

The Fig Tree

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Surely the most problematic miracle in the Gospels is the Fig Tree,¹ Mk 11:12-14 (curse) and 11:20-21 (fulfilment). I here follow that miracle through the Gospels.

First Fig

Jesus sees a fig tree, and goes to pick fruit from it, though “it was not the season for figs.” To seek fruit out of season is pettish; to curse the tree when none is found (“No man eat fruit from thee henceforward forever”) is the tantrum of a cranky child.² Why does he expect fruit out of season? Because of Ezekiel 47:12, which predicts that in the future good age, fertilizing water will flow, *in all seasons*, from the Temple:

Ezek 47:1. And he brought me back unto the door of the house, and behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward . . . [7a] upon the bank of the river were very many trees on the one side and on the other. [12] And upon the bank thereof. . . shall grow every tree for food, whose leaf shall not wither, neither shall the fruit thereof fail; *it shall bring forth new fruit every month, because the waters thereof issue out of the sanctuary* . . . and the fruit thereof shall be for food.

The fig tree is then an index of the proper functioning of the Temple. The curse is not against the tree, but against the Temple which it symbolizes. Jesus’ anger on finding things other than he expected may have a precedent in God’s anger in Jeremiah:

Jer 8:13. I will utterly consume them, saith Jehovah; there shall be no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade . . .

That the Temple is not fulfilling its function is the conclusion of the original layer of Mark, which ends³ at Mk 15:38 with what amounts to the curse of God:

Mk 15:38. And the veil of the Temple was rent in two, from the top to the bottom.

Why from the top? Because it is an act of God. Why rent? Because that violent action desacralizes the Temple; it is finished as a religious center.

¹Theophylact (c1090), “And let us understand the things concerning the fig tree. For there is much there that might seem odd;” Bundy (1958), “Irrational and revolting;” Nineham (1963), “One of the most difficult in the Gospels;” Evans (2001), “Jesus’ action does seem petty and capricious, and begs for an explanation;” France (2002), “has always been a problem.”

²Johnson (1960), “it reminds one of the apocryphal infancy stories, and it seems to conflict with Jesus’ character;” France (2002), “Even worse, Jesus’ curse on the tree appears to be a spontaneous and spiteful reaction to his personal disappointment at finding no figs.”

³Following the reconstruction in Yarbrow Collins **Mark** 819.

Was the Fig Tree original in Mark? No. As a display of supernatural power, it belongs to the Divinization layer of Mark.⁴ It is also anomalous in context. Nineham, following Bundy,⁵ notes that the narrative is better without it. He outlines it this way:

PRIMITIVE SEQUENCE	LATER INSERTIONS
The Ovation (11:1-10)	Transition (11:11)
	The Fig Tree I (11:12-14)
The Cleansing (11:15-17)	[Editorial] (11:18-19)
	The Fig Tree II (11:20-27a)
The Challenge (11:27b-33)	

Notice that the Fig Tree is here divided by the Cleansing, considered as an earlier passage. The Cleansing is hopeful; it is meant to purify the Temple of commercial defilements, so it can function as the abode of God.⁶ The Fig Tree is a final judgement *against* the Temple. The Curse represents the failure of the Cleansing.

Separately, the Allegory of the Vineyard recalls the Temple establishment's killing of Jesus, to protect their own illegitimate possession. The throwing of the body of the Son out of the vineyard may echo fact: the body of Jesus the Criminal was most likely disposed of in a common grave outside the city.⁷ The allegory must then reflect a time before the Empty Tomb story, part of the Resurrection stratum, was added to Mark. This would put it close to the Fig Tree (part of the Divinization layer), and Nineham might well have continued his diagram this way:

PRIMITIVE SEQUENCE	LATER INSERTIONS
The Challenge (Mk 11:27b-33)	The Vineyard (12:1-12)
The Trap of the Pharisees (Mk 12:13-17)	
The Trap of the Sadducees (12:18-27)	

in which the Vineyard story too is best construed as narratively interruptive.

Second Fig

Mt 21:18-22) abbreviates the miracle, and brings its halves together. In Matthew, the fig tree withers *immediately* at the curse of Jesus, emphasizing Jesus' power.

Third Fig

The miracle is not repeated in Luke. But the motif of the barren fig tree seems to have been transformed in Luke, to appear as a parable which has no parallel elsewhere, the Parable of the Spared Fig Tree.⁸

⁴See Brooks **Divinization**.

⁵Nineham **Mark** 298; Bundy **Jesus** 424.

⁶Quoting Isa 56:7, another condition which the Jesus party thought must be fulfilled before the promised return of God to his temple (Malachi 3:1).

⁷For other non-Tomb traditions, see Kirby **Case** 192.

⁸For a summary, see Brooks **Sermon**. This passage is at p176.

That parable runs:

Lk 13:6. And he spake this parable: A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit thereon, and found none. [7] And he said unto the vinedresser, Behold, these three years I came seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none; cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground? [8] And he answering saith unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it, [9] and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down.

This is quintessential Luke: solicitous and forgiving, hoping until the last moment for the repentance of the unfruitful. This is one of a triplet of unique Lukan segments, whose point is to clarify the relation of sin to punishment. In outline:

- Lk 12:57-59. Make *peace* with your accuser, or you will face prison
- Lk 13:1-5. Accidental death is meaningless, but you must *repent*, or you will die
- Lk 13: 6-9. There will be time to repent, but you must *repent*, or you will die

I suggest that Luke's Sparing the Fig Tree is a remake of Mark's Cursing the Fig Tree, here with a closing note of encouragement: there will be time to repent.

A Different Fig

In John, one of Jesus' first disciples is Nathanael, whom Jesus miraculously sees "under the fig tree," a traditional symbol of Jewish learning.⁹ That very learning enables him to recognize Jesus as Son of God. He will later behold the Risen Jesus.

Perhaps Nathanael serves as an emblem of continuity in the later Jesus Movement. Not indeed the Jerusalem *Temple*, which was definitively desacralized in Mark 15:38, but the Jewish *heritage* in Christianity is still alive.¹⁰

The torch has passed. The Christians are the real Jews.

Works Cited

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⁹For this Rabbinic interpretation, see Schnackenburg 1/317 n103 and n104.

¹⁰For the meaning of "Nathanael," which is not constant in John, see Brooks **Nathanael**.