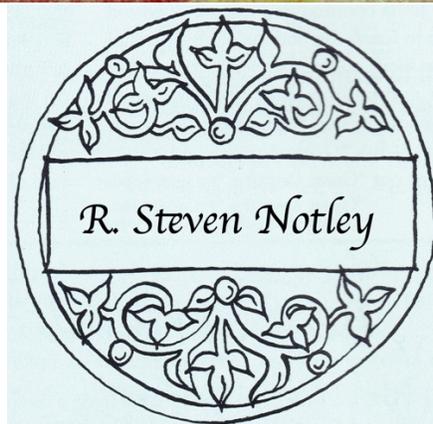


# The Season of Redemption

*In the face of a national disaster, hope remained. Summer and its ripe figs—signs of future redemption—would come.*



Once, while listening to some people praise the grandeur of the Temple, Jesus remarked, "The days are coming when there shall not be left here one stone upon another stone" (Luke 21:6). Those who heard his sober remark could not help but to ask, "When will this be, and what will be the sign when this is about to take place?" Jesus' answer to these questions is found in Luke 21:8-9, 20-24 and 28-31.

Often Christians have missed the thrust of Jesus' concluding parable about the fig tree (Luke 21:29-31), because it includes a sophisticated Hebrew wordplay and is intricately interwoven with first-century Jewish ideas. Here, I hope to shed light on both the ingenuity of Jesus' answer to the questions about the Temple's demise and the meaning of his message of hope.

Often Christians have missed the thrust of Jesus' concluding parable about the fig tree (Luke 21:29-31), because it includes a sophisticated Hebrew wordplay and is intricately interwoven with first-century Jewish ideas. Here, I hope to shed light on both the ingenuity of Jesus' answer to the questions about the Temple's demise and the meaning of his message of hope.

#### A Hebrew Wordplay

In verses 8-9 Jesus responded:

"See to it that you be not misled; for many will come in my name saying, '...The *time* is at hand!' Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified...the *end* does not follow immediately." The two words in italics above have been translated into English from the Greek words *καιρός* (*kairos*, "time") and *τέλος* (*telos*, "end"). Assuming that Jesus was speaking in Hebrew, I surmise that beneath both of these Greek words was the single Hebrew word *קֵץ* (*ketz*).

Hebrew readers of the Dead Sea Scrolls know that in Jesus' day *ketz* meant both "time" and "end." Moreover, this same word appears in Amos 8:1-2 as part of a Hebrew wordplay that God once made with the similar-sounding word *קַיִץ* (*kayitz*). *Kayitz* means both "summer" and "summer fruit." In a vision given to Amos, a basket filled with summer fruit stood before the prophet.

The LORD caused me to see, and behold, a basket of summer fruit (*kayitz*). He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end (*ketz*) has come upon my people Israel!"

Using two closely sounding Hebrew words, God communicated to Amos that calamity was about to strike the people of Israel. The *kayitz* ("summer fruit") signaled the approaching *ketz* ("end"). Incidentally, among the fruit piled in the basket, Amos surely saw plenty of figs. For people living in the eastern Mediterranean, figs stand out as the example par excellence of summer fruit. As I suggested above, Jesus also used the word *ketz* when he said, "the time is come" (vs. 8) and "the end does not follow immediately" (vs. 9). Later, in verse 30, Jesus concluded, "Already the summer is near." Do we hear from Jesus' lips the same Hebrew wordplay based upon *ketz* and *kayitz* that God used to communicate his warning to Amos?

Taking into account the broader context of Luke 21:8-9, 30, namely the imminent ruin of Jerusalem, I am of the opinion that Jesus assumed his hearers' familiarity with the wordplay of Amos 8:1-2. The wordplay stood in the background to Jesus' reply concerning the Temple's fate. Furthermore, the words, which originate from a single Hebrew root (*kwtz*: "end," "time"; "summer," "summer fruit"), and which run like a thread through Luke 21:5-32, strengthen the conclusion that verses 8-9, 20-24, and 28-30 should be read as one continuous, originally independent unit of material.

#### Luke's Editorial Activity

In verses 29-30 Luke wrote:

And he told them a parable: "Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth [leaves], you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near."

The prefatory remark, "And he told them a parable," indicates the evangelist's role as an editor. Jesus had offered some consoling words about redemption, and after them he simply added, "Behold the fig tree ...." Luke penned, "And he told them a parable" for the benefit of his readers.

Likewise, another vestige of Luke's editorial activity may be "and all the trees." Jesus would have been speaking specifically about trees yielding their fruit in the summer—for example, figs.

#### Leaves or Fruit?

This opinion becomes more plausible in the light of the fact that Luke's Greek verb προβάλωσιν (*probalōsin*, "they put forth") has no direct object. When translating Luke 21:29, English translators have sought help from Matthew 24:32 and Mark 13:28, where the word "leaves" does appear as a direct object. Accordingly, they have routinely supplied "leaves" as things that the trees put forth. Nevertheless, one should pause at this point and ask whether there are other, more fitting alternatives. In his brief parable

could Jesus have intended that the trees would put forth something other than leaves?

Centuries ago Christian scribes who lived in an agricultural age added to some Greek manuscripts a direct object for Luke's verb. Unlike modern translators, their choice was not "leaves," but "fruit." Consider also the prudent words of the first-century stoic philosopher Epictetus. According to his student Arrian, the philosopher once explained:

Nothing great is produced suddenly.... If you said to me now, "I want a fig," I would answer that it takes time. Let the tree's blossoms appear first, then let the tree put forth fruit, and finally let the fruit ripen."

(Epictetus 1.15.7)

Epictetus' προβάλη (*probalē*, "let put forth") is a form of the same verb that Luke used. Note especially that the philosopher made fruit the direct object of his verb.

Josephus, too, while explaining the agricultural laws linked to Leviticus 9:23, used a form of the same Lukan verb. In *The Jewish Antiquities* 4.226, he wrote: "When a man plants a piece of land, if the plants put forth fruit before the fourth year...." Once again we encounter fruit as the direct object of the Greek verb προβάλλειν.

Finally, in Song of Songs 2:13, the biblical poet declared: "The fig tree has put forth its green figs." To translate this verse, Aquila, a Jewish convert who produced a very literal Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in the second century A.D., chose the same verb that Luke used. On this occasion the fig tree and its fruit were specified in the verse, and Aquila linked them as subject and object with the Greek verb προβάλλειν.

Epictetus described more fully what the biblical poet had mentioned merely in part—the seasonal growth cycle of figs. In the early spring the green figs (in Hebrew, פגים, *pagim*) first appear. These small fig look-alikes are actually blossoms, which must be fertilized in order to develop later in the summer into ripe figs. Epictetus made reference to the seasonal growth, which starts at the first appearance of the blossoms and ends with the ripening of the fruit. This whole process spans about six months from early spring to late summer.

Reading Luke 21:29-30 against the linguistic backdrop of the Hebrew wordplay heard in Amos 8:1-2, the ancient assumption of "fruit" as the most

natural object of Luke's verb (προβάλλειν), and the imagery of Song of Songs 2:13, I suspect that Jesus said something like: "Behold the fig tree...as soon as it puts forth [its green figs], you see it and know for yourselves that [the time for] summer [fruit] has arrived."

### Interpreting Jesus' Fig Tree Saying

The writers of the Gospels struggling to recompose Jesus' remarks decades after the fact apparently puzzled over the sense of Jesus' saying. Each of the first three evangelists tried to assist his readers. Mark's assistance came in the form of a wordplay in Greek with θέρος (*theros*, "summer") and θύρα (*thura*, "door"), perhaps to direct the attention of his readers to James 5:9. If so, this wordplay in the Second Gospel would represent a classic example of a "[Markan pick-up](#)." R. L. Lindsey coined this term to describe Mark's habit of transposing vocabulary from other passages in the style of a Jewish interpreter. Matthew simply followed Mark's lead. Luke, on the other hand, introduced the idea of the Kingdom of God in an effort to clarify the meaning of "summer is now near." He did something similar in his introduction to the parable of the pounds (cf. Luke 19:11 and Matt. 25:14).

Indeed, Jesus' saying about the blossoming fig tree and summer drawing near presents a challenge for any interpreter, ancient or modern. Our challenge is to hear and understand Jesus' message within the historical and cultural context of his time. What seems to have been often overlooked, however, in trying to make sense of Jesus' words, is the substructure of Jewish ideas that undergirds the parable.

Salvation history is not exclusively linear, but cyclical, too. When Israel persisted in disobedience, God punished the people. Punishment motivated the people to repent, which in turn caused God's blessing to return to them. Inevitably, taking prosperity for granted, Israel would again turn away from God, and the whole cycle would repeat itself (cf. Gen. 15:13-16; Tobit 14:4-5). Therefore, the prophets could speak of pending calamity and scarcity in times of peace and plenty, or hope and restoration at the moment God's wrath weighed heaviest upon the people. Sometimes the process took decades or even centuries to make one complete cycle.

The rabbis continued thinking in this vein. In the Talmud one finds the anonymous saying, "War is also the beginning of redemption" (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 17<sup>b</sup>). In a homiletical commentary from the Byzantine period on Song of Songs 2:12-13, a passage that we already touched upon, the rabbis interpreted "The time of pruning has come" in reference to salient redemptive events in Israel's history. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba interpreted the next verse, "The fig tree puts forth its green figs," to mean that "shortly

before the days of the Messiah a great epidemic will come upon the world and the wicked will vanish.” In contrast to green figs, the next clause of Scripture, “the vines in blossom release their fragrance,” was understood to refer to the survivors and the period after the great epidemic—the period of future redemption.

### Conclusion

Jesus’ words echo ideas in harmony with these ancient homiletical comments found in Song of Songs Rabbah 2:13. Instead of contrasting the fig and vine, however, Jesus contrasted the inedible, bitter green figs of early spring with the tasty ripe figs of late summer. In 68 A.D., when hostile armies surrounded Jerusalem to sack the city, those who had heard and understood Jesus’ metaphor surely reflected on the message of the fig tree of early spring. In the face of a national disaster, hope remained. Summer and its ripe figs—signs of future redemption—would come. Anticipating that these terrible events would overtake Jerusalem, Jesus encouraged his followers not to lose heart, but to lift their heads. Such a catastrophe would certainly be followed by redemption. In other words, the time of bitter, green figs would yield to the season of the choice, sweet, summer fruit.