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# The Cursing of the Barren Fig Tree (Mark 11:2-14)

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THE CURSING OF THE BARREN FIG TREE (MARK 11:12-14)

by Ronald W. Lehenbauer

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GREEK transliterations

α - a  
β - b  
γ - g  
δ - d  
ε - e  
ζ - z  
η - ē  
θ - th  
ι - i  
κ - k  
λ - l  
μ - m

ν - n  
ξ - x  
ο - o  
π - p  
ρ - r  
σς - s  
τ - t  
υ - u  
φ - ph  
χ - ch  
ψ - ps  
ω - ō

The pericope of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree (Mk. 11:12-14,20-25; Mt. 21:18-22) is perhaps the most difficult story in the four canonical Gospels. The problems connected with the pericope multiply the closer one examines it. Two scholars have described the problems as follows: "Apart from its sheer physical impossibility and evident absurdity...the act depicted is irrational and revolting: Jesus curses a fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season."<sup>1</sup> Although some interpreters may be multiplying problems unnecessarily, it cannot be denied that the story does pose problems --perhaps only because we are so far removed from the original settings in which the incident happened and in which the story was told and written down.

We may isolate the major problems as follows: 1) It is the only miracle of destruction attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. As Nineham states, "...it approximates more closely than any other episode in Mark to the type of 'unreasonable' miracle characteristic of the non-canonical Gospel literature."<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of Thomas contains stories of the boy Jesus being provoked to anger and performing miracles of destruction through curses.<sup>3</sup> 2) The juxtaposition of the two phrases "He went to see if He could find something on it," and "for it was not the season for figs," causes us to ask several questions: If it was not the season for figs, why did Jesus go to see if there were figs on the tree? Why did Jesus curse a tree for not bearing fruit out of season? 3) What was the significance of the incident, and why did the early Church and the Evangelists preserve the story? Was it simply to show the power of Jesus? Or did the story have a deeper, symbolic meaning? 4) Did Jesus really work such a miracle, or was it a

story developed by the early Church? 5) If it is historical, is it placed in its original historical setting in the Gospels or ought we to allow a longer interval between the entry into Jerusalem and the Feast of the Passover?<sup>4</sup> 6) The accounts of Matthew and Mark differ considerably in regard to the sequence of events surrounding the cursing of the fig tree. In Matthew Jesus enters Jerusalem, cleanses the temple, and then departs for Bethany on the first day; on the second day He curses the fig tree, the disciples notice that it withers immediately, and Jesus teaches them about faith and prayer (Mt. 21:1-22). In Mark Jesus enters Jerusalem and visits the temple briefly on the first day; on the second day He curses the fig tree and cleanses the temple; on the third day the disciples discover the withered fig tree and Jesus teaches them about faith and prayer (Mk. 11:1-26)<sup>5</sup>

Other problems could probably be added to this list. The main purpose of this paper, however, is to attempt to answer the third question listed above; it is hoped that in the process of the discussion solutions to some of the other difficulties will also suggest themselves. Concentrating on the Markan account, we will proceed first by discussing various answers that have been suggested to the question: what was the original purpose of the story? Secondly, the text will be examined exegetically and its context in Mark will be scrutinized in an effort to determine which of the suggested answers best accords with the evidence. Because of the scope of the paper we will limit our detailed analysis to the actual account of the cursing in Mark 11:12-14; the account of the withering of the fig tree and the subsequent sayings on faith and prayer (Mk. 11:20-25) will be discussed as context.

The textual variations in Mark 11:12-14, 20-25, as listed by Nestle, do not have strong manuscript attestation, and most of them can be viewed as

simplified readings of the original, more difficult text adopted by Nestle.<sup>6</sup>

The editors of The Greek New Testament list only three of the variants as significant.<sup>7</sup> 1) The omission of verse 26 in the original is virtually

certain in their judgment; it is probably an addition from Matthew 6:15.

2) The aorist, elabete, in verse 24 is also almost certain; it is the more difficult reading, as one would expect a future or a present here. 3) In

verse 23, against the Nestle choice, ekete, The Greek New Testament selects ei ekete as the probably reading, although with some degree of doubt.<sup>8</sup>

This choice, however, creates a complex conditional sentence with two conditional clauses, each with its subject in a different person; ei ekete may be a gloss from the Matthean ean ekete (Mt. 21:21). We prefer the Nestle reading.

We therefore offer the following translation on the basis of the Nestle text:

(11:12) On the next day when they came out of Bethany He began to get hungry. (13) And catching sight of a fig tree in the distance which had leaves (on it), He went (to see) if he could find something on it; and going up to it He found nothing but leaves; for it was not the season for figs. (14) And in response He said to it: "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And His disciples were listening.

(11:20) And in the morning as they passed by they saw the fig tree withered from its roots. (21) And Peter, remembering (what had happened), said to Him: "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered." (22) And in response Jesus said to them: "Have faith in God. (23) Amen I say to you: whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and be hurled into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says happens, it will be done for him. (24) Therefore I tell you, all things, whatever you pray and ask for, believe that you received it, and it will be yours. (25) And when you stand praying, if you have something against anyone, forgive (him), in order that your Father in heaven may also forgive your transgressions."

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<sup>1</sup>Charles W. F. Smith, "No Time For Figs," Journal of Biblical Literature,



LXXIX (1960), 315; quoting W.E. Bundy, Jesus and the First Three Gospels, p. 425.

<sup>2</sup>D. E. Nineham, The Gospel of St. Mark (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 298.

<sup>3</sup>Gospel of Thomas III:1-3, "But the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph, and he took a branch of a willow and dispersed the waters which Jesus had gathered together. And when Jesus saw what was done, he was wroth and said unto him: O evil, ungodly, and foolish one, what hurt did the pools and the waters do thee? behold, now also thou shalt be withered like a tree, and shalt not bear leaves, neither root nor fruit. And straightway that lad withered up wholly, but Jesus departed and went into Joseph's house." IV, "After that again he went through the village, and a child ran and dashed against his shoulder. And Jesus was provoked and said unto him: Thou shalt not finish thy course. And immediately he fell down and died. But certain when they saw what was done said: Whence was this young child born, for that every word of his is an accomplished work? And the parents of him that was dead came unto Joseph, and blamed him, saying: Thou that hast such a child canst not dwell with us in the village: or do thou teach him to bless and not to curse: for he slayeth our children." (The Apocryphal New Testament, translated by M.R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 50.)

<sup>4</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to St. Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), pp. 354-5.

<sup>5</sup>H. Van Der Loos, The Miracles of Jesus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), p. 688.

<sup>6</sup>E. Nestle, editor, Novum Testamentum Graece, 25th edition (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1963), pp. 118-9.

<sup>7</sup>Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, editors, The Greek New Testament (New York: American Bible Society, 1966), pp. 170-72.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid..

## II

Most of the answers which interpreters have suggested in regard to the question of the meaning and purpose of the story of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree fall into two categories: there are those who interpret it as a miracle which shows that Jesus possessed divine power, and there are those

who interpret it as a miracle with symbolic meaning.

A. Those who hold that the story merely describes a miracle of power usually point to two features in the text and context as evidence. First, Jesus Himself seems to interpret the cursing of the fig tree as a sign of the power of faith and prayer; when the withered fig tree is pointed out to Him by Peter, He responds with the lesson that faith and prayer can move mountains (Mk. 11:22ff.). Secondly, they point to elements in the story itself which indicate that it relates Jesus' attempt to satisfy His hunger, His disappointment, and His use of divine power when His attempt was thwarted: "He began to get hungry;" "He went to see if He could find something on it (the fig tree);" "He found nothing but leaves;" Vincent Taylor concludes that "whatever the original facts may have been, Mark clearly intends to describe a miracle of power."<sup>1</sup> Dibelius held that the miracle stories in general were designed to show the superiority of Jesus as a miracle-worker over all other miracle-workers.<sup>2</sup>

There are several variations on this position that the purpose of the story was merely to describe a miracle of power. One interpretation explains the event on the basis of a psychological analysis of Jesus. He was troubled by the thought of His approaching death, the ingratitude of the people, and the blindness and obstinacy of Israel's leaders. On that morning as He approached Jerusalem He was hungry and hoped to find something to eat on a fig tree He saw in the distance. His disappointment in not finding any fruit "proved to be the last straw, and the long pent up indignation broke forth, and Jesus vented His anger upon the inanimate object before Him." Jesus' action is comparable to Moses' breaking the tables of the law in anger (Ex. 32:19).<sup>3</sup> The cursing of the fig tree is, then, the

story of a miracle of punishment (Strafwunder).<sup>4</sup> In evaluating this interpretation we must keep in mind that the Evangelists were not primarily interested in the question of motives in their description of Jesus as miracle-worker. Occasionally they refer to His compassion (e.g. Mk. 8:2), but, as Richardson states, "the Evangelists do not relate the miracle-stories primarily in order to illustrate the compassion of Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

Likewise in the story of the cursing of the fig tree Mark was not primarily interested in illustrating the anger or impatience of Jesus. This, of course, does not rule out a place for the righteous anger of Jesus in a correct interpretation of the story.

Other interpreters view the story as a non-historical, aetiological legend. According to this view there was a withered fig tree on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem; primitive Christian tradition attached to it the legend of the fig tree being cursed by Jesus for not bearing any fruit as an explanation of the presence of the withered tree.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that such a suggestion is pure conjecture and does not take the Markan narrative seriously. As Robin points out, the text contains details which strongly suggest that the story originates with an eye witness: 1) The chronology surrounding the event is very precise. 2) The statement "It was not the season for figs" would be unlikely in a legend. 3) Jesus noticed the tree "from afar" (apo makrothen). 4) The disciples were listening.<sup>7</sup> Cranfield also notes that the reference to Peter's remembering (11:21) looks like personal reminiscence.<sup>8</sup>

A third view is that the story is an expanded and reinterpreted saying. According to this view Jesus originally said simply that the parousia is near and that the end commences with His passion and resurrection; He

illustrated this by pointing to a fig tree which He said would not have time to bear another crop of fruit before the parousia. When the parousia was delayed, the early Church reinterpreted the saying as a curse on the fig tree, and a withered tree outside of Jerusalem became proof of the fulfillment of the curse.<sup>9</sup> This too, of course, is conjecture, and the eye witness details listed above also suggest that this interpretation leaves something to be desired.

B. The main problem with the view that the story in question merely describes a miracle of power is that if this is so, this miracle-story differs from all other miracle-stories in the Gospels. For the miracles, as Richardson and Kallas clearly show, are not merely proofs of the deity or power of Jesus nor signs designed to attract attention to His message. Jesus frequently demanded individuals to keep His miracles secret (e.g. Mk. 5:43, 7:36), and He refused to work miracles just as a sign of His identity (Mk. 8:11f.). Like the sayings and the parables, the miracles functioned as a means for deepening "the understanding of the mystery of Who Jesus is," and for awakening "saving faith in the person of Christ as the Word of God."<sup>10</sup> The miracles of Jesus, then, have the same purpose and message as the words of Jesus. The parables and sayings were verbal announcements of the kingdom of God and the miracles were physical anticipations and signs of the kingdom of God; the miracles were enacted parables. "...they are vitalized dramatizations which illustrate precisely the same truth as his sermons and parables."<sup>11</sup> This then brings us to the second basic type of interpretation of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, that which sees this story as a sign or symbolic action which is to deepen His followers' understanding of Who He is and what He came to do. Two varieties of symbolic

interpretation can be isolated: there are those who feel that in the cursing and withering of the fig tree Jesus' victory over and destruction of Satan and the forces of evil are depicted, and there are others who feel that Jesus' judgment upon Israel or her leaders or Jerusalem is symbolized in this story. There is much that can be said in favor of both views.

According to the former view, all of the miracles of Jesus are signs of victories of the kingdom of God over the kingdom of Satan. Jesus' casting out of demons by the Spirit of God is a sure sign of the coming of the kingdom of God (Mt. 12:28). Jesus' healing miracle released the woman with the spirit of infirmity from Satan's bond (Lk. 13:16). In Jesus' miracles the "forces of evil were already being overthrown."<sup>12</sup> In Rabbinic Judaism the Messianic Age was expected to undo all of the evil consequences of the Fall. Davies notes these features in the Rabbinic picture of the expectations of the Messianic Age: The whole creation became involved in the corruption of the Fall. "Six things in particular followed the Fall: the earth lost its fruitfulness as did the trees, and the atmosphere ceased to be clear; while as for man he lost the glory of his appearance, the eternity of his life, and the magnitude of his form." The Messiah was expected to restore the whole universe to its original condition.<sup>13</sup> Jesus partially fulfilled this expectation when He cursed the fruitless fig tree. Kallas summarizes this interpretation in the following words:

Just as a storm was a demon-inspired perversion of a God-created function cf. [Mk. 4:35-41], so also a fruitless tree was a demon-inspired perversion of a God-created function. And so it was destroyed. All that was barren, fruitless, enslaving man in chains of fear and hunger, all these things would be no more in the kingdom of God. And so already the fruitless and worthless and demonic are being rooted out and destroyed.<sup>14</sup>

It is possible that this and the second view of this category of interpretation are not diametrically opposed.

A majority of the commentators in the history of the interpretation of this story of the cursing of the fig tree appear to adopt the view that Jesus' action and the withering of the tree were symbolic of the fate of Israel or of some part of Israel. Even Taylor, who holds that Mark intended to describe a miracle of power, allows that "he may have regarded the incident as significant with reference to Jerusalem and Judaism."<sup>15</sup> Cranfield's position is representative of many commentators:

The most satisfactory explanation of this difficult section is surely that which is given by the earliest extant commentary on Mk, that of Victor of Antioch, viz. that the withering of the fig tree was an acted parable in which Jesus 'used the fig tree to set forth the judgement that was about to fall on Jerusalem.' A people which honoured God with their lips but whose heart was all the time far from him (vii. 6) was like a tree with abundance of leaves but no fruit.<sup>16</sup>

Richardson states that the fig tree with leaves but no fruit represents the sterility of Pharisaic religion with its empty ceremonies and traditions "by which the Jews attempted to cover up the nakedness of their spiritual life--as Adam attempted to conceal his nakedness with fig-leaves (Gen. 3:7)." According to Richardson, Jesus enacted the miracle as a warning to the Pharisees, whose outward religious profession produced no fruits of repentance.<sup>17</sup> Trench held that the fig tree symbolized Israel and that it was cursed not for being without fruit but for proclaiming with its leaves that it had fruit when it had none. "The Gentiles were empty of all fruits of righteousness, but they owned it; the Jews were empty, but they vaunted that they were full." Israel, under the symbol of the fig tree, is cursed not for being barren but for being false.<sup>18</sup> Gould also sees the story as a symbol for Jesus' judgment on the hypocrisy of Israel as a nation.<sup>19</sup>

Scharlemann holds that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree was symbolic of the same truth expressed by the parable in Luke 13:6-9, and that the fig tree "stood for the attitude of Jerusalem toward the preaching of John the Baptist and of Jesus."<sup>20</sup>

Although there are differences in detail among the scholars who hold to this second symbolic interpretation of the pericope, and although not all of the details of these symbolic interpretations may stand in a concentrated study of the evidence, this view generally has much to commend itself. The prophets of the Old Testament performed enacted prophecy in a similar manner. Yahweh commanded Jeremiah to buy a potter's earthen flask and to break it before the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the rulers of Judah as a sign of the evil which Yahweh sends upon them for forsaking Him for other gods (Jer. 19). Amos sees a basket of summer fruit, and it is a sign by which Yahweh reminds him of the end and destruction which has come upon Israel (Amos 8:1-3). Jesus, standing at the end of the long line of prophets would also naturally use symbolic action of this kind to proclaim the judgment of God upon unfaithful Israel. The pericope immediately preceding the cursing of the fig tree is the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; in the Matthean account these words are put into the mouths of the crowds who welcomed Him: "This is the prophet (ho prophētēs) Jesus of Nazareth of Galilee." (Mt. 21:11) Carrington suggests that many of the actions described in this section of Mark are prophetic acts on Jesus' part: the riding on the ass, the acceptance of the acclamations, the word spoken to the fig tree, and the cleansing of the temple are "dramatic actions by which a message is communicated to God's people in an unmistakable and memorable manner...."<sup>21</sup> Some critics of this position cite two elements in the text of Mark as evidence against such a

symbolic interpretation: Jesus went to the tree because He was hungry, and the note is added that "it was not the season for figs." But, as Cranfield states, Jesus may have used His hunger as an occasion for this symbolic act, and the element of the unexpected and incongruous ("it was not the season for figs"), "which would stimulate curiosity, was a characteristic feature of the symbolic actions of the O.T. prophets (e.g. Jer. 13:lff., 19:lff.)."<sup>22</sup>

Parallel passages to the Markan story of the cursing of the fig tree in Luke also point toward this symbolic interpretation. Some commentators conjecture that the Lukan parable of the fig tree (Lk. 13:6-9) was transformed into the Markan miracle-story by the early Church tradition. Some also adopt the aetiological legend hypothesis and state that the occasion of the parable becoming a miracle-story was a withered tree on the Bethany-to-Jerusalem road.<sup>23</sup> Against this conjecture, however, it should be noted that the characteristic element in the Lukan parable is the delay granted to the fig tree and that this is completely absent in the Markan miracle-story. Secondly, the eye witness features of the Markan story, discussed above, can be cited against this conjecture also. Thirdly, as Smith argues, this hypothesis must mean that "an original parable of Jesus had been transformed by Mark before Luke found it and wrote it down in its original form. This is something of an oddity."<sup>24</sup> One could perhaps as easily conjecture that Mark's story is the original and that the Lukan parable is a corrected, transformed miracle-story; J. van Goudoever, in fact, makes such a conjecture.<sup>25</sup> Although, then, the Lukan parable and the Markan miracle-story probably did not have a common origin, because of their similarity it can be held that the essential teaching which the Markan



incident conveys is also to be found in the Lukan parable.<sup>26</sup> Scharlemann, as noted above, holds this view and suggests that the fig tree in both cases represents only a part of Israel--Jerusalem. In the parable the fig tree is in a vineyard; Scharlemann points to Isaiah 1:8 where Zion is compared to a "cottage in a vineyard"--part of a vineyard being representative of part of Israel. He also points to Isaiah 5:7 where the men of Judah are called God's pleasant plant, to Luke 13:4,22 where special mention is made of Jerusalem, and to Luke 13:33-35 where Jesus laments over Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> Another feature of Luke's Gospel may also shed light in this area. Mark places the story of the cursing of the fig tree between the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple. Luke narrates both of the latter events but in between, instead of the cursing of the fig tree, places the weeping of Jesus over Jerusalem:

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation."(Lk. 19:41-44)

Is this perhaps Luke's substitute for Mark's story of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree and therefore one of the earliest commentaries on it? If so, we can conclude that the withered fig tree symbolizes Jerusalem and the destruction to come upon it for unfaithfulness and for not recognizing Who Jesus was.

Readers of Mark popularly have problems in this pericope with the seemingly capricious, uncompassionate action of Jesus in cursing the fig tree. This is particularly the case if one interprets the story merely as a miracle of power. The historicity of the incident is usually questioned

for this reason that Jesus would hardly go about cursing harmless fruit trees simply because they did not have any fruit--and out of season at that. As Branscomb states: "It doesn't matter whether figs were possible or not, it still remains nonsensical and 'out of character' for Jesus to have forbidden the tree to have any fruit in the future simply because it did not have any at the moment."<sup>28</sup> When, however, one views the incident as a prophetic, symbolic act on Jesus' part, the problem dissolves, for Jesus was fulfilling His function as the Messiah by expressing divine, righteous anger at the demonic corruption of the world of nature and/or the demonic unfaithfulness, blindness, and obstinacy of Jerusalem in the face of the kingdom of God newly present in Him. One need only read through the Gospels to see how severely Jesus deals with the scribes and Pharisees and leaders of Jerusalem (e.g. Mt. 23). Straton notes that a good deal of false sympathy has been bestowed upon the fig tree and continues:

The whole incident furnishes a healthy corrective to a modern sentimental view of a 'gentle' Jesus. On more than one occasion Jesus showed a divine indignation which adds to his character rather than detracts from it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1963), pp. 459-60.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Richardson, The Miracle Stories of the Gospels (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1941), p. 25, citing M. Dibelius, From Tradition to Gospel (translated by B. L. Woolf, 1934), pp. 70ff., 96, 100.

<sup>3</sup>V. Anzalone, "Il fico maledetto (Mc. XI, 12-14, 20-25)," Palestra del Clero, XXXVII (1958), 257-64, as paraphrased by Collins, New Testament Abstracts, III (Fall, 1958), 25-6.

<sup>4</sup>Gerhard Munderlein, "Die Verfluchung des Feigenbaumes," New Testament Studies, X (1963), 92-4.

<sup>5</sup>Richardson, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>6</sup>Maurice Goguel, The Life of Jesus (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1945), p. 241. Cf. also B. H. Branscomb, The Gospel of Mark (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, n.d.), pp. 201-2; and V. Taylor, op. cit., p. 459.

<sup>7</sup>A. de Q. Robin, "The Cursing of the Fig Tree in Mark XI. A Hypothesis," New Testament Studies, VIII (1962), 277.

<sup>8</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to St. Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), p. 355.

<sup>9</sup>Hans. W. Bartsch, "Die 'Verfluchung' Des Feigenbaums," Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, LIII (1962), 256-60.

<sup>10</sup>Richardson, op. cit., pp. 1, 26.

<sup>11</sup>James Kallas, The Significance of the Synoptic Miracles (London: S.P.C.K., 1961), p. 77.

<sup>12</sup>Richardson, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>13</sup>W. D. Davies, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), p. 39.

<sup>14</sup>Kallas, op. cit., p. 96.

<sup>15</sup>Taylor, op. cit., p. 458.

<sup>16</sup>Cranfield, op. cit., pp. 356-7.

<sup>17</sup>Richardson, op. cit., pp. 55-6.

<sup>18</sup>(Richard C.) Trench, Notes on the Miracles of our Lord (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., (1855) ), pp. 363-4.

<sup>19</sup>Ezra P. Gould, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 211-12.

<sup>20</sup>Martin H. Scharlemann, Proclaiming the Parables (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 66.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Carrington, According to Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), p. 238.

<sup>22</sup>Cranfield, op. cit., p. 356.

<sup>23</sup>Julius Schniewind, Das Evangelium nach Markus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963), p. 150.

<sup>24</sup>Charles W. F. Smith, "No Time for Figs," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXXIX (1960), 324.

<sup>25</sup>J. van Goudoever, Biblical Calendars (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), p. 266.

<sup>26</sup>Robin, op. cit., pp. 277-8.

<sup>27</sup>Scharlemann, op. cit., pp. 66-7.

<sup>28</sup>B. H. Branscomb, op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>29</sup>H. H. Stratton, Preaching the Miracles of Jesus (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 64.

### III

Our purpose in this section is to take a closer look at the Markan text which contains the narrative of the cursing of the fig tree. After a study of various words and phrases in the account, we will concentrate on the concepts of "curse" and "fig tree" in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>1</sup>

A. 11:12. tē epaurion: Supply hēmera: "on the next day" (BAG, s.v.). This is no doubt a temporal dative in answer to the question 'when?' (BD, 200). Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem had occurred the day before this incident; in the evening after the triumphal entry He returned with the Twelve to Bethany after looking around in the temple (Mk. 11:11). According to the Markan chronology, the triumphal entry apparently took place on the Sunday before the last Passover meal which Jesus celebrated with His disciples (cf. 11:12,20; 14:1,12,17; 15:1,42; 16:1). The incident of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, then, took place on Monday.

exelthontōn...Bēthaniās: The genitive absolute here denotes "time when". Apo is used for ek in a local sense (BD, 209,1): "when they came out of Bethany;" or "after they had left Bethany" (NEB). Matthew substitutes epanagagōn eis tēn polin ("returning to the city," namely, Jerusalem).

Bethany was a small village about one and five eighths miles east of Jerusalem,

on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. "One approach to Jerusalem from the E was through Bethany and over the ridge of the Mount of Olives; this was the course followed by Jesus when he...made his 'triumphal entry'."<sup>2</sup> Jesus and His disciples lodged at Bethany while attending the festival in Jerusalem; perhaps they stayed with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha (Jn. 11:1-55) or with Simon the leper (Mk. 14:3).

epeinasen: "He felt hungry"(NEB); "He was hungry"(RSV). Perhaps this is an ingressive aorist (Nunn, 93): "He began to hunger," or "He began to get hungry." Munderlein translates the phrase, "uberfiel ihn Hunger."<sup>3</sup>

11:13. idōn sukēn: Either "see," "catch sight of," or "notice" with the accusative of the thing perceived (a fig tree) may be used here (BAG, s. horaō). Fig trees and their significance will be discussed later in this chapter.

apo makrothen: The apo is added "since the suffix -then has lost its original separative force"(BAG, s. makrothen): "from a distance" or "in the distance"(RSV, NEB, TEV). Matthew substitutes, epi tēs hodou (by the road.)

echousan phulla: The historical present (participle) is used here for the sake of vividness (Nunn, 88): "which had leaves (on it)," or "in leaf" (RSV, NEB), or "covered with leaves"(TEV). In the O.T. the state of leaves on a tree was symbolic of the Israelite's relationship with Yahweh. The withered or fallen leaf symbolized unrepentant rebels and sinners and their judgment (Is. 1:21, 27-31: "You shall be like an oak whose leaf withers [apobēlōkuia ta phulla]."), those who are unable to act righteously (Is. 64:5(6): "We all fade like a leaf [exerruēmen ōs phulla];" note Mk. 11:20), and the enemies of God from whom He hides His face (Job 13:24f.: "Wilt thou

frighten a driven leaf...?"). The tree whose leaves do not wither (to phullon autou ouk aporruēsetai), on the other hand, is symbolic of the man who delights "in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Ps. 1:2f.) Note here the probable connection to Yahweh's covenant with His people: the tree whose leaves do not wither is like the man who lives by Yahweh's law (nomō)--who lives within the covenant relationship which Yahweh established. We see then that Jesus was following a precedent set very clearly in the O.T. if He was cursing the unfaithful of Israel under the symbol of a fig tree whose leaves He caused to wither.

ei ara ti eurēsei en autē: Ei is used here to express an expectation of Jesus which accompanies the action (ēlthen), and the expectation is strengthened by the ara (BD, 375): "He went to see if He could find anything on it" (RSV, NEB). There was a chance that He might find some fruit on the tree; He had such expectation which caused Him to go and look. Matthew omits this phrase.

elthōn ep' autēn: Epi with the accusative of place denotes motion that comes close to or in the neighborhood of something (BAG, s. epi, III,1,g): "When he came to it..." (RSV, TEV); "when he came there..." (NEB). "When He came up to it He found nothing but leaves" probably gives the clearest translation.

kairos: This refers to a definite time, "time when the figs are ripe" (BAG, s.v., 3): "For it was not the season for figs" (RSV, NEB); "Because it was not the right time for figs" (TEV). This phrase, which Matthew omitted, will be discussed in detail later.

11:14. mēketi eis ton aiōna ek sou mēdeis karpon phagoi: The optative expresses an adverse wish in the N.T. only here and in Acts 8:20 ("May you

come (eiē) to a bad end, for thinking God's gift is for sale!"(BD, 384). The second compound negative strengthens the first negative (Nunn, 267), and makes this statement emphatically negative. Eis ton aiōna with the negative means "never," "not at all," "never again"(BAG, s. aiōn, 1,b): "May no one ever eat fruit from you again"(RSV). Some commentators do not think that this is a curse; Carrington contends that it is a compulsive saying of Peter, who falsely interpreted it as a curse (11:22).<sup>4</sup> Taylor points out, however, that the distinction between a wish and a curse is rather fine, and that the strength of the expression here is shown by Matthew's substitution of a milder subjunctive (genētai).<sup>5</sup> Jesus' statement had the effect of a sentence of death on the fig tree: on the next morning they saw the fig tree "withered from its roots" (exērammenēn ek rizōn) (11:20), the perfect here describing abiding results and ek rizōn indicating complete destruction.<sup>6</sup>

Fruit (karpos) has similar symbolic significance in the Old and New Testaments as does phulla, discussed above. In Psalm 1:2-3 the man who is faithful to Yahweh's covenant is likened to a tree which "yields its fruit in its season" (karpon...en kairō autou). In the Pentateuch whether or not the trees will yield fruit (as a blessing of Yahweh) depends on whether or not Israel keeps the covenant (Lev. 26:3f., 14-20). In the new Jerusalem "there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month.... Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing"(Ez. 47:12). This last verse was picked up in the N.T. in the Apocalypse, where it is added that in the new Jerusalem "there shall no more be anything accursed"(katathema) (Rev. 22:2f.). In line with these traditions, then, Jesus perhaps cursed the

fig tree as a sign of His mission to build the new Jerusalem where all trees would yield fruit for food as they were meant to do. In His parables recorded by Mark, Jesus more than once compared fruit or grain (karpos) with the expected results of the preaching of His Word about the nearness of the kingdom of God (4:7-8,29; 12:2-12). It is very possible, then, that this barren fruit tree near Jerusalem was meant by Jesus and by Mark to symbolize the unfruitful results of Jesus' Word among the inhabitants and rulers of Jerusalem--the city which God promised to make new and fruitful.

ēkouon oi mathētai autou: Jesus frequently used the verb akouō in connection with His parables, in which context it appears to have the meaning "understand" (Mk. 4:9, "He who has ears to hear let him hear;" 4:33, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it;" cf. also 4:3,23f.; 9:7). After the two feeding miracles (which were enacted parables in many respects) Christ admonished His disciples for not understanding their meaning: "Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear?" "Do you not yet understand?" (cf. Mk. 8:18-21) This note that the disciples were listening after the cursing of the fig tree may, then, be a notice that Christ had performed a parable in cursing the fig tree and that this time the disciples understood what His parable meant. It is possible, however, that the phrase is simply Mark's literary device for delaying the narrative of the withering of the tree until after the cleansing of the temple, when the story is again picked up in 11:20ff.: "And Peter, remembering what had happened...." It should be noted, however, that even the verb remember (anamnēstheis) is used in connection with the disciples' failure of understanding the feeding miracles (8:18, "Do you not remember (mnēmoneuete)?").



B. "A curse is a directly expressed or indicated utterance which in virtue of a supernatural nexus of operation brings harm by its very expression to the one against whom it is directed."<sup>7</sup> In the Old Testament the efficacy of curses is derived from Yahweh (Prov. 3:33; Gen. 12:3; Num. 22:6; 23:8). There are three main uses of curses in the O.T. 1) A curse is a retributive or punitive measure leveled against sinners of various kinds (Gen. 3:16-18; 4:11-12; 9:25-27; 49:4; II Sam. 1:21) and against enemies (II Sam. 18:32; Job 27:7; Ps. 35:4-8, 26; 40:15f.; Jer. 11:20). The curse is to sin as blessing is to righteousness. It is a "poisonous, consuming substance" that destroys the soul so that it falls to pieces and loses its strength, or it consumes the earth, "which loses its power of germination; the plants fade, towns collapse, the inhabitants wail and disappear from the surface of the earth (Is. 24:6-12), the whole of the country decays, all pastures are dried up (Jer. 23:10)."<sup>8</sup> 2) Conditional curses were pronounced upon oneself to insure the truth of one's statement, such as in an oath (cf. Num. 5:19-22; Ps. 7:3-5). 3) The third category is a subcategory of the first; in order to protect the terms of a covenant or contract, a curse was directed at the future violator of the covenant.<sup>9</sup>

The best example of this third use of curses is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Many curses are spoken there against those who do not keep the Mosaic Covenant:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse (kataran): the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and the curse (kataras), if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known. (Deut. 11:26-28; cf. 30:19-20.)

Two features of this blessing and cursing connected with the covenant should also be noted. First of all, as the blessings are for the most part material

(fertility in man, beast, and plants, peace from enemies, and furtherance of life; cf. Deut. 28:1-14), the curses also display in material ways the wrath of Yahweh (particularly, through lack of fertility and impairment of life; cf. Deut. 28:39-42).<sup>10</sup> Secondly, when the curse comes upon Israel, it is to be a means of repentance for her (cf. 30:1-3). Could it be that in cursing the fig tree, Jesus, symbolically, was beginning to fulfill the curses of the covenant to which Israel's rulers had been unfaithful, and that in so doing He was also calling them to repentance?

In the New Testament followers of Christ are strictly forbidden to curse other persons (Lk. 6:27f.; Rom. 12:14; James 3:8-10, 12). God's curse, however, is upon all ungodly, unrighteous men: "They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin." "Accursed (kataras) children! Forsaking the right way they have gone astray"(II Pet. 2:14f.). The king "will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed (katēramenoi), into the eternal fire...."(Mt. 25:41) Those who rely on the works of the law are under a curse (kataran), but Christ redeemed those who believe in Him from the curse, having become a curse for us (Gal. 3:10-13). God's curse on features of nature for not serving their proper functions are symbolic of His curse on persons who do not bear fruit as is fitting for repentance:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, received a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed (kataras); its end is to be burned. (Heb. 6:4-8)

The New Testament, then, picks up characteristics of the Old in its

description of the use of curses; all who do not keep God's law or do not accept the Christ who bears the curse of the law for them are like land or trees that do not bear fruit--they are under God's curse. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree can in this light be seen more clearly to be the beginning of the fulfillment of God's curse upon Jerusalem, which has been unfaithful to God's covenant by corrupting the law, and whose inhabitants do not accept the Christ whom God has sent to bring them back to Him in repentance.

C. Fig trees (sukē usually refers to the tree, sukon to the fruit) have been cultivated since ancient times in the Mediterranean area. The fig tree was a popular tree because of its delicious fruit and its heavy shade. "It produces two crops: the winter figs, occurring on leafless twigs, are small, hard, and not edible; the summer figs, which ripen from the middle to the end of the summer, are the only usable crop."<sup>11</sup> Of the summer figs, the early, first-ripe fruit was regarded as a special delicacy because of its sweetness (cf. Is. 28:4)<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Jesus was looking for premature, early figs in this pericope. The fig tree also grew wild and is often found in the form of a long, straggling, branching shrub. In more favorable conditions, however, it grows like a tree, usually 20-30 feet tall, and, when standing alone, it "often forms a conspicuous object in the landscape"<sup>13</sup> as it probably did in our pericope, since Jesus saw it "from a distance."

In the Old Testament the fig tree or its figs often appear as a symbol or illustration in stories and parables (Judges 9:10f.; Jer. 24). As Trever states, the majority of the references to the fig in the O.T. are metaphorical.<sup>14</sup> First of all, the fig tree and its fruit symbolize well-

being, prosperity, peace, health, deliverance from trials and from enemies. When the fig tree puts forth its fruit, one knows that winter is over (Sg. of Sol. 2:11-13). Fig trees were a sign of the plenty and prosperity of the promised land (Deut. 8:7-8). Every man sitting under his fig tree is a symbol of the removal of guilt (Zech. 3:9f.) and the peace and prosperity of the promised new age of the "latter days" (Micah 4:1-4), "a return to the situation which existed in the days of Solomon (I Kings 4:25)."<sup>15</sup> The promise of fruitful fig trees is put along side the promise that Israel will be delivered from her enemies (Joel 2:20-22).

Secondly, on the opposite side, the lack, destruction, or withering of fig trees and bad figs serve in the O.T. as symbols of terrible destruction, plagues, sickness, defeat in battle, famine, and the wrath of God. When Yahweh delivered Israel from Egypt He plagued Egypt by smiting their vines and fig trees (sukas)(Ps. 105:33,38). In Jeremiah the people who have rejected the word of Yahweh and have become degenerate are described as fruitless fig trees (Jer. 8:8-17, "...they have rejected the word of the Lord ....from the least to the greatest every one is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest every <sup>one</sup> deals falsely. ...When I would gather them... there are no grapes on the vine nor figs on the fig tree;"). Micah laments that there is no godly man on the earth and compares it to the lack of any first-ripe figs (Mic. 7:1-7). Yahweh's judgment upon Israel for forsaking Him and His covenant is also described in terms of the destruction of the fig trees: "Your children have forsaken me....the house of Judah have been utterly faithless to me....I am bringing upon you a nation from afar.... they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees (sukōnas)"(Jer. 5:7-17). "Upon her children also I will have no pity because they are children of

harlotry. ...I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees"(LXX, v.14, sukas)(Hosea 2:4-12). "...a nation has come up against my land, powerful and without number; ...it has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; ...the vine withers, the fig tree languishes. ...all the trees of the field are withered; and gladness fails from the sons of men"(Joel 1:6f., 12). Yahweh's purpose in such judgment is to bring the people to repentance (Amos 4:9, "your fig trees (sukōnas) and your olive trees the locust devoured; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.").

Probably the clearest example of a symbolic use of figs occurs in Jeremiah 24:

...the Lord showed me this vision: Behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten.(1b-2)

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart." (4-7)

"But thus says the Lord: Like the bad figs which are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse (kataran) in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land which I gave to them and their fathers."(8-10)

Several things should be noted in this chapter which have a bearing on our interpretation of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree: 1) The language is covenant language ("my people"; "their God", "they shall return with their whole heart", "curse", and the promise of the land, made to the fathers, is taken

from them.). 2) Those who have been faithful to the covenant are good figs, and those who have been faithless to the covenant are bad figs.

3) The bad figs are the people in Jerusalem and their rulers. The attitude of these people who had escaped exile was very similar to the attitude of the inhabitants and rulers of Jerusalem in New Testament times: Their doctrine of the inviolability of Zion had corrupted their theology; "...the conventions of orthodoxy, and the temple itself, are substituted for the direct relation with Yahweh. Their false center of worship corrupts their images and falsifies their lives."<sup>16</sup>(cf. also Jer. 29:16-19) 4) These bad figs of Jerusalem are cursed and destroyed. In the Old Testament, then, we find explicit and clear precedents for interpreting the story of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree as symbolic of His divine wrath fulfilling the curse of the covenant upon those who have been faithless to it. It is very possible that Jesus had this set of imagery and symbolism in mind when He spoke His harsh words to the barren fig tree. As Nineham states, "in the light of these Old Testament passages, the action of Jesus here may well have been seen as a fulfilment of the scriptures."<sup>17</sup>

In the New Testament the fig tree is used in various ways to symbolize the end time and the fulfillment of all that God had promised. The events and signs before the coming of the Son of Man in great glory are like the leafing of the fig tree which tells you that summer is near (Mk. 13:28f.; cf. John 1:50f.) A sign of the end will be the stars falling from the sky to the earth "as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale" (Rev. 6:13). The destruction or withering of fig trees is used as a symbol of the judgment of God on those who have not borne fruit and who have not been faithful to His covenant. As we have seen, Luke's parable of the fig

tree is a warning of the judgment that would come upon Jerusalem (Lk. 13:6-9). Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warns His listeners of the fate awaiting false prophets under the symbol of a fig tree which bears evil fruit:

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs (suka) from thistles? So every sound tree bears good fruit (karpous), but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. (Mt. 7:15-20; cf. Lk. 6:43-45)

It is possible that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' exposition of the New Covenant, which is the fulfillment of the Old, and that these verses toward the end of the sermon are a statement of the curse that is coming upon those who have been unfaithful to the covenant.<sup>18</sup> The tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. According to the words of John the Baptist to the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus, the One coming after him, was to work this judgment (Mt. 3:10-12). Jesus announced that the Son of Man would "gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire;" (Mt. 13:41-2) He also announced that when the Son of Man comes, the King (the Lord of the Covenant?) will curse those on His left hand: "Depart from me, you cursed (katēramenoi), into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink...." (Mt. 25:31-46) It is through Christ that the Old Covenant is fulfilled (Mt. 5:17) and it is through Him that the blessings and curses of the Old Covenant are fulfilled and accomplished. We may tentatively conclude that Jesus cursed the fig tree as a symbolic act of His fulfillment of the curses of the Covenant upon the rulers and inhabitants

of Jerusalem, who were unfaithful to it, and who had left the commandments of God to hold fast to the traditions of men (Mk. 7:8).

We cannot conclude this section without a discussion of the problematic clause, ho gar kairos ouk ēn sukōn (Mk. 11:13). Interpreters have dealt with this clause in several ways. Some have taken the position that it is a gloss. Smith and Manson take this position and add that the cursing of the fig tree and the events surrounding it originally took place during the Feast of Tabernacles in the early fall, the season of the fig harvest, and that the church later moved the events in their tradition into the Passover season in early spring and added this clause as an explanatory gloss. Some of the evidence which they bring forward to support this hypothesis is as follows: 1) The Feast of Tabernacles was the festival most esteemed by the Jews. 2) The cries of Hosanna! (Mk. 11:9) are from Psalm 118 and are part of the Hallel, which was used most distinctively at the Feast of Tabernacles. 3) Part of the Hallel liturgy was the waving of green branches. 4) Zechariah 14, which was a synagogue lection associated with the Feast of Tabernacles, has some remarkable connections with Mark 11:1 to 12:12 (e.g., the removal of mountains, Zech. 14:4 and Mk. 11:23).<sup>19</sup> 5) The Passion narrative opens with a new note of time (14:1), "a completely new start with the narrative." "There is no chronological link whatever with the preceding sections in Mk., and it is pure conjecture that the events from the healing of Bartimaeus to the Crucifixion fall into the period from Sunday to Friday in one week." 6) This conjecture would also give the mob who welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday time for its change in attitude toward Him apparent at His trial; this change can be seen as being caused by a growing sense of disappointment at Jesus' failure to lead a great national revolt.<sup>20</sup> Manson contends that the



clause in question is the only clause that dates the incident during the Passover season, and that if it is removed we are free to place the incident "at a time of year when fig-trees have leaves and may be expected to have edible fruit...."<sup>21</sup> The problem with this position, however, is that there is absolutely no manuscript evidence of the clause being a gloss, and one cannot wish it away simply to make the story more congruent. The evidence listed above is not decisive enough to make us call the clause a gloss without any manuscript evidence.

Other interpreters have taken the position that this gar clause is calling the reader to understand the story in the light of something outside of the details presented to him in the story. Bird describes this use of gar clauses as follows:

There are many examples of this assertive use of gar in the New Testament where it draws attention to a further fact which, without directly explaining the preceding sentence, is extremely relevant to the understanding of the context. The nuance would best be expressed in English by such an extended sentence as "And the significant thing about it is" or "And I draw your attention to this point", or by the exclamatory "why!" Akin to this assertive use of gar is the allusive, where one factor in a given situation is emphasized because it is the point of contact with another set of ideas, already familiar to the reader, which would elucidate the fuller significance of the whole context.<sup>22</sup>

Bird believes that the other "set of ideas" to which Mark is calling his readers' attention with this gar clause in the story of the cursing of the fig tree is Ezekiel 47:12. A tradition based upon this verse, conjectures Bird, suggested that a faithful tree should bear fruit unceasingly; Mark then interpreted Jesus' curse in the light of this tradition, and calls our attention to this tradition "by an allusive gar clause."<sup>23</sup>

Birdsall agrees with Bird's general suggestion in regard to the gar clause, but he believes that the portion of Scripture to which Mark is

pointing as the key to understanding the incident is Micah 7:1-6:

Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the vintage has been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig which my soul desires. The goldy man has perished from the earth, and there is none upright among men; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts his brother with a net. (Mic. 7:1-2)

Jesus, as He approached Jerusalem and His death there, longed, like Micah, for people who would act in accordance with God's will and who would accept Him for what He was; but the closer He came to His death, the more hopeless He realized His longing was. When He cursed the fig tree, then, He had Micah's lament in mind.<sup>24</sup>

Robin also holds that Jesus had Micah 7:1-6 in mind during the cursing of the fig tree and, he adds, that Jesus in accordance with the Rabbinic practice of indicating a passage of scripture by quoting its opening words was heard by His disciples to say, "My soul desireth the first ripe fig." The disciples, however, misunderstood Jesus to say that He was hungry. The clause, "for it was not the season for figs" was not a Markan comment but the comment of one of Jesus' disciples who did not "understand the significance of the quotation from Micah."<sup>25</sup> If this is the case, then the entire incident in its present form was passed on by Mark in this misunderstood fashion, for Mark clearly states that Jesus was hungry; this makes Robin's conjecture highly improbable.

Probably the best explanation of this problematic clause is that it is simply Mark's way of noting that this fig tree which had leaves on it was an uncommon appearance at that season of the year--Passover. At this time the normal fig tree would at the most have only new, small, green figs without any leaves. After the green figs appear, the leaves blossom and soon overshadow the green figs. The usual time for this is early summer.

"Hence a fig tree with leaves must already have young fruits, or it will be barren for the season."<sup>26</sup> The tree that attracted Jesus attention was abnormally early with its leaves; Jesus then could have a slight hope of finding figs on such an abnormal tree, and the fact that there was none on it meant that the tree would be barren all season. That figs are possible at such an abnormally early time is witnessed to by Bishop, who claims to have found a fig tree "with figs quite large enough to warrent picking" on a Good Friday in mid-April near Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> Such an unusual fig tree aroused Jesus' expectations for fruit to satisfy His hunger, but when He approached the tree and saw that His expectations had been deceived<sup>28</sup> and that the tree would be barren for the entire season, He used the opportunity and cursed the fig tree in order to instruct His disciples about the fate of fruitless Jerusalem and to drive back the nature-destroying kingdom of Satan.

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<sup>1</sup>In this section the following sources will be footnoted in the text itself according to the following abbreviations:

(BAG) William Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, editors, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

(RSV) Bible, Holy, Revised Standard Version (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1952).

(BD) F. Blass and A. Debrunner, A Greek Grammar of The New Testament, translated by Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

(TEV) Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English Version, translated by R.G. Bratcher (New York: American Bible Society, 1966).

(NEB) The New English Bible (Oxford: University Press, 1961).

(Nunn) H. P. V. Nunn, A Short Syntax of New Testament Greek (Cambridge: University Press, 1956).

<sup>2</sup>K. W. Clark, "Bethany," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, edited by George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), I, pp. 387-8. Hereafter this dictionary will be referred to as IDB.

<sup>3</sup>Gerhard Munderlein, "Die Verfluchung des Feigenbaumes," New Testament Studies, X (1963), 90.

<sup>4</sup>Philip Carrington, According to Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), p. 240.

<sup>5</sup>Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1963), p. 460.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 466.

<sup>7</sup>Friedrich Büchsel, "ara, kataraoimai, katara," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, edited by G. Kittel, and translated and edited by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), I, p. 449.

<sup>8</sup>Johannes Pedersen, Israel (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), I, p. 437.

<sup>9</sup>S. Gevirtz, "Curse," IDB, I, pp. 749-50.

<sup>10</sup>Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, translated by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), I, p. 229.

<sup>11</sup>M. Zohary, "Flora," IDB, II, pp. 286-7.

<sup>12</sup>J. F. Ross, "Food," IDB, II, p. 305.

<sup>13</sup>Harold N. and Alma L. Moldenke, Plants of the Bible (Waltham, Mass.: Chronica Botanica Co., 1952), p. 105.

<sup>14</sup>J.C. Trever, "Fig Tree, Fig," IDB, II, p. 267.

<sup>15</sup>A. de Q. Robin, "The Cursing of the Fig Tree in Mark XI. A Hypothesis," New Testament Studies, VIII (1962), 279.

<sup>16</sup>Stanley R. Hopper, "Jeremiah: Exposition," The Interpreter's Bible, edited by G. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), V, p. 997.

<sup>17</sup>D. E. Nineham, The Gospel of St. Mark (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 299.

<sup>18</sup>Although this hypothesis demands further investigation, there is some evidence that the Sermon on the Mount contains many of the formal features of the Mosaic Covenant in the O.T., particularly in Deuteronomy, which has been shown to be formally patterned after the Hittite suzerainty treaties (cf. von Rad, op. cit., p. 132):

1) The preamble identified the mediator of the covenant (Deut. 1:1-5). Here the mediator is Jesus (Mt. 5:1f., 17).

2) The prologue listed what the Lord had done for His people (Deut. 7:6). Perhaps 5:13-16 serves this purpose in Matthew.

3) The stipulations here, as in Deuteronomy, demand an exclusive relationship to the one God and an unwavering trust in Him (Mt. 5:21-7:20; especially 6:24f.).

4) The stipulation of the public reading and remembering of the covenant (cf. Deut. 7:11) may perhaps have its counterpart in Christ's command not to relax one of His commandments (Mt. 5:19f.) or in His parable of the houses built on rock and sand (Mt. 7:24-27).

5) It is probably stretching this similarity too far to see Mt. 6:26-30 as a call upon witnesses in nature to witness to the covenant (cf. Deut. 32:1).

6) The promise of blessing upon those who are faithful to the covenant are evident in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:1-12) and in the promise of 7:7ff.

7) Curses upon those who are unfaithful to the covenant are evident in Mt. 7:13, 15-20, 21-23, 26f. "Like the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20-23), the Deuteronomic code (Dt. 12-28), and the Law of Holiness (Lev. 17-26), the Lord's commentary on the Law closes with warnings and exhortations, compiled from various sources." (A. H. M'Neile, The Gospel According to St. Matthew (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1961), p. 93).

<sup>19</sup>These are the arguments listed by Charles W. F. Smith, "No Time for Figs," Journal of Biblical Literature, LXXIX (1960), 318-22.

<sup>20</sup>Arguments 5) and 6) are from T. W. Manson, "The Cleansing of the Temple," Bulletin of John Ryland's Library, XXXIII (1951), 276-81.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>22</sup>G. H. Bird, "Some gar Clauses in St. Mark's Gospel," Journal of Theological Studies, IV (October, 1953), 173.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 178-9.

<sup>24</sup>J. N. Birdsall, "The Withering of the Fig-Tree," The Expository Times, LXXIII (March, 1962), 191.

<sup>25</sup>Robin, op. cit., p. 280.

<sup>26</sup>G. E. Post, "Figs," A Dictionary of the Bible, edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1928), II, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>Eric F. F. Bishop, Jesus of Palestine (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), p. 217.

<sup>28</sup>cf. F. L. Steinmeyer, Apologetische Beiträge: Die Wunderthaten des Herrn (Berlin: Wiegandt und Grieben, 1866), p. 250.

## IV

A. Our final task in this study is to examine the context of Mark's story of Jesus' cursing of the fig tree in order to determine whether or not Mark gives any clues as to the validity of interpreting the story as a symbolic act of divine judgment upon Jerusalem.

Current studies for the most part outline Mark into two basic divisions: Jesus' ministry in Galilee and His ministry in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> This is no doubt a valid approach to Mark's structure, and it gives a clue to the understanding of our pericope. For Mark Galilee is the place of Jesus' revelation of Himself: He came from Galilee (1:9), He began His ministry in Galilee (1:14), He gathered His disciples in Galilee (1:16) (cf. also 1:28,39; 3:7; 9:30), and He would make His resurrection appearances in Galilee (14:28; 16:7). Jerusalem, on the other hand, is the place of hostility and rejection: He goes up to Jerusalem expecting rejection and death (10:32-4), in Jerusalem He cleansed the temple and experienced deadly opposition (11:15-12:40), He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (13), He was tried and crucified in Jerusalem (14-15), and He made no Easter appearances in Jerusalem as He did in Luke. "Jesus goes before the disciples into Galilee rather than to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem is doomed. The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem would reject a resurrection story, just as it had rejected Jesus' word and deeds."<sup>2</sup> In light of this hostility and rejection connected with Jerusalem, we can be fairly sure that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree on His way to Jerusalem was not just a rash act caused by His hunger, but an act of deeper significance with respect to Jerusalem.

Recent studies have also discovered in Mark several major sections or natural groupings of materials, such as the "way of the cross" section

(8:27-10:45). Faw has divided Mark into ten such sections on the basis of the following criteria: 1) The narrative and saying materials in a section express a common mood or emphasis. 2) Repeated structural forms or refrains express this common mood and hold the section together. 3) Each section closes with a climaxing statement which highlights the mood of the section. 4) At the beginning of each section there is "in every case a sudden or quite unexplainable shift in locale."<sup>3</sup> One of the natural sections which Faw discerns is Mark 10:46-12:44. Mk 10:46 notes a change in the locale: Jesus and the disciples come to Jericho and then head toward Jerusalem. The section is a kind of intensified recapitulation of Jesus' Galilean ministry, with the hostility and opposition between Jesus and His opponents moving up to fever pitch. The only full length parable outside of chapter 4 is contained in this section, and it is a parable which was against His opponents and which they understood (12:1-12). "There seems to be no climactic conclusion to this section, unless it is the later Passion Narrative itself."<sup>4</sup> Mark has placed the story of the cursing of the fig tree in this intensified opposition section. This perhaps is his way of explaining the significance of the story to his readers: it is to be taken as a significant reaction of Jesus in parabolic form to the opposition He faces in Jerusalem.

F. Danker has shown in a recent study of the secrecy motif in Mark that Jesus' purpose in commanding silence after His miracles was not to avoid being taken as a mere miracle-worker or a political Messiah, but to avoid the climax of His conflict with His opponents until the proper time. The opposition against Jesus starts already in chapter one, where Jesus, in direct violation of the law, had personal contact with the leper whom He

healed; therefore He was forced to stay away from the towns where He might meet His opposition (1:45). The early conflict stories (2:1-3:6) climax with the plot of the Pharisees and Herodians to destroy Him. Jesus began speaking in parables as a response to the unbelief of Israel's leadership (4:12,33); "open speech would hasten the showdown with the leaders" and "the inevitable hour that Jesus is to meet in His own good time."<sup>5</sup> Danker notes a striking change in the silence motif in 10:48, where Jesus does not command silence of blind Bartimaeus whom He had healed, for now He is near the appointed hour of His rejection and death, and He "is prepared now to accept the consequences of His identity."<sup>6</sup>

All of these approaches to the structure and hostility theme of Mark's Gospel lead us to view the immediate context of the cursing of the fig tree as a turning point in Jesus' handling of His opponents. As Shillito stated:

With this section (11:1ff.) the Evangelist brings Jesus into the circle of the Cross; with the entrance into Jerusalem the story becomes charged with destiny; the scale changes at this point; the speed of the narrative slackens, as though the drama has reached the crisis towards which it has moved swiftly.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this section that the chief priests, scribes, and elders together challenge Jesus' authority (11:27-8), but more significantly it is in this section that "Jesus takes the initiative in an unprecedented fashion" against the leaders of His people.<sup>8</sup> For His entry into Jerusalem (11:1-10) Jesus arranged a public demonstration of His Messiahship. He goes into the temple and throws out those who were using it for commercial purposes (11:15-18), and accuses the leaders, in the words of Isaiah, of making God's temple a den of robbers when it was meant to be a house of prayer. Franzmann sees this pericope, which follows the story of the cursing and withering of the fig tree in Matthew, as the explanation of the symbolism



in that story:

The temple with its roaring trade in victims, its throngs of worshippers, its endless sacrifices, is fittingly symbolized by the tree in the glory of its leafage. The emptiness and the falsehood of the temple worship, which made the temple a robbers' den, are symbolized by the barrenness of the tree. And the judgment upon the desecrated house of God is symbolized by the withering of the tree.<sup>9</sup>

This is no doubt true in Mark also, but the continuing context indicates that the barren fig tree symbolized more than the falseness and emptiness of the temple worship. In 12:1-12 Jesus again takes the initiative against His opponents and seems to deliberately to provoke them by telling a parable against them which was clear to everyone. He accuses them of being unfaithful tenants of God's vineyard (Israel), of killing God's servants, the prophets (including John the Baptist?), when He sent them to look for fruit from the tenants, and of even rejecting God's Son, Himself, when He was sent to look for fruit. Parabolically Jesus told the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes, and elders that God would destroy them for rejecting Him. Can there be much doubt that Jesus was saying the same thing through parabolic action when He cursed the fig tree? Later, in Mark 12:38-40, Jesus dropped all parabolic form and spoke clearly and directly:

Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.

B. There remains one significant section in the context with which we have not yet seriously dealt--the withering of the fig tree and the sayings on faith and prayer (11:20-25). As noted above, those who hold that the cursing of the fig tree merely describes a miracle of power point to these verses as proof that Jesus, Himself, interpreted it in this way.

This, however, does not satisfy us when we see that so much of the evidence points to the story of the cursing of the fig tree as being a symbolic act by Jesus. Interpreters who have adopted the symbolic interpretation of the "cursing" pericope have come up with various harmonizing interpretations of this "withering" pericope.

Some hold that Jesus here is not dealing with the main lesson to be learned from the incident of the cursing of the fig tree on the previous day but that He picked up a secondary lesson on faith and prayer to get the most out of the incident. Swete states: "The Lord does not explain the lesson to be learnt from the fate of the tree, but deals with a matter of more immediate importance to the Twelve, the lesson to be learnt from the prompt fulfilment of His prayer."<sup>10</sup>

A position held by a large number of scholars is that the sayings of Jesus in Mk. 11:22-25 were independent sayings of Jesus which were appended to the story of the withered fig tree by Mark.<sup>11</sup> Taylor suggests that the arrangement was for catechetical purposes.<sup>12</sup> The best evidence that these are appended sayings is that all three verses appear separately in different contexts in the other Gospels (11:23 in Mt. 17:20, Lk. 17:6; 11:24 in Mt. 7:7, Lk. 11:9; 11:25 in Mt. 18:35).<sup>13</sup> Note, however, that these are not exact parallels and could easily be held to be different sayings.

Bird suggests that these sayings express the same teaching as the cursing of the fig tree: the mountain (11:23) like the fig tree "stands for the people of God, or maybe the temple." He conjectures that "ho lalei (11:23) refers to the Lord ("...believe that what the Lord says, comes to pass."). His conclusion reads as follows:

The upshot of the verse would then be "whosoever takes his stand wholeheartedly on the side of the prophetic faith and in the

name of the Lord rejects all external observances of Judaism and human traditions, will find himself justified in so doing."<sup>14</sup>

Menzies has suggested that in these verses Jesus expresses a hope that the fate of Israel which He portrayed parabolically in the cursing of the fig tree will not come to pass. Jesus here was stating that it was His and His disciples' work to bring the Jews to a faith in Him so that they may stand with the Messiah and not against Him on the day of judgment. "Jesus will not abandon hope for his nation, but will nerve himself for a supreme effort, in which the disciples are to take their part, to remove the mountain of unbelief which he sees opposing him, and to bid it take itself away."<sup>15</sup>

A solution which has strong appeal has been hinted at by Carrington. He has pointed to some thought similarities between Mark 11:20-25 and Psalm 36(37). He conjectures that when Peter pointed to the withered fig tree, he may have had Ps. 36(37):35f. in mind: "I have also seen the ungodly in great power and flourishing like a green bay tree...I passed by and, lo, he was gone." Jesus, knowing what was behind Peter's words responded with thoughts based on the same Psalm: "They shall be cut down like the grass and wither even as the green herb...put thou thy trust in the Lord (have faith in God)...and he shall give thee thy heart's desire"(Ps. 36(37):2-4).<sup>16</sup> If one examines this Psalm closer he will discover that this is not a wild hypothesis, that it is entirely possible that the Psalm was behind Jesus' words and actions in both the incidents of the cursing and the withering of the fig tree, and that it was in Mark's mind in relating both incidents to his readers. The following verbal and thought parallels strongly suggest just that:

- Psalm 36(37):2. (The wicked and wrongdoers) will soon fade (apoxēranthēsontai) like the grass, and wither like the green herb. (cf. Mk. 11:21, exērantai.)
3. Trust in the Lord (elpison epi kurion) and do good; so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security.
4. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart (kardias sou). (cf. Mk. 11:23, kardia autou.)
5. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.
9. For the wicked shall be cut off; but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land.
12. The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him;
13. But the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming.
22. For those blessed by the Lord shall possess the land, but those cursed (katarōmenoi) by him shall be cut off. (cf. Mk. 11:21, katērasō.)
27. Depart from evil, and do good; so shall you abide for ever (eis aiōna aiōnos).
28. For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. The righteous shall be preserved for ever (eis ton aiōna), but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. (for vv. 27-8 cf. Mk. 11:14, eis ton aiōna.)
32. The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks (zētei) to slay him. (cf. Mk. 11:18, "And the chief priests and scribes heard it and sought (ezētoun) a way to destroy him.")
38. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off.
39. The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge (huperaspistēs) in the time (en kairō) of trouble. (cf. Mk. 11:22f., pistos, and Mk. 11:13, kairos.)

If this hypothesis is correct, the two stories of the cursing and withering of the fig tree are to be taken as expressing the two contrasting thoughts of this Psalm: The wicked will be cursed and destroyed by God, but those who put their trust in Him will receive their hearts desire; the rulers and inhabitants of Jerusalem, who oppose and reject Jesus, Who was sent to them as God's Messiah, will be cursed and wither as a barren fig tree, but those disciples who believe in Him and cling to God's promise will receive whatever they ask.

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<sup>1</sup>cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to St. Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), pp. 13-14; and Vincent Taylor, The Gospel According to St. Mark. (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1963), pp. 106-11.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick W. Danker, "Postscript to the Markan Secrecy Motif," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVIII (January, 1967), 25.

<sup>3</sup>Chalmer E. Faw, "The Outline of Mark," The Journal of Bible and Religion, XXV (January, 1957), 20.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick W. Danker, "Mark 1:45 and the Secrecy Motif," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXVII (September, 1966), 497.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 498.

<sup>7</sup>Edward Shillito, "The Beginning of the Last Action," The Expositor, Series 8, XX (November, 1920), 363.

<sup>8</sup>T. A. Burkill, "Strain on the Secret: An Examination of Mark 11:1-13:37," Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, LI (1960), 31.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Franzmann, Follow Me (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 161.

<sup>10</sup>Henry B. Swete, The Gospel According to St. Mark (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1909), p. 259.

<sup>11</sup>Cranfield, op. cit., p. 360.

<sup>12</sup>Taylor, op. cit., p. 451

<sup>13</sup>A. B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," The Expositor's Greek Testament, edited by W. R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), I, p. 419.

<sup>14</sup>C. H. Bird, "Some gar Clauses in St. Mark's Gospel," Journal of Theological Studies, IV (October, 1953), 177-78.

<sup>15</sup>Allan Menzies, The Earliest Gospel (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1901), pp. 211-12.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Carrington, According to Mark (Cambridge: University Press, 1960), p. 241.

## V

On the basis of our study of Mark's account of the cursing of the fig tree we can draw the following conclusions:

1) This miracle-story, like the other miracle-stories in the Gospels, was not limited to serving as proof of the divine power which Jesus possessed.

2) Jesus originally approached the fig tree because, seeing its leaves in the distance, He had expectations that it would have fruit on it to satisfy His hunger, even though it was not yet the season for figs.

3) On the basis of various Old Testament precedents Jesus used the barren fig tree as a symbol of the rulers and inhabitants of Jerusalem who were barren of the fruits of repentance, rejected Him, and were plotting to kill Him.

4) In cursing the fig tree Jesus may have been symbolically turning back the kingdom of Satan, which was corrupting creation, and advancing the kingdom of God, which was recreating the cosmos.

5) Jesus cursed the fig tree as a sign of the judgment of God which was to fall upon Jerusalem and its leaders, and as a call to repentance and to the recognition of Who He was.

6) Jesus may have been accomplishing His role as the fulfiller of the Old Covenant when He cursed the barren fig tree; we may view Jesus' cursing of the fig tree as a symbolic act which was the beginning of His fulfillment of the curses of the Covenant upon the rulers and inhabitants of Jerusalem who were unfaithful to the covenant and who had left the commandments and true worship of God for the emptiness and hypocrisy of their own traditions.

7) In His sayings following the withering of the fig tree Jesus reminded His disciples, perhaps on the basis of a Psalm, that although those who had borne no fruit would be destroyed by God's judgment, nevertheless, those who cling to Him in faith will receive whatever they ask in prayer.

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