

**MISCELLANEOUS  
BIBLICAL STUDIES**

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

**A NEW INTERPRETATION  
OF JESUS' CURSING  
THE FIG TREE**

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## A NEW INTERPRETATION OF JESUS' CURSING THE FIG TREE

### Matthew 21:18–22\*

18 In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. 19 And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once. 20 When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” 21 Jesus answered them, “Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to **this boundary stone**, ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done. 22 Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.”

[vv. 23–28: Jesus’ debate  
with chief priests and elders]

\* The texts in **bold italics** are translations based upon what was most likely in the original Hebrew text of Matthew and the Hebrew source used by Mark.

### Mark 11:12–14, 18–22\*

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—**though it was indeed the season for figs**. 14 **He cursed** and said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it.

[vv. 15–19: Jesus’  
cleansing of the Temple]

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 boundary stone**, ‘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.”

The Passover in 30 A.D. came on Nisan 14–15th, which corresponds to April 6–7th. Thus, the first Palm Sunday can be dated to April 2, 30 A.D. and Jesus' cursing the fig tree can be dated to April 3, 30 A.D. But, according to Mark 11:13b, this day in early April “was not a time of figs” (ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς οὐκ ἦν σύκων'.) However, there are eyewitness accounts and now photographic evidence that early April was “indeed a time of figs.” For example, Eric F. F. Bishop (1955: 217) wrote,

On April 16, 1936, Good Friday, . . . we walked around the walls of the City. We came unexpectedly on a fig tree sheltered by an angle in the wall not far from the Church of St. Anne and opposite Olivet. It had figs quite large enough to warrant picking. They were unripe, and they were hot “*duffür*”. The owner kindly gave us a specimen which was photographed next day. The fruit had not been artificially stimulated, ripened for example with the application of olive oil. Hungry Palestinians will eat unripe fruit—grapes, as we know from Jeremiah [49:9], figs and almonds. This was a coincidence of time and place. Thereafter for ten years whenever we were in Jerusalem this special fig tree was visited on the Tuesday in Holy week—western or eastern. There was always foliage, and fruit, but not ripe.

Eric Bishop's photograph was not published, but seventy years later David Q. Hall (2006) published online two photograph albums, entitled *Israel Photos II* and *Israel Photos III*, which included photographs taken on April 12–13, 2005, of very fruitful fig trees on the Mount of Olives and in the Tisch Zoo in Jerusalem (see Addendum). David Hall commented,

During April 13, 2005, I was on the west slope of the Mount of Olives and photographed a fig tree with figs on a branch hanging over the road over a garden wall of someone's yard. This was ten days before the Passover of the 23rd and 24th of 2005. While it was not time for the fig harvest, it was

time for the tree to be growing the figs. These were starchy and used as food by the poor. As Jesus approached Jerusalem close to the time of the Passover celebration, he arrived in a town called Bethany. He continued towards Jerusalem and arrived at Bethphage. Bethphage meant “house of the unripe figs”. It was in this area where Jesus cursed a barren fig tree. The unripe figs were not considered proper as food to be served in a Sabbath meal (Babylonian Talmud - *Erubin*), but were considered to be acceptable as an offering to the poor. While one would not normally eat unripe figs, a grower might curse a tree not fruiting in season.

The discrepancy between Mark’s stating ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς οὐκ ἦν σύκων, “for it was not a time of figs,” when in fact “it was indeed the time of figs,” can easily be resolved once the Hebrew emphatic particle **ל** “indeed” comes into focus. In Chapter 14, “The Origin of Jesus’ Messianic Secret,” (pp. 226–232) I called attention to Mark’s misreading five times (1:44, 5:43, 7:37, 8:26, 8:30) the emphatic **ל** (= **ל**/*lu*) “indeed, verily” in his Hebrew source as the negative particle **ל** (= **ל**/*lo*) “no, not”—which contributed to the erroneous notion that Jesus wanted to keep his messianic role a secret. The οὐκ “not” in Mark 11:13b—rather than ὄντως “really” or ἀληθῶς “actually”—marks Mark’s sixth misreading of the emphatic **ל** in his Hebrew source.

But, in all fairness to Saint Mark, it needs to be noted that the emphatic **ל** “indeed, verily” in Hebrew was not recognized by scholars until 1894, when Paul Haupt stated,

A comprehensive study of the use of the **ל** *praefixum* in the Old Testament will no doubt reveal a considerable number of cases where the **ל** is not the preposition but the emphatic particle **ל** = Arabic *la* and Assyrian *lû* ‘verily.’<sup>1</sup>

Over the past century the study Paul Haupt envisioned was extended to include the particles לָא and לְמָה. Of the 3,323 occurrences of the לָא in the Hebrew Scriptures about 50 have now been identified by various scholars as being the emphatic לָא (= לָאִ / *lu*<sup>2</sup>), with twenty-seven occurrences being cited now in David Clines' *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. It also appears in Shem Tob's *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*; and, as I have argued in Chapter 14, לָא (לָאִ / *lu*<sup>2</sup>) "indeed" was, without a doubt, found in the Hebrew sources used by the Gospel writers.<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew phrase behind the Greek ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς οὐκ ἦν σύκων, "for it was not the time of figs" was probably כִּי לָא הִיְתָה עֵת תְּאֲנִים and read as כִּי לָא הִיְתָה עֵת תְּאֲנִים. But Mark should have read this as כִּי לָא הִיְתָה עֵת תְּאֲנִים "though indeed it was the time of figs."

The Hebrew כִּי "because" corresponds to the Greek ὅτι and γὰρ; but כִּי can also mean "though, although, even though," as in Exodus 13:17, כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא "even though it was near" (NAS)<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the כִּי in Mark's Hebrew source of 11:13b should have been translated as εἰ καὶ "although, even though" as in Mark 14:29,

ὁ δὲ Πέτρος ἔφη αὐτῷ· εἰ καὶ πάντες  
 σκανδαλισθήσονται, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐγώ  
 But Peter said unto him, Although all  
 shall be offended, yet *will* not I. (KJV)

Thus, "although indeed it was the time of figs," i.e., the פְּנִים "early *unripe* figs, it was not the time of the הַבְּכָרוֹת הַתְּאֲנִי "the first *ripe* figs," mentioned in Jer 24:2, which were regarded as a delicacy (BDB 114).

Jesus, being in the vicinity of Bethphage (Βηθφαγή / בֵּית פְּנֵה פְּנֵה “House-of-Unripe-Fig”), hoped to find there some of the פְּנֵה “early *unripe* figs.” Once it became obvious that the fig tree which caught his attention was leafy but fruitless, Jesus responded by cursing that particular tree—*swearing*

- according to Mark 11:14, Μηκέτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἕκ σοῦ μηδεὶς καρπὸν φάγοι, “No one no longer in the future may eat your fruit,” and
- according to Matthew 19:21b, Μηκέτι ἕκ σοῦ καρπὸς γένηται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, “No longer in the future may fruit come from you.”

According to Matthew the fig tree withered immediately (καὶ ἐξηράνθη παραχρῆμα ἢ συκῆ); but for Mark it withered overnight, for “in the morning they saw the fig tree withered to its roots” (πρωτὶ εἶδον τὴν συκῆν ἐξηραμμένην ἕκ ῥιζῶν).

At first glance the initial phrase in Mark 11:14 is a bit surprising. It reads, καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτῇ “and answering he [Jesus] said to it [the fig tree]”—as if the fig tree had said something to Jesus which required a reply. In Jotham’s parable told to the men of Shechem (Judges 9:8–15) there were many talking trees, including the fig tree (9:11),

וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם הַתְּאֵנָה הַחֲדָלָתִי אֶת־מִתְקִי  
וְאֶת־תְּנוּבָתִי הַטּוֹבָה וְהִלַּכְתִּי לְנוּעַ עַל־הָעֵצִים:

But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to sway over the trees?’

But Mark 11:14 is not a verse in a parable. Consequently, the participle ἀποκριθεὶς, “answering,” was ignored in the translations of the RSV, NRS, NAU, NIV, NIB, NJB, and NLT, where the καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτῇ was translated simply

as “and he said to it,” or “he addressed the fig tree.”

The surprising ἀποκριθεὶς though need not be translated as “answering,” It may well translate the *Niph<sup>c</sup>al* participle נִשְׁבַּע “swearing” in Mark’s Hebrew source. A similar phrase comes in I Sam 20:3, וַיִּשָּׁבַע עוֹד דָּוִד וַיֹּאמֶר, “then David took an oath again and said.” This phrase was translated into Greek as καὶ ἀπεκρίθη Δαυιδ τῷ Ἰωναθαν καὶ εἶπεν “and David swore to Jonathan, and said.” Thus, the participle ἀποκριθεὶς can mean either “answering” or “swearing.” Support for identifying this ἀποκριθεὶς of Mark 11:14 with שָׁבַע “to swear” comes from Mark 11:21 where Peter is reported to have said, Παββί, ἴδε ἡ συκῆ ἣν κατηράσω ἐξή ρανται, “Master, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered.”

Jesus’ cursing the fig tree calls to mind the parable in Luke 13:6–9 about a barren fig tree.

And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit 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.’”

Given Jesus’ compassion for the sick, lame, blind, and the hungry, one might well expect Jesus to have had comparable compassion on the fruitless fig tree near Bethany/Bethphage as had the vine dresser in this parable. But Jesus acted more like the “Sir” who commanded “Cut it down!” Ironically, though Jesus happily fed 5,000 with just five loaves and two fish, his own hunger led to some anger.

Jesus’ anger is not identified as such in this passage, but there are other texts where his anger is explicitly mentioned—as well as some texts where there is a misreading of homo-

graphs found in the Hebrew sources being used.<sup>4</sup> Earlier in Mark 3:5 there was this reference to Jesus' anger.

And he [Jesus] said to them [Pharisees], "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

Had Jesus found buds or figs on the tree he would have *happily* destroyed them by eating them; but since there were no buds or figs he *angrily* destroyed the fig tree itself. Whereas the vine dresser in the parable thought that his master's fig tree might become fertile next year, Jesus knew otherwise in the case of this real tree and pronounced his curse, precluding others from having a vain hope that next year this tree's fertility would be a reality.

The important point to note is that while Jesus' anger led him to terminate a tree, his anger never led him to terminate a human being, even when his religious colleagues were seeking to terminate him. This was an important point for Mark. Matthew (21: 12–14) placed Jesus' cleansing the Temple on Palm Sunday (when "the blind and the lame came to him and he healed them"). Luke (19:45–48) also placed the cleansing of the Temple on Palm Sunday. But Mark assigned Jesus' cleansing the Temple to the following day and placed the story right in the middle of the text of Jesus' cursing the fig tree (11:15–19). In this account Jesus was hungry and angry when he entered the Temple. His disciples were no doubt asking themselves, "What will the angry Jesus do once in the Temple? What will he curse? Will he 'terminate' anyone" to fulfill what Isaiah predicted, "he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (Isaiah 11:4)—as easily as he killed the fig tree? The four Gospel accounts (cited next) are in agreement that there was turbulence in the Temple but there were no terminations.

**Matt 21:12–13.** He drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you make it a den of robbers.”

**Mark 11:15–18.** He began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. And he taught, and said to them, “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.” And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him.

**Luke 19:45–47.** He began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.”

... The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him.

**John 2:13–17.** “In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”

The following comments of C. S. Mann (1986: 447) are noteworthy with reference to the above verses.

True, Jesus could have denounced publicly the authorities responsible for the commercial enterprises in the temple, but this would in all probability have only been heard by those around him, who were probably sympathetic to his convictions. What Jesus chose to do was to make clear his denunci-

ation by a brief attack on a small scale, momentarily disrupting business, and at the same time giving his reasons for his actions. The disruption would have been slight, but the point had been made, and judging by Mark 11:28 the reason Jesus gave is precisely that he was acting as a prophet. . . The traders themselves were there only because the true offenders—the temple clergy—allowed them to be there. . . But seen as a symbolic prophetic action, protesting the judgment of God against the use being made of the temple, the whole episode falls into place in the ministry of Jesus.

When Peter and the disciples questioned Jesus about his cursing the fig tree, Jesus responded with several statements about the power of faith and prayer, including,

- Matt 21:21a, “even if you say to this mountain (ὄρει), ‘Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,’ it will be done.”
- Mark 11:23a, “if you say to this mountain (ὄρει), ‘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.”

Similar statements appear in

- Matt 17:20, “If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain (ὄρει), ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.”
- Luke 17:6, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree (συκαμίνω), ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”<sup>5</sup>

Thanks to I Sam 20:3 (discussed on p. (272), the equation ἀποκρίθη = אָפַקְרִיתָ = “he swore” made it easy to translate the ἀποκριθεὶς in Mark 11:14 back into Hebrew as אָפַקְרִיתָ “swearing.” But translating back into Hebrew the ἀλλὰ κἀν τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ εἶπητε “even if you say to this mountain”

(Matt 21:21) or the ὅτι ὃς ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ “whoever says to this mountain” (Mark 11:23) is problematic because the ὄρει itself has these three possible meanings.

- As traditionally read ὄρει is the dative singular of ὄρος “mountain, hill,” appearing here proverbially as something that seems impossible (Arndt and Gingrich, 1957: 586). It usually translated the Hebrew הַר/הַרְרָה, “mountain, hill.”
- Ὄρει read as ὄρει could be a Semitic loanword equal to the Arabic هِرَاء (hirâ<sup>c</sup>) “a young shoot of a palm tree when first plucked from the mother-tree” (Lane 1893: 2889). Castell (1669: 881, under the stem הַר/הַרְרָה) also cited the Arabic هِرَاء (hara<sup>c</sup>) and هِرَاء (harâ<sup>c</sup>/hurâ<sup>c</sup>) all meaning “*surculus palmae*.” Because Matt 21:21 and Mark 11:21 report what happened the day after the first Palm Sunday there were plenty of discarded palm shoots and branches lying around which needed be picked up and tossed away.<sup>6</sup>
- Ὄρει could also reflect an equation or interchange of ὄρος “mountain” with ὄρος “boundary stone.” This option is suggested by Psa 78:54 (LXX 77:54), where the MT reads, וַיְבִיֵאֵם אֶל-גְּבוּל קְדֹשׁוֹ הַר-זֶה קְנָתָהּ יְמִינוֹ, “and he brought them to the border of his sanctuary, to this mountain, which his right hand had gotten.” The LXX has here καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτοὺς εἰς ὄρμον ἁγιάσματος αὐτοῦ ὄρος τοῦτο ὃ ἐκτήσατο ἡ δεξιὰ αὐτοῦ.<sup>7</sup>

And he brought them in to the mountain of his sanctuary, this mountain which his right hand had purchased.

(Lancelot Brenton, 1851, underline added)

and he brought them to the mount of His holiness— to this mountain which his right hand purchased.

(Charles Thomson, 1808, underline added)<sup>8</sup>

The Vulgate reads *et induxit eos in montem sanctificationis suae montem quem adquisivit dextera eius*, which became in the DRA, “And he brought them into the mountain of his sanctuary: the mountain which his right hand had purchased.” These translation were followed by the NRS which has “And he brought them to his holy hill, to the mountain that his right hand had won.” Other translations of the גְּבוּל / ὄριον include “border” (KJV, ASV, NKJ, NIV, NIB) and “land” (NAU, RSV, NAB, NJB, NLT) (underline added).

These varied translations (land, mountain, hill, border) point to a Hebrew *Vorlage* of Matt 21:21 and Mark 11:23 having the same גְּבוּל as found in Psalm 78:54.

- גְּבוּל can mean ὄρος “mountain,” as readily as גְּבוּל has been recognized as the cognate of the Arabic جبل (*jabal*) “mountain” (Lane, 1865: 376). This גְּבוּל was probably in Paul’s mind when he wrote in I Cor 13:2 of a “faith so as to remove mountains” (ὄρη μεθιστάνα).
- גְּבוּל and גְּבוּלָה “boundary, border” (BDB 147–148; Jastrow 204–205) equal ὄρος / ὄριον “border, boundary” (Liddell and Scott, 1966: 1252, 1255).
- גְּבוּל means “boundary stone, landmark” in Deut 19:14, לֹא תִסֵּיג גְּבוּל רֵעֶךָ, οὐ μετακινήσεις ὄρια τοῦ πλησίον σου, “You shall not remove your neighbor’s boundary stone,” and 27:17, אָרֹר מְסִיג גְּבוּל רֵעֵהוּ, ἐπικατάρατος ὁ μετατιθεὶς ὄρια τοῦ πλησίον, “cursed is he who moves his neighbor’s boundary stone.”
- גְּבֵל, as the cognate of the Arabic جبل (*jibill*) “dry tree” (Lane, 1865: 376) may also be the basis for the “tree” (συκαμίνω) in Luke 17:6, cited above.

In light of this data the following reconstructions are proposed for these three text. The passive Greek verbs have been translated back into Hebrew as *Niph<sup>c</sup>al* forms, which can be either passive or reflexive. I translate them as reflexive verbs.

Matt 17:20b

ἐρείτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ,  
 Μετάβα ἔνθεν ἐκεῖ, καὶ μεταβήσεται  
 תאמרו לגבול הזה<sup>10</sup>

העתק מזה ונעתק ממקומו

You will say to this *boundary stone*,

“Move yourself from here to there” then it will move.

Matt 21:21b

ἀλλὰ κἂν τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ εἴπητε,

Ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, . . .

אף תאמרו אל הגבול הזה

הנשא ונעתקת אל הים . . .

But even if you say to this *boundary stone*,

“Pick yourself up and cast yourself into the sea,” . . .

Mark 11:23

ὅς ἂν εἴπη τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ,

Ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν . . .

כל אשר יאמר אל הגבול הזה

הנשא ונעתקת אל הים . . .

all who will say to this *boundary stone*,

“Pick yourself up and cast yourself into the sea,” . . .

Once the imperatives become reflexives human physical strength is not required to lift and throw a boundary stone. But great faith is required so as to initiate nature's affirmative response to what was requested in the prayerful commands.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Richard Hiers (1968, 394), in the initial paragraph of his article entitled “Not the Season for Figs,” stated,<sup>11</sup>

Certainly one of Jesus’ most enigmatic, and to many readers, offensive actions was his cursing of a fig tree on the outskirts of Jerusalem (Mark 11:12–14). The tree happened to have no figs on it at the time. Why should Jesus have behaved so outrageously? The incident is all the more problematic because, as Mark points out, “It was not the season for figs.”

However, in this study the evidence has been presented that, contra the Greek text of Mark 11:14 but in accord with what must have been in Mark’s Hebrew source, “*it was indeed the season of figs.*” By reading the Hebrew לֹא as לוֹא (luʿ) “indeed” rather than לוֹ (loʿ) “not” the statement in Mark’s Hebrew source was dendrologically correct. In the areas around Bethany and Bethphage fig trees have unripe but edible fruit by the first of April.

Moreover, simply by changing an ὄ into an ὄ an unaccented ὄρος can be changed from a ὄρος “boundary stone” into an ὄρος “mountain” (Liddell and Scott, 1966: 1252, 1255). Consequently, a simple scribal error in Matt 17:20b, 21:21b, and Mark 11:23 could be responsible for the extreme hyperbole of “casting a ὄρος into the sea,” rather than the more modest hyperbole of “casting a ὄρος into the sea,” or compelling the ὄρος to relocate itself.

However, instead of being a scribal error in Greek which transformed a *boundary stone* into a *mountain*, the problem apparently—like the problem with לוֹא (luʿ) “indeed” and לוֹ (loʿ) “not”—goes back to the Hebrew source(s) used by the Gospel writers which contained the noun גְּבוּל, which can mean ὄριον/ὄριος “boundary/boundary stone” as well as

ὄρος “mountain.” It was not a matter of scribal misspellings but one of a translator’s (mis)interpretation of a Hebrew word having multiple meanings.

Francis Beare (1987: 419), noting that this is the only cursing miracle in the Gospels, expressed his opinion that “It will not be supposed that it is a report of an actual incident.” In agreement with numerous commentators of the past, Beare considered this story to be a sign of the coming destruction of Israel. John Noland (2005: 850–852) also noted such skepticism,

The original unity of the Markan materials has been widely doubted: the withering of the fig tree, the casting of the mountain into the sea, the promise of answered prayer, and the need to forgive may each have circulated separately. Not surprisingly the historicity of the withering of the fig tree has been questioned.

Citing the prophetic texts of Micah 7:1, Jer 8:13, Hosea 9:16, Noland shared the opinions of Beare and many others, stating “Though the fig tree is no cipher for Israel, what is imaged can hardly be anything else than the prospect of judgment on unfruitful Israel.”

However, once the interpretations offered above come into focus, the unity of Mark in 11:12–26 becomes transparent. The euphoria of the first Palm Sunday precluded Jesus’ paying any attention to his need for daily bread. But the next day, a mundane Monday, Jesus became aware of his hungry. Because “*it was indeed the season of figs*,” Jesus followed the socially acceptable practice of helping himself to a fig tree on someone else’s property. But the leafy fig tree he went to had no edible unripe figs. Disappointed and irritated Jesus rightly recognized that the leafy but fruitless tree was infertile, so he committed an “act of public service,” cursing the tree and causing it to wither. Never again would anyone seeking nourishment be

misled by the leaves of that tree. There was no need to wait for another season or two; uproot it now and plant anew.

Disappointed and irritated Jesus entered the Temple and became all the more agitated. Again he took matters into his own hands; but this time it was not an act of public service but acts of prophetic zeal. He cleansed the Temple from being a “den of robbers” back into its becoming “a house of prayer for all the nations.” With his mission accomplished—but for a season—Jesus and the disciples left Jerusalem.

Once the withered tree was in view, Peter exclaimed, “Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered!” (Mark 11:21), and the disciples then asked, “How did the fig tree wither away so soon?” (Matt 21:20). Jesus’ response to Peter’s exclamation and the disciple’s question had nothing to do with equating that fig tree with Israel and the tree’s becoming withered as a sign of the immanent destruction of Israel, as argued by many commentators. Quite to the contrary, Jesus teaching at that moment focused on the power of faith and prayer. That teaching included a hyperbole which contained the word ὄρος and has traditionally been read as,

Whoever says to this mountain,  
“Be taken up and cast into the sea,”  
and does not doubt in his heart,  
but believes that what he says will come to pass,  
it will be done for him.

But as argued above the original ὄρος is better read as ὄρος:

Whoever says to this *boundary stone*,  
“Pick yourself up and cast yourself into the sea,”  
and does not doubt in his heart,  
but believes that what he says will come to pass,  
it will be done for him.

## NOTES

1. "A New Hebrew Particle," *Johns Hopkins University Circulars* 13, No. 104 (1894) 107–108. See Chapter 14, above, pp. 220–221.

2. See above Chapter 14, "The Origin of Jesus' Messianic Secret," pp. 220–225.

3. See BDB 473 (2. c.).

4. In Mark 1:41 fifty-three manuscripts and codices have σπλαγχνις θεις, "having compassion" to describe Jesus' response to the leper's request, "If you will, you can make me clean." But Ephraem (fourth century), five manuscripts (Codex Bezae from the sixth century [= D], and the Old Latin manuscripts *a*, *d*, *ff* 2, and *r*1), have ὀργισθεὶς "becoming angry" as Jesus' initial response to the leper's request (Aland 1968: 123, noting that the Old Latin mss. *b* omits the ὀργισθεὶς). Bart Ehrman (2005: 133–135) argued unconvincingly that ὀργισθεὶς "becoming angry" was the original reading which was changed by scribes long ago to σπλαγχνις θεις, "having compassion." See above, Chapter 15, "Lost Lexemes Clarify Mark 1:41 and John 3:3," pp. 246–250.

Contrary to the Greek text, Jesus did not become angry when he went to raise Lazarus from death. The Greek text of John 11:33 and the literal translation of Ramsey Michaels (1989: 206) read: ἐνεβριμήσατο τῷ πνεύματι καὶ ἐτάραξεν ἑαυτὸν *He became angry in his spirit, and shook himself*. However, the Hebrew source behind this text apparently had 𐤀𐤅𐤆, stem I, "to be indignant, to be angry," and the widely attested 𐤁𐤏𐤏, stem I, "wind, breath, spirit" (BDB 276, 924; Jastrow 408, 1458). But there was also 𐤀𐤅𐤆, stem II, "to be

assertive” and  $\text{הָרַץ}$ , stem II, “to act quickly, promptly.” Unfortunately,  $\text{עָצַם}$ , stem II, and  $\text{הָרַץ}$ , stem II, became lost lexemes. But, thanks to Arabic cognates, they have been recovered and permit this reinterpretation of John 11:33 and 11:38.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, becoming assertive he immediately took full responsibility upon himself and asked, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see. . . . then Jesus, again asserting himself, came to the tomb.”

See above, Chapter 16, “Lost Lexemes Clarify John 11:33 and 11:38,” pp. 257–262.

5. In Greek there is no graphic similarity between  $\sigmaυκαμίνος$  “mulberry tree” and  $\delta\acute{\omicron}ρος$  “mountain” or  $\delta\acute{\omicron}ρος$  “boundary-stone (Liddell and Scott: 1966: 1255).

6. For a list of Semitic loanwords appearing in Greek texts, see T. F. R. G. Braun, “The Greek in the Near East,” pp. 25–26,” which is Chapter 36a in the *Cambridge Ancient History*, III, Part 3.

7. Rahlfs (1950, II: 85 ) noted “ $\omicron\rho\iota\omicron\nu$  Gra.]  $\omicron\rho\omicron\varsigma$  mss.”

8. Thomson, Charles. 1808. *The Septuagint Bible: The Oldest Text of the Old Testament*. Edited, revised and enlarged by C. A. Muses. Second Edition 1960. Indian Hills, Colorado: The Falcon’s Wing Press. Brenton, Sir L. C. F. 1900. *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament: with an English Translation, and with Various Readings and Critical Notes*. London: Bagster.

9. For ὄρος “boundary stone” see Liddell and Scott, 1966: 1256, 2c.

10. . The Shem Tob *Hebrew Gospel Matthew* reads here: **אם תאמינו תאמרו להר הזה סורו ויסור** (see G. Howard, 1995, 86).

11. Richard Hiers “Not the Season for Figs,” *JBL* 87, 1968: 394–400.

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#### ADDENDUM

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Mount of Olives fig tree April 13, 2005



Mount of Olives Fig Tree April 13, 2005



Jerusalem Tisch Zoo Fig Tree April 12, 2005



Sycomore Fig Tree in Jericho April, 2005