Parable as Pollinator: Cultural Memory, Religious Ecology, and the Politics of Waiting in Luke 13:6-9

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Abstract

This study examines the parable of the barren fig tree (Lk. 13:6-9) as a pollinator of religious ecology and cultural memory, challenging conventional readings focused solely on divine judgment or mercy. Reinterpreting the gardener's plea for one more year—a politics of waiting—the parable subverts eschatological immediacy with agricultural patience, where waste (dung, untilled soil) becomes sacramental medium. The fig tree, rooted in Israel's prophetic memory (Hosea 9:10, Joel 1:7), embodies collective trauma and hope, resisting colonial Roman arboriculture that demanded constant productivity. Within religious ecology, waiting is not passive but generative: manure enriches microbial life; time allows root repair. This "wasteful waiting" disrupts neoliberal spiritualities of instant yield, recentering marginalized bodies and lands as bearers of hidden fecundity. The parable thus functions as cross-pollinator between human and more-than-human communities, grafting memories of survival onto practices of sustainable patience. In an age of climate collapse and political urgency, Luke's gardener proposes a politics of deferral without despair—where justice grows through the slow, dirty work of accompaniment.

Keywords: Luke 13:6-9, ecotheology, nurture, productivity, landowner, pollination.

Introduction

In the agrarian tapestry of the Synoptic tradition, few texts have proven as deceptively fertile as the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9). At first glance, its narrative economy—a landowner's demand for judgment, a vinedresser's plea for patience, and a single year of reprieve—seems to offer a straightforward moral calculus of repentance and deferred punishment. Yet this very simplicity has generated a complex harvest of interpretations, from allegories of covenantal judgment to existential meditations on divine forbearance.[1] What remains underexplored, however, is the parable's function not simply as a vehicle of theological meaning but as a pollinator: a dynamic agent that cross-fertilizes cultural memory, religious ecology, and the politics of waiting. This study proposes that the fig tree in Luke's gospel does not merely illustrate a point about eschatological readiness; rather, it actively cultivates an alternative temporal and material economy, one in which waiting becomes a mode of creative resistance rather than passive endurance.

To read the parable as a pollinator is to foreground its generative, cross-contaminating movements. First, it draws deeply on cultural memory—the reservoir of arboreal symbols from Israel's prophetic traditions, where the fig tree signified both national prosperity and divine judgment.[2] In the re-narrating this memory, Luke's Jesus invites his audience into a recomposed relationship with their own failed histories, refusing to let the tree's barrenness serve as a final verdict. Second, this memory inflects what might be referred to as the parable's religious ecology: the mutual shaping of human spiritual practice and the more-than-human world. The vinedresser's labor—digging, fertilizing, waiting—is not a metaphor for grace but an actual ecological praxis that rebukes any disembodied eschatology.[3] The soil, the manure, the seasons: these material actors participate in the drama of salvation, upending any purely forensic reading of repentance. Finally, this ecological and memorial web grounds a distinctive politics of waiting. Against imperial and apocalyptic temporalities that demand immediate fruitfulness or accelerate toward final harvest, the parable's "one more year" enacts a counter-political patience. Waiting is not deferral but an active, gritty tending of possibility where others see only waste.[4]

1 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. Eerdmans, 2008), 290–310.

2 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 220.

3 Tom Thatcher, ed. *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond: The Oral and the Written Gospels* (Baylor University Press, 2008), 29–44; Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Fortress Press, 1983), 210.

4 Lisa Gasson-Gardner, "Listening for the Power of the People: A Political Theology of Affect," in *Political Theology on Edge:*

Method for the Study

Employing socio-rhetorical interpretation illuminates how the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk. 13:6-9) operates as a "pollinator" by analyzing its social and cultural textures. Regarding social texture, the parable exhibits a conversionist ethic, which is one of the sub-textures of the social texture. Drawing on the works of Peter Berger and Vernon K. Robbins, the conversionist sects reject the world's present structure while offering a transcendent alternative that transforms individual participants.[5] The vinedresser does not accept the landowner's judgment—that the barren tree merely "wastes the soil"—but proposes an intervention of digging and fertilizing that reorients the social world from extraction to cultivation. This conversionist waiting refuses both despair and acceleration, instead forming a counter-community defined by merciful patience rather than productive outcomes.

Concerning cultural texture, the parable operates as counter-cultural to both Jewish and Roman traditions. Against a dominant Jewish prophetic framework where barren fig trees signaled covenantal judgment (Hosea 9:10; Joel 1:7), Luke's Jesus delays that judgment, challenging any assumption that divine justice acts immediately.[6] Against Roman imperial temporality—which valorized *celeritas* (swiftness) and immediate fruitfulness as legitimating power—the parable's "one more year" enacts a slow, humble politics of accompaniment.[7] In this double counter-cultural move, the parable does not simply repeat cultural memory but re-functions it. The fig tree remains a symbol of Israel's failed fidelity, yet the vinedresser's labor transforms that memory from an indictment into an ecological and political resource. Thus, the parable pollinates its hearers not with certitude but with a patient, dirt-covered hope that resists both Jewish apocalyptic urgency and Roman triumphalism.

Ruptures of Justice and Belief in the Anthropocene, eds. Clayton Crockett and Catherine Keller (Fordham University Press, 2021), 165-182.

5 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967), 166–168; Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretations* (Trinity Press International, 1996), 73.

6 Bovon Francois, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer (Fortress Press, 2013), 371–372.

7 Matthew S. Moore, *Waiting for the Rest: Time, Hospitality, and the Political Theology of Delay* (Fordham University Press, 2019), 95–98.

The Conversionist Pollination of the Barren Fig Tree

Conversionist sects proclaim a transcendent alternative—a new order accessible through radical individual transformation, typically understood as a change of heart, repentance, or rebirth.[8] The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk. 13:6-9) operates precisely with this conversionist social texture, but with a crucial modification: the transformation it envisions is not merely individual or spiritual but is pollinated across three registers—cultural memory, religious ecology, and the politics of waiting. In this reading, the parable does not simply describe conversion; it functions as a pollinator, carrying generative particles from Israel's prophetic past, the non-human created order, and a counter-imperial temporality into the present heart of the listener. The result is a conversionist vision in which rejecting the world's fruitless structures, and receiving a transcendent alternative, are inseparable from remembering differently, tending the soil, and waiting with active patience.

The opening scenario of the parable presents a damning indictment of the world as currently structured. A landowner visits a fig tree planted in his vineyard—a deliberate intermingling of symbols from Israel's prophetic memory, where the fig tree stood for national blessing and the vineyard for the house of Israel.[9] Yet for three years, the tree has yielded nothing. The landowner's verdict is swift and brutal: "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" (Luke 13:7). This judgment mirrors the dominant social logic of the age—imperial, Herodian, and even certain strands of apocalyptic Judaism—which measured worth by visible productivity and consigned the barren to destruction.[10] The world's structure, the parable implies, operates as a tribunal of immediate fruitfulness, leaving no room for latency, failure, or renewal. To hear the parable is to feel the weight of that condemnation, not only upon the fig tree but upon any community or individual caught in the grip of a system that demands yield without remainder.

The parable invites the listener to reject that world's verdict as final. The landowner's command represents the logic of the present age—accelerated judgment, scarcity, and disposal. But the parable does not end with that voice. In this sense, Luke 13:6-9 aligns with conversionist sects that reject the world's present structure not by fleeing it but by refusing

8 Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 168; Roy Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology* Columbia University Press, 1977), 10–12.

9 Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 296–298.

10 Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 45–49; John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Eerdmans, 2016), 112–115.

to accept its authority over human and non-human flourishing. Into this economy of condemnation steps the vinedresser (or gardener)—a figure who embodies an alternative order. His response—"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it" (Luke 13:8)—introduces a logic that is transcendent not because it is otherworldly but because it originates from a different set of values: patience, care, intervention, and the belief that barrenness is not a permanent state but a condition amenable to cultivation.[11]

This transcendent alternative rejects the world's zero-sum temporality. Where the landowner sees wasted soil, the vinedresser sees latent possibility. Where the world demands immediate execution, the vinedresser's alternative offers a one-year reprieve—not as indulgence but as active, material grace. The transcendent nature of this alternative lies in its source: it is grounded in the character of the coming kingdom proclaimed by Luke's Jesus, a realm where the last are first, the lost are found, and the barren are given another season. For conversionist texture, this transcendent alternative is not a distant heaven but an accessible reality that breaks into the present through transformed individuals and communities. It becomes explicit when it is asked: who is transformed, and how? The surface answer is the fig tree—but trees do not experience conversion. Rather, the parable is structured to catch the listener in its narrative net. Jesus tells the parable as a response to a report about Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with sacrifices (Luke 13:1). That disturbing news prompts Jesus to reframe tragedy not as divine punishment but as a call to repentance: "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:5).

Thus, the individual participant—the listener, the Lukan audience the contemporary reader—is the true fig tree. The parable's conversionist demand is that each person recognizes their own barrenness within the world's condemned structure and accept the vinedresser's offer of an alternative season. Transformation occurs not through moral effort alone but through receptivity to the vinedresser's labor: the digging, the fertilizing, the waiting. This is conversion as cultivation, not courtroom declaration. The distinctive claim is that Luke 13:6-9 is pollinated—carried and cross-fertilized—across three interwoven domains. The metaphor of the pollinator is apt because conversion in this parable is not a solitary bolt of illumination but a distributed, relational, and material process. Like a bee moving between flowers, the parable travels between cultural

11 Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2000), 98–102.

memory, religious ecology, and political temporality, depositing and gathering transformative potential at each stop:

First, the parable draws on Israel's deep memory of fig trees as symbols of covenant blessing and divine judgment. To hear the fig tree as Israel (or as the Jerusalem community) is to remember a history of fruitlessness and divine forbearance.[12] The conversionist move is not to erase that memory but to repollinate it—to reinterpret the past not as a record of irreversible failure but as a field of recurring grace. The vinedresser's "one more year" echoes the prophetic rhythm of judgment deferred, mercy extended. By activating this memory, the parable converts the listener's relationship to their own tradition: from guilt-laden repetition to hope-filled re-cultivation. Second, the vinedresser's actions—digging, applying manure (or fertilizer), waiting—are not metaphors for grace but the very stuff of grace in a more-than-human world. Religious ecology examines how spiritual transformation is entangled with soil, seasons, decay, and nourishment. The conversionist alternative is transcendent precisely because it is not merely spiritual: it requires material intervention. Manure—waste, death, refuse—becomes the agency of new life. The individual transformed by this parable is converted to an ecological self, one who sees their own barrenness as receptive to the slow, pungent work of compost. This challenges conversionist traditions that might reduce transformation to inner states; it implies conversion is dirty, grounded, and interdependent with non-human actors. Third, the most distinctive conversionist claim of this parable concerns temporality. The world's structure operates on a politics of urgency: three strikes, then the axe. The transcendent alternative offers a politics of waiting—not passive deferral but active, attentive presence to latent possibility.[13] Waiting becomes a form of resistance against imperial and apocalyptic timelines that demand immediate fruit or final destruction. For the individual participant, conversion means entering this alternative temporality: accepting that transformation may take another season, that the vinedresser's labor continues beyond visible results, and that the final judgment (if not, you can cut it down) is perpetually deferred by the very act of care. This waiting is not quietism; it is the patient, persistent work of digging and fertilizing—practices that themselves constitute the new world they anticipate.

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, read through a conversionist social texture, rejects the world's logic of immediate productivity and capital punishment. It offers a transcendent alternative grounded in the

12 Michael Carasik, "Why Did Hannah Ask for 'Seed of Men'?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 433–436.
13 John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*. The New Testament library (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 251–262.

vinedresser's patient, material grace. And it summons individual participants to transformation—not as an inward turn only, but as a reception of the parable's pollinating work across cultural memory, religious ecology, and the politics of waiting. To be converted by this parable is to become, like the fig tree, a site of cross-fertilized possibility: remembered anew, tended with manure, and granted time to bear fruit that the world's accelerated judgment could never foresee. In this pollination, the conversionist finds not an escape from the world but a deeper, more patient inhabitation of it—waiting, digging, and trusting the season to come.

Counter-Cultural Texture: Resisting Prophetic Judgment and Imperial Speed

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Lk. 13:6-9) draws on Israel's arboreal imagery, it does so not as faithful repetition but as strategic subversion. The parable's cultural texture cuts against two hegemonic grammars: the prophetic logic of covenantal judgment within Second Temple Judaism, and the Roman ideology of *celeritas* (swiftness) that legitimated imperial power through immediate, visible fruitfulness. In refusing both, the vinedresser's plea for "one more year" articulates a counter-cultural politics of patient accompaniment that unsettles any easy mapping onto either Jewish apocalyptic or Roman triumphalism.

The Hebrew prophetic tradition repeatedly deploys the fig tree as a cipher for national failure. In Hosea 9:10, YHWH recalls discovering Israel "like the first fig on the fig tree in its first season" only to watch them turn to Baal-peor—a memory of pristine potential corrupted.[14] In addition, Joel 1:7 announces divine judgment: "It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down, leaving their branches white."[15] In this prophetic ecology, barrenness or destruction of the fig tree is never neutral; it is the legible signature of covenantal curse, warranting abandonment. Luke's parable inherits this vocabulary but inverts its grammar. The landowner voices the expected prophetic script: a fig tree planted for three years without fruit is wasting the soil, and judgment (cutting it down) is the logical, even pious, response. Yet the vinedresser does not dispute the fact of barrenness; he disputes the temporality of judgment. His intervention—digging, manuring,

14 Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 167–168.

15 James L. Crenshaw, *Joel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible 24C (Yale University Press, 1995), 94–98.

waiting—reframes the fig tree not as a juridical defendant but as an agronomic patient. Where prophetic tradition accelerates toward verdict, the parable embeds judgment within the slow, uncertain rhythms of soil biology and composting. The counter-cultural move is this: failure is met not with excision but with intensified material care. Against a cultural memory shaped by Hosea and Joel, where barrenness legitimates wrath, Luke's Jesus proposes that fidelity to the covenant may require delaying the very judgment the covenant seems to demand.

If Jewish prophetic temporality threatens premature verdicts, Roman imperial temporality celebrates premature victories. The ideology of *celeritas*—swiftness—pervaded Julio-Claudian self-representation. Augustus boasted of acting *celerius quam cogitari potuit* (more swiftly than could be thought); Suetonius records that "nothing was more characteristic of Caesar than speed."[16] In military campaigns, architectural projects, and legal judgments, Roman power legitimated itself through visible, immediate efficacy. Fruitfulness that took time was weakness; delay was dysfunction. A fig tree that fails to fruit after three years would, in this calculus, be not a candidate for mercy but evidence of misrule. The parable's "one more year" directly counters *celeritas* with a different temporal virtue: *patientia*—but not the passive endurance of the conquered. Rather, the vinedresser's waiting is active, humble, and unglamorous. He does not command the tree to bear fruit; he digs around it, adds manure, and waits. There is no Roman triumph here, no swift decapitation of the unfruitful, no spectacle of immediate restoration. Instead, the parable valorizes a low-status, olfactory politics of accompaniment—literally getting one's hands dirty in the slow work of rehabilitation. Against an empire that demanded instant productivity as the sign of legitimacy, this parable insists that legitimate power waits and tends without guarantee of success.

What makes this counter-cultural texture remarkable is its simultaneity. The same gesture—refusing to cut down the fig tree—resists both Jewish prophetic rigorism and Roman imperial acceleration. Neither tradition, in its dominant forms, made room for a vinedresser who pleads for time not as evasion but as ecological and pedagogical necessity.[17] The parable thus occupies a liminal cultural space: too patient for prophetic judgment, too slow for imperial speed, too material for purely spiritualized repentance. It offers not a third way between Judaism and Rome but a vulnerable way beneath both—the way of manure, mud, and the stubborn hope that what appears to be a waste of soil might yet become

16 (Res Gestae Divi Augusti 1.1; Suetonius, Divus Iulius 57.3).

17 Luise Schottroff and Linda M. Maloney, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Fortress Press, 2005), 166–168.

a sacrament of patience. In the larger argument of Parable as Pollinator, this counter-cultural texture fertilizes the politics of waiting. Against every demand for immediate fruitfulness—whether from prophetic accusation or imperial audit—the fig tree stands as a living rebuke, cultivated by hands that refuse to hurry toward judgment.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree is not a lesson in patience; it is a practice of pollination. Across this study, I have traced how Luke 13:6-9 cross-fertilizes cultural memory, religious ecology, and the politics of waiting into a single, stubborn act of accompaniment. Against prophetic traditions that read barrenness as verdict, the parable re-members Israel's arboreal symbols not as death sentences but as sites of intensified care. Against Roman *celeritas*—the imperial cult of speed and immediate fruitfulness—the vinedresser's "one more year" enacts a counter-political temporality that refuses to equate delay with failure. And against any disembodied soteriology, the manure, the soil, and the seasons insist that salvation smells like compost. The fig tree remains ambiguous. It may yet bear fruit; it may not. The parable offers no guarantee, only a year—and with that year, the scandalous proposal that waiting, when practiced as humble, dirty, relational tending, is itself a form of fruitfulness. To read this parable as a pollinator is to become, like the vinedresser, a keeper of precarious time in an age of urgent judgments leading to ecological crises. The kingdom, it seems, grows not in spite of the waste places but within them—one handful of manure at a time.

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