
Exegesis 11: The Barren Fig Tree

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The one thing that all the commentators do agree about regarding Mark 11:12-14 is that it is difficult. 'This narrative bristles with difficulties', says Cranfield. ¹ 'One of the most perplexing in the Gospels', wrote A M Hunter. ²

For many exegetes problems arise from their approach to Scripture. For Hunter and others like him the story is 'frankly incredible'. ³ They have two main problems with the incident. They find it both 'irrational and revolting'. ⁴ Revolting, because the story 'does not ring true' ⁵ with their ideas on Jesus' character. Barclay speaks of his 'petulance' and J B Phillips of Jesus 'venting his feeling of frustration and despair upon the fig tree'. ⁶ But there is need neither to accuse Jesus of sin nor to see the story as a 'legendary concretising' of Luke 13:6-9 for aetiological purposes. ⁷ As Bengel asserts 'Whatever does not serve Jesus Christ is unworthy to serve any one of mortals'. ⁸

Then there is verse 13 which, for some, makes Jesus' behaviour irrational. Certainly there is a problem. 'The juxtaposition of the two seemingly contradicting assertions heightens the difficulties, for the explicit statement that it was not the season for figs appears to make Jesus' action arbitrary and meaningless'. ⁹ Of course, some are willing to cut the Gordian knot and simply remove verse 13, even though it is typical of Mark's asides. ¹⁰ Surely the better path is to take comfort in the belief that the problem is one 'which evidently the Evangelist did not feel as he deliberately makes it for us'. ¹¹ But what *is* the solution to this apparent difficulty?

A number of evangelical commentators want to find the solution in the possibility of very late or very early figs. ¹² However, the idea that Jesus would not have looked for figs without some hope of there being any 'assumes too much'. Vincent Taylor is scathing about such a line of argument and says it has 'nothing to commend it'.¹³ Bengel's idea that Jesus may have been looking for *inedible* figs to miraculously transform is fanciful and bizarre. ¹⁴

In order to do true justice to the passage one has to accept the following three propositions:

1 It was not possible for edible fruit to be on the tree regardless of how much foliage it had put forth.

There are two crops for the fig tree, one early, one late. The first is in May or June and the second is in August or later still.¹⁵ The incident occurs, of course, in April or even March, when, as Mark points out, 'it was not the season for figs'. It was too soon for the early crop to be ready and too late for anything edible to be remaining from the previous year. 'There was then no reason to expect fruit upon this tree beyond the promise of its leaves'.¹⁶

2 Jesus knew that this was the case.

Wuest suggests that Jesus ‘at least hoped to find figs on the tree’ and stresses the ‘self-imposed human limitations’ of the incarnation, while warning against any denial of Christ’s basic omniscience.¹⁷ However, here common sense, a knowledge of his own land, would have been enough to convince Jesus that, regardless of appearances, there could be no fruit on the tree. Gould says *ara* is *illative* here (ie denoting motion into)¹⁸ and R Alan Cole states ‘The Greek particle *ara* suggests that the finding of figs was an unlikely possibility contemplated by the Lord; he was thus in no sense surprised by the tree’s unfruitfulness, as he would have, had it been the time of the regular fruit crop’.¹⁹

3 Jesus’ hunger was nevertheless real.

J A Alexander fulminates, ‘That this was a simulated hunger, is not only unworthy and irreverent but a perfectly gratuitous assumption as our Lord, by his incarnation, shared in all the innocent infirmities of human nature’.²⁰ This is where the Lord’s humanity appears, in his hunger not in his supposed ignorance.

An important Scripture for unravelling the remaining difficulties is one apparently ignored by everyone except Calvin.²¹ That is John 4:31-34. On that occasion Jesus dealt with his hunger by doing the work of God. It is the same here.

After spending the night in Bethany Jesus and his disciples set off for Jerusalem early in the morning. Had he skipped breakfast as Henry suggests?²² Being an area rich in figs, dates and olives it was reasonable for him to think of getting something on the way.

Jesus then looks up and sees a leafy fig tree in the distance, ‘a derelict perhaps of some old garden or vineyard’.²³ Perhaps it was in some sheltered hollow and so was more leafy, more *precocious*.²⁴ Jesus is aware, however, that it is not the season for figs. Immediately **his mind is turned from the natural to the spiritual**. A number of Scriptures may have come into his mind. Micah 7:1,2 seems the most likely suggestion,²⁵

“What misery is mine!

I am like one who gathers summer fruit

at the gleaning of the vineyard;

there is no cluster of grapes to eat,

none of the early figs that I crave.

The godly have been swept from the land,

not one upright man remains.

All men lie in wait to shed blood;

each hunts his brother with a net.”

Christ weeping over Jerusalem is vividly brought to mind (Mt 23:37, Lk 13:34). Seeing the beautiful foliage and knowing it all means nothing reminds him of the

judgment about to fall on his own people. Cranfield is one of many who notice the careful way Mark has woven the clearing of the Temple into the narrative, 'The best commentary on vv 12-14 and 20 f is found in the narrative these verses enframe'.²⁶

Many other Old Testament references identify God's people with the fig tree. ²⁷ Hosea 9, and especially verses 10 and 16, echoes the sentiments found here. Israel was not short of 'foliage' - the Temple and its ritual, outward and legalistic acts of virtue, a form of godliness. But what was lacking was actual fruit, the fruit of righteousness. Like the fig tree they were 'louder than all the rest in profession, yet behind in performance'. ²⁸ This was the very thing that John the Baptist had warned about (Mt 3:7-10) and that Jesus too had spoken of (Mk 7:6). **Israel's sin was not just the sin of barrenness but of barrenness with an appearance of fruitfulness.**

The warning of this enacted parable, for such it was, is still needed today. Ryle, in his 'Expository Thoughts on the Gospels' applies it admirably.

There was a voice in the fig tree for all the branches of Christ's visible Church, in every age and every part of the world. There was a warning against an empty profession of Christianity, unaccompanied by sound doctrine and holy living, which some of those branches would have done well to lay to heart. But above all there was a voice in that withered fig tree for all carnal, hypocritical, and false-hearted Christians. Well would it be for all who are content with a name to live while in reality they are dead, if they would only see their own faces in the glass of this passage.

Let us take care that we each individually learn the lesson that this fig tree conveys. Let us always remember that baptism, and church-membership, and reception of the Lord's supper, and diligent use of the outward forms of Christianity, are not sufficient to save our souls. They are leaves, nothing but leaves, and without fruit will add to our condemnation. Like the fig leaves of which Adam and Eve made themselves garments, they will not hide the nakedness of our souls from the eye of an all-seeing God, or give us boldness when we stand before Him at the last day. No: we must bear fruit, or be lost for ever! There must be fruit in our lives, - the fruit of repentance toward our Lord Jesus Christ, - and true holiness in our conversation. Without such fruits as these, a profession of Christianity will only sink us lower into hell.²⁹

References

- 1 C E B Cranfield, Cambridge Greek New Testament Commentary, ST MARK with supplementary notes, Cambridge 1972, p 354
- 2 A M Hunter, Torch Bible Commentary, ST MARK, London 1949, p 110
- 3 Hunter, p 110
- 4 Bundy, quoted in D E Nineham, Pelican Commentary, ST MARK, London 1963, p 225
- 5 William Barclay, Daily Study Bible, MARK'S GOSPEL, Edinburgh 1975
- 6 J B Phillips, PETER'S PORTRAIT OF JESUS, London 1976, p 104

- 7 See A W Blunt, Clarendon Bible, ST MARK, 1939, p 226 and Hugh Anderson, NEW CENTURY BIBLE COMMENTARY, London 1976, p 263f
- 8 Bengel's 'GNOMON', Vol I p 553
- 9 William Lane, NICNT, GOSPEL OF MARK, Grand Rapids 1974, p 399
- 10 Cf eg 3:30, 5:42, 7:3,4 etc
- 11 Richard Glover, A TEACHER'S COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF ST MARK, London 1957, p 208
- 12 These include Barnes, Bengel, Cole, Hendriksen, Ryle and Swift (NBC rev)
- 13 Vincent Taylor, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK, London 1952, p 458
- 14 Bengel, p 553
- 15 This is the consensus of the commentaries and dictionaries consulted.
- 16 H B Swete, Greek Testament with notes and indices, THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MARK, Cambridge 1920
- 17 Kenneth S Wuest, Word Studies, MARK, Grand Rapids, 1950, p 219
- 18 Ezra Gould, ICC, ST MARK'S GOSPEL, Edinburgh 1896, p 211
- 19 R Alan Cole, Tyndale NTCs, Leicester & Grand Rapids 1971, p 177
- 20 J A Alexander, MARK, 1858, Edinburgh & Carlisle Pa 1960, p 303
- 21 John Calvin, HARMONY OF THE SYNOPTICS, Vol 3 p 18 Baker ed, (CTS trans)
- 22 Matthew Henry, COMMENTARY, Vol 5 p 526 (MacDonald ed)
- 23 Swete, p 254
- 24 Alford's word in his 4 vol Greek Testament
- 25 See Lane pp 401,402. Following Bird he argues that the final clause of v 13 should translate, 'and the significant thing about this is that it was not the season for figs'. Such passages come where 'Jesus alludes to the Scriptures without explicitly quoting them'.
- 26 Cranfield, p 357
- 27 See the list in Lane, p 400
- 28 Glover, p 208
- 29 J C Ryle, EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS, Mark, 1856, Cambridge 1973, p 234

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The cursing of the fig tree is not so far out of character for Jesus as some would have us believe. The same Jesus exorcised demons so that two thousand pigs were drowned. Perhaps the fact that his two punitive miracles - the swine and the fig tree - are not directed against men should teach us something of Jesus' compassion. He who is to save his people from their sin and its consequences resorts to prophetic actions not directed against his people, in order to warn them of the binding power of the devil (the destruction of the swine) and of God's enmity against all hypocritical piety (the cursing of the fig tree).

D A Carson on Mt 21:18-19
