

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 34, Pilate, the Tower and the Fig Tree. Part V, Luke 13:1-9

1. *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. 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.

2. 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. The owner skeptically replied, “thou hast not been industrious in what is thine own, and how wilt thou be industrious in what is not thine own?” Here the tree

itself is not pleading, and more important we are given a negative answer. The reader is left with a strong negative impression—nothing can be done—the situation is hopeless. Not so with the p of Jesus. In Jesus pa the fig tree is given one last chance. Again the theme of mercy is prominent.

3. The p. has two distinctive colloquialisms. The first is grammatical and the 2nd is cultural. The p. is told in the past tense. Suddenly in verse 8 there is a historical present, rare in Luke. That is the text suddenly shifts to the present tense and reads, “answer he says (sic) to him....” This shift adds a colloquial vividness to the telling of the story and suggests that Luke is using traditional material (Marshall). Then in Luke 20:19 bot the people and the leaders understand that the p is also told against the religious leadership and that this would have been immediately sensed by the listening audience, then we have a somewhat humorous peasant turn of phrase. The word “Manure,” (Koprion) occurs only here in the NT. It is not the kind of language that is ordinarily used in religious illustrations. The vinedresser could have offered to spread on fresh earth, or water the tree each day, or even prune it back. IF the fig tree represents the scribes and the chief priests, and the p talks of the need to cast on some manure, then we have a clear case of what comedians would call “insult humor.” What they need is a little manure spread around them. The original audience would have found this imagery humorous. Mild irreverence for people in power is usually appreciated by popular audience. With such details the spark and vitality of the p. appears long with its unmistakable cutting edge.
4. Christian allegorizers have had a field day with this p. through the centuries. The “three years” have become everything from ‘law, prophets, and the Gospel’ to the three years of Jesus’ ministry. In such cases the allegorization is misleading, but harmless. But in this stanza the vinedresser has often been identified with Jesus, who then would be arguing with God the Father. Such an identification could have been hardly imagined by the original audience or part of Jesus’ intention. The Christian allegorizer begins with his theology of the Trinity and from that makes the above identification. When he does so, God seems harsh and judgmental, and Jesus appears as gracious and loving, hence a split in the Trinity. For centuries, Islam views Christianity as Tritheistic; when such interpretations surface, unmistakable cracks appear in the concept of unity of God to the extent that in Isaiah 5, the owner is the farmer who both plants the vineyard and then tears it down, when it produces wild grapes.

Here two people debate the fate of the vineyard among themselves. It is far more appropriate to understand the debate as between mercy and judgment. Manson observes, “The conversation between the owner and his workers is reminiscent of Rabbinical passages in which the attributes of God debate, for this time, it’s the attribute of mercy with justice. If God dealt with Israel by strict justice, Israel would perish. Be he does not. He gives another chance. And if madness to fly in the face of His justice, it is desperate wickedness to flout His mercy.”

5. We agree with Manson’s identification of the fig tree with Israel, but agree with his understanding of the debate between justice/mercy. Judgment requires that the tree be dug out for the stated reasons. Mercy pleads for more grace and a 2nd chance. The same tension is felt throughout the entire OT and is intensely focused in prophets like Isaiah, who can thunder harsh oracles of judgment in one very and the next say;
“How can I give you up, O Ephraim!..... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender, (Hos. 11:8-9).”

6. In this p mercy and judgment are given voices. They are personified by the owner and the vinedresser who struggle together over the unfruitful vine. The tension itself is deep within the heart of God. The theology of the Son of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 is powerfully reinforced by the use of wordplay. The last part of verse 7 reads,

“And he looked for mishpat. (justice)

And behold, mishpah (bloodshed)

For sedhaquh (righteousness)

But behold,” se’aqah (a cry)

In Jesus’ dialogue of the vineyard there is quite likely a similar use of wordplay. This wordplay surfaces in the old Syriac version of the p.. Given that the Syriac and Aramaic are dialects of the same language this wordplay may well have been present in the original Aramaic of the p. itself. It is as flows:

Dig it out=fsuqih

Forgive it/let it alone=shbuqih.

So the vinedresser pleads not fsuqih, (dig it out) but rather shbuqih. (forgive it). Thus the thrust of the main point in each voice (grace and judgment) is perhaps reinforce and made unforgettable by a skillfully constructed wordplay.

7. STANZA FIVE:

*“And if it bears fruit in the future---
And if not
Dig it out.”*

*FIND FRUIT?
NO FRUIT
DIG OUT*

The Greek phrase, ‘Eis to mellon’ is often translated, “Next year.” The identical translation in 1 Timothy 6:19 is translated, “For the future.” The word ‘mellon’ is commonly referred for the future (Bauer) and this may be a better translation for the text. The voice of grace/mercy is talking. The vinedresser is pleading for grace (give it more time) and mercy (forgive it). These elements are strengthened if a specific time for “execution” is not stated. The time of the future judgment is left unspecified.

8. In the second half of the verse, the ‘then’ of the ‘if-then construction’ is missing. The RSV and many other translations supply the missing words, ‘well and good.’ Which are implied, but not stated. The construction is classical (Marshall), but the reason for it may be literary. In stanza four the vinedresser suggests two horticultural acts in an attempt to revive the fruitless tree. He will ‘dig around it,’ and ‘spread on manure.’ From a literary point of view this gives the fourth stanza four lines to match the four lines of stanza two. The same concern for balanced stanzas may be at work in stanza five. The apodosis may have been omitted so that stanza five would have only three lines to match stanza one with its three semantic units. In any case, the meaning is clear; after ‘the acts of redemption’ are completed and sufficient time for renewal is given, the fig tree must respond. If it does not, judgment will be the only option left. The health of the vineyard is too important and the master’s expectation of fruit too strong to leave an unproductive tree indefinitely occupying good ground and sapping its strength.
9. Even so, the salvation offered has a special quality to it. It comes exclusively from the outside. The voice of mercy pleads for forgiveness yet one more time. The redemptive acts that may lead to the renewal (the production of fruit) are proposed. The word ordinarily translated, “Let it alone,” (v. 8) is the NT word for forgiveness, and there is no misunderstanding about what Jesus is discussing. Forgiveness can be offered yet again, but that will mean nothing unless some help for the tree comes from the outside. Renewal cannot come from the resources of the tree itself. It cannot gather the strength it needs from its own roots. The vinedresser must act to save the tree and the tree must respond.