

Parable Research Paper

The Budding Fig Tree

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Introduction & Thesis

In the triple tradition of the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus uses the parable of the Fig Tree as one of at least two attempts to help His disciples interpret the times about which they had asked. In doing so, they would gain a *when you see this you will see that* perspective about the signs of the times given in response to their questions about His return. Matthew, Mark, and Luke's reflections of this saying (Matthew 24:32-5, Mark 13:28-31, and Luke 21:29-33) are nearly identical, which implies importance and accuracy one doesn't always find in disparate biblical accounts about other events.¹ I contend that the reason lies in the saying's familiarity, simplicity, and critical nature. Jesus wanted the disciples to understand the events that would precede His return and of His *Parousia*² itself and used a common utterance to make His point.

Jesus' Purpose

*As He [Jesus] was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"*³ In this setting, Jesus had just fueled any appetite for mystery and intrigue by stating that the Temple Mount buildings would be destroyed and completely leveled at some point in the future in response to their admiration of the structures. Looking back, we understand that the destruction occurred in 70 CE at the hands of Roman soldiers countering rebellious Jews

¹ Examples include the inconsistencies in the number of demoniacs healed by Jesus (cf. Matthew 8:28-34 & Mark 5:1-20), the number of animals Jesus rode into Jerusalem (cf. Matthew 21:7 & Mark 11:7, etc., NASB (New American Standard Bible).

² Contrary to a contemporary pre-tribulation point of view that Jesus' initial return in Matthew Chapter 24 will be a quick, pre-coming coming, the term strongly indicates an arrival, a presence. Indeed, a holistic view comprising the Mt. of Olives account and the Revelation given by Jesus to John show a continued presence from the time of His appearance. That presence – arrival – will herald God's wrath against the remaining world, His kingship, judgment, the new age, etc. (my perspective). Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., pp. 780–781). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³ Matthew 24:3, NASB.

held up in the Temple complex. However, the outcome must have seemed inconceivable to incredulous disciples who knew that the temple facelift itself had taken Herod four decades to complete!

When would the end of the age come indeed! I still muse at our meager 94-verse glimpse of a conversation that may have taken an hour or more to complete.⁴ After all, how does one adequately answer such a series of questions in less space and time? Time was scarce, but Jesus, as the ultimate communicator, understood full-well that an effective answer would take the receiver from what was known to the unknown in satisfying a seemingly insatiable appetite for apocalyptic insight.

At first glance, one may be tempted to isolate the parable and take it out of context to support a pre-tribulation prejudice or other position such as the preterist eschatological point of view;⁵ however, a true student of the Bible must be careful to dig for Jesus' intended use of the saying. After all, there would have been no point in expending breath to voice the parable without purpose. So, what was His impetus?

The disciples desired to know about the destruction of the Temple buildings, Jesus' return, and the end of the age. They likely envisioned these events as occurring concurrently or at least near each other. Therefore, they expected a sequence of some kind. Jesus would not disappoint! After warning them of potential deceit, false Christs, wars/violence, plagues and widescale death, and an Antichrist, He revealed that His return would cut short a time of incredible tribulation at the hands of the latter. Jesus, to emphasize the importance and timing of His return, then spoke a

⁴ I am referring to the combined chapters of Matthew 24 & 25.

⁵ Pre-tribulation proponents and related dispensationalists will often claim the report is symbolic or inapplicable to anyone but the Jews; similarly, mainstream Preterists misinterpret the symbolism to isolate the account to the time of Roman occupation, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the rule of Emperor Nero, *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 21 (for instance).

short *when you see this you will see that* parable that expressed expectation (vultures to dead bodies in this case). As with the parable of the Fig Tree, this too was a common saying we find not only in the Mt. of Olives account but also in in Job's account of God's incredible grace and sovereignty.

After describing the impactful and contrasting nature of His return and the corresponding gathering of the Saints, Jesus re-emphasizes the importance and timing of His second advent by using another *when you see this you will see that* parable: The Fig Tree. There, Jesus reminds the disciples that His return and insertion into our history will occur when the signs He had revealed (including a complete darkening of the sun, moon, and stars) come to fruition. Twice Jesus used a parable to create a sense of expectation in the context of His return and the end of the current age and in answering His disciples' questions. Of the two which metaphorically used carrion-eating birds and fig trees, our focus will be on the latter. How similar were all triple-tradition accounts? After all, variations could imply disagreement or negate a sense of urgency or importance!

Differences in Gospel Accounts

With few exceptions in wording, Matthew and Mark's accounts of the parable of the Fig Tree are identical in form, redaction, and meaning. The differences are minor and do not detract from the message. For instance, Mark 13:28 prefaces 'near' with the present indicative verb $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\nu$ to create 'is near' – something implied in Matthew 24:32. And, Matthew 24:33 prefaces "these things" with $\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha$ to produce the statement *all these things*. Conversely, Mark's reference excludes *all*, leaving "these things" with an implied inclusive and comprehensive nature. Perhaps the author felt that the adjective was unnecessary. Similarly, Mark appends *these things* with the neuter participle $\gamma\iota\nu\omicron\mu\epsilon\nu\alpha$ (*happening* or *coming into being*) whereas Matthew leaves out the

modifier. Mark's addition is helpful, though, as it serves as an indicator of concurrency. In other words, what follows will happen during or near the *things* seen. Although Matthew and Mark agree in form, redaction, and meaning, Luke's relative text is different at first glance. Does that change his intent or create disagreement with the other gospel accounts?

First, Luke inserts "But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."⁶ between the signs Jesus had just revealed and the fig tree parable. The insertion helps rather than hurt a *when you see this you will see that* thesis and supports Mark's use of γινομενα to indicate proximity between the signs and Jesus' Parousia.⁷

Second, the author appends *and all the trees*⁸ to "Behold the fig tree ..." (an addition not made by Matthew or Mark). The significance of the addition lies in its contradiction, and indeed negation, of poor eschatological interpretations that metaphorically compare the fig tree to the Nation of Israel and, therefore, assume that Jesus' return will soon follow Israel's formal recognition.⁹ Other minor differences include the assumption of 'leaves' in verse 30 and the addition of *for yourselves* to complete "... know for yourselves ...". However, there's one very interesting difference that begs exploration.

Third, whereas *that* which will follow the signs for Matthew and Mark is nearness to Jesus' return, it is the Kingdom of God for Luke.¹⁰ I don't believe this is a contradiction or

⁶ Luke 21:28, NASB.

⁷ See Luke 21:31, NASB.

⁸ Luke 21:29, NASB.

⁹ May 14, 1948; the assumption has fueled faulty theologies and theories and produced works such as 88 *Reasons Why the Rapture Will Happen in 1988* when also incorrectly interpreting and applying the word *generation* to the parable and signs (Edgar C. Whisenant; 1st edition (1988)).

¹⁰ Matthew 24:33 & Mark 13:29 versus Luke 21:31, NASB.

disagreement with the other Gospel writers but a confirmation such as we see in the Revelation 21:1-6 that Jesus' Parousia will bring with it the Kingdom of God and a new age in answer to the disciples' questions. Perhaps a good next step will be to examine the parable of the Fig Tree closer and contrast it with other similar references as we continue our attempt to understand Jesus' purpose for its use.

Commentary & Interpretation

Before exploring the interpretation of specific terms or concepts such as *these things*, *the Kingdom of God*, *near*, and *generation*, it would be prudent first to determine whether a thesis that Jesus used the parable of the Fig Tree to highlight a relationship between signs and His return is valid. I believe comparing the parable to other similar sayings will show that the thesis is indeed credible.

We find in Luke 12:54-5 a parable about 'interpreting the time' yet another way of pointing out *when you see this you will see that* (or *say that*, in this case). There, Jesus uses a well-known and applicable cause-effect saying about the weather. The correlation is between clouds rising in the west and the appropriate response, "a shower is coming." He adds another example in verse 55 to substantiate His point: "And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and it turns out that way." To what existential event was Jesus referring? He had been teaching His disciples of the folly of chasing greed and the adverse character of some of the Pharisees besides admonishing them to be ready for the Master's return. Verses 51-3 reflect the unpeaceful division His presence had brought with it. The teaching, admonishment, and reflection of His current state should have aided a realization of Jesus' role as the Messiah; however, the Pharisees who should have known better were unable to interpret those signs of the time. In this case, they were blind in that they *saw this* but hadn't *seen that*. Luke includes

another related parable that we also see in Matthew 24:28 – the expectation of seeing vultures around dead bodies as a way of understanding or interpreting the times. It too is in the context of Jesus’ return and its signs.

The Brotherhood of Vultures & Figs

Just as Jesus used the vultures-and-corpse reference in Matthew 24:28 to introduce the apocalyptic revelation of His second advent at the sign of the complete darkening of the sun, moon, and stars, He did the same elsewhere to highlight an unexpected appearing. The parable is repeated in the author’s seventeenth chapter when Jesus begins, “It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.”¹¹ Here, He is alluding to the unexpected Day of the Lord wrath and the gathering of the Saints at His appearing¹² and then reiterates the separation of followers from the unbelieving world destined for destruction. The Messiah ends His dissertation with this phrase, which mirrors His comment on the Mt. of Olives: *Where the body is, there also the vultures will be gathered.*¹³ To summarize, Jesus used a blood-sucking, carrion-eating parable twice (once before the Mt. of Olives discourse and again during the question-and-answer time) and the fig tree parable to help His disciples interpret signs of the time. What time? His return and, with it, the physical manifestation of the Kingdom of God at the new age following His appearing. Although the parable and its meaning may seem simple enough, there are those who misinterpret the vulture-corpse saying to support a Preterist view that Jesus was describing the Roman atrocities and destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.¹⁴ The conclusion is improbable

¹¹ Luke 17:30, NASB.

¹² For instance, Matthew 24:2-31 alongside Revelation 6:12-17, NASB.

¹³ Luke 17:37, NASB.

¹⁴ The misinterpretation is facilitated by Bible translations such as the King James Bible that use the word ‘eagle’ in place of ‘vulture.’ The eagle was an important symbol of the Roman Empire and carried on a standard.

considering the remainder of the Olivette discourse (e.g., the parable is about signs and events that have not come to fruition) and that the saying is used elsewhere and, therefore, likely common.

The Lord God touts what may appear to be obvious when the author of Job reflects this scenario and metaphor: “Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up, and makes his nest on high? On the cliff he dwells and lodges, upon the rocky crag, an inaccessible place. From there he spies out food; His eyes see it from afar. His young ones also suck up blood; **And where the slain are, there is he.**”¹⁵ Although we have addressed what I consider to be the more significant issue of interpreting the parables in support of an *interpreting the times* or *when you see this you will see that* thesis, exploring other curiosities about things, generations, the Kingdom of God, and the meaning of *near* could be rewarding.

Other Curiosities

... so, you too, when you see all these **things**, recognize that *He is near, right at the door*.¹⁶ What things? Of what should the audience witnessing Jesus’ return be watchful? So far, Matthew in Chapter 24 has revealed a coming sequence of false Christs, increasing violence, famine and pestilence, death, and a significant Antichrist authority, and a great tribulation Jesus’ Parousia will interrupt. Signs of the latter include a complete darkening of the sun, moon, and stars as prophesied in the Tanakh that will contrast a bright appearing of the Messiah and gathering of the Saints.¹⁷ Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s accounts agree that, just as tender fig

¹⁵ Job 39:27-30, NASB.

¹⁶ Matthew 24:33, NASB.

¹⁷ Tanakh is an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim Law, Prophets, and the Writings. Prophecies that foretell of the same complete darkening preceding Jesus’ return and the wrath of God include Joel 2:30-2, NASB.

leaves herald a coming summer and vultures signal rotting flesh, the signs they revealed will indicate a near Parousia of Jesus. But, what does *near* mean in this context?

The term near as represented by Greek ἐγγύς can indicate a proximity in time or to a place. Unfortunately, we, as with the disciples, will be unable to determine the length of time meant by Jesus. Interpretations have ranged from a brief time inside a human frame of reference (such as a Preterist insistence that the Olivette events must have already happened as a result) to a figurative nearness of the Kingdom of God. However, ἐγγύς in a relationship of the Parousia to the signs is likely to be of an imminent nature for multiple reasons. For instance, and as I have already mentioned, Mark and Luke's accounts put nearness in the context of events in progress.¹⁸ Also, all three gospel accounts state that the generation that sees the signs Jesus revealed will also see His appearing and establishment of the Kingdom of God.¹⁹

So, what is a generation and of which generation does the triple tradition refer? Answering both questions can be important to countering errant eschatology that the generation to which Jesus referred was that of His time or that a 40-year generation substantiates a theory that Jesus was to return in 1988 – 40 years after Israel's recognition as a nation.²⁰

Noun γενεά is used to denote a generation, the one that would see the signs of the time of Jesus' return and physical manifestation of the God's Kingdom on earth. Although interpreters often attempt to quantify a generation in years (commonly 40 or 70), there is no precedent for doing so. What we *can* glean from Scripture and various interpretive tools²¹ is that a generation

¹⁸ Mark 13:29 and Luke 21:31 respectively, NASB.

¹⁹ Matthew 24:24, Mark 13:30, and Luke 21:32, NASB.

²⁰ Again, as referenced in works such as *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Happen in 1988* (Edgar C. Whisenant; 1st edition (1988)).

²¹ *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon on the Greek New Testament* (Logos Bible Software), Moulton, J. H., & Milligan, G. – *The vocabulary of the Greek Testament*; Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., Jones, H. S., & McKenzie, R. – *A*

is a unit comprising enough years to see the signs of the end²² and Jesus' return at the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars²³ at the heralding of God's Kingdom on earth.²⁴ Next, we will explore the gospel authors' probable reason for including the parable of the Fig Tree in the Mt. of Olives discourse.

The Evangelists' Intent

Matthew Chapters 24 and 25, Mark Chapter 13, and Luke Chapter 21 highlight key points of Jesus' discourse on the Mt. of Olives when He answered several related questions about the destruction of the Temple complex, His return, and of the end of the age. At a glance, one might assume the authors included the fig tree parable only because Jesus used it during the conversation. However, He must have said many things *not* included. What would have made the parable significant enough to document?

First, parables and storytelling in extended simile²⁵ were important to Jewish tradition and oral reporting – especially when God was the subject. To truly understand the meaning and impact of parables such as that of the fig tree, we should study them as *Jewish Haggadah* spoken by Jesus the Jew in Jewish culture to a Jewish audience. In this case, as with many if not most

Greek-English lexicon; Büchsel, F. (1964–). γενεά, γενεαλογία, γενεαλογέω, ἀγενεαλόητος. G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 1, pp. 662–663); etc.

²² The implication is that the time of the end will be a short and intense period beginning sometime after the initial not-yet-the-end birth pang events denoted in Matthew 24:4-8 also reflected in the first three revealed in Revelation 6:1-6 by the breaking of scroll seals.

²³ See also the event of darkening and subsequent appearing of Jesus revealed upon the breaking of the sixth seal in Revelation 6:12-17.

²⁴ According to Luke in 21:31 as also foreseen by Daniel in 7:9-27 and revealed again by Jesus to John in Revelation 11:15, 12:10, and 21:1-27 through 22:5.

²⁵ Dr. Robert C. Newman, *Parables: Review and Preview*.

parables, the Fig Tree story was meant to elicit a response.²⁶ I believe its purpose in context is to command a decision: Whether to be watchful and sober, properly interpreting the times ... or not.

Second, the parable serves as a bridge between the signs of the time and the main event of which Jesus spoke: His return and, with it, the physical manifestation of God's Kingdom. The story stitches components together to enhance the flow of information. It also stressed the importance of marrying signs of Jesus' return to the advent and of the end itself (hence the repetition of facts and multiple metaphors of vultures and fig trees).²⁷ So far, we have discovered similarities in redaction and form between author accounts. What about their source? And are there any effects of source, form, or redaction criticism on the message itself?

Source, Form, and Redaction Criticism Effects

Accuracy and relevance seem to be primary, and positive, effects of source, form, and redaction criticism of the triple tradition accounts of the Mt. of Olives discourse and, therefore, the parable of the Fig Tree from the points of view of Peter (book of Mark) and Matthew. As we've seen, their accounts are nearly identical. Although not a participant of the conversation, Luke appears to have done due diligence in researching the event and Jesus' words and then recording them, enhancing or clarifying Mark's writing in the process. Three separate authors but three nearly-identical reports. Why? How was this possible?

Although I contend that accuracy because of the relevance of Jesus' dissertation was a driving force in maintaining continuity between the different accounts, I suggest that source and form made the process easier than it could have been. The parable form made information easier

²⁶ Young, *Introduction: Gospel and Rabbinic Parables*, 7.

²⁷ Dr. Robert C. Newman, *Parables: Review and Preview*, 4.

to remember. That information would have included the fragments surrounding the stories (of the vultures and fig trees, in this case). Also, if the consensus of a *Markian priority*²⁸ is true, then Matthew used Peter's account as first recorded in Mark Chapter 13 (again, resulting in nearly identical accounts). Luke would have heard and then recorded the oral tradition while also having the benefit of and enhancing the original account recorded by Mark. As such, this is the only noticeable and yet insignificant editorial difference in the triple tradition of the fig tree parable. Therefore, I contend that source, form, and redaction criticisms reveal nothing but positive effects on the parable: Accuracy and relevancy. Are the parable and surrounding text to which it applies relevant today?

Contemporary Significance

If the parable was meant to have a decision point regarding God (as parables often did),²⁹ then the parable of the Fig Tree should compel all people of all ages to recognize the signs of the times given by Jesus and take action. In other words, we must be diligent in learning the biblical truth and applying our knowledge and faith in ways that prepare us for His return. The results will be a spiritual readiness that commands a *well-done good and faithful servant* response by the Master and a keen awareness of the times.

From false Christs, increasing violence, famine, and persecution to incredible tribulation and a complete darkening of the natural lights, the imminence of Jesus' Parousia and the establishment of the Kingdom of God will be apparent to the watchful and obedient. Keeping this focus is becoming increasingly more difficult in our electronic age where people are more

²⁸ Stein, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* and Fee's *A Text-critical Look at the Synoptic Problem*, for instance.

²⁹ Young, *Introduction: Gospel and Rabbinic Parables*, 4.

likely to practice the easier and exciting but dangerous ‘media exegesis’ whereby they take signs of the times from news reports and human contexts rather than the Bible.

Learning and practicing proper hermeneutics is necessary to maintain proper focus on truth and the times. Therefore, my admonishment to the Church is to learn, practice, grow, and then ‘rinse and repeat’ in a never-ending endeavor to avoid the deception Paul warned against and stay watchful and aware according to Jesus’ teaching.³⁰ In this way, we are more likely to recognize the eagles and budding fig trees heralding our blessed hope.³¹

Conclusion

The parable of the Fig Tree, just like that of the Vulture and Carcass, is meant to establish the relationship between the signs Jesus gave His disciples on the Mt. of Olives, His return, and the end of the age. It also emphasized the importance of the information and demanded a decision of whether to take notice and act (or do nothing). Indeed, we must choose wisely to devote ourselves to God, follow Christ, walk by the Spirit, and learn for growth while being *gentle as doves and wise as serpents*.³² Only then will we recognize the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars during an incredible tribulation and rightly anticipate our imminent salvation.

³⁰ cf. Ephesians 5:6, Colossians 2:8, 2Thessalonians 2:3 & 10, 1Timothy 4:1, 2Timothy 3:13, Matthew 24:44-51 and Chapter 25, etc., NASB.

³¹ Titus 2:13-14, NASB.

³² cf. Matthew 10:16, NASB.

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