

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 33, Pilate, the Tower and the Fig Tree. Part IV, Luke 13:1-9

1. 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.

2. STANZA ONE

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

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. These 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, the 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.

3. 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 it 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. The 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).
4. 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 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;

5. 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.

6. STANZA THREE:

<i>Dig it out!</i>	<i>DIG OUT</i>
<i>Why should it exhaust the ground?”</i>	<i>SAVE THE GROUND</i>

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.

7. 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 p. a dramatic shift *occurs*.

8. *STANZA FOUR:*

<i>But he answering said to him,</i>	<i>VINEDRESSER SPEAKS</i>
<i>“Master! Forgive it this year also</i>	<i>ONE YEAR</i>
<i>Until I dig around it</i>	<i>HELP FRUIT-BEARING</i>
<i>And spread on manure</i>	<i>HELP FRUIT-BEARING</i>

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. The prototypical p. in Isaiah 5 has no offer of grace. There the p. moves from the disappointment of no fruit to immediate judgement. The owner announces that we will remove the hedge...break down its wall....make it a wasteland and command the clouds that they rain no rain on it. (Isaiah 5:5-6). The judgment is harsh enacted by the owner himself and carried it out all at once. From such final scene was surely expected by Jesus’ version of this classical p.. The point of turning for this text is twofold. The fig tree is offered a period of grace and special attention is planned for it; the vinedresser will dig around it and add manure. Thus, when compared with the Song of the vineyard in Isaiah, this p. has a striking emphases on mercy that is usually overlooked in the motif of judgment.

9. Another point of literary comparison is the story of Ahikar in the Pseudepigrapha (Charles II). The part of the story in question may be in a later comparison. In the story Ahikar has a wayward son who promises to reform. Ahikar tells the boy that he like a palm tree beside a river that cast its fruit into the river The owner decided to cut it down. The tree complained, offering to produce carobs if given one more year.