

AMPUTATION PREFERRED TO EXECUTION

Some of the stuff in the Bible seems downright obnoxious, at least to modern readers. Jesus' suggestion that people should chop off their hands or feet, for example, comes across as all but repulsive.

You'll find the shocking piece of advice in the Christian scriptures at Mark 9:43-48. It's part of a longer speech in which Jesus was discussing his followers' priorities. The way he saw it, life in God's kingdom should be tops on anyone's list of objectives.

"If your hand causes you to stumble," he offered, "amputate it! You'd do better to enjoy life maimed, than to roast in Gehenna with two good hands!" Ditto for a foot or an eye. If either organ trips you up, chop it off or pluck it out. Better that than a grave in Gehenna.

(Gehenna, by the way, was a ravine on the outskirts of Jerusalem. In Jesus' day it was the city dump. Its smoking, bug-infested piles of garbage became the model for later pictures of the torments of hell.)

Obviously the rabbi didn't intend for his advice to be taken literally. Although throughout the centuries there have been a few nuts who tried. More than once, especially during medieval times, some practiced a bit of impromptu surgery in the hopes of securing a more favorable position in the hereafter.

Jesus was not calling for a coterie of amputees. On the other hand (no pun intended), he was not merely exaggerating. Even though most modern commentators dismiss his remark as an example of oriental hyperbole. This was more than a forceful way of saying that no sacrifice is too great for the kingdom.

The passage sounds quite different once one realizes that in biblical times convicted

thieves often lost a hand. That was the punishment.

If that didn't deter the criminal, then the other hand would be lopped off, and after that a foot. In a culture where down-and-outers could freely beg, it was unconscionable for someone to steal.

In theory that brand of criminal justice should have been a potent deterrent. At the moment a thief climbed a trellis or picked a pocket he could balance his chance for profit with the possibility of losing forever his ability to repeat the offence.

Was the prize worth the hand or foot itself?

Furthermore, the ancients considered the practice humane! Moderns would have called it "cruel and unusual punishment." But consider the alternative: execution.

According to most ancient legal codes, crimes against property could properly earn a sentence of death. Lenient judges, however, could substitute a chopped off hand for a chopped off head.

Against that background Jesus' advice to eliminate a scandalous hand or foot or eye did not seem so extreme. It was merely practical, scarcely out of the ordinary.

If the alternative were capital punishment, an amputated appendage would have been a small price to pay.

It was no fault of Jesus that twenty centuries later readers of the Bible might have forgotten the facts of life in his world.

Today instructions about poking out your eye in order not to miss out on the kingdom seem grotesque. But in an age where amputation was preferred to execution it made a lot of sense.

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