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## 1 Corinthians 16:22—Not a Curse (or a Drug)

In 1 Corinthians 16:22, Paul writes, “Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Marana ‘tha!”

The phrase “Marana ‘tha” is an Aramaic expression meaning “Come, Lord!” Paul’s Greek readers in Corinth did not know any more Aramaic than modern Americans and so Paul very deliberately used an expression that they would not understand unless someone explained it to them. Most likely he had already told them what it meant and the phrase may have become part of that liturgy: it had an exotic sound to it and helped to solidify their community identity.

Paul’s intention is ignored or spoiled by the NIV, NRSV, and other modern English Bibles that substitute an English phrase rather than using a phrase that would require explanation or communal knowledge.

In any case, the word has had an interesting history of misinterpretation in English-speaking Christianity.

### ***King James Version***

The translators of the 1611 King James Version of the Bible did not know what the word meant but since it is preceded in Paul’s letter by the word *anathema*, which means “accursed,” they guessed that it should be paired with that word to mean “a double curse.” They

translated the verse thus: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha.” And centuries of Bible readers were told that *Anathema Maranatha* means “cursed” or “really cursed” (since *anathema* by itself would mean “cursed”).

As a result the phrase turns up in numerous works of English literature.

- A famous essay by Thomas Macaulay laments how “principles of liberty became the Anathema Maranatha of every fawning dean” (“Essay on Milton,” 1895).
- A well-known poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow says, “Anathema maranatha! was the cry That rang from town to town, from street to street” (“Jewish Cemetery at Newport,” 1854).
- So too in works by Harriet Beecher Stowe and other English writers.<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who understands “Maranatha” to mean, “Come, Lord” may be at a loss to explain such odd uses of the word in English literature. But the explanation is actually simple: following the KJV, the writers thought the word *maranatha* was one half of a curse.

### ***Hippie Christians in the 1970s***

The early 1970s saw a religious revival of evangelical piety among “hippie Christians” in the United States and other parts of the world. The revival was dubbed “the Jesus movement” by the press and its

participants were often called “Jesus freaks” (a term that, for the most part, they did not find offensive).

These Jesus freaks latched on to the word “maranatha” as a slogan, in part because the revival was imbued with a heavy dose of “rapture theology” and many Jesus freaks were expecting the Lord to come soon. Indeed, a music company initially devoted to recordings made by and for participants in the Jesus movement revival took the name Maranatha! Music.

The problem of misinterpretation arose again. Outside the Jesus movement, not many Christians (to say nothing of non-Christians) knew what the word “maranatha” meant and many seemed to associate it with “marijuana” or, for some other reason, were convinced it had something to do with drugs.

Hippie pietists who owned T-shirts, Bible covers, posters, and other paraphernalia with “Maranatha!” blazoned in bright colors were often disparaged as aficionados of something related to the drug culture. Jesus freaks with a sense of humor seized upon this frequent misunderstanding to display slogans like, “Maranatha! God’s Way to Get High” (an ironic reference to the impending rapture).<sup>1</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 480–81.