

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.*

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*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

mercy of God to save them from further sin, and at the same time it would act as a very effective deterrent to others.

At first sight it looks as if the offence of the little boys in taunting the prophet Eliseus was no more than a boyish prank. But since the whole story only fills two verses, we should avoid hasty conclusions. As the note in the Douay Bible says, Bethel, the town from which the boys came, was a centre of false worship, being one of the two places where Jeroboam erected golden calves, to prevent his subjects going to worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, III Kings xii, 29. The prophets, insistent on restoring the true worship of God in the one sanctuary of Jerusalem, never tired of condemning these illegal sanctuaries, and consequently brought down upon themselves the bitter hatred of the priests that served those places, cf. Amos vii. The mocking of which we read in IV Kings ii, 23 thus appears to be an example or reflexion of this rivalry and hatred—the children evidently take after their parents. We may therefore regard the punishment that overtook the boys as serving a double purpose: besides bringing retribution on the offenders it also served to show that Eliseus was a true prophet and that by consequence the men of Bethel were in the wrong. It will be recalled that not long before this God had effectively shown Israel that Elias was a true prophet and that He alone was true God—and that Baal and his priests were false, III Kings xviii.

Looking at the immediate circumstances of the episode under consideration, we see that it is the second of two signs worked by Eliseus to show that the spirit of Elias has indeed descended upon him—the first sign being the healing of the spring at Jericho (verses 19–20).

It thus appears that the mauling (not necessarily killing) of the boys by the bears was the result and fulfilment of the curse of Eliseus. The text does not warrant our assuming any merely accidental sequence. We must not of course think of the prophet as uttering his curse in a fit of bad temper—the circumstances as explained above should sufficiently exclude that notion. Though Eliseus called on God to punish them, and knew that his prayer would be heard, he may not have known precisely the form which that punishment would take. Filled with zeal for the worship of the true God and with desire to vindicate his office of true prophet, Eliseus uttered his curse under the inspiration of the Almighty.

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