

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 32, Pilate, the Tower and the Fig Tree. Part III, Luke 13:1-9

1. The stunning climax of the twice-repeated refrain is the call for the listeners themselves to repent, lest they also perish. This unexpected thrust gives us an illustration of the courage of Jesus, and understanding of a part of the reason why he was rejected by this community, and a profound insight into a part of his response to the oppressed struggling for justice. When Jeremiah opposed the political climate of his day, he was protected by influential friends and his life was spared, (Jer. 26:24). So as far as we know, Jesus did not have powerful friends who would or could protect him. Nicodemus' one feeble attempt illustrates the point in John 7:50. In studying Luke 13:1-5, with ME classes the present writer often had students marvel that Jesus was not physically attacked on the spot. This call for repentance is thrown in the face of political enthusiasts who stand in opposition to Roman oppression. Those who fight for a just cause can often assume that the struggle for this cause makes them righteous. It does not. (Luther on war and righteous assumptions). The more intense the struggle for justice the more oppressed tend to assume their own righteousness. This assumption of righteousness at times expresses itself as arrogance that refuses any criticism. The subconscious rational is very often that if our cause is righteous than we are righteous. “With all we have suffered, how dare you inflict more wounds on us by your criticism.” Attitudes of this type have on occasion surfaced on both sides of the barb wire in the ME the past 30 years. Only the strong and brave can dare to endure the wrath of such oppressed and turn the attention away from criticism of the hated enemy to painful self-criticism with the warning. “Unless you all repent! You all will perish.” In the synagogue in Nazareth there is a similar refusal on the part of Jesus to identify with the nationalism of his day. There he chooses two foreigners (one a woman) as illustrations of the kind of people who through faith will receive the benefits of the Kingdom. There the listening audience is so upset that they try to kill him. Here in Luke 13 we have no record of the audience’

reaction, but we can assume similar hostility. Anyone who wants to recast Jesus as a political revolutionary must not fail to take seriously the confrontation here in Luke 13.

2. The same call for repentance can be seen in its deepest level to those who are outraged as Jesus refuses to reinforce their views. Jesus speech should not be read simply as a rejection of the nationalistic struggle nor as a concern for things, “spiritual,” rather than political. Rather he seems to be saying at least, “you want me to condemn Pilate, I am not talking to him, he is not here, I am talking to you, Pilate or no Pilate. You must repent or all of you will be destroyed by those forces.” Among those who struggle for justice, the attitude develops, “we are the angels and they are the devils.” Blessed is the movement that is willing to listen to a courageous voice quietly insisting, “there are devils among us and angels among them.” We must repent. He does not tell them to submit to Pilate. Jesus is not acquiescing to Roman oppression. Rather, he bravely demonstrates a deep concern for the people in front of him who will destroy themselves and all around them if they do not repent.
3. Finally, what is the precise response Jesus is hoping to evoke from the nationalists who bring him the atrocity story? At least this; “We ask him to look at evil in Pilate. He wants us to see evil in our own hearts. We must repent. If we do not, that evil will destroy us.”
4. What are the theological motifs found in this Dominical response to the atrocity story? We can identify at least the following:
 - a. Sin is defined by both evil acts and duties unperformed.
 - b. There is a one to one relationship between sin and suffering. Easy theological judgments about the reasons for natural and political disasters must be rejected.
 - c. Any intense political movement must look deep within its own soul to repent of its own evil, lest it destroy itself and the very people it seeks to serve.
 - d. The compassion of Jesus reaches out to all who suffer, not only to those who are politically oppressed.
5. THE BARREN FIG TREE: (Luke 13:6-9). A clear identification of listeners is made in Luke 12:54. Here is a slight shift in the audience in 13:1, and some came at that time who told him. In 13:10, the scene moves toward the synagogue. The text assumes a continuity between 13:1-5 and 13:6-9, The structure is as follows;

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| 1 | A man had a fig tree planted in his
Vineyard.
And he came seeking fruit on it
And he found none | PLANT
SEEKING
NO FRUIT |
| 2 | And he said to the vinedresser,
"Behold! These three years
I have come seeking fruit on this tree
And he found none | MASTER SPEAKS
THREE YEARS
SEEK FRUIT
NO FRUIT |
| 3 | Dig it out!
Why should it exhaust the ground?" | DIG OUT
SAVE THE GROUND |
| 4 | But he answering said to him,
"Master! Forgive it this year also
Until I dig around it
And spread on manure | VINEDRESSER SPEAKS
ONE YEAR
HELP FRUIT-BEARING
HELP FRUIT-BEARING |
| 5 | And if it bears fruit in the future----
And if not
Dig it out." | FIND FRUIT
NO FRUIT
DIG OUT |

6. The overall structure of this p is clear and very close to other observed patterns in other p. The 'plant, seek fruit, no fruit' themes of stanza one are balanced by find fruit, no fruit and dig out in the last stanza. The p begins with a planting and ends with a threatened digging up. Stanzas two and four are parallel and match almost line for line. Stanza two could be roughly called "The problem" and stanza four, 'the hoped for solution.' As is usually the case when the inversion principal is used, the climax occurs in the center and is then mirrored thematically in some way at the end. This literary device is used there in that the motif, 'dig it out' occurs in the middle and again at the end. The critical point of turning occurs, as is usual in such structures, just past the center. At that point the voice of mercy pleads for additional grace. The literary structure is simple, balanced and artistically satisfying. Each stanza will be examined in turn.

7. STANZA ONE

<i>A man had a fig tree planted in his Vineyard.</i>	<i>PLANT</i>
<i> And he came seeking fruit on it</i>	<i>SEEKING</i>
<i> And he found none</i>	<i>NO FRUIT</i>

In Joel 1:7, the close association of the fig and the vine is seen where the prophet says of the locust horde, “It has laid waste in my vines, and splintered my fig trees.” Again in 1:12, “The vine withers and the fig tree languishes. Thus a fig tree in a vineyard is not an oddity. In Isaiah 5:1-7, we have the classical OT p of the vineyard. There symbols are identified. The owner of the vineyard is the Lord of hosts, and the vineyard itself is the house of Israel. (Isaiah 1:7). We can assume that the same symbolic identification would have immediately been made in this p. by Jesus’ audience. There is a crucial convergence of symbols. Isaiah discusses all the vines in the vineyard collectively. Jesus’ p. concentrates on one plant in the vineyard and that is not the vine, but the fig tree. This selection may be in order to draw attention that Jesus is now speaking about one particular tree and not the vineyard as a whole (In contrast to Isaiah). Also because the fig in Palestine bears fruit 10/12 months of the year, so almost at any time the owner can find fruit on it. In any case the grape vine and fig tree throughout the OT are closely associated and a symbol of peace. (Micah 4:4, Zech. 3:10). Then finally the fig in its first fruit is Hosea’s symbol of pure, innocent, responsive people, “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel
Like the first fruit on the fig tree
In its first seasons, I saw your fathers, 9:10.
Also in 9:6, he failure to produce fruit is a symbol for idolatrous days in which Hosea lived. Thus Jesus could have had a variety of reasons for choosing a fig tree rather than a vine in this particular p.

8. Whenever there is a clear literary background for a p. it becomes crucial to see what Jesus does as He reworks well known material. (Remember the OT is the NT concealed and the NT is the OT revealed!) In this case the symbolism is unmistakable because is already identified in the prototype of Isaiah 5:7 and we find no reason to reject the same symbolism in this present p. Thus, the owner again God and the vineyard (not the tree) is “The house of Israel.” The NT p. of the vineyard, (Luke 20:9-16) has some of the same background. In the NT, the text is specifically interpreted by the evangelist as spoken against the scribes and the chief priests....perhaps they thought that Jesus has spoken this p. against them. Thus the evangelist shares that the p is against the leadership of the nation, not the nation itself. In Isaiah’s p. the vineyard, the nation is deliberately torn down by the owner (IS. 5:5-6), by contrast, the present p of the Barren Fig

Tree, the master is concerned for the fruitfulness of the vineyard and thus asks some serious questions about that particular fig tree. It is unfruitful and is thus blessing strength from the vineyard itself by its continuing presence. He master acts to preserve the health of the vineyard, not to destroy it. Thus in harmony with the clear symbolism of Luke 20:9-16 and Isaiah 5:1-7, we would see the problem discussed in the p to be the crises of fruitless leadership within the nation of Israel itself (Monefiore).

9. The text also preserves an authentic note of traditional culture. The landowner of the past did not get his hands dirty. Even so in this story. The vineyard owner does not plant a fig, but rather has it planted. The point is the theologically insignificant, but gives a stamp of authenticity to the p. as a story that fits in ME culture. Thus, in a simple and straightforward manner, the problem is stated in the opening stanza;

10. STANZA TWO:

<i>And he said to the vinedresser,</i>	<i>MASTER SPEAKS</i>
<i>“Behold! These three years</i>	<i>THREE YEARS</i>
<i>I have come seeking fruit on this tree</i>	<i>SEEK FRUIT</i>
<i>And he found none</i>	<i>NO FRUIT</i>

The owner and the vinedresser cooperated in the planting of the first vineyard. Now they cooperate in the evaluation of the problem. The common understanding of the time sequence is that the tree would have three years in which to grow. Then for three years the fruit was considered forbidden, according to Leviticus 19:23. The fruit of the fourth year, (that is, the seventh year of the tree’s life) was considered clean and was offered to the Lord. (Lev. 19:24). The details in this brief p. are scanty, but the probable intent is that the master is seeking this 7th year fruit specified in Luke 19:23 as an offering to the Lord, as he has been seeking it for 3 years. The master would not “come seeking,” the unpurified fruit of years four to six of the tree’s life. Now nine years have passed since the planting of the tree. Thus for three years he sought the first fruits and has been disappointed three times. Now nine years have passed since the planting of the tree. The situation seems hopeless. If our identification of the symbolism of the p is correct this stanza is saying that quite enough time has passed for the current leadership of the nation to produce the fruits expected of it (Probably the fruits of repentance, see Luke 3:8). The master

has waited patiently, long beyond the expected time of fruit-bearing. His conclusion is set out in stanza three.

11. STANZA THREE:

Dig it out!

Why should it exhaust the ground?"

DIG OUT

SAVE THE GROUND

Not only does the disappointing tree fail to produce fruit and take up space that could be used for other useful plants, but it drains strength out of the ground, thereby exhausting it. In his concern for good soil in the good vineyard, the master orders the fig tree to be dug out.

12. Here an authentic note in the story appears, in the West woodsmen cut down trees, in the ME, the tree is 'dug out.' The tree, with its stump and some of its root cluster, fall as one block and is removed. This agricultural practice is reflected in the text of Luke 3:9, where John says, "Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees." (Not the trunk). So the verb in 13:7 (katargeo) literally means 'dig out,' not 'cut down.' Thus, the Palestinian agricultural scene, accurately reflected in the text, gives a vivid picture of a radical elimination of this fruitful tree. The unfruitful leadership of the nation is to be rooted out. At this point in the parable a dramatic shift occurs.

13. STANZA FOUR:

But he answering said to him,

"Master! Forgive it this year also

Until I dig around it

And spread on manure

VINEDRESSER SPEAKS

ONE YEAR

HELP FRUIT-BEARING

HELP FRUIT-BEARING

In Biblical literature, when the stanzas related to each other in an inverted fashion, there is often a crucial shift just past the center of the literary structure. (Bailey). This important feature, as we have noted, occurs in this p.. The speech of the master outlines the problem and is carefully matched by the speech of the vinedresser, who suggests a hoped-for solution.