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# THE EXPULSION CURSE



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# THE EXPULSION CURSE

In the Old Testament to put to death offenders was tantamount to excising them from the body of the community of Israel, in order to preserve it holy and healthy. The Tanakh provided death penalty – an implicit form of expulsion – for the sins of idolatry, necromancy, non-observance of the Sabbath, rebellion against the parents, as well as for a whole series of sexual crimes ranging from bride’s impurity to homosexuality, from bestiality to incest and adultery (Leviticus 20, Deuteronomy 22). Such harsh legislation would have resulted in overwork stress for the executioner, so the acquiescent priests devised an equally effective alternative: the curse<sup>1</sup>. This could trigger a divine revenge not only immediate, but also disproportionate to the gravity of the fault:

*From there Elisha went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, some boys came out of the town and jeered at him. “Get out of here, baldy!” they said. “Get out of here, baldy!” He turned around, looked at them and called down a curse on them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys (2 Kings 2:23-24).*

In Deuteronomy the curse takes on a ritual, liturgical aspect: *The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice: “Cursed is anyone who...”. Then all the people shall say: Amen!* (Deut 27: 14-26). Deut 28: 15-68 makes clear that whoever breaks the covenant with YHWH and does not observe his Law will be cursed (*all these curses will come on you and overtake you. 15*) and – after an odyssey of misadventures and misfortunes<sup>2</sup>, bothersome and repulsive diseases<sup>3</sup>, intrafamilial cannibalism<sup>4</sup>, despair<sup>5</sup> – will be struck by death (20-22, 24, 45).

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<sup>1</sup> “William Horbury (“Extirpation and Excommunication,” VT35 – 1985, pp. 27-30) has shown that there was a transition in Second Temple Judaism from executing offenders to excommunicate them (with the use of curses) as a preparation or substitution of such punishment... There is evidence for exclusion as a substitute for a death-penalty” (Roy E. Ciampa, *The Presence and Function of Scripture in Galatians 1 and 2*, Tübingen 1998, p. 84).

<sup>2</sup> *You will be pledged to be married to a woman, but another will take her and rape her. You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit. 30 - Swarms of locusts will take over all your trees and the crops of your land. 42.*

<sup>3</sup> *The LORD will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. 22 - The LORD will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured. 27 - The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. 28.*

<sup>4</sup> *Because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the LORD your God has given you. 53.*

The curse entails expulsion, since the offender is excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, which conversely enjoys the favor of YHWH:

*If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God. You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock — the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you (Deut 28: 1-8).*

In the wake of Deut 27-28<sup>6</sup>, in Qumran (1QS 2), in an annual liturgical ceremony for the renewal of the Covenant with YHWH, priests and Levites pronounced the curse formulas addressed to the followers of Belial, that is, to those who wittingly placed themselves outside the community of the saints of Israel, and the assembly replied *Amen, amen!* Expulsion was explicitly connected to the curse: *May he be cut off from the midst of the sons of light (1QS 2:16)*<sup>7</sup>.

Apparently, such rituals seem foreign to the New Testament, but a Pauline text, although less explicit than the previous ones, has drawn great scholarly attention:

*So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5: 4-5).*

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<sup>5</sup> *The LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. 65 - You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. 66 - In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!" — because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. 67.*

<sup>6</sup> "Deut 27 and 28 should be studied together: chapter 27 furnishes the details of the preparatory ceremonial acts and the speaking roles of both the Levites and the gathered assembly; chapter 28 continues the recitation of curses to be spoken by the levitical practitioners" (Melissa Dianne Ramos, *Spoken Word and Ritual Performance: The Oath and the Curse in Deuteronomy 27-28*, Los Angeles 2015, p. 2).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine M. Murphy surmises that even in Qumran the capital execution was substituted by the expulsion curse ceremony, a figurative death (*Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community*, Leiden 2002, p. 56). Truly a smart way to shun the spell of the sword.

According to David Raymond Smith<sup>8</sup>, in the Church of Corinth a liturgical ritual of expulsion curse was practiced, what Paul regarded so particularly effective that it would unfailingly lead to the physical suffering and death of the offender, albeit with the intention of redeeming it.

Let us now examine whether similar cases can be found in other pages of the New Testament and precisely in chapters 1 and 5 of the Acts of the Apostles, which are about the disembowelment of Judas and the sudden demises, in quick succession, of Ananias and Sapphira.

The source Q, Paul and the Gospels of Mark, John and Thomas say nothing about Judas' death, although Mark and John describe him as a traitor. Paul (1Cor 11:23) knows that Jesus was betrayed or, better, handed over (to the adversaries), but does not say by whom. In the light of Rom 8:32 it was God himself who delivered him to his destiny (*he did not spare him, but handed him over for us*). According to Matthew, Judas hanged himself shortly after the betrayal and the return of the thirty pieces of silver to the priests who bought a field with them. In Luke's opinion (Acts 1:18), however, Judas had the time to negotiate and conclude the purchase of the field, where he at the end lay disemboweled. The silence of the other sources and the major discrepancies between Matthew and Luke rouse the suspicion that the divinely inflicted death is nothing but a legend widespread in some circles of the early Church<sup>9</sup>.

Let us start from the core of incontestable truth. The four gospels agree in considering Judas the traitor to Jesus and his cause. The expressions of Luke 22:3 *Satan entered Judas* and John 13:27 *Satan entered him* reveal apostasy, defection, the choice of a way antithetical to Salvation.

Then the early community wastes no time. In the ten days elapsing between the Ascension and Pentecost, according to Luke (Acts 1:15-26) Peter puts forward the proposal to replace the traitor. To replace an apostle who is still alive<sup>10</sup> implicitly means to cut him from the community, to excommunicate him, or, in Pauline terms, to hand him over communally, thanks to the power of the Lord Jesus, to Satan. Thus the culprit becomes the target of the

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<sup>8</sup> "Hand this man over to Satan". *Curse, Exclusion and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5*, Edinburgh 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson P. Estrada, *From Followers to Leaders: The Apostles in the Ritual of Status Transformation in Acts 1-2*, New York 2004, p. 183.

<sup>10</sup> In Acts Judas' end precedes his replacement, whereas it was actually seen by the disciples as the inevitable future effect of the expulsion curse.

curses enumerated in chap. 28 of Deuteronomy. Once cursed and excommunicated, Judas cannot escape death<sup>11</sup>.

The same argument explains what, taken to be true, would stand for a bewildering instance of divine cruelty, the episode of Ananias and Sapphira<sup>12</sup>. The historical truth of the story is limited to the ascertainment of the enrollment in Lucifer's host. Peter asks rhetorically: *How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? - How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord?* (Acts 5:3, 9). From it results the commission of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit, in the face of which Peter cannot get out of inflicting, with the approval of the community (*Amen, amen!*), the excommunication, delivering both to the curse<sup>13</sup> and to the power of Satan, that is, in the eyes of pious believers, to a sure death<sup>14</sup>.

So the proper conclusion to draw from these parallel cases, only a few pages away, is that historical events are perceived according to the cultural background of the beholder and then interpreted, reshaped and remodulated in order to adapt themselves to his needs.

These are the elements found, that could be identified in similar cases:

- A historical fact not explicitly narrated, hidden in the folds of the story (in our case, the expulsion curse);
- an association of ideas (in our case, that between expulsion curse and death);
- a profound moral requirement (in our case, that of an exemplary punishment).

It is truly regrettable that Luke, the evangelist of mercy and historical accuracy, credited legends lacking in both aspects. So he obliterated the core of truth, that is, the expulsion curse ritual, and reported instead the hoped-for relentless divine revenge, seen as actual thanks to the filter of the will to believe.

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<sup>11</sup> An echo of the expulsion curse ritual can be found in the verse quoted by Peter as a prophecy: *May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it* (Psalm 69:26, slightly altered).

<sup>12</sup> James DG Dunn considers it "one of the most unnerving episodes in the whole of the New Testament" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Peterborough 1996, p. 62).

<sup>13</sup> See further on this theme Benedict HM Kent, "Curses in Acts: Hearing the Apostles' Words of Judgment Alongside 'Magical' Spell Texts", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 2017 Jun, 39 (4), pp. 412-440.

<sup>14</sup> Gerd Lüdemann links Peter's implicit expulsion curse to the passage already examined in 1 Corinthians (*Early Christianity according to the Traditions of the Acts of the Apostles. A Commentary*, London and Philadelphia 1989, pp. 65-66).

