

FIG STORIES PROVE FRUITFUL ANECDOTES

You've heard the expression, "It ain't worth a fig"? It comes from the Bible, folks. One of those little gems almost attributable to Jesus. Not exactly a quote from the famous rabbi, but based on one of his lesser known stories.

It's his anecdote about an unproductive fig tree. You can find it in the Christian scriptures at Luke 13:6-9. If you don't care to look it up for yourself, here's the Reader's Digest condensed version:

For three years Farmer Brown tried to find some figs on his tree. But each year, nothing. "Chop it up for kindling," he orders.

"Let's give it another 12 months," suggests his gardener. "I'll dig it and dung it. If it produces next season, fine. If not, I'll cut it down." The End.

The warning is obvious: If you don't do something worthwhile with your life, the ax will fall. Shape up or ship out. The sharpness of the moral is blunted slightly by a stay of execution: You have an extra year to get your act together.

So far, so good. What we have in Luke's gospel seems to be an innocuous moralism against complacency.

But there's more going on here than meets the eye. The clue is the fact that neither the gospels of Matthew or Mark tell this same story. But they both contain a similar story about another fruitless fig tree.

In their case it wasn't an anecdote Jesus told about a fig tree, but an incident in his career where he cursed one! Check it out either at Matthew 21:18-22 or at Mark 11:12-14, 20-21. The details don't mesh completely, but the incident is the same.

One morning while he and his men are commuting to Jerusalem from the suburbs, Jesus gets hungry. A few blocks down the road he spies a fig tree. But a closer inspection proves disappointing: not a piece of fruit in sight.

So he curses the tree! "May you never grow a fig again!" he swears. "May no one ever eat from you."

With that, the tree shrivels up, either right there on the spot (according to Matthew) or overnight (according to Mark). Either way, Jesus puts a hex on the fig tree and it dries up—branches and trunk, roots and all.

How do you figure that? Most Bible readers don't know what to do with this trick.

Jesus is usually pictured as kind, loving and patient. So his whammy on a helpless fig tree seems out of character, especially since it was not even the season for ripe figs.

Some scholars guess that's precisely why Luke left this incident out of his gospel and substituted the less troublesome story mentioned at the top of this page. In any event, the fig tree stories give a person cause to pause.

One way to handle the cursed fig tree incident is to change the question from "Why would Jesus do that?" to "Why would the writer tell it?"

In both Matthew and Mark the incident takes place during the last week of Jesus' life, between his "Palm Sunday" parade into Jerusalem and his "Good Friday" execution.

Both of these gospels' authors wanted their readers to catch the crucial importance of Jesus' last days. Those who miss out on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, they suggest, will miss out on the single most important event in history.

So to underscore the fate of those who refuse to accept their interpretation of Jesus' significance, Matthew and Mark related the incident of the damned fig tree. That, they imply, is what happens to people who aren't ready for Jesus' grand finale.

Luke's parable makes roughly the same point

Obviously all three authors were pushing religious propaganda. They used their fig tree stories to get their readers to understand the importance of Jesus. (The fourth gospel, John, doesn't have any comparable fig tree anecdote.)

But you don't have to be a committed believer to appreciate the authors' panache. Matthew and Mark were gutsy enough to tell an uncharacteristic story about how Jesus damned a tree. Luke had the temerity to drop it altogether and substitute a less offensive anecdote.

In each case, the tree wasn't worth a fig. But the stories make fruitful reading.