last? As for the punishment, we as Catholics believe in hell as part of the Christian revelation and explicitly described by Christ in the Gospel. Who will say that sudden death of the body is a worse punishment? It is not said in the Bible that those who so died all went to hell. Such a death might even be a