

PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 35, Pilate, the Tower and the Fig Tree. Part VI, Luke 13:1-9

1. 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 to those acts or they are of no avail. In this simple agricultural picture can we not overhear the great themes of God’s own mighty redemptive acts?
10. Here as in other p. w2 do not know what happens. This story is also open ended. Does the owner grant the reprieve? Does the tree respond? We are not told. The action freezes like a TV Spot and the reader/listener must respond. In conclusion, What specific response is sought from the original audience by telling this p.? We suggest that the original audience is pressed to understand:

The present leadership of the nation is fruitless, judgement threatens. God in His mercy will act to redeem. If there is no response, judgment will be the only alternative. His love for the community of faith is too deep to be otherwise.

11. The cluster of theological motifs present in this p. include the following:
 - a. The spiritual leaders of the household of faith are planted in "God's vineyard." They are expected to produce fruit for Him.
 - b. When the leadership is fruitless it not only falls in its own obedience but also sterilizes the community around it. God cares for the community and will not tolerate this situation indefinitely.
 - c. Mercy is extended to unfruitful leadership in the form of forgiveness and renewing grace.
 - d. Only in the grace of God, freely given to the fruitless leaders, is renewal offered. God acts to forgive and renew. These acts come from beyond the leaders, who cannot renew themselves.
 - e. God's offer of mercy must evoke a response from within or renewal will not take place and judgment is inevitable.

12. Thus these two units of traditions are closely related. The first deals with the suffering of the community that results from Roman leaders, the people are called on to repent. The second deals with the barrenness in the community that results from the failures of the national leaders who need forgiveness and grace. Thus in the first, (13:1-5) the people must repent. In the second (13:6-9) the leaders need forgiveness. In each, politics and repentance (forgiveness) are related in ways that instruct the faithful in every age.