

Clearing up Confusion in Cursing

Mark 11:11-25 (NRSV)

- 11: Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.
- 12: On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry.
- 13: Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.
- 14: He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.
- 15: Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves;
- 16: and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.
- 17: He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."
- 18: And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.
- 19: And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.
- 20: In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots.
- 21: Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered."
- 22: Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God.
- 23: "Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you.
- 24: "So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.
- 25: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

Introduction

In Mark 11:11-25, Jesus' cursing of the fig tree symbolizes his actions in the temple; it further provides an opportunity to teach about the power of faith and prayer in a relationship with God. As we study these verses in more detail, background information on the Jewish Passover, temple worship, and fig trees will help us gain a deeper understanding of this passage. Mark 11 tells the story of Christ at the beginning of the Passover week, a main reason why that there was so much activity in the temple when Jesus was there. A basic knowledge of fig trees will also help us learn the significance behind Jesus' interactions with it.

Mark 11:11-25 can be broken down into four sections: verse 11 concludes Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem with Christ entering and leaving the temple, in verses 12 through 14 and 20 through 21, Jesus curses the fig tree, verses 15 through 19 describe his attack on those in the temple, and finally in verses 22 through 25 Jesus teaches the disciples about faith and prayer. At first glance, it seems like there is a lot going on. Although this scripture has four separate and distinct parts, each is related; we will explore that relationship throughout this paper.

Additionally, one may ask why verse 11 is included in this exegesis. Most commentaries consistently begin with verse 12. However, I believe verse 11 provides a critical transition into the rest of the story. While Mark 11:1-10 describe Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, verse 11 specifically mentions the temple; the temple, as we will find out, plays a vital role in the rest of the passage.

In verses 12 through 14 and 20 through 21, Jesus encounters a fig tree and curses it because it has no fruit. At first glance, this seems odd. Why would Jesus curse a helpless plant? What kind of point is he trying to make here? His action almost seems petty. The incident reminds me of a child who does not get what he or she wants, and as a result that child pouts, throws a temper tantrum, and gets angry. While Jesus does not throw a temper tantrum, he does curse the tree as if he's trying to take revenge on it for not giving him a fig when he was hungry.

Moreover, as one studies the passage further, the reader soon realizes that fig trees are not even in season. They would produce inedible fruit at that time of the year; this is information that most people in the time and location of Christ would know. The story becomes even more perplexing. Why did Jesus go to the fig tree if he already knew it was not going to have any figs? There must be some reason behind his action.

However, Christ driving people out of the temple in the next several verses may help us understand why Jesus condemned the fig tree. Because the verses about his actions in the temple occur between the verses about the fig tree, it is likely that Mark is using one story to explain the other. Jesus' curse on the fig tree is symbolic of his actions in the temple.

In the last section of this passage, Jesus teaches how faith can move mountains. Peter's comment in verse 21 provides Christ with an opportunity to teach the disciples what faith can do. He already demonstrated a miracle, something that seemed impossible; he cursed the fig tree and it withered up, never able to bear fruit again. Jesus takes this event and tells the disciples about the power of having faith in God.

As we look at historical, cultural, and societal factors in this exegesis, we can find a deeper understanding and meaning for Christ's actions. Looking at the words Mark uses, in addition to comparing them to similar passages found in the other gospels, will also help explain this scripture. Ultimately, this will help us gain a theological understanding of Mark 11:11-25 and even a way to apply these verses to our own lives.

Exegesis

In examining any scripture passage, understanding the author, the audience, and the date and location it was written in are critical aspects which may help the reader understand any confusing issues. Mark, because of its short and simple style, is believed to have been the first gospel written. In fact, the authors of Matthew and Luke most likely took parts of Mark in writing their accounts of Christ's life. Mark's author could be John Mark who is mentioned in Acts as a ministry partner with Paul, Barnabas, and Peter; however, even though he is speculated to be the author, it cannot be confirmed.¹ Additionally, this gospel was most likely written in the late 60s A.D., while Nero was persecuting Christians. As well, in 66 A.D., there was a Jewish revolt against Rome.² In regards to this specific passage, this may have been in the audience's minds as they read about Jesus creating disorder in the temple and calling it a "den of robbers." Finally, it is possible that Mark's gospel was written in Galilee or southern Syria because of his focus on rural and peasant life. As well, peasants were heavily taxed by the Roman Empire during this time period; many also disliked the Jewish religious authorities. They were viewed as collaborating with Roman authorities, looking for political power and financial gain.³

Understanding the Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, is also critical background information. This is one of the most important times of the year for the Hebrew people. When Jesus enters Jerusalem at the beginning of chapter 11, he is coming to celebrate the Passover. Mark 14:1 gives us a time frame: "It was two days before the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread" (NRSV). Between his entrance to Jerusalem in Mark 11 and the time reference in Mark 14, Jesus has multiple encounters with the Pharisees, makes several prophecies, and also teaches several lessons. It was a busy week for Jerusalem as well; it was Israel's Holy City and the location of the Jewish temple—God's sanctuary on Earth.

Passover has its roots in the exodus of the Hebrew people from enslavement in Egypt. This event, where God freed them through Moses, is one of the most defining moments for Israel. They left foreign land and the Lord was leading them to a place they could claim as their own. God tells Moses in Exodus 3:7-8,

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (NRSV).

While the Pharaoh was reluctant to let the Hebrew people go, one of the decisive events was when God passed over Egypt. Exodus 12:12-13 states,

For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses

¹ *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 799

² *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, 800.

³ *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, 800.

where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt (NRSV).

In verse 8, God commands them to eat bread without yeast. Finally, God tells his people that “You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance” (Ex. 12:17, NRSV). The Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread are not only the most central aspects of the very identity of Israel, but also God’s command. Deuteronomy 16:3 elaborates, saying it should last seven days. Furthermore, Leviticus 23:6-8 states that there should be daily sacrifices. With God’s presence at the temple in Jerusalem, there would have been many Jews coming here from all over the empire during this week.⁴ Furthermore, because there may have been so many people visiting Jerusalem, they may have been forced to stay outside the city walls due to a lack of lodging. These travelers would have most likely still tried to eat within the city walls.⁵

Moreover, the temple in Jesus’ day, specifically as it relates to this passage, had vendors selling animals and people exchanging money. Money changers were essential because Jews could not use Roman coins in the temple. These coins had the Emperor’s image on it, which violated the commandments.⁶ Exodus 20:4 reads, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (NRSV). The King James Version says, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image....” Finally, in getting even closer to the original Hebrew language, Young’s Literal Translation reads, “Thou dost not make to thyself a graven image....” Using these coins at the temple would have violated God’s commandment. They had to exchange their Roman coins for specially minted coins from Tyre.⁷

In Jesus’ day, animal sellers were also a necessary part of temple operations. Moses tells the Israelites not to bring animals long distances for sacrifice; instead they can buy animals for sacrifice in Jerusalem.⁸ In taking this information into consideration, one must ask why exactly was Christ angry if both money-changers and animal-vendors were needed to properly observe the law? A discussion of these verses in the following paragraphs will help answer that question. Finally, the temple separated people based on gender and race, putting women on a lower level and Gentiles in the outermost court for purity reasons.⁹

Lastly, having basic knowledge of a fig tree is critical in understanding this passage. Fig trees were one of the most important and well-known plants of first-century Palestine. It could grow in even rocky conditions and yield fruit for fifty years.¹⁰ Additionally, the fig tree is used in

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 165.

⁵ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 166.

⁶ Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. VIII: New Testament Articles, Mark, Matthew*, vol. 8, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 663.

⁷ Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 663.

⁸ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 165.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰ *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, 453

multiple passages to represent Israel. Hosea 9:10 reads, “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors” (NRSV). Other passages which associate Israel with the fig tree include Amos 8:1-2 and Nahum 3:12.¹¹ Fig trees are also often seen together with the vine, another symbol of Israel that usually represents peace.¹²

Additionally, fig trees were out of season when Jesus encountered this tree, most likely around March; edible figs would not be on the trees for about six more weeks.¹³ Even if there were figs on the tree, they would be an early crop and not be ripe until late May. The normal harvest for figs would come between mid-August and mid-October.¹⁴ The only other option for finding edible figs on the tree would possibly be leftover ones, known as “winter figs.” These would have remained from the previous fall and be ripe around spring.¹⁵

Unfortunately, as Mark states, Jesus did not find any figs on the tree; not even winter figs.¹⁶ Last of all, this fig tree had leaves on it; fig trees with leaves that early in the season would not produce any fruit at all for the entire year.¹⁷ Considering this background information regarding fig trees, the temple, and the Passover will help make this passage clearer.

Mark 11:12-14 and 20-21 tell the story of Jesus cursing a fig tree. It is considered a miracle story, more specifically a nature miracle and a curse miracle.¹⁸ Some even think that this episode did not happen because it seems as if it is out of line with the rest of Jesus’ character and ministry; it may have been a legend which formed in order to elaborate on the events that happened in the temple.¹⁹ Though as a nature miracle, it falls in line with stories of rabbis in Jewish literature that talked to plants and demanded food from them. When the plant did not produce, the rabbis cursed the plants and they withered.²⁰ However, it seems that in those stories, the teachers may have simply been angry at the plant for not providing food; Jesus, on the other hand, is trying to prove a different point. One must also note that this is the only miracle which occurs in the passion narrative.²¹ Furthermore, it is the only curse-miracle which is actually recorded in the gospels, another reason why some have argued that this incident could not have happened.²²

A similar account in Matthew helps us realize the emphasis Mark is making in this passage. In Matthew, Jesus’ curse on the fig tree and its fulfillment occurs in one day. The *Word Biblical Commentary* states that this places an emphasis on the miracle itself; it didn’t happen over two

¹¹ *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, 453

¹² Craig A. Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, vol. 34b, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 154.

¹³ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 165.

¹⁴ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 154.

¹⁵ Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 155.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁷ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 154.

¹⁸ Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

²¹ Keck, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 660.

²² Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 152.

days as it did in Mark, but occurred over one day.²³ So why did Mark decide to separate it with the story of Jesus in the temple? It is because the two were meant to interpret each other. It is possible, considering what the fig tree typically represents, that in this action Jesus is condemning the temple. While some may argue that Jesus condemns Israel through the cursing of the fig tree, the *Word Biblical Commentary* says that would be a mistake. The fig tree, although typically representative of Israel, is also used in other contexts in the Bible without an association with Israel. Jesus going into the temple helps clarify that it may be specifically be a condemnation against the religious leaders of Israel.²⁴ Additionally, throughout the gospels, Jesus does not have issues with the Israelites themselves; in fact, he is constantly showing love, respect, and compassion to those he meets. It is the religious leaders who have constant friction with Christ; both show constant animosity towards the other. Moreover, other events, such as Jesus telling the parable of the vineyard tenants in Mark 12:1-11 and his prophecy concerning the coming destruction of the temple in Mark 13:1-2, relate the cursing of the fig tree to the religious leaders.²⁵

Verses 20 through 21 show the culmination of the miracle. The next day as Christ and the disciples pass by the tree again, Peter exclaims how Christ's curse has been fulfilled. Not only was the tree dead, as if it were from natural causes, but it was "withered." Some even suggest it was withered from the root up, demonstrating just how extreme this curse was.²⁶ If one continues with the metaphor of the fig tree representing Israel, it only further shows how Christ's curse was focused on the religious leadership of Israel. The temple, where that religious leadership was focused, would be the "root" or foundation of Israel. The *Word Biblical Commentary* offers a good summary:

Instead of being simply a nature miracle that illustrates the power of God through faith, the fig tree story represent a curse miracle that is a symbolic or prophetic story pointing to the coming destruction of the temple, which is confirmed by the narrative that is intercalated between the two halves of the fig tree story.²⁷

The end of the temple is further confirmed at Jesus' death when the veil is torn. Even in verse 12, Mark may be including a metaphor by saying "for it was not the season for figs;" the *Word Biblical Commentary* states that "the season or time for the temple had been eclipsed with the fulfillment of time in Jesus' coming and proclamation of the kingdom of God."²⁸ Christ's actions here should be seen as an acting out of a parable. In other instances, he told a story; in this instance, he actually performed the story. Verse 14 includes, "and the disciples heard it," further demonstrating the parabolic nature of his actions.²⁹

Jesus' attack on the temple helps us understand his actions against the fig tree. Just as people thought that his condemnation against the fig tree did not happen because it was out of line with

²³ Ibid., 159.

²⁴ Ibid., 160.

²⁵ Ibid., 154.

²⁶ Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 160.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 161.

²⁹ Ibid., 159.

Jesus' character, there are some who would suggest that Jesus' outbursts in the temple did not actually take place either, questioning how it's possible that one man could cause this much destruction by himself. Instead, it may have developed from a saying of Christ where he criticized the temple. Still others say that Christ was at least present in the temple.³⁰

This story, which also occurs in John, is similar to that gospel's account: it has three main parts. First, Christ goes into the temple, protesting part of temple trade. Second, Christ quotes scripture. Third, Christ encounters the religious leadership in the temple.³¹

However, with what we already know about the temple, it seems that money-exchangers and animal-vendors were necessary and even allowed by the law. So the question arises as to why Jesus was protesting these aspects if they were legal. Or he may have been protesting against the religious leadership; it was under their authority that the temple was being run. Therefore, by challenging this part of temple trade, Christ may have been challenging their leadership. Another way of looking at these events may be that Christ was angry about the way that these activities were happening in the temple. While Christ may not have been against the sale of animals or money-exchange in and of itself, he may not have wanted it to go on in inside the temple.³²

Christ sees the temple's failings. He sees the segregation of men, women, and gentiles and calls it out, quoting 1 Kings 8:41-43 and Isaiah 56:7. The temple should be a place where all people can come and worship God. 1 Kings 8:41-42 reads,

Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house....
(NRSV).

Isaiah 56:7 states, "...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (NRSV). Christ was clearly outraged at this separation which was occurring in the temple. Furthermore, the symbolic action of Christ cursing the fig tree supports the condemnation of the religious leadership, foreshadowing of the destruction of the temple.³³ He cites Jeremiah 7:11 in calling the temple a den of robbers, which reads, "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD" (NRSV).

The *Word Biblical Commentary* sums up this passage: "Jesus did not wish to destroy the temple or the system of sacrifice; he wished to save it, to propel it to achieve its prophetic calling and destiny."³⁴ His actions against the temple and the fig tree were not meant to condemn Judaism, but were against the "political and religious policies of the nation's leaders."³⁵ Jesus himself

³⁰ Ibid., 165-166.

³¹ Ibid., 167.

³² Ibid., 182.

³³ Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 182.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

says that he has come to fulfill Judaism's law in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (NRSV).

After this episode at the temple, Jesus and his disciples leave the city at the end of the day. The next morning they pass by the fig tree again, now withered. Peter exclaims, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." Jesus, knowing that the miracle has taken place, uses this as an opportunity to teach about faith, prayer, and the possibilities that they have to offer. The disciples just saw the near-impossible – a fig tree cursed and destroyed in a day, and in less than a day in Matthew's account.

This teaching again is also found in Matthew 17:20, although it is separated from the account of the fig tree. Luke 17:6 mentions a mulberry tree instead of a mountain; mulberry trees have very deep roots and are extremely difficult to remove.³⁶ Additionally, sayings about mountain-moving are found twice in the Gospel of Thomas, although they are not associated with faith. Because of this, many believe that Jesus taught this at some point in his ministry, although it may not have actually been with this event.³⁷ So why does Mark include this teaching here? It may be the association of Jesus' attack on the temple mount.³⁸ However, more than likely, Jesus could be referring to any mountain because it seems that the main point of Jesus' teaching is the possibilities of faith in God. The commentary states, "Given the hyperbolic nature of the saying, it makes no difference which mountain is to be thrown into the sea."³⁹ This faith that Christ discusses shows the possibilities of what can happen when one has a relationship with God.

In verse 24, Jesus emphasizes prayer. By talking about this, he is also focusing on the necessity of a relationship between a human and God; prayer is an expression of that relationship.⁴⁰ In a way, he is saying that through our relationships with God, when we ask God of something, we can have faith and know that God hears us; anything is possible.⁴¹ Finally, in verse 25, Jesus teaches about the importance of forgiving others. This is actually the only time in Mark where Christ teaches about forgiving others. This also relates again to his teachings which are found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.⁴² Through verses 22 to 25, Christ's emphasis is on the relationship with God.

The OT background for mountain-moving or mountain-removing language, coming as it does in the context of God's promised day of salvation with personal and cosmic implications indicates that Jesus was speaking about God's promised redemptive activity in the world. One is not to trivialize this promise, as though God were merely in the earth-moving business of removing personal and physical mountains that stand in the

³⁶ Ibid., 185.

³⁷ Ibid., 187.

³⁸ Ibid., 188.

³⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁰ Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 191.

⁴¹ Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 666.

⁴² Evans, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, 193.

way of God's promised salvation. Furthermore, God moves these mountains through those who have yielded their lives in faith to God.⁴³

Conclusion and Application

After looking at each part of this passage in depth and learning about Passover, the temple, and fig trees, we have been able to answer several questions I raised earlier. Jesus is not simply angry at the fig tree for not giving him food when he was hungry, but used this curse-miracle to act out a parable. Furthermore, it symbolized his actions in the temple itself. Jesus was making a statement about Israel's religious leadership: they were not producing any fruit. As the commentary reminds us, it is important that we do not take Jesus' curse on the fig tree as against the nation of Israel. It was the religious leaders who were not doing God's work or following his law. When Jesus saw that men, women, and Gentiles were segregated, he reminds the religious authorities, along with the people at the temple that day, that God's house is for all peoples. Jesus most likely overturned the tables of money-exchangers and animal-vendors as an attack on those religious leaders who were in charge of the temple. Finally, as Christ and his disciples see the withered fig tree the next day, Jesus uses it as opportunity to explain the power of prayer and faith that a relationship with God can offer.

In ending this exegesis, I want to look at possible applications for this scripture for our lives today. While we as Christians may not have religious leadership focused in the temple, it is still important to ask ourselves if this passage, in any way, can influence our lives. The *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* gives several excellent ideas. Regarding the cursing of the fig tree and the temple, this commentary asks if our own churches have become distracted or corrupted by other concerns. We may even become distracted unknowingly. For example, Christian leaders may try to think of ways to get money in order to support buildings or programs. Gaining or worrying about may then become a bigger priority than spreading Christ's message. Additionally, we as Christians must remember that the temple is for all people. We must welcome everyone into a church and invite them to join in worship to God with us.⁴⁴ Lastly, we as Christians should take confidence in Jesus' teachings at the end of the passage. We should know that God hears our prayers and that he is capable of doing anything, even if it is doing something in our own lives which may seem as large as a huge mountain or as stubborn as a mulberry tree. Simply by praying and having faith in him, we should know that God hears us. Lastly, we must always remember to forgive others.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 195

⁴⁴ Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 664.

⁴⁵ Keck, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 666.

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