

## LEARN THE LESSON OF THE FIG TREE\*

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In the conclusion of the Synoptic Discourse (Matt 24:1–36; Mark 13:1–37; and Luke 21:1–36), Jesus punctuated his message by drawing attention to the fig tree. His parabolic use of the fig tree is a vestige of an ancient Jewish homily concerning the redemption of Jerusalem. The reason the aim of the parable has escaped the attention of New Testament scholars has been two-fold. First, there is a tendency to overlook the independent form of the saying preserved by Luke.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Luke's parable is read merely as a revision of Mark's own editorial activity. Thus, key elements in Luke's more primitive form of the parable are ignored. Second, scholars have not noticed in the Lukan parable parallels to an early Jewish midrash,<sup>2</sup> which employed the budding fig tree to signal the time of redemption. In our study, we will give attention to the literary development of the parable, to its role as the concluding unit of

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\* For our daughter, Kathryn Claire, whose birth reminded us that life is never without hope.

<sup>1</sup> C.H. Dodd in his study of the Synoptic Discourse concluded that Luke employed a source different from Mark. Indeed, at points Dodd suggested, "it is Mark, not Luke, which is secondary;" "The Fall of Jerusalem and the 'Abomination of Desolation,'" in *More New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968), 83. The question of Lukan dependence upon Mark in the Synoptic Discourse has been vigorously debated. While the majority of scholars still contend that Luke is wholly reliant on Mark for the Discourse, there has been a significant minority which has argued that Luke at points is using a literary source different from Mark. See V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Macmillan, London, 1957), 511 [henceforth: *Mark*]; idem, *Behind the Third Gospel: A Study of the Proto-Luke Hypothesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 101–125; T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1949) 323–327; P. Winter, "The treatment of his sources by the Third Evangelist in Luke xxi–xxiv," *Studia Theologica* 8 (1954): 138–172; G.B. Caird, *St. Luke* (Pelican Gospel Commentaries; Hammonds Worth, 1963), 227–229. Concerning the issue of overall Lukan independence in the Passion Narratives see Taylor *The Passion Narrative of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 119–140 and J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1987), 40.

<sup>2</sup> On the question of a possible Jewish source(s) to the Synoptic Discourse see R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 123; and Taylor, *Mark*, 498–500.

the Synoptic Discourse, and to its meaning within the religious milieu of Judaism in late antiquity.

Καὶ εἶπεν παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς ἴδετε τὴν συκὴν καὶ πάντα τὰ δένδρα ὅταν προβάλωσιν ἤδη βλέποντες ἅφ' ἑαυτῶν γινώσκετε ὅτι ἤδη ἐγγύς τὸ θέρος ἐστὶν οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς ὅταν ἴδητε ταῦτα γινόμενα ἠνώσσετε ὅτι ἐγγύς ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (Luke 21:29–31).

While there is no doubt that Luke left his imprint on the parable,<sup>3</sup> there are indications that he did not depend upon Mark.<sup>4</sup> Instead, his form of the parable represents an independent literary tradition. Markan editorial activity is also evident, but he has reshaped the material in a different way.

Just how important the literary relationship between Mark and Luke is in our parable, can be seen in the way scholarship has interpreted Luke 21:30. Almost without exception, translators and interpreters alike have read Luke's elliptical verb προβάλωσιν to accord with its Markan parallel (ἐκφύη τὰ φύλλα; Mark 13:28).<sup>5</sup> In spite of the fact that Luke lacks any object for the verb, all of the modern English versions render it "when they put forth *leaves*" (emphasis added). There is good reason, however, to suggest that "leaves" was not the intended object of the elliptical verb in Luke.

Before examining more closely the parable itself, it is worthwhile to give brief attention to its broader literary context. To some extent, one's understanding of the aim of the dominical saying is predicated on assumptions concerning the parable's literary relationship to the Syn-

<sup>3</sup> For example, note Luke's introductory phrase εἶπεν παραβολὴν (cf. Luke 6:39) and his insertion of the phrases καὶ πάντα τὰ δένδρα (cf. Luke 6:30 = Matt 5:42) and ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (cf. Luke 9:11; Matt 14:13/Mark 6:31; Luke 4:43; Mark 1:38; Luke 18:29; Matt 19:29/Mark 10:29).

<sup>4</sup> Unlike Matthew's close following of Mark, Luke omits or alters the Markan phrases: μάθετε τὴν παραβολὴν; ὁ κλάδος αὐτῆς ἀπαλὸς γένηται; and ἐκφύη τὰ φύλλα. The essential question is whether Luke has so reshaped his Markan material that he obscures his literary dependence, or whether he instead has employed a source other than Mark. In any evaluation of the data, it is important to notice that where Luke differs from Mark in this pericope, he lacks anything characteristically "Lukan." This would tend to suggest that his characteristic independence is a result of Luke's source(s) and not the editorial creativity of the Evangelist.

<sup>5</sup> For example, W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 709; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV* (AB 28a; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1351–1352 [henceforth: *Luke X–XXIV*]; J.M. Creed, *The Gospel According to Luke* (London: MacMillan, 1950), 258; and A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896), 485 [henceforth: *Luke*].

optic Discourse, in which the Evangelists have interwoven Jesus' warning about the destruction of Jerusalem and an apocalyptic description of events preceding the Parousia.<sup>6</sup>

The Discourse opens with a report of Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple (Mark 13:2 and par.).<sup>7</sup> His prediction resurfaces again in the accusation before the Sadducean priests (Matt 26:61). The accusation also seems to draw from an unrecorded statement by Jesus regarding the Jewish expectation that the Messiah will rebuild the Temple.<sup>8</sup> In the synoptic tradition Jesus' warning about the destruction of the Temple is fused with his statement concerning the rebuilding of the Temple to create a charge<sup>9</sup> that Jesus claimed, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days" (Matt 26:61).

Against the background of Jesus' warning of imminent danger to Jerusalem, he cautions his hearers not to think that the "end" (τέλος) will be at once (Luke 21:9 and par.). Many will mistakenly claim "the time (καιρός) has arrived" (Luke 21:8). Yet, it is only *after* the destruction

<sup>6</sup> On the composite nature of the Synoptic Discourse see D. Flusser, *Jesus* (2d. ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 238; idem. "A Prophecy about Jerusalem in the New Testament," in *Jewish Sources of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Sifriat Hapoalim, 1979), 253–274 [Hebrew]; L. Gaston, *No Stone on Another. Studies in the Significance of the Fall of Jerusalem in the Synoptic Gospels* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 23; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 244–256; and W.L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974), 444–450.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus is to be counted among others who foresaw the coming disaster. See the reports about Jesus ben Ananias (*Jewish War* 6.300–309) and Rabbi Zaddok (*b. Git.* 56b; *Lam Rab.* on Lamentations 1:4–5). For an overview of expectations of the Temple's destruction see C.A. Evans, "Predictions of the Destruction of the Herodian Temple in the Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Scrolls, and Related Texts," *JSP* 10 (1992): 89–147.

<sup>8</sup> Zechariah 6: 12: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord.'" The Dead Sea Scrolls have demonstrated that one may speak about the "rebuilding" of the Temple while the Temple is still standing. The sectarian midrash, 4QFlorilegium (4Q174 1:2–3), interprets the "place for my people Israel" promised in 2 Sam. 7:10, "This is the House which [He will build for them in the] last days, as it is written in the book of Moses, 'In the sanctuary which Thy hands have established, O Lord, the Lord shall reign for ever and ever'" (Ex 15:17–18); cf. Flusser, "Two Notes on the Midrash on 2 Sam. VII," in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 88–93.

<sup>9</sup> While Mark 14:57–58 attributes this charge to the false witnesses (ἠψευδομαρτύρουν κατ' αὐτοῦ λέγοντες ... ἠκούσαμεν αὐτοῦ λέγοντες ὅτι ἐγὼ καταλύσω τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον), Matthew 26:60 distinguishes between the testimony of the false witnesses and the two who testify concerning Jesus' statements about the Temple. Scholarship has rarely noted that Matthew does not state that this latter charge is false. The Johannine tradition (2:19–22) represents an even later stage in which the claim itself is placed directly on the lips of Jesus.

of the Temple and the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled that they should lift their heads, “because (then) your redemption is near” (Luke 21:28). It seems that behind the Greek words (καρὸς and τέλος) stands the notion expressed by the Hebrew term קָץ, which in the Old Testament connotes “a point in time,” but not necessarily the eschaton (cf. Gen 41:1; and Deut 31:10). In the sectarian vocabulary of the Dead Sea Scrolls, קָץ designates simply a period of time,<sup>10</sup> but may also signify the hoped-for era of God’s redemption.<sup>11</sup>

It is the time (קָץ) for the year of favor (i.e. Isa 61:2) for Melchizedek and his armies, a nation of the holy ones of God for the rule of judgment. (1Q13 2.9)

As we will see, recognition that the Hebrew idiom may stand behind τέλος and καρὸς in the Synoptic Discourse creates a literary anticipation for the parable and its *nimshal* in Luke 21:28–30.<sup>12</sup>

Mention of θέρος at the conclusion of the Synoptic Discourse, in a saying about fig trees, is intended to exploit the well-known Hebrew word play on קִיץ (summer [fruit] = figs).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 1QH 17.7–8 (להדורותם וכול קציהם); 1QS 4.13 (מקץ לקץ תשתנועשע נפשי בהמון רחמיכה); References to the Thanksgiving Hymns in this study have followed Puech’s proposed rearrangement. See E. Puech, “Quelques aspects de la restauration du Rouleau des Hymnes,” *JJS* 39 (1988): 38–55.

<sup>11</sup> For the use of קָץ to signify the era of God’s redemption, see 1QS 3.23 (קבו לפי רזי); (אל עד

CD 19.10 (בקץ הפקדה); see also CD 4.10; 1QS 4.18; 1QpHab 7.7 (הקץ האחרון); 1Q34bis f3 2:5 (בקץ רצונך).

<sup>12</sup> On the literary structure of the *masal* proper and its *nimshal* in Jewish parables see D. Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 8, and 16–19.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 2 Samuel 16:1–2; Jeremiah 40: 10; Isaiah 16:9; *t. Nedarim* 4.1–2. See P. Lapide, “Hidden Hebrew in the Gospels,” *Immanuel* 2 (1973): 29; Lane, *Mark*, 477 n. 97. The Greek term can also have the secondary meaning of “summer-fruits, harvest, crop.” θέρος ἀλλότιον ἄμᾶν: Aristophanes *Equites* 392; θέρη σαγύσων: Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus* 2; cf. H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 794. Gundry rejects the possible wordplay in Mark because of the Evangelist’s clear intent that the subject is personal (i.e. “he”), rather than impersonal (i.e. “the end”). In addition, he comments that the wordplay “is possible only in Hebrew, not in Aramaic ... much less in Greek.” While Gundry’s reading of Mark may be correct, that does not preclude that at an earlier stage the saying existed as a Hebrew wordplay. On the question of the continued presence of Hebrew as a spoken language in the New Testament period, see Barr who has rightly criticized New Testament scholarship for continuing to function under the outdated and mistaken notion that Hebrew was not spoken in the first century. R. Gundry, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 788; J. Barr, “Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Hellenistic Age* (ed. W.D. Davies and L. Finkelstein; Cambridge: Cambridge

This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit (פִּרְיָ). He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me, “The end (קֵץ) has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” (Amos 8:1–2)

The Evangelists, however, do not seem to be aware of the Hebrew idiom and seek to clarify the appearance of θεός. Matthew follows Mark’s attempt to interpret the term as a Greek play on θεός and θύρα (Matt 24:33; cf. Mark 13:29), while Luke introduces “the kingdom of God.”<sup>14</sup> The ambiguity of the implicit pronoun (he, she or it) in the inflected verb (ἔστί) allowed Mark’s interpretive addition “[he] is near *at the gates*” (ἐπι θύραις; emphasis added), with reference to the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:24–27).<sup>15</sup> Yet, the structure of the Discourse indicates the phrase ἔγγύς ἔστιν (“he/she/it is near”) refers not to the parousia but to the preceding literary block concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (Mark 13:5–23).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the Lukan Synoptic Discourse the only sections which are undeniably eschatological are Luke 21:10–11 and 25–27.<sup>17</sup> The remaining content refers to the tumultuous events surrounding the destruction of the Temple. The literary bridge between Luke 21:20–24 and 21:28–30 is the recurrent phrase “is at hand” which appears in Luke 21:20, 28 and 30.<sup>18</sup>

If the parable and its application refer to Jerusalem’s future, then imbedded in our saying is a sophisticated secondary word play between פִּרְיָ (summer fruit) and the promised period of redemption (קֵץ) which is to follow Gentile domination of Jerusalem. The dominical saying should thus conclude, “you know that *it* (i.e. קֵץ = the time of God’s redemption) *is near*” (ἔγγύς ἔστιν: Luke 21:30; emphasis added). At this juncture in our study of the parable, what is important is the recognition that the Greek term—θεός—may have been intended to convey the Hebrew idiom, “summer [fruit].” The idiom’s appearance in the *nimshal* of the parable (οὕτως = כֵּן) strengthens our suggestion that an

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University Press, 1989), 79–114.

<sup>14</sup> See Luke 19:11: “As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was *near* (ἔγγύς) to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the *kingdom of God* (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) was to appear immediately” (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Compare James 5:9: ἰδοὺ ὁ κριτὴς τῶν θύρων ἔσθιεν.

<sup>16</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 478 n. 99.

<sup>17</sup> Flusser, *Jesus*, 238.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. ἤγγικεν (21:20), ἔγγίζει (21:28), ἔγγύς (21:30).

implied reading was also intended within the *mashal* proper, “when they put forth *early fruit*” (emphasis added).<sup>19</sup>

Returning to the elliptical use of προβάλλειν in Luke, the verb’s natural collocation is with “fruit” and not “leaves.” Only by imposing Mark’s τὰ φύλλα on Luke’s ellipsis can one assume that “leaves” was the intended object. On the other hand, the combination of προβάλλειν with καρπός appears elsewhere in first century Jewish-Greek literature. Josephus Flavius employs the terms in his discussion of the agricultural laws in Leviticus 9:23, πρὸ ἐτῶν τεσσάρων ἂν καρπὸν προβάλη τὰ φυτά (*Ant.* 4.226). The first century Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, likewise couples the words in his instruction on the need for patience. In an aphoristic saying preserved by his student Arrian, Epictetus illustrates his instruction—in a similar fashion to the dominical saying—using an example of the unripened fruit of a fig tree.

Nothing great is produced suddenly, since it is not so even with the grape and the fig. If you said to me now, “I want a fig,” I would answer that it takes time. Let the tree blossoms appear first, then let it *put forth fruit* (εἶπα προβάλη τὸν καρπὸν), and finally let it ripen. (*Epict. diss.* 1.15.7; emphasis added)

Even in the early Christian transmission of Luke 21:30, the elliptical phrase is expanded to read, ὅταν προβάλωσιν τὸν καρπὸν αὐτῶν—“when they put forth their fruit.” Though the textual variants are not strongly attested,<sup>20</sup> they do indicate that προβάλλειν in an agricultural setting was most naturally understood by readers in the ancient world to mean “to bud or produce fruit.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, it is important to note that the literalistic Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures by Aquila (second century C.E.) renders πρῶτον in Song of Songs 2:13 προέβαλεν and not ἐξήνεγκεν as in the LXX.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Aquila translates the preceding colon, ὁ καιρὸς τῆς κλαδεύσεως ἔγγικεν (cf. Luke 21:8; and Matt 21:34: ἔγγισεν ὁ καιρὸς τῶν καρπῶν). As we shall see, the earlier appearance of ὁ καιρὸς ἔγγικεν with προβάλλειν and συκην (σῆκη), may indicate that Jesus—like other early Jewish parabolists—was structuring his

<sup>19</sup> See note 12.

<sup>20</sup> D (892txtpc b q sys.c.hmg).

<sup>21</sup> See C. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (trans. J.D. Ernest; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 177–178; and C.E. Carlston, *The Parables of the Triple Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 82.

<sup>22</sup> F. Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt: Tomus II* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1875), 415; J-P. Migne, ed., *Origines, Opera Omnes, Hexaplorum. Patrologia Graeca* (vol. 16ii; Paris, 1863), 1576.

parable upon a particular Old Testament text.<sup>23</sup> However, the modern translations of Luke 21:30 which have sought to create a linguistic parallel with Mark have largely overlooked these possible verbal allusions to Song of Songs 2:12–13.<sup>24</sup>

Use of the image of the fig tree to convey the destiny of Jerusalem is heard earlier in the warning of Luke 13:6–9.

Unless you repent you will all likewise perish ... A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit (καρπός) on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’

The parable in Luke 13:6–9 resembles Isaiah’s “Parable of the Vineyard” (Isa 5:1–6) and the ancient parable found in the Story of Ahikar.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Stern suggests that the midrashic contexts of rabbinical parables “may in fact be the original contexts;” *Parables in Midrash*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> On the whole, Luke preserves citations and allusions to the Old Testament which are more abbreviated (cf. Matt 4:4 and Luke 4:4) and subtle than his Synoptic counterparts. This elliptical style is rabbinical and is an indication of the primitive state of Luke’s sources. It also argues against his reliance upon Mark on these occasions. For example, Mark’s (12:31) full quotation of Leviticus 19:18b (= Matt 22:39) is a more developed form of the report than the Lukan account (Luke 10:27). By the way, Luke’s narrative on this occasion is more fitting with the Jewish cultural milieu. It presents Jesus’ response in the form of a question with the actual citation by the lawyer (Matt 22:35; and Luke 10:25) and not by Jesus. The key word which links Deuteronomy 6:6 and Leviticus 19:18 is deftly assumed in Luke’s second verbless citation “and your neighbor as yourself.” The two Old Testament verses cited represent two of the three occasions in which a command is begun with the verb **וְאָהַבְתָּ** = ἀγαπήσεις, and this explains why they are linked in the Gospel account. Moreover, it is rarely noted that this may be why the encounter between the lawyer and Jesus is concluded with the story of the Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). The third command “to love” occurs in Leviticus 19:34 concerning the foreigner (**גֵּר**) which would have included the Samaritan, **וְאָהַבְתָּ לוֹ כְּמִיךָ**: “you shall love him (i.e., the foreigner) as yourself.” The entire Lukan complex represents a sophisticated example of *gezerah shavah* which is obscured in the Markan and Matthean reports. On Hillel’s hermeneutical principal of *gezerah shavah* see *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* 37 Ver. A (S. Schechter, *Avot de-Rabbi Nathan: Solomon Schechter Edition* [New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1997], 110); H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 21.

<sup>25</sup> “O my boy! Thou art like the tree which was fruitless beside the water, and its master was fain to cut it down, and it said to him, ‘Remove me to another place, and if I do not bear fruit, cut me down.’ And its master said to it, ‘Thou being beside the water hast not borne fruit, how shalt thou bear fruit when thou are in another place.’” (Arab. *Ahikar* 8:30; Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford:

Both Isaiah and Luke 13:6–9 convey the message of imminent judgment. Jesus' parable was also intended to communicate a deadline for the season of repentance:<sup>26</sup> "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Taylor suggested that Jesus' parable of the fig tree in Luke 13 provided the genesis for Mark's secondary account of the "cursing of the fig tree."<sup>27</sup> According to Mark's gospel, the deadline had passed. Judgment had already come. "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" (Mark 11:14).

Mark's *de jure* presentation of Jerusalem judged and cursed fits his broad motif of severing Jesus' ties with Jerusalem.<sup>28</sup> Since Mark omits any reference to Jesus' laments over Jerusalem, can it be a coincidence that he also omits mention of hope for the future redemption of the holy city—"Lift your heads, for your liberation draws nigh" (Luke 21:28)? Mark, instead, leaves Jerusalem like the fig tree—destroyed and without hope.

On the other hand, Jesus' prophecy about Jerusalem in Luke follows the classic cyclical pattern of judgment, dispersion, and regathering-redemption (Luke 21:20–24, 28–31). Seminal elements of this religious concept are already heard in the words to Abraham (Gen 15:13–14,16).

Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions ... And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is *not yet filled*" (emphasis added).

The Genesis account lacks any mention of judgment. Nevertheless, judgment, dispersion and regathering appear repeatedly in the Biblical tradition (see Ps 106:40–47). In the post-Biblical period (cf. *Pss. Sol.* 11.1–9; and *Ass. Moses* 2–4), the theme is heard again in the promised future to the descendants of Tobit.<sup>29</sup> There the redemption and regathering of the people coincides with the rebuilding of the Temple.

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Oxford University Press, 1913), 775). Compare also the parable of the king and the unfruitful field in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* 16 Ver. A (Shechter, 65).

<sup>26</sup> Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972), 171.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Mark*, 459.

<sup>28</sup> Flusser, *Jesus*, 237–250.

<sup>29</sup> C.A. Moore, *Tobit* (AB 40a; New York: Doubleday, 1996), 291.

Our brethern will be scattered over the earth from the good land, and Jerusalem will be desolate. The house of God in it will be burned down and will be in ruins for a time. But God will again have mercy on them, and bring them back into their land ... After this they will return from the places of their captivity, and will rebuild Jerusalem in splendor. And the house of God will be rebuilt there with a glorious building for all generations for ever, just as the prophets said of it. (Tobit 14.4b-5)

Jesus, in a similar fashion, concludes the warning of judgment with a message of hope. “God will again have mercy on them.”<sup>30</sup>

Jesus’ asserts that the time of God’s redemption would be revealed when “the time of the Gentiles *is fulfilled* (πληρωθῶσιν)” (Luke 21:24; emphasis added).<sup>31</sup> The phrase specifying the culmination of this period reflects the language of Genesis 15:16, “until the sins of the Amorites *are filled* (LXX: ἀναπεπλήρωνται; emphasis added).” Plummer also noted the similar language in Luke 21:24 and the phrase in Tobit 14.5: ἕως πληρωθῶσιν καιροὶ τοῦ αἰῶνος.<sup>32</sup> The limited period of judgment at the hands of the nations is well attested in the Hebrew prophets (e.g. Zech 8:13). This notion continues in the post-Biblical period where we hear of the coincidence of national redemption with deliverance from “the hands of the Gentiles” (e.g. *Jub.* 23.30). At that time, Satan and evil will also be removed from the earth (cf. *Jub.* 23.29; *Ass. Moses* 10.1). According to the faith of the Qumran sectarians, in the present period Belial and his minions have dominion, but at the time of God’s visitation the righteous will prevail.

Now God through the mysteries of his understanding and through his glorious wisdom has appointed a period (ῥῥ) for the existence of wrongdoing; but at the season of visitation he will destroy it forever; and then the truth of the world will appear forever. (1QS 4.18)<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Rabbi Akiba encouraged his colleagues, Gamaliel, Joshua and Eleazar ben Azariah, when they visited the ruins of the Temple in the autumn of 95 C.E. As they approached the ruins, a fox ran out, and the three began to weep thinking they had witnessed the fulfillment of Lamentations 5:18, “The mountain of Zion which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it.” However, Akiba did not weep. “We should rather rejoice,” he said. “For the Scriptures foretell both the utter desolation of the Temple and its reconstruction. How can we hope for the fulfillment of the good promises, until the worst has come to pass.” See L. Finkelstein, *Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 37; cf. *b. Makkot* 24a-b.

<sup>31</sup> I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel According to Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 773.

<sup>32</sup> Plummer, *Luke*, 483.

<sup>33</sup> A.R.C. Leancy, *The Rule of Qumran and Its Meaning* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 156; J. Licht, *The Rule Scroll* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1996), 102 [Hebrew].

Lastly, the *Assumption of Moses* presents the end of the present era of wickedness and the domination of the Gentiles, but in language which closely resembles the words of Jesus. “For the Most High will arise, the Eternal God alone. And he will appear to punish the Gentiles ... *For the time allotted them will have run its course*” (*Ass. Moses* 10.7–8).<sup>34</sup>

After his prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent domination of the nations, Jesus encouraged his hearers, “lift your heads for your liberation (ἀπολύτρωσις) is at hand” (Luke 21:28).<sup>35</sup> The promise of hope parallels both the language and the sense of the phrase in Luke 2:38 where we hear of those in the Temple who were looking for “the redemption (λύτρωσιν) of Jerusalem.”<sup>36</sup> It is in the context of the promise for Jerusalem’s redemption that Jesus’ hearers are encouraged, “learn the lesson of the fig tree” (Matt 24:32; and Mark 13:28).

Why a fig tree? In the Old Testament the dry fig was a sign of judgment and desolation (Isa 34:4; Jer 8:13; Hos 2:12; Joel 1:7; Hab 3:17; and Hag 2:19), while the budding fig tree was a sign of God’s blessing

<sup>34</sup> Compare also Romans 11:25: ἄξει οὐ τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰσελεῖθαι.

<sup>35</sup> Confusion over the literary structure of the Synoptic Discourse has led most scholars to attach the redemptive message of Luke 21:28 with the coming of the Son of Man, rather than with the end of Gentile domination of Jerusalem. Fitzmyer notes curiously that the verse “stands in contrast to that of v. 21, about flight from Jerusalem.” *Luke X–XXIV*, 1350. However, as we have indicated, no tension need exist if Luke 21:28 is read as the continuation of the cycle of judgment and redemption which is evident in other contemporary literature.

<sup>36</sup> See also Luke 1:68. In the Synoptic Gospels, λύτρωσις and ἀπολύτρωσις refer to national and political redemption, while elsewhere in the New Testament the term ἀπολύτρωσις (Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; and Heb 9:15) signifies individual, spiritual redemption. See O. Procksch, “λύω” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. 4; ed. G. Kittel; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968), 335. For a discussion of similar developments in terminology designating divine redemption in Jewish thought of late antiquity see E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979) 649–692. The phrase, צִיּוֹן לְגַאֲלוֹתָ (“For the redemption of Zion”), appeared on Jewish shekels minted in the third year (69 C.E.) of the revolt against Rome. This inscription was a change from that of the previous years of the revolt in which coins were inscribed צִיּוֹן לְחֵרֶת (“For the freedom of Zion”). Meshorer has suggested that the change in wording was because of the changing fortunes in the conflict. By 69 C.E., the Jewish partisans only retained control of Masada and Jerusalem. “Hope no longer focused on the power of the people. Rather, a heavenly redemption was required;” Y. Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage: Herod the Great through Bar Cochba* (vol. 2; New York: Amphora, 1982), 122–123, and 262–263; idem, *Jewish Coins of the Second Temple Period* (Tel Aviv: Am Hasefer, 1967), 157; *Inscriptions Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1972), 211 [Hebrew]; and E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), 605–606.

(Joel 2:22; and Zech 3:10). According to the prophet Micah, the days will come when, “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (Mic 4:4). As we have demonstrated, however, a more profound linguistic connection exists between our saying and Song of Songs 2:11–13.

For now the winter is past (i.e. the summer is near), the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. *The fig tree puts forth its (early) figs* (תְּנִינָה פְּרִיָּה הַתְּאֵנָה) and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. (Emphasis added)

The image of the budding fig tree was employed in Jewish homilies, which derived hope for the future redemption of Israel from the imagery of the Song of Songs. According to *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the season indicated in the song signifies the time when God would redeem Israel.<sup>37</sup>

“*The time of pruning/singing* [צֵת הַזְּמִיר] *has come*”—the time for the redemption of Israel has come. The time has come for the pruning [זְמִיר] of the kingdom of wickedness (i.e. Rome) which will be ended. The time has come for the kingdom of heaven (מַלְכוּת שָׁמַיִם)<sup>38</sup> to be revealed, as it says, “■ And the Lord shall be king over all the earth (Zech 14:9). And the voice of the .non-matching quote turtle-dove is heard in our land: Who is this? This is the voice of the Messiah proclaiming. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings (Isa 52:7). “The fig tree puts

<sup>37</sup> The Aramaic Targum to Song of Songs 2:13 also attached redemptive imagery to its interpretation, but it understood the verse in light of the Exodus from Egypt. “The Congregation of Israel is comparable to the first-fruits of fig trees, which opened her mouth and sang the Song (Ex 15:1–18) at the Red Sea. Even children and infants praised the Lord of the Universe in their own language. And immediately the Lord of the Universe said, ‘Arise, Congregation of Israel, my beloved and my beauty. Arise and depart from here to the land that I established with your Fathers.’” See A. Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic. The Hagiographa: Transition from Translation to Midrash* (vol. 4a; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 131.

<sup>38</sup> Although the mention of “the kingdom of heaven” in our saying is doubtless a Lukan addition, it is interesting to note the appearance of the term also in the rabbinic midrash. The revelation of the kingdom of heaven at the time of redemption closely approximates Jesus’ use of “the kingdom of heaven” to designate “the Days of the Messiah.” See also the description of the advent of the Days of the Messiah in *Pesikta Rabbati* (35 end), “In that hour the Holy One, blessed be He will show His glory and His kingdom to all the inhabitants of the world.” According to Flusser, “In the understanding of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven became more dynamic than in rabbinic thinking. Since according to Jesus the kingdom was identical with the messianic period, it was no longer, as in rabbinic thought, an eternal suprahistorical entity. It became a dynamic force which broke through into the world at an identifiable point in history;” *Jesus*, 274–275.

forth her green figs.” R. Hiyya b. Abba said: “Shortly before the days of the Messiah a great epidemic will come upon the world and the wicked will vanish.” (*Song of Songs Rabbah* on Song 2:13)

While modern scholarship has engaged in renewed debate concerning the inherent ambiguity in the hapax—זמיר—in Song of Songs 2:12,<sup>39</sup> the Jewish midrashim in late antiquity read the term simply to mean “pruning, cutting.” They proceeded to consider what might be signified by the biblical verse: the reinstatement of circumcision, the end of the time of the Egyptians, or the end of Canaanites dominion in the land of Israel.<sup>40</sup> Each of these suggestions belongs to the story of Israel’s redemption from Egypt. *Song of Songs Rabbah*, however, also looked towards the future to suggest that עת הזמיר designates the season of future redemption. The kingdom of wickedness (i.e. Rome) will be “cut off,” and the kingdom of heaven will be revealed. The coincidence of the time of redemption and the cessation of Gentile domination echoes the words of Jesus, “Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles,<sup>41</sup> until (ἄχρι) the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24; emphasis added).

So, what are we to learn from the fig tree? Discussion in the midrash concerning the unripened figs brings us to the aim of the parable. According to *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the green fig signifies the dark days which preceded the redemption from Egypt. In Jewish tradition, future redemption will also be preceded by a period of turmoil and suffering (■ *Song of Songs Rabbah* on 2:13; and *b. Meg.* 17b. The *Syriac Apocalypse of*  
non-matching parenthesis

<sup>39</sup> Gordon has suggested that the ambiguity and placement of the term between the two colons in which harvesting and singing are mentioned was intentional and is an example of “asymmetric Janus parallelism.” In other words, זמיר is a transitional term which is to be read in reference to both contexts. See C. Gordon, “Asymmetric Janus Parallelism,” in *Eretz Israel* (vol. 16; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1982), 80\*–81\*; M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7c; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), 397.

<sup>40</sup> In both *Song of Songs Rabbah* and the Aramaic Targum, these verses are interpreted in light of the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:13–14. As we have already noted, the language of this promise is significant for understanding the words of Jesus in Luke 21:24. The complex conceptual interrelationship of the midrash-targum, dominical saying and the Biblical text suggests that behind our literature lies a common ancient Jewish interpretation of the promise to Abraham. See D. Flusser, “‘Today if You Will Listen to His Voice’: Creative Jewish Exegesis in Hebrew 3–4,” in *Creative Biblical Exegesis* (ed. B. Uffenheimer and H. Graf Reventlow; JSOT, Supplement Series 59; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 55–62.

<sup>41</sup> See *Psalms of Solomon* 2.19a: “For the Gentiles reviled Jerusalem, trampling it down.”

*Baruch* presents the appearance of the Anointed One following twelve eras of chaos.<sup>42</sup>

That time will be divided into twelve parts, and each part has been preserved for that which it was appointed. In the first part: the beginning of commotion. In the second part: the slaughtering of the great ... (fourth) the drawing of the sword ... (fifth) famine and the withholding of rain ... (sixth) earthquakes and terrors ... And it will happen after these things when the time of the appearance of the Anointed One has been fulfilled ... (2 *Baruch* 27.1–15; and 30.1)

Likewise, a sequence of “messianic woes” precedes the advent of the priestly Messiah in the *Testament of Levi* 17.6–18.3. Finally, in a similar rabbinical portrayal the green fig of Song of Songs 2:13 is interpreted to signify the period of affliction and apostasy that is expected to precede the Days of the Messiah.

In the generation when the son of David will come, scholars will be few in number, and as for the rest, their eyes will fail through sorrow and grief. Multitudes of trouble and evil decrees will be promulgated anew, each new evil coming with haste before the other has ended. (*b. Sanh.* 96b–97a)

It is worthwhile restating that the aim of our parable is to serve as the concluding unit in Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus warned his hearers that the promise of future redemption will not prevent the tumultuous days ahead. Yet, he does not leave his hearers without hope. The parable is intended to echo his earlier encouragement in Luke 21:28. However, Jesus’ creative use of the imagery from the biblical canticle is distinct. Whereas in rabbinical literature the future expectation of tribulation followed by redemption corresponds respectively to “the early fig and the vine” in Canticles 2:13, Jesus employs instead the early and latter stages of the fig.

a. But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation *has come near* (Luke 21:20; emphasis added).

a. When the fig tree puts forth its green fruit ...

<sup>42</sup> The notion of the division of time, and tribulation preceding redemption is frequent in apocalyptic literature. See *1 Enoch* 91:12–17; and 93:1–10; *4 Ezra* 14:11–12; *Sibylline Oracles* 4:47–48; Licht, “Time and Eschatology in Qumran,” *JJS* 15 (1965): 177–182; and M.E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra* (Heremania; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 421.

b. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is *near* (Luke 21:28; emphasis added)

b. You see for yourselves and know that the summer (fruit) is *already near* (emphasis added).

The green fig—which in ancient homilies signified the darkest days of Israel’s travail in Egypt—likewise in our parable signifies the dark days ahead. Nevertheless, all hope is not lost. Just as the bitter, green fig is followed by the arrival of summer with its sweet, ripened fruit, so Jesus encourages his hearers through the parable: In the darkest days of despair, “Lift your heads, because your redemption is near.”