

Reading 1 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time C Exegesis

Reading I

[Jer 17:5-8](#)

Thus says the LORD:

Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings,
who seeks his strength in flesh,
whose heart turns away from the LORD.

He is like a barren bush in the desert
that enjoys no change of season,
but stands in a lava waste,
a salt and empty earth.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,
whose hope is the LORD.

He is like a tree planted beside the waters
that stretches out its roots to the stream:
it fears not the heat when it comes;
its leaves stay green;
in the year of drought it shows no distress,
but still bears fruit.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

(D) Sapiential Sayings (17:5-11). The authenticity of this small collection of wisdom is still highly disputed; in fact, no definitive arguments can be given for or against it. **5-8.** This first saying on “true justice” uses the antithetical synonymity and the literary form of the blessings and curses. The idea of the just man being like a green tree because his strength is in God is well known in the wisdom literature (Ps 52:10; Prv 3:18; 11:13; Sir 24:13ff.), as is also the opposition between the trust in God and the trust in man (Pss 39:5; 118:8-9; 145:3ff.). But the closest parallel is Ps 1, where this opposition is expressed with the very same comparisons, also attested to in the wisdom of the Egyptian Sage, Amen-em-Ope (6:1-12; cf. *ANET* 422). Most exegetes agree that Ps 1 is dependent on Jer, for the trust in the Law is characteristic of later Judaism. The saying intends to put across the real heart of true religion: God is man’s sole refuge. We see no evidence to hold, with R. Davidson, that what Jeremiah expresses here is a

ff. and the following verses

ANET J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (rev. ed.; Princeton, 1955)

rejection of Josiah's nationalistic reform after the latter's death at Megiddo in 609, proving that the human policies are futile (VT 9 [1959] 204-205).

Douay-Rheims Scripture followed by Haydock's Catholic Commentary

5 Thus saith the Lord: Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord.

6 For he shall be like tamaric in the desert, and he shall not see when good shall come: but he shall dwell in dryness in the desert in a salt land, and not inhabited. 7 Blessed be the man that trusteth in the Lord, and the Lord shall be his confidence. 8 And he shall be as a tree that is planted by the waters, that spreadeth out its roots towards moisture: and it shall not fear when the heat cometh. And the leaf thereof shall be green, and in the time of drought it shall not be solicitous, neither shall it cease at any time to bring forth fruit.

6 "Tamaric"... A barren shrub that grows in the driest parts of the wilderness.

Haydock's Commentary:

Ver. 5. *Thus.* Septuagint continue from the last chapter, "cursed," &c. (Haydock) --- Sedecias had formed alliances with several princes, instead of turning to the Lord, chap. xxvii., and xxxvii. (Calmet) --- Our chief dependence must be on God, not on human policy. (Worthington)

Ver. 6. *Tamaric.* A barren shrub, that grows in the driest parts of the wilderness. (Challoner) --- *Harhar* denotes some sort (Haydock) of "useless wood." (Symmachus) See chap. xlvi. 6., and Isaias xvii. 2. --- *Salt*, like the environs of Sodom, the fruits of which were bad.

Ver. 8. *Fruit.* See Psalm i. 3. (Pindar, Nem. viii.) How different from the wicked! (Calmet)

The New American Commentary (non-Catholic)

17:5–6 The Lord pronounced a curse on the person who trusts in human resources. Some commentators equate "man" with Jehoiakim or Zedekiah, but it is preferable to interpret the statement as a generalization about human conduct. Those who depend on flesh (instead of Spirit, Isa 31:3) for "strength" (lit. "arm") are satisfied with their own abilities. They do not believe they need divine help (cf. Prov 28:26; John 15:5).

That kind of person is compared to a "bush in the wastelands."¹⁷ The person who trusts in self and human resources will have a dried up, empty life. That life will be as

barren and unattractive as a desert plant struggling for survival on land that has been salted to prevent the growth of any vegetation (cf. Judg 9:45; Job 39:6; Ps 107:34).

17:7–8 The difference between trusting in people and trusting in the Lord is the difference between “cursed” (v. 5) and “blessed” (v. 7; cf. Deut 28; Ps 40:4). Though drought and heat may come, a tree planted by water will flourish. Its leaves will remain green, and it will bear fruit. The figure suggests a person who can endure life’s adversities without anxiety¹⁸ and is stable and productive. It is the OT equivalent of the “abundant life” Jesus mentioned (John 10:10).

Daily Bible Study Series (non Catholic)

Jeremiah 17:5–8

⁵Thus says the Lord:

“Cursed is the man who trusts in man
and makes flesh his arm,
whose heart turns away from the Lord.

⁶He is like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see any good come.

He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.

⁷“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.

⁸He is like a tree planted by water,

17 The “bush” has been variously identified by translators as heath (KJV), juniper (NEB, REB, Holladay), tamarisk (LXX; a dwarf plant that grows in the barren desert), scrub (JB), and shrub (NRSV).

18 Parallel to **רָאָה** (“see”) in v. 6, the MT ketib has **יִרָאָה**, “fear” in v. 8, translated by the LXX, NIV, NAB, NEB. The Massoretes preferred **רָאָה**, which is read by the Tg and KJV. Either could be correct.

that sends out its roots by the stream,
and does not fear when heat comes,
for its leaves remain green,
and is not anxious in the year of drought,
for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

Read Psalm 1; notice the contrasting pictures it draws of the righteous man who prospers and the wicked man who perishes, and you will see why this passage is often thought to be little more than a variation on that Psalm. Since moreover, as we have seen (12:1–4), Jeremiah learned through bitter experience that life does not follow this script, it is hardly surprising that many scholars argue that this passage does not come from Jeremiah. But the links with Psalm 1 are not as close as are sometimes claimed. The contrast here is not between the wicked and the righteous, but between “the man who trusts in man” (verse 5) and “the man who trusts in the Lord” (verse 7).

We might approach this passage, then, as a further extract from Jeremiah’s spiritual diary. Does this represent the prophet’s response to God’s call to him to “turn” in 15:19–21? Were the doubts and the dark moods of depression which had almost overwhelmed him rooted in the fact that he had begun to “trust in man” rather than in the Lord? Perhaps by trying to go it alone or by paying too much attention to what other people were saying, his faith in the Lord was weakening. It is hard to plough a lonely furrow, to hold on to what you believe, when everyone else is saying that you are wrong.

There is one snag in this, however. In similar passages Jeremiah is not usually so coy about saying that he is describing his own experience. When he means “I”, he says “I”, not “the man who...”. It is better to take this passage as part of Jeremiah’s preaching, an attack on those within the community who believed that Judah could only survive by successfully playing the game of power politics, by playing off the Egyptians against the Babylonians just as some countries today dabble in playing off Russia against the USA in bidding for military and economic aid. In a similar situation of political intrigue a hundred years earlier the prophet Isaiah rounds on those who go down to Egypt for aid, pointing out that

The Egyptians are men, and not God,
and their horses are flesh, and not spirit.

(Isa. 31:3)

Isaiah calls upon his people to believe in the Lord’s ability to protect Jerusalem. So here Jeremiah calls down a curse upon “the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his

arm”, and points his people to that which alone can survive when the heat is on and every prospect seems bleak, “trust in the Lord”.

This message would have been peculiarly relevant in the aftermath of the reformation of 621 B.C. when so many hopes centered on the young Josiah, national hero, reforming king. Perhaps indeed this passage was prompted by the shock produced by the tragic death of Josiah at the battle of Megiddo in 609 B.C. For Judah nationalism, however much it claimed the blessing of religion, was not enough. To place your trust in man or in any kind of human power is ultimately a recipe for disillusionment. At no time in human history more than the present has there been such an urgent need to question putting trust in man. The human power is there, awesomely there, but to trust it is to invite the disillusionment of a nuclear holocaust.