

CURSING THE FIG TREE IN MARK

by

Andrew Simmonds 10/8/15

ABSTRACT: Mark's narrative of the cursing of the fig tree has baffled commentators. It has been called the "least attractive of all narratives about Jesus," a "difficult passage," "puzzling." Yet, scholars generally agree: "the fig tree stands for the Temple, Israel or the religious authorities." However, this ignores the indisputable fact that different nations had different arboreal symbols, and the fig tree represented Rome, not Israel or anything Jewish. The palm represented Israel and all things Jewish, the olive Athens, etc. Roman national symbols were never used to represent anything Jewish. Moreover, Mark's gospel is thought to have been written in Rome at the time of Nero's persecutions, and at that time it was widely related that Nero killed the sacred fig tree of Rome. Nero had the Christians of Rome executed in mimic theatrical performances. And, Mark's fig tree story draws on the genre of Roman mime and the obscene myth of Dionysos and the fig. Mark calls the actor in the story "he" rather than "Jesus." "He" mimes Nero killing the Roman fig, which, in turn, mimes the myth of Dionysos and the fig, which, in turn, mimes the ribald story of Alexander's triumphant conquest of India.

KEY WORDS: fig, tree, mime, curse, Nero, Mark, Dionysos/Dionysus

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This article is about Mark 11:12–14, 20, the cursing and killing the fig tree. Mark’s narrative runs as follows: “And on the next day, they having gone out from Bethany, he hungered. And having seen a fig tree from afar having leaves, he went if perhaps anything he will find on it. And having come to it, nothing he found but leaves. It was not, indeed, the season for figs. And having answered, he said to it, ‘No more for the age, of you not one fruit to eat’ . . . And passing by in the morning (of the following day), they saw the fig tree dried up from (its) roots.” (Observe that the evangelist studiously avoids naming Jesus in this unseemly pericope but repeatedly refers to the actor as “he.”)

The fig tree narrative only appears in the Mark and Matthew 21:18–21. However, Matthew tones it down considerably by having the tree by the side of the road, not in the distance; Jesus does not make the error of thinking that leaves signal fruit; and the tree withers immediately, not delayed until the next day. Luke has a different fig tree narrative.¹ And, John, the most Roman-oriented of the gospels, avoided figs entirely.

Mark’s fig tree narrative runs contrary to the indicated genre in which the animal, plant, or inanimate object always wins, which is the whole point where someone, a human or god, is so stupid as to fight with an animal, plant, or inanimate object, they will be shown to be even more dim-witted that the object they attack. The tree is the underdog worthy of protection. Examples of this genre include Dionysos and the frogs in Aristophanes, Balaam and his ass, Don Quixote tilting at windmills, Brer Rabbit and the tar baby, Charlie Chaplin and the

¹ Brent Kinman, “Lucan Eschatology and the Missing Fig Tree,” *JBL* 113:4 (1994): 669–78.

Murphy bed, and Lucy and Ethel and the chocolate factory conveyor belt.

Ordinarily, this genre is lighthearted.

In Callimachus, ax men threaten Ceres' trees, and the goddess defends and saves them.² It was an immensely serious offense to kill a sacred tree.³ William Telford cites a particular Talmudic story as "perhaps a closer parallel" to Mark's pericope than any other.⁴ Putting aside that it is late, clearly a parody, and very possibly a parody on Mark, in it, a son calls forth figs out of season and is punished by his own (instead of the tree's) death. That is the way the narrative is supposed to work; the tree should win. In Mark 7:25, Jesus argues with a Syro-Phoenician woman, whom he disparages as a "dog," but she wins besting Jesus in clever rhetoric telling him, "Even dogs are entitled to scraps from their master's table." Thus, Jesus is bested by a "dog," in rhetoric, that is.

Thus, we should point out just how vicious and ugly Mark's fig tree narrative is in its disparagement the tree's killer. He "hungers," not that he is simply hungry; he craves. He thinks exclusively of his bodily desires.⁵ His eyesight is fallible; he cannot see whether the tree has fruit or not. Ignorantly thinking that leaves signal fruit, the furthest from omnipotent, he is unbelievably stupid, not realizing the obvious, which Mark explicitly tells, that it is not fig season. Traveling to the tree in the distance, he undertakes a fool's errand. And,

² Callimachus, *Hymn* 6.31.

³ Lysias *Orat.* 7; Sophocles, *Oed. Col.* 707.

⁴ William R. Telford, *The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redactional-critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig Tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and Its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition* (JSNTSup 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 188 citing *Ta'an.* 24a1.

⁵ Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 99 ("odd that Jesus is depicted as hungry").

worst of all, he is stunningly violent and punishing. The fig tree pericope is the only place in Mark or Matthew where a miracle is performed in order to punish.⁶ Peeved at not finding any fruit to eat, irrationally vindictive, mindlessly destructive, and callously indifferent to the entirely blameless tree, not at fault for not bearing fruit out of season, he curses it for his own gross misjudgment with the most disproportionate maximal curse of the tree, its seed and root, in other words, not just the tree but in anthropomorphic terms its ancestry and progeny as well (Mark 11:14, 20–21).⁷ And, while it is very easy to destroy a tree, yet it is compared to lifting up a mountain and casting it into the sea (Mark 11:23).

To explain (away) what is supposed to be Jesus' conduct, commentators have come up with an array of creative but fruitless explanations. For example, the now largely discarded so-called “winter fig” theory,⁸ or that it was the tree's fault, the “braggart tree” theory.⁹ Or, “Jesus expected to find fruit . . . because he was expecting the messianic age to begin; for in the messianic age figs . . . would always be in season.”¹⁰ We are told, “in the world of the Haggadah talking to trees is nothing unusual”—only “foreign” to our “mentality.”¹¹ Many

⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28* (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 2005), 21

⁷ Kinman, “Missing,” 671, 676.

⁸ Telford, *Tree*, 3; cf. Christfried Bottrich, “*Jesus und der Feigenbaum* Mk 11:12–14, 20–25,” *NT* 39:4 (1997) 338–39. Figs signal summer (Mark 13:28–31). Marcus Aurelius employed an ancient expression, “only a madman will look for figs in winter.” Marcus Aurelius, *Mediations* 11.33; William R. Telford, “More Fruit on the Withered Tree: Temple and Fig-Tree from a Greco-Roman Perspective,” in *Templum Amicitiae: Essays on the Second Temple Presented to Ernst Bammel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 275 n. 34.

⁹ Telford, *Tree*, 5.

¹⁰ Richard H. Hiers, “Not the Season for Figs,” *JBL* 87:4 (1968): 395.

¹¹ Telford, *Tree*, 187.

commentators have read the pericope in theological, symbolic, abstract, allegorical terms, as a simile or metaphor.¹² Thus, Jesus hungers for faith in him, the leaves correspond to the acclamations of the crowd, the missing fruit corresponds to the missing acceptance of him, “not the season for figs” refers to the tension created by his entry into Jerusalem, and so forth.

Yet these explanations have not overcome the severe misgivings. Mark’s story of the cursing of the fig tree has been called the “least attractive of all narratives about Jesus,”¹³ a “difficult passage,”¹⁴ “puzzling,”¹⁵ presenting “moral difficulties,” for Jesus acts “unreasonably.”¹⁶ “So odd, so unmoral, so unlike conventional ideas of what Jesus ought to have done,”¹⁷ the story “reflects upon Jesus’ intelligence.”¹⁸

Yet, although the pericope is poorly understood, nevertheless, all commentators agree that the fig tree is a symbol of some sort, and “it is generally agreed that the fig tree stands for the Temple, Israel or the religious authorities.”¹⁹

¹² Collins, *Mark*, 523–26; Yong-Eui Yang, “Reading Mark 11:12–25 from a Korean Perspective,” in *Reading the Gospels Today* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing), 78–97; Bottrich, “*Feigenbaum*,” 328–59.

¹³ Hiers, “Season,” 394.

¹⁴ Telford, *Tree*, 264–304; .

¹⁵ Telford, *Tree*, 187.

¹⁶ Telford, *Tree*, 2. See also comments on Matthean version in Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 21 & n. 10–11 (“unworthy,” “contradicts spirit”).

¹⁷ Telford, *Tree*, 7.

¹⁸ Hiers, “Season,” 394.

¹⁹ Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark’s Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2, 142.

The problem with this interpretation is that, while ancient nations certainly had arboreal symbols, the arboreal symbol of Jews and Israel (or Judea) was the palm,²⁰ Athens the olive,²¹ and Rome the fig.²²

THE FIG TREE REPRESENTED ROME, NOT ISRAEL

The scholarly consensus that the fig tree represents Israel, the Temple, or something Jewish is and has to be wrong because the fig tree was the symbol of Rome, not Israel. And, the fig tree was a massively important Roman symbol. In the foundation legend of Rome, the sacred Roman fig, the *Ficus Ruminalis*, housed in its roots the she-wolf's den where Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus, were suckled. So strong was the bond between Rome and the fig that Cato, whose constant refrain was that Carthage must be destroyed, by displaying a single fig in the Roman senate (that he claimed was from Carthage), finally

²⁰ Zofja Ameisenowa (trans. W. F. Mainland), "The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2:4 (1939): 326–45; David S. Wiesen, "The 'Great Priestess of the Tree': Juvenal VI, 544–45," *CJ* 76:1 (1980): 14–20 (in the first century, Jews throughout the Empire used the palm to symbolize Israel, Judaism, and things Jewish: in synagogue decorations, ossuaries, sarcophagi, lamps, coins, etc.); Laura B. Voelkel, "Coin Types and Roman Politics," *CJ* 43:7 (1948): 403; Paul Romanoff, "Jewish Symbols on Ancient Jewish Coins," *JQR*, New Series 33:4 (1943): 436; Jacob Neusner, *A Life of Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakkai, Ca. 1–89 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 8 (famed palms "emblem of the land"); *Meg.* 14a4 & n. 47 ("The palm uniquely symbolizes the bond between Israel and the almighty"); Baruch Kanael, "Ancient Jewish Coins and their Historical Importance," *BA* 26:2 (1963): 56 (As a result of the First Jewish-Roman War, over decades, the Mediterranean world was flooded with *Judea Capta* (and other) coins that represented Israel by the palm).

²¹ Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.27.2, 37.2; Herodotus, *Hist.* 8.53–55; Gloria Ferrari, "The Ancient Temple on the Acropolis at Athens," *AJA* 106:1 (2002): 11–35.

²² Jane DeRose Evans, "The Sacred Figs in Rome," *Latomus* 50:4 (1991): 798–808; Laura B. Voelkel, "Coin Types and Roman Politics," *CJ* 43:7 (1948): 403; G. D. Hadzsits, "The *Vera Historia* of the Palantine *Ficus Ruminalis*," *CP* 31:4 (1936): 305 & n. 2, 309; T. P. Wiseman, "The God of the Lupercal," *JRS* 85 (1995): 8.

precipitated Carthage's destruction.²³ So important was the fig to Rome's identity that according to Pliny, "The city that rivaled Rome for sovereignty of the world for 120 years owed its fall to a single fig." I could go on and on, but it is unnecessary. It is entirely clear, not needing further elaboration, that the fig was the arboreal symbol of Rome—and Rome alone and certainly not Israel.

THE ROMAN *FICUS RUMINALIS* AND NERO

Due to the misrule of Nero,²⁴ Rome's sacred fig tree, "inextricably bound up with the fortunes of the city, and indeed of the state itself," withered from the root up,²⁵ which was "seen as a portent of disaster" for Rome.²⁶ Although Tacitus says that it was regarded as a portent, "until it renewed its verdure with fresh shoots," that is hindsight from long afterwards. There was a long tradition, found in the Sibylline Oracles and in Revelation, for example, that Nero destroyed, or would return to destroy, Rome.²⁷

Traditionally, Mark has been thought to have been written in Rome at the time of Nero's persecution of the Christians of Rome, and at exactly that time when Mark was written the withering of the great fig tree of Rome was an extremely important topic. Obviously, for the persecuted Christians of Rome at the time Mark was written, Mark's story of the fig would have resonated and

²³ Pliny, *NH* 15.20; Telford, "Fruit," 296 & nn. 160–61.

²⁴ From June 68 to December 69, Rome had five emperors, and in a particularly ominous calamity, the most revered temple in Rome, of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, was destroyed. Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.54; Incigneri, *Romans*, 157–62.

²⁵ Telford, "Fruit," 298–300; Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.58; Harold Y. McCulloch, "Literary Augury at the End of 'Annals' XIII," *Phoenix* 34:3 (1980): 240.

²⁶ Pliny *NH* 15.40, 78; Telford, "Fruit," 300.

²⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 384–452; John Joseph Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Ancient Egyptian Judaism* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974), 78–87.

brought to mind the destruction of the sacred Roman fig tree by Nero as reflecting the immanent destruction of Rome.

Trees and tree portents and omens played an enormously prominent, indeed religious role in Roman culture far beyond any similar role in Jewish culture.²⁸ In Roman (Etruscan-based) religion, fruit bearing and non-fruit bearing trees were *arbor felix* and *arbor infelix*.²⁹ Trees that bore no fruit were considered ill-omened, sinister, inauspicious, and cursed as *damnatae religionis* with punitive and funereal associations.

Trees withering from the root were a particularly ominous Roman portent.³⁰ The laurel represented the Julio-Claudians,³¹ the cypress the Flavians.³² In the last year of Nero, the last Julio-Claudian emperor, purportedly a whole grove of god-given laurels withered, root and branch.³³ Similarly, shortly before the death of the last Flavian, Domitian, the Flavian cypress withered.³⁴

NATIONAL SYMBOLS ARE UNIQUE IDENTIFIERS

²⁸ Pauline Ripat, "Roman Omens, Roman Audiences, and Roman History," *GR* 53:2 (2006): 155–74; Selby Vernon McCasland, "Portents in Josephus and in the Gospels," *JBL* 51:4 (1932): 323–35. Compare the Jewish *Tu B'Shevat*. Writing to Romans, Paul uses tree symbolism: "if the root is holy, so too the branches; if some branches brake off, a wild shoot (Gentile Christianity) is grafted on to share in the root" as a "sprig from the root of Jesse" (Romans 11:16–17; 15:12).

²⁹ Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.20.3; Pliny, *NH* 16 (108); Anne Weis, "The Motif of the Adligatus and the Tree: A Study in the Sources of Pre-Roman Iconography," *AJA* 86:1 (1982): 21–38.

³⁰ Telford, "Fruit," 297.

³¹ Marleen B. Flory, "Octavian and the Omen of the 'Gallina Alba,'" *CJ* 84:4 (1989): 348; Idem, "The Symbolism of Laurel in Cameo Portraits of Livia," *MAAR* 40 (1995): 43–68.

³² Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.78; M. Gwyn Morgan, "Vespasian and the Omens in Tacitus *Hist.* 2.78," *Phoenix* 50:1 (1996): 41–55 & n. 11; McCulloch, "Augury."

³³ McCulloch, "Augury," 241; Flory, "'Gallina,'" 347; Telford, "Fruit," 295.

³⁴ McCulloch, "Augury," 241.

It should come as no surprise to the reader that national symbols, do not function malleably like metaphors, similes, allegories, or parables. Symbols are a visual shorthand that animate, anchor, and embody the subject. Specific, concrete, and appropriate, they are not to explore possibilities but instantly convey an unambiguous, unmistakable meaning that requires no cogitation, explanation, or elaboration.³⁵ National symbols were, are, and always have been unique identifiers.

Thus, to give examples with which the reader will be more familiar than arboreal symbols, the dove was a Jewish symbol,³⁶ the eagle Roman.³⁷ The lamb was a Jewish symbol, the sow Roman. Ask yourself, can Jesus be symbolized by the eagle or sow, or should Jesus be symbolized by the dove or lamb?

Particularly given the hostilities between Rome and Israel, Roman national symbols were never used to represent Israel. While Jews adopted many other

³⁵ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), viii–ix, xiii; Allison Sharrock, “The Theatrical Life of Things: Physical Items in Plautus’ *Curculio*,” *Dictynna* 5 (2008): 171–89; Mary C. English, “Reconstructing Aristophanic Performance: Stage Properties in ‘Acharnians.’” *CW* 100:3 (2007): 199–227, especially 201–02, 226.

³⁶ Psalm 68:14; *Berachos* 3a4 n. 30; 53b3 & nn. 28–29; *Shabbos* 130a4 & nn. 45–47; Mark 1:10; Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:22; John 1:32.

³⁷ Warren Carter, “Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as ‘Lights Out’ Time for Imperial Rome (Matthew 24:27–31),” *JBL* 122:3 (2003): 467–87, especially 474–76; Josephus, *Bell.* 1.648–55; Idem., *Ant.* 17.149–67; Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1990), 15–18.

types of pagan symbols, foreign national symbols were strictly avoided.³⁸ Thus, for example, olives and figs were “conspicuously absent” from Jewish coinage.³⁹

Moreover, as a result of the First Jewish-Roman War, over decades, the Mediterranean world was flooded with *Judea Capta* (and other) coins that represented Israel by the palm.⁴⁰ In sum, in Mark’s day, everyone in the Mediterranean world knew that the palm represented Israel and did not represent Rome and that the fig represented Rome and did not represent Israel or anything Jewish. And, hence, anyone reading Mark’s fig tree story could see that its subject, represented by the fig tree, was Rome.

WHY HAS MARK’S STORY BEEN MISINTERPRETED?

Since the fig represented Rome, and the Roman fig was killed by Nero exactly at the time of Nero’s horrendous persecution of the Christians of Rome and at the time when Mark was written, why have commentators all found that Mark’s fig tree represents Israel. The reason commentators have misinterpreted Mark’s fig tree story is because its meaning is stunningly obscene, and seems to involve Jesus in a stunningly obscene story, and for that reason they have conceived its meaning to be impossibly inappropriate.

The seminal work on Mark’s fig tree is William Telford’s Cambridge dissertation (later published in 1980) under Ernst Bammel, a conservative German

³⁸ Erwin R. Goodenough, “The Crown of Victory in Judaism,” *Art Bulletin* 28:3 (1946): 139–59.

³⁹ Paul Romanoff, “Jewish Symbols on Ancient Jewish Coins,” *JQR*, New Series 33:1 (1942): 4 & nn. 16–17; Telford, “Fruit,” 277 & n. 38.

⁴⁰ Baruch Kanael, “Ancient Jewish Coins and their Historical Importance,” *BA* 26:2 (1963): 56.

scholar and Germanophile.⁴¹ It makes no mention whatever of Mark's fig tree possibly representing Rome, its sexual connotations, and its destruction by Nero—which omissions I attribute to Bammel's influence. However, in 1991, in a festschrift for Bammel, Telford published an article that pointed out the research of German classicists that the fig tree represents Rome, the person who killed it was Nero, and its obscene sexual meaning in Greco-Roman culture.⁴² In his article, Telford states, "The seeking and plucking of figs had a covert sexual connotation, and the fig-tree offering its fruit to all" was offering sex. "The fig-tree with leaves but no fruit is the old prostitute whose sexual fires have been spent."⁴³

Telford, however, refused to countenance this obscene reading of Mark's story because, in his view, that would mean that Jesus solicited an old prostitute, was disappointed, and killed her. In Telford's estimation because Jesus initiates the interaction with the tree, that would mean that Jesus was at fault. However, Telford recognized that the obscene connotations of the fig tree in Greco-Roman culture were so clear that the only way to avoid seeing them in Mark's story was to assume that in Jewish culture of the time the fig somehow had a different meaning than it had in Greco-Roman culture. But, this is untenable, because the fig tree had the same obscene meaning in Jewish culture that it had in the rest of the Mediterranean world.

⁴¹ Telford, *Tree*.

⁴² Telford, "Fruit."

⁴³ Telford, "Fruit," 281 & n. 71–72; Lucian, *Dial. Meretr.*

Furthermore, Telford's argument is impossibly inconsistent. Telford believed that Mark was thoroughly anti-Jewish⁴⁴ and written for a Gentile audience.⁴⁵ If Mark was written for a Gentile audience as Telford believes, then Mark's fig tree story certainly had the obscene meaning that Telford concedes it had in Greco-Roman culture.

That Telford omitted the obscene reading of the story in his dissertation was probably not his fault. He probably had to do it to satisfy Bammel. And, it is to Telford's credit that he did later publish the information in his follow-up article. Nevertheless, not including the information in his book had lasting consequences because Telford's article is as rarely cited as his book is universally cited.⁴⁶ And, the field of biblical scholarship does not want to know about the true obscene meaning of the pericope because they think it would reflect on Jesus, not appreciating that the story is written in mime and reflects on Nero.

Here is what actually appears to have happened. Nero had the Christians of Rome executed in mimic skits based upon Greek mythology. And, Mark's author returns the favor. Paying Nero in his own coin, using Roman mime, Mark depicts Nero cursing and destroying Rome symbolized by the fig tree. Mark's fig

⁴⁴ W. R. Telford, *Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 19 (Mark "has a strong anti-Jewish bias"), 23, 124, 139 ("repudiating legalistic Judaism"), 135 ("With the coming of Jesus, there has been, for Mark, a judgment on Israel"), 137 (the withering of the fig prefigures "the destruction of a sterile Temple cultus;" "If any New Testament writing deserved to be described as anti-Semitic," it would be Mark); W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 238, 241 (Jews "must be considered in Christian theology as 'spiritually blind'").

⁴⁵ Telford, *Mark*, 23 (Mark written for a gentile Christian audience); Telford, *Theology*, 235–37 (not just opposed to Judaism but to Jewish Christianity).

⁴⁶ In the leading reference work, Collins, *Mark*, for example.

tree story alludes to and depicts a particular Greek myth about the fig tree, the story of Dionysos and the fig. Laid on top of the myth of Dionysos and the fig, Mark's story further alludes to Nero destroying the fig tree of Rome. What is unusual and surprising for us is the genre. Mark has Jesus, or, to distance Jesus from the execrable story, "he" mime Nero. Thus, the person in Mark's story who kills the fig tree is not Jesus, but Nero.

Observe, that the attributes of the killer of the fig tree (gluttony, sexual perversion, irrationality, violence) are as appropriate to Nero as they are alien to Jesus.⁴⁷ In the ancient axiom, "tyrants are prey to their appetites."⁴⁸ The fig tree story is about a murderous, glutinous, irrational tyrant.

Although it may seem strange to us for Jesus to mime Nero, it was not at all strange in the 60s in Rome when mime was by far the most popular literary form.⁴⁹ And, the single most popular aspect of mime were depictions that alluded to current events. Thus, mimes would put on plays about ancient myths and then,

⁴⁷ Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 145, 152–53; Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.64; 15.37–39; Eric Csapo, "Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconology, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction," *Phoenix* 51:3/4 (1997): 260; Dorothy May Paschall, "The Vocabulary of Mental Aberration in Roman Comedy and Petronius," *Language* 15:1 (1939): 57.

⁴⁸ Tim Whitmarsh, "Greek and Roman Dialogue: The Pseudo-Lucianic Nero," *JHS* 119 (1999): 148.

⁴⁹ Mime offered a unique avenue by which foreigners, including many from the Near East, were able to rise in Roman society, some acquiring great fame and wealth, and it did not require linguistic fluency. Suetonius, *Nero* 11–12; Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 7.32.3; W. J. Slater, "Three Problems in the History of Drama," *Phoenix* 47:3 (1993): 206, 211; Lucian, *Of Pantomime*, 64; Steve Mason, *Life of Josephus: Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 24–27 & nn. 110–19; G. Kenneth G. Henry, "Roman Actors," *Studies in Philology* 16:4 (1919) 334–82; W. J. Slater, "Pantomime Riots," *Classical Antiquity* 13:1 (1994): 120–44; H. A. Kelly, "Tragedy and the Performance of Tragedy in Late Roman Antiquity," *Traditio* 35 (1970) 37–44; Aldrete, *Gestures*, xx, 77.

by what is known as a temporal references, allude to current events, often about the ruler. Of all literary topics, the so-called “adultery mime” topos of obscene references to those in power was the single most popular literary topic of the time.⁵⁰

However, there is another much more prosaic and less inflammatory reason why the biblical scholarship community has not associated Mark’s fig tree story with Nero and the fig tree of Rome or Dionysos and the fig. Mark’s story is told in a so-called Markan sandwich.⁵¹ One bread slice of the sandwich is the story of the cursing of the fig tree. In the middle is the cleansing the Temple, and then, the other bread slice, on the following day Jesus and his disciples pass by the fig tree, which has now “dried up from its roots,” and Peter says to Jesus, calling him “Rabbi,” unusual for Mark, that the fig tree that he cursed has died.

Thus, not illogically, scholars concluded that the bread slices of the story, which deal with the fig tree, must relate to what is contained within, the cleansing of the Temple. And since the sandwich is about the Temple, which presumably relates to the Jewish Temple, hence the entire sandwich should have a Jewish theme.

However, the cleansing of the Temple story is itself acknowledged to be “most puzzling,”⁵² a “problem passage,”⁵³ that has “always puzzled scholars”

⁵⁰ R. W. Reynolds, “Criticism of Individuals in Roman Popular Comedy,” *CQ* 37:1/2 (1943): 37–45; Idem, “The Adultery Mime,” *CQ* 40:3/4 (1946) 77–84.

⁵¹ James R. Edwards, “Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narrative,” *NT* 31:3 (1989): 193–216.

⁵² Richard H. Hiers, Purification of the Temple: Preparation for the Kingdom of God,” *JBL* 90:1 (1971): 82.

particularly because it is the only place in the gospels where Jesus acts violently, with, based upon this, some contending that Jesus was a violent revolutionary, who (arguably from a Roman perspective) was (justly) executed as such.⁵⁴ Thus, judging the meaning of the poorly understood fig tree story from the poorly understood cleansing of the Temple story is a case of “the blind leading the blind” (Matt 15:14).

More importantly, however, Hans Dieter Betz points out that Herod’s Temple represented *Roman* control of Judea so that the cleansing of the Temple meant cleansing it from *Roman* influence.⁵⁵ The allusion in Mark 11:15 to the cleansing of the Temple is to Zechariah 14:21: “no more Canaanites in the house of the Lord.” And, far from being anti-Jewish, Jesus’ position against commerce in the Temple precinct was precisely the position of the Pharisees.⁵⁶ Thus, the cleansing of the Temple scene may be anti-Roman, not as commonly supposed, anti-Jewish. And, the cleansing of the Temple may add further support that the fig tree story is about Rome.

HOW SCHOLARS MADE THE FIG TREE A SYMBOL OF ISRAEL

⁵³ N. Clayton Croy, “The Messianic Whippersnapper: Did Jesus Use a Whip on People in the Temple (John 2:15)?”, *JBL* 128:3 (2009): 558.

⁵⁴ Eyal Regev, “Moral Impurity and the Temple in Early Christianity in Light of Ancient Greek Practice and Qumranic Ideology,” *HTR* 97:4 (2004): 383–411 passim, 397, 410–11.

⁵⁵ Hans Dieter Betz, “Jesus and the Purity of the Temple (Mark 11:15–18): A Comparative Approach,” *JBL* 116:3 (1997): 463, 469; Cecil Roth, “The Cleansing of the Temple and Zechariah XIV 21,” *NT*, 4:3 (1960): 175, 178–79; Collins, *Mark*, 529–30.

⁵⁶ *y. Ber.* 9:5.

The way a number of scholars made Mark's fig tree a symbol of Israel was by saying that in the Hebrew Bible the fig was a symbol of Israel. But, as other scholars pointed out, this was simply not true, just *ipse dixit*.⁵⁷

The most common fig formulation in the Hebrew Bible is: "In that time, each man shall have/sit under (in soothing shade/peace) his fig (tree) (female) and (grape) vine (male) (he shall have his house/family/prosperity unto him)" (1 Kgs 4:25; Mic 4:4; Zec 3:10; John 1:48). Thus, the most common formulation in the Hebrew Bible is that vines and figs are paired and they stand for male and female. In 2 Kings 18:31, the Assyrian commander attempts to sway the army of Jerusalem to desert Hezekiah by promising "each his own vine and fig," which is obviously idiomatic, not a literal meaning. And, the formulation of a man at ease combining vines and trees is found in Horace, *Odes*, 4.5 ("On his own hillside each man spends the day, and weds his vines to waiting trees"); *Epode*, 2.

However, there is a much more important issue regarding how to read Mark. Most people interpret texts by what the words say to them, or the words seem to say in a timeless way. Or, they try to interpret what the author of the narrative meant, had in mind.

But, the correct approach, in my view, is not what the words say or the author meant, but what the early hearers or readers at the time the text was originally composed, thought when they heard or read the text. What did the words of the narrative bring to mind to the hearer or reader, not what was in the mind of the author or intrinsically in the meaning of the words themselves. If the

⁵⁷ Kinman, "Missing," 671 & n. 8; Collins, *Mark*, 523–24.

words would bring some meaning to the hearer or reader, especially if it is a clever or disguised meaning, it is likely that the author had that meaning in mind, not that such a meaning just happened randomly, by happenstance.

Furthermore, the entire gospel should not necessarily be read as a constructed, coherent, integrated whole. In ancient times text might be written in what I call “vaudeville style,” containing different types of genres and topoi, much as a vaudeville show may have different acts or “chapters” that range from a ventriloquist, knife thrower, comedian, singer, juggler, and so on.

In this connection, even if, for the sake of argument, the fig tree in the Hebrew Bible symbolized Israel, which is not true, that would be largely irrelevant because the people at the time the text was written hearing or reading it would immediately associate the fig tree with Rome and Nero and as well the highly topical and obscene myth of Dionysos and the fig. In other words, you have to take what words meant at the time they were written, and those would be the meanings they conjured up in the minds of the people who hear or read them at the time.

The real issue is what the author must do to hide the real meaning so as to successfully get away with writing seditious material at a time when authors were killed and their works destroyed were they were found to be offensive to the powers that be.⁵⁸ Thus, a universal feature of this style of writing is the “flight to safety” that allows the “seditious message” to be “clothed in terms that can lay

⁵⁸ One reason that Mark’s author may have been able to get away with his fig tree story was that Nero was extremely unpopular with the noble Roman establishment and in the Flavian restoration of order.

claim to a perfectly innocent construction.”⁵⁹ Hence, Mark’s fig tree narrative can be naively read to “truly” transpire in Bethany in the 30s, as an inoffensive (to Rome) etiological explanation of Bethany’s stunted figs. “Bethany,” *beth-te’ena*, means “House of Fig(s).” Nearby, Bethpage means “House of Green/Unripe Figs.”⁶⁰

And, by the same token, Revelation can be read naively to transpire, as it says, or seems to say, in Babylon, and the whore of Babylon is not Caesar, but some real woman. But for those “in the know,” that is just a disguise for the protection of the writer and the text. In other words, the author needed to have a fallback position, that the fig tree is not a symbol, the author actually meant a story about a tree. But, Mark’s story is too outrageous, and none of the other evangelists repeat its highly offensive presentation.

THE FIG WAS OVERWHELMING ASSOCIATED WITH SEX

One reason that the fig symbolized Rome and did not symbolize Israel was because the fig represented sex.⁶¹ One might think that obscene symbolism was something that any person or nation would recoil from, and the Jews were

⁵⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990), 158, 164.

⁶⁰ Asaph Goor, “The History of the Fig in the Holy Land from Ancient Times to the Present Day,” *Economic Botany* 19:2 (1965) 124–25; *Pesah*. 53a1.

⁶¹ Fred Hageneder, *The Meaning of Trees: Botany, History, Healing, Lore* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005) 90–93 (In the plural, fig fruits were associated with testicles). In pedophilic literature it meant a child’s penis. W. M. Clarke, “Phallic Vocabulary in Straton,” *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 47:4 (1994): 466–72, especially 471. The milky sap of the fig was sometimes called by Greeks *sperma* and Romans *semen*. Telford, “Fruit,” 278. *Fica* today, and often in antiquity as well, means open female genitals.

prudish, but not the Romans, who from their own accounts were the most sexually debauched people in history.⁶²

Romans relished sexual violence. Traditionally, Rome began with the rape of Romulus and Remus' mother, the city grew with the rape of the Sabines, and gained its independence with the rape of Lucretia. Roman armies were rapists, disciplined to sexually abuse and often kill the populace prior to looting their possessions.⁶³ Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is obsessed with rape. In Tacitus and Suetonius, the lives of the Caesars are portrayed as encyclopedically pornographic and violent. The height of this outrageous obscenity, in advanced age, Tiberius sought a cure for impotence using eager to suckle newborns (Suetonius, *Tib.* 44). Horace, and more so Martial, are stunningly, to my way of thinking incomprehensibly, obscene—but the Romans loved it. No wonder many Christians at the time opted for previously unknown extremes of chastity and celibacy.

In Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Lucius as the ass is to perform on stage bestial-human sex. In Petronius' *Satyricon*, asked the right age to commence intercourse, the Priestess of Priapus professed to be unable to recall a time when she was a virgin.⁶⁴ In sum, the Romans took an exquisite delight in recording and reading

⁶² Andrew Dalbey, *Food in the Ancient World From A to Z* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 143; Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 20–23.

⁶³ S. P. Oakley, "Single Combat in the Roman Republic," *Classical Quarterly*, New Series 35:2 (1985): 406.

⁶⁴ Petronius, *Satyricon* 23.

about, “still greater depravities that one can hardly bear to tell or be told, let alone believe.”⁶⁵

Contrariwise, Jews generally believed in no sex outside marriage, shunned homosexuality and public nakedness, such as at the Roman baths, and any sort of debauchery. “The beams of her roof never saw the braids of her hair” expressed the Jewish ideal.⁶⁶ Perhaps Jews were not quite as prudish and proper and they appear in the historical record of the time, but compared to the Romans they certainly were.

JEWISH SEXUAL FIG REFERENCES

Telford acknowledges that in Greco-Roman culture Mark’s fig tree story had an obscene meaning, but he maintains that in Jewish culture it did not. Thus, it becomes necessary to show that in Jewish culture of the time figs also had an obscene meaning.

In Jewish literature, the earliest reference, of course, is to the fig leaves Adam and Eve placed to hide their genitals. In Israel and the Near East, the fig was identified with the tree of knowledge in the Garden.⁶⁷ Since the fig’s leaves allowed Adam and Eve to hide their nakedness, its fruit had caused them to see it.

The name Bathsheba is a play on *bat sheva*, “an especially fine fig,” who when taken by David was unripe (her time was not ripe).⁶⁸ Based upon the

⁶⁵ Suetonius, *Tib.* 44.

⁶⁶ *Yoma* 47a3.

⁶⁷ Romanoff, “Coins,” 4 & n. 16; Telford, *Tree*, 134; *Ber.* 40a4 & n. 51; *Sanh.* 41a3 n. 31; 70b1 & n. 4. Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel follows ancient Jewish tradition representing the tree as a fig.

⁶⁸ Tamar Kadari, *Jewish Women’s Archives*, s.v. “Bathsheba: Midrash and Aggadah;” *Sanh.* 107a3 & n. 30.

resemblance in Hebrew of the words “fig” and “coitus” (Jer 2:24),⁶⁹ Robert Eisler called the fig “*das uralvolkstümliche Sexualsymbol* (age-old/universal sexual symbol in the plain, vulgar parlance of the common people)”⁷⁰ In the Maccabean period, a man and his wife were severely punished for having sex “under a fig tree,” meaning idiomatically “in public” (*Yev.* 90b4 & nn. 33-35). In John 1:48, Jesus astounds Jewish Nathanael by telling him, “When you were yet under the fig tree, I saw you,” meaning that Jesus knew Nathanael’s innermost secrets. The theme of Jesus knowing innermost sexual secrets is repeated in John’s story of the Samaritan woman (John 4:29).

The Talmud contains numerous fig sexual references. Citing Song of Songs 2:13, “The fig tree has formed its buds,” the maturation of girls into women is presented in terms of unripe and ripe figs (*Nid.* 47a2–3). Women committing the offense of “unripe figs” was related to but not as bad as adultery (*Yoma* 86b).⁷¹

The tips of the fig were compared to nipples; like breasts, figs change physically as they grow (*Nid.* 47a2–3 & nn. 20, 32). In an allusion to intercourse, citing Proverbs 27:18, “He who guards the fig tree shall eat its fruit,” the words of the Torah are like a fig—continually bearing new fruit with each time as good as the first (*Erub.* 54a4–b1 & n. 1–2; *Ber.* 57a2). The fruit of other trees ripens simultaneously, while the fruit of the fig ripens at staggered intervals, like the

⁶⁹ *Ta’ana* a word play on *te’ana*, fig.

⁷⁰ Telford, “Fruit,” 277–78 nn. 54, 57.

⁷¹ Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942), 162–64.

mate who is desirable to her mate every time. When embarking on a long journey (life) start with unripe figs for they will last you until journey's end; start with ripe figs, by journey's end they will spoil (*Hag.* 5a1 & n. 13). The prostitute, Gomer, all "trode" upon her (euphemistic) as a pressed fig (*Pesah.* 87b1 & n. 2).⁷²

According to ancient legend, Cleopatra's asp was delivered to her breast in a basket of figs.⁷³ Livia delivered poison to Augustus in a serving of fresh figs.⁷⁴ And, moreover, the Church Fathers used the fig as meaning sex. For example, Tertullian speaks of the fig's leaves of sexual desire and milky juice of lust.⁷⁵ In his *Confessions*, the fig tree that Augustine was converted under represents sexual concupiscence.⁷⁶

As Saul Lieberman pointed out, by the first century, Greek culture had permeated Jewish culture, and from Greek influence oppressed Jews came to view Rome as an old prostitute, the *pagis*, "trap" Lucian wrote about, youthful and vigorous appearing without due to her luxuriant hair, which was but a wig, but old and spent within.⁷⁷

Moreover, Mark and the entire New Testament is written in Greek for a Greek-speaking audience and displays considerable Hellenistic influence. It is inconceivable that in Mark the fig would have a meaning completely at variance

⁷² Telford, "Fruit," 281 n. 78.

⁷³ Stacy Schiff, *Cleopatra: A Life* (New York: Little Brown, 2011), 304–08.

⁷⁴ Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.71; Cassius Dio, 55.22.2; 56.30.

⁷⁵ Vinzenz Buchheit, "Feigensymbolik im antiken Epigramm," *RheinMus* 103 (1960): 200–09; Telford, "Fruit," 282.

⁷⁶ Vinzenz Buchheit, "Augustinus unter Feigenbaum (zu Conf. VIII)," *VC* 22:4 (1968): 257–71; John Freccaro, "The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics," *Diacritics* 5:1 (1975): 34–40.

⁷⁷ Lieberman, *Greek*, 44–46.

with its meaning throughout the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world at that time. Thus, the notion that when Mark was written the fig meant different things in Greco-Roman and Jewish Greek-speaking culture is unsupportable.

THE LITERARY ORIGINS OF THE FIG TREE STORY

Mark's fig tree story follows a lengthy tradition of lowbrow, crude, often obscene literature composed by the under-classes for role reversal holidays. This is the tradition of underclass "trick or treat" literature⁷⁸ found in Archilochus, Hipponax,⁷⁹ ancient Greek "bird" songs, such as the Crow or the Swallow, Horace, Catullus, and, for that matter, ancient Purim Shpiel. And, in this literature, going back to Archilochos, Hipponax (7th and 6th centuries), and others, the fig was used as a sexual metaphor.⁸⁰ The form is typically angry, threatening, demanding, obscene, wildly insulting, and unconstrained,⁸¹ but usually somewhat tongue-in-cheek. In Atheneaeus, *Deipn.* 359d–360b, the bird salaciously begs the "slave-boy to open the door . . . and let the girl bring some figs."

A clear precedent for Mark's fig tree narrative drawn from this genre is Eratosthenes of Cyrene's (or Pseudo-Eratosthenes') story that Apollo sent his bird, the crow, (male genitals)⁸² to fetch some water for a sacrifice.⁸³ But, the

⁷⁸ Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 100–02, 208 n. 38.

⁷⁹ In Hipponax, fig branches are used to beat the scapegoat. M. L. West, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

⁸⁰ Guy Hedreen, "The Return of Hephestos, Dionysian Processional Ritual, and the Creation of a Visual Narrative," *JHS* 124 (2004): 58.

⁸¹ Anne Gosling, "Political Apollo: From Callimachus to the Augustans," *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 45:4 (1992): 504 (unequivocally frivolous, disrespectful, and offensive).

⁸² W. D. Furley, "Apollo humbled: Phoenix' Koronisma in its Hellenistic literary setting," *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 33 (1994): 10, cf.

greedy bird spied a fig tree full of fruit (female genitals), but which, having gone to the tree and tried to eat them, all proved unripe and hard. So Apollo's bird delayed waiting for the figs to mature. Then, having gorged himself, sated, he caught a long water snake which he brought to Apollo claiming that the snake plugged up the hole and drank all the water. Apollo cursed his bird causing its plumage to change from white to black (an etiological allusion to Alexander's black Egyptian pharaoh father⁸⁴).

Eratosthenes' story of Apollo's bird and the fig tree was repeated with minor variation by Augustan poets Hyginus and Ovid, of whom more later. Perhaps reflecting the close connection between the obscene story of Apollo's bird and the fig and the obscene stories told on the Roman holiday of Lupercalia, Ovid's *Fasti* has the story of Apollo's bird and the fig on February 14, close by the stories of Lupercalia and the *Ficus Ruminalis* on February 15.

LUPERCALIA AND THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

The Romans especially, more so than the Greeks, institutionalized a practice of the lower classes, slaves or clients, writing and performing flattering

18–21. Known as the Crow Song, it is one of a number of songs, the most famous of which was the Swallow Song, which were sung by rowdy young men as “trick-or-treat tunes” for carnivalesque role reversal holidays. In the Swallow Song the young men threaten to carry away the mistress of the house unless they get their way. The genre goes back at least to sixth century Greece. Sara Forsdyke, “Revelry and Riot in Archaic Megara: Democratic Disorder or Ritual Reversal,” *JHS* 125 (2005): 79 & nn. 23–25. Cf. Richard W. Hooper, “In Defense of Catullus’ Dirty Sparrow,” *GR*, Second Series 32:2 (1985): 167–78.

⁸³ Eratosthenes, *Catasterismoi* 41; Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2; Carole E. Newlands, “Ovid’s Ravenous Raven,” *CJ* 86:3 (1991): 244–45; Frederick H. Ahl, “Amber, Avallion, and Apollo’s Singing Swan,” *AJP* 103:4 (1982): 388, 410.

⁸⁴ Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (ed. Bryan P. Reardon; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 663–73, 694.

poems or plays for or about their masters or patrons and especially the emperor.⁸⁵

But, even more so, on role reversal holidays, these took the form of satiric biting parodies.⁸⁶ During holidays, mime, satire, and parody enjoyed a “sporting” license, jester’s privilege *inter ludos*. And, the lower class relished the mockery, social inversion, and freedom of speech permitted during the games.⁸⁷ Father Liber (Dionysos) was the patron of such “free speech.”

Thus, in Roman culture there was an established tradition of composing and performing otherwise inappropriate, scandalous, salacious, obscene works.⁸⁸ A famous example, apparently composed for Saturnalia, is Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*, which ridiculed as absurd the notion that deceased Emperor Claudius became a god.

Most particularly, for their “fig tree” holiday of Lupercalia, the people of Rome⁸⁹ composed and performed obscene, outrageous skits, stories, and songs.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Kathryn Argetsinger, “Birthday Rituals: Friends and Patrons in Roman Poetry and Cult,” *Classical Antiquity* 11:2 (1992): 175–93.

⁸⁶ Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*; R. R. Nauta, “Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* as Saturnalian Literature,” *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series, 40:1/2 (1987): 80–82; Lucian, *Saturnalia*; Idem, *Ocaromenippus*.

⁸⁷ Sumi, “Impersonating,” 582; Reynolds, “Individuals,” 43; Slater, “Pantomime,” 211; J. H. Waszink, “Varro, Livy, and Tertullian on the History of Roman Dramatic Art,” *VC* 2:4 (1948): 241.

⁸⁸ Living in Italy as a child I noticed that my Italian friends occasionally performed such extremely vulgar obscene songs about the high and mighty, for which there was and is very little equivalent in American or English culture.

⁸⁹ Greg Woolf, “The Religion of the Roman Diaspora,” in *Ritual Dynamics and Religious Changes in the Roman Empire* (eds. Olivier Hekster *et al.*; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 249.

⁹⁰ A. W. J. Holleman, “Ovid and the Lupercalia,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 22:2 (1973): 264; Idem, *Pope Gelasius I and the Lupercalia* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1974), 63, 89; William M. Green, “The Lupercalia in the Fifth Century,” *CP* 26:1 (1931): 66–67; Agnes Kirsopp Michels, “The Topography and Interpretation of the Lupercalia,” *TAPA* 84 (1953): 51.

Involving ritualized violence against women, on Lupercalia naked male runners, wearing nothing but a goat's skin cape,⁹¹ beginning at Rome's sacred fig tree, ran a race around Rome's pomerium. They fashioned goat-skin whips for the occasion with which they "whipped" the women, who lined the route purportedly holding out their hands to be whipped "like children in school."⁹²

The customs of Lupercalia were so popular and so deeply entrenched in Roman society that the popes had enormous difficulty in abolishing this most long-lived of all Roman holidays—supposedly instituted by Romulus, it continued for 1250 years. The Romans protested that their obscene holiday parodies served the salutary "Christian" purpose of exposing sinners, whose offenses might otherwise go unnoticed and hence un-condemned. Seeking to abolish the holiday, the pope was accused of trying to cover up sinful conduct, but finally in roughly 500, the pope prevailed by telling the Roman senators urging the holiday's continuance to run in the race themselves—naked.⁹³

Interestingly, the whipping of Lupercalia seems related to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. In John 2:15, Jesus specifically fashions a whip on the spot for the

⁹¹ Depicted in T. P. Wiseman, "The She-Wolf Mirror: An Interpretation," *Papers of the British School at Rome* 61 (1993) 1–6. There are several "goat," *caper*, connections, caprification of figs, *Nonae Capratinae*, etc.

⁹² Wiseman, "Lupercal," 14; Holleman, "Lupercalia," 260–68; Green, "Lupercalia," 62–64; Michels, "Topography," passim; E. Sachs, "Notes on the Lupercalia," *AJP* 84:3 (1963): 266–79 (from the god of penetration); Wiseman, "Lupercal," 3–6, 10; J. N. Adams, "Culus, Clunes, and Their Synonyms in Latin," *Glotta* 59:3/4 (1981) 246–49; Hedreen, "Return," 38–64; Jennifer A. Glancy: "Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23–25)," *JBL* 123:1 (2004): 111–12 (equivalence of beating and penetration).

⁹³ Wiseman, "Lupercal," 12; Telford, "Fruit," 272, 277–82, 291–303; Holleman, *Gelasius*, 164. Because of the nakedness, Lupercalia became important in Christian anti-pagan literary polemic. E.g., Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* 10.160–85.

occasion (as was done for Lupercalia) with which he administers whippings. And, word used for “whip” is the Latin loanword “flagellum,” which is unusual.⁹⁴ Moreover, in Lupercalia, the persons whipped did not resist, accepting their “fate.” In Mark, Jesus drives out the merchants, with no indication that they resisted, and then Jesus immediately and repeatedly returns to the Temple as though he had done nothing out of the ordinary (Mark 11:27; 14:49), which seems to imply Jesus’ actions were symbolic, ceremonial, and ritualistic, perhaps alluding to the Roman holiday which is closely parallel.

DIONYSOS AND THE FIG

We can now turn specifically to the story of the man/god interacting with a fig tree, the thoroughly obscene story of Dionysos and the fig. It goes as follows: Dionysos travelling to Hades to fetch back his mother!, not knowing the way, sought directions from Prosymnos,⁹⁵ who, in exchange for giving Dionysos directions, obtained Dionysos’ promise to allow Prosymnos after Dionysos’ return to bugger him. However, by then Prosymnos had died; so, lustfully expectant, not to be denied, Dionysos fashioned from a fig branch a dildo that, in lieu of Prosymnos, Dionysos greedily used upon himself.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Croy, “Whippersnapper,” 556–57.

⁹⁵ The spelling of his name varies.

⁹⁶ Csapo, “Riding,” 273–76. Cf. Telford, “Fruit,” 284–85. Buchheit, “*Feigensymbolik*,” 229; Clarke, “Straton;” Eugene O’Connor, “A Note on *Fici Suavitas* in ‘Priapea’ 69,” *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 35:3/4 (1982): 340–42; Martha Habash, “Dionysos’ Roles in Aristophanes’ ‘Frogs,’” *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 55:1 (2002): 1–17; Elmer G. Suhr, “Herakles and Omphale,” *AJA* 57:4 (1953): 251–63. The reputation of Greeks for never keeping promises shows that Dionysos’ “show of fulfilling a promise” is a mockery. Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) 186 (“Merry Rogue” tradition); Matthew Dillon, “By Gods, Tongues, and

Patron of the fig, Dionysos was associated with tree-trunks, phallic imagery, and ritual wood carvings. Favored for its plasticity, Greek ritual phalluses and masks of cults of Dionysos and his son Priapus were made of fig wood, including the giant phalluses carried in Dionysian processions.⁹⁷ Dionysos' staff, the thyrsus, of hollow fennel with a pine cone on top, was a phallic symbol.⁹⁸ A common way of depicting Dionysos was as a head mounted on a column.⁹⁹

The story of Dionysos' journey to Hades and his character as an old, voracious (gluttonous) farting catamite appears in Aristophanes' *Frogs*.¹⁰⁰ In Euripedes' *Cyclops*, Dionysos' sidekick, Silenus, gets the cyclops drunk only to be raped by him.

Nevertheless, for the most part, before the time of Augustus, in ancient literature (that survives), undoubtedly because of its impropriety, the story of Dionysos and the fig is not explicitly recorded and barely alluded to.¹⁰¹ We owe the prominence of the story of Dionysos and the fig to a quirk of history—that Antony embraced Osiris, who equated to Dionysos, as his divine patron.

After the death of Alexander, opposing the Seleucid menace, Ptolemy modeled himself as Egyptian god Horus, the son-of-the-father, and successfully garnering Egyptian patriotic support. But, Antony could not model himself on

Dogs: The Use of Oaths in Aristophanic Comedy," *GR*, 2nd Series 42:2 (1995): 141; Paul, *Titus* 1:12.

⁹⁷ Csapo, "Riding," 286; Telford, "Fruit," 283.

⁹⁸ Csapo, "Riding," 255, 258–60, 265, 277, 279.

⁹⁹ Shelley Hales, "Dionysos at Pompeii," *British School at Athens Studies* 15 (2007): 338.

¹⁰⁰ Csapo, "Riding," 276 & n. 92.

¹⁰¹ Csapo, "Riding," 275–76.

Horus.. Married to Cleopatra, who was Isis, the mother goddess, Antony had to be Osiris, the father god. On the upside, Osiris equated with Alexander, but very much on the downside, Osiris equated with Dionysos.

With the stakes so high and rivalry so intense, the contest between Antony and Octavian descended into a no-holds-barred propaganda war. Some of what occurred is well known. Most famously, Octavian made much of Antony, like his patron Dionysos, being an uncontrollable alcoholic. And, of course, both Antony and Octavian accused each other of owing their successful careers to having as barely pubescent boys prostituted themselves for greatest political advantage. This was simply a stereotypical trope found most famously in Aeschines' *Against Timarchus* and nothing out of the ordinary in an age when character assassination was an accepted topos.¹⁰² But, in the case of Antony, Octavian let his propagandists go much further than was usual.

Augustus' freedman and high appointee, Hyginus (who retold Eratosthenes' story of Apollo's bird and the fig tree), explicitly wrote of Dionysos' (read Antony's) promise of anal sex.¹⁰³ Horace in his Ode to Bacchus (*Carm.* 2.19) cries out in (mock) terror to be spared (being assaulted) by Bacchus' mighty thyrsus, and wrote of Cerberus, the three-headed (euphemistic for the

¹⁰² *Character Assassination Throughout the Ages* (eds. Martin Icks and Eric Shiraev; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁰³ Hyginus, *Astronomy* 2.5. What was unusual and shocking was to present Dionysos, who after all was a god or demigod, acting this way, and into adulthood/old age, and voraciously/glutinously.

male sex organs) dog licking (euphemistic) Bacchus' thigh (euphemistic).¹⁰⁴ In Horace, *Sermones* 1.8.1, 46, we hear of the birth of Dionysos' son, "Priappus formed from a fig tree"—"from my cleft bum fig tree I let a thunderous fart."¹⁰⁵

One might assume that pious Christians would have nothing to do with such outrageous obscenity, but nothing could be further from the case. Later Christian authors Clement of Alexandria and Arnobius were far less circumspect than their pagan counterparts, not only mentioning, but trumpeting the story of Dionysos and the fig, with Arnobius graphically elaborating upon the consummation of the act.¹⁰⁶

It was pagan moralists such as Varro and Dionysius that deplored disreputable depictions of the gods.¹⁰⁷ Christians (and the pagan underclass) loved deplorable representations of the pagan gods. Pagan audiences loved it because the "god" stood for their despotic rulers, whom they hated.

Derived from Roman mime, Christians developed an anti-pagan literary genre that I call "Leda and the Swan," attacking their Roman oppressors with the

¹⁰⁴ John A. Stevens, "Seneca and Horace: Allegorical Technique in Two Odes to Bacchus (Hor. *Carm.* 2.19 and Sen. 'Oed.' 403–508," *Pheonix* 53:3/4 (1999): 292.

¹⁰⁵ Like his son, Priapus, Dionysos himself was born from his father, Zeus', thigh (euphemistic).

¹⁰⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* 2; Arnobius, *Ad Gent.* 5.28. Clement maintained that the phalli used in the Dionysian processions and rituals originated from the event. Csapo, "Riding," 275–76. For hundreds of years from the Renaissance until recently the graphic account of Arnobius was not translated into English but rendered in English editions in Italian.

¹⁰⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.18.3; T. P. Wiseman, *Remembering the Roman People: Essays on Late Republican Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 92–93; Idem, "Liber: Myth, Drama and Ideology in Republican Rome," in *The Roman Middle Republic: Politics, Religion, and Historiography* (ed. Christer Bruun; Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2000), 288 & n. 94.

stories of the immoral sexual antics of the pagan gods.¹⁰⁸ This produced the extraordinary genre of what might be called Christian porn. Thus, for example, Tertullian mocked pagans giving awards to poets who proclaim Zeus having sex with his own children (*Apol.* 11:13; likewise, Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 21).

The common image that has survived is of Christians going to their deaths in the arena with such dignity that pagan audiences were greatly impressed and won over, but that was probably not what really happened. The condemned wore costumes¹⁰⁹ and were forced to perform to loud music that drowned out anything they said. Moreover, smart aleck loudmouths were dealt with by the (fish) hook in their mouths.¹¹⁰ And, as for the crowds at the Roman arenas, pagan and Christian sources agree, caught up in the frenzy, the crowds' actions were so unspeakably dreadful as to make the conduct of those in the stands seem far worse than what went on in the arena itself.

Thus, while the howling mobs at the games probably were not assuaged of their bloodthirstiness by the Christians' demeanor, Christians' mocking the sexual antics of the pagan gods apparently worked well. Unlike Greek theater, Roman

¹⁰⁸ Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrs* 10.215–35; Robert Levine, "Prudentius' Romanus: The Rhetorician as Hero, Martyr, Satirist, and Saint," *Rhetorica* 91:1 (1991): 5–38; L. R. Shero, "Alceme and Amphytrion in Ancient and Modern Drama," *TAPA* 87 (1956): 192–238; Lucian, *Of Pantomime*; Nicholas Horsfall, "Epic and Burlesque in Ovid, *Met.* VIII 260ff.," *CJ* 74:4 (1979): 310–32 R. Elaine Fantham, "Mime: The Missing Link in Roman Literary History," *CW* 82:3 (1989): 161; Idem., "Sexual Comedy in Ovid's *Fasti*: Sources and Motivation," *HSCP* 87 (1983): 192–94, 207 & n. 80.

¹⁰⁹ According to Christian reports, their guards showed mercy to Perpetua and Felicity by allowing them not to wear their costumes, but, if true, that may not have gone over well with the crowd expecting a good show.

¹¹⁰ Saul Lieberman, "Roman Legal Institutions in Early Rabbinics and in the *Acta Martyrum*," *JQR*, New Series 35:1 (1944) 29–53.

theater was irredeemably subversive and irreconcilably opposed to authority,¹¹¹ and this benefitted Christians.

But, the pagan authorities fought back also using mime against the Christians to make them look ridiculous, for example, in slapstick portrayals of mimes impersonating Christians being baptized or crucified.¹¹² But, in turn, Christians fought back with stories of mimes mocking Christians suddenly undergoing onstage conversions that produced a number of Christian mime martyr saints.

DIONYSOS AND THE FIG IN JEWISH CULTURE

The story of Dionysos and the fig seems to have been known to first century Jews. Philo's bitter *Embassy* 88 asks, "Have you (Caesar Caligula) imitated Bacchus in any respect?" (Suggesting that he should). In a knockoff of the phallic allusion using trees in the story of Susanna and the Elders, "a mastic or holm?"¹¹³, first century rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai cross-examined a purported witness as to the shape of the fig branch—"thick or thin?"¹¹⁴ But, such a question! could not be relevant to adultery under the tree, nor to cutting down a fig on the Sabbath, thus, it was a case of—a stabbing by a fig (*Sanh.* 41a4–5). A stabbing with the rubbery fig? Tarfon cross-examining was told, "He and I were

¹¹¹ William S. Anderson, "The Roman Transformation of Greek Domestic Comedy," *CW* 88:3 (1995): 171-80.

¹¹² Costas Panayotakis, "Baptism and Crucifixion on the Mimic Stage," *Mnemosyne*, 50:3 (1997): 302–19.

¹¹³ Add Dan 13:54–55, 58–59. Tree sexual imagery is found in the sacred marriage of God and Israel. Moshe Weinfeld, "Feminine Features in the Imagery of God in Israel: The Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Tree," *VT* 46:4 (1996): 515–29.

¹¹⁴ *Sanh.* 40a2 & n. 14; 41a4 & nn. 26–31 ("Is their testimony 'firm?").

chased by a troop of soldiers and he grabbed and broke off a fig branch that he used to put them all to rout” (*Yev.* 122b2).¹¹⁵

This story of Johanan ben Zakki can be dated to at or around the first century because later rabbis questioned why in relating the story Judah the Prince in the *Mishnah* (*circa* 200) called Johanan ben Zakkai unusually, “Ben Zakkai” (*Sanh.* 40a1–2; 41a4–b1). It was for the same reason that Mark does not mention Jesus by name, only using “he;” it was to distance/disassociate Johanan ben Zakkai from the myth, while still allowing him to allude to it. This is clear because Johanan ben Zakkai himself used the same device elsewhere calling himself Ben Zakkai to avoid an invidious comparison (*Ber.* 34b4).

Jews also seem to have understood the meaning of “fig(s)” in Roman slang, i.e. disease sores of the anus from sexual violence.¹¹⁶ Bar Kappara counseled: “The horn (herald) calls in the marketplace of Rome: ‘Son-of-a fig-seller, sell/buy your Daddy’s figs.’” (Meaning, when you urgently need to defecate, proceed without delay, immodest Roman communal latrines

¹¹⁵ David when engrossed in Torah makes himself pliant like a worm; when he goes out to battle, he “makes himself hard” as a tree. James A. Diamond, “King David of the Sages: Rabbinic Rehabilitation or Ironic Parody?”, *Proof* 27:3 (2007): 391–2.

¹¹⁶ Judith P. Hallet, “*Pepedi/Diffissa Nate Ficus*: Priapic Revenge in Horace, Satires 1.8,” *Reinische Museum* 124 (1981): 341–47; Martha Habash, “Priapus: Horace in Disguise,” *CJ* 94:3 (1999): 286 & n. 10; J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 112–14 (anal injuries caused by sexual violence); Idem, “Culus, Clunes, and Their Synonyms in Latin,” *Glotta* 59:3/4 (1981): 246–49 (venereal disease sores of the anus); Martial, *Epigrams*, 12.33 (“In order to buy boys you sold your farms; now you have nothing but a fig plantation”); O’Connor, “*Fici*,” 340–42; Buchheit, “*Feigensymbolik*,” 229.

notwithstanding).¹¹⁷ The common Jewish people used an oath, “by-the-life-of-the-fig-picker,” which the rabbis regarded as absurd and worthless but were unsuccessful in eradicating.¹¹⁸

Because of the fig’s obscene connotations, Jewish culture substituted a different tree stereotype in its place, the carob (locust), a tree not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹⁹ The carob produced an enormous canopy of leaves, but no fruit (until much later in life than other fruit trees).¹²⁰ The cursing and killing of the fig tree in Mark 11:23 is likened to moving a mountain and casting it into the sea, which alludes in rabbinic literature to the difficulty in uprooting the carob with its broad and deep root system, not the fig.¹²¹

OID PORTRAYS APOLLO (AUGUSTUS) MAKING LOVE TO A TREE

Ovid is an extremely important influence upon Mark’s fig tree story. After his dispute with Antony, Octavian, who had portrayed himself as Apollo in opposition to Antony’s Dionysos, established the precedent that Dionysos was not to be associated with the emperor nor appear in Roman imperial imagery.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Lieberman, *Greek*, 144–46; *Ber.* 62b1 & nn. 7, 11;

¹¹⁸ Lieberman, *Greek*, 127–28, 136–38.

¹¹⁹ Holger Michael Zellentin, *Rabbinic Parodies of Jewish and Christian Literature* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 216–23 & n. 20; *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2d, s.v. “Carob.”

¹²⁰ *Ta’an.* 23a–24b (only after seventy years, a gross exaggeration).

¹²¹ Zellentin, *Parodies*, 216.

¹²² Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (trans. Alan Shapiro; Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1988), 44–65; Champlin, *Nero*, 93; Kenneth Scott, “The Political Propaganda of 44–30 B.C.,” *MAAR* 11 (1933): 30–37; Arthur Darby Nock, “Notes on Ruler-Cult, I–IV,” *JHS* 48:1 (1928): 21–43, especially 30 & n. 48; E. A. Fredrickmeyer, “The Origin of Alexander’s Royal Insignia,” *TAPA* 127 (1997): 102–07.

Nonetheless, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* portrays Apollo (read Augustus) as having sex with a tree, thereby alluding to Dionysos and the fig.¹²³

Ovid relates that, pursued by Apollo trying to rape her, desperate and terrified, Daphne metamorphosed into a laurel (Apollo's and Augustus' tree), but not before Apollo (read Augustus) put his hands on her breasts, felt her still beating heart under the bark, kissed the wood, and clasped the branches as though they were human.¹²⁴ Just as in Mark where leaves are thought to signal fruit, in Ovid, the laurel's leaves are thought (by Apollo) to nod the tree's acceptance of his love.¹²⁵

Ovid portrays Apollo (Augustus) with the same stereotypical features as are found in Mark: un-divine, fallible, bumbling, insensitive, impulsive, out-of-control, and terribly destructive—conveying the message that, far from divine, Apollo (Augustus) is—far from a god—more bestial than human.¹²⁶ In a further insulting detail, Ovid's Daphne is modeled after, in Callimachus, Apollo's mother!¹²⁷ Thus, by allusion to Callimachus, Ovid's Apollo (Augustus) is a mother-raper.

The satiric trope of human/tree sex (though forgotten today, in ancient times) was a favorite. In Lucian's *A True Story*, in a parody on the *Odyssey*, a

¹²³ W. S. M. Nicoll, "Cupid, Apollo, and Daphne (Ovid, Met. 1.452 ff.)," *CQ*, New Series 30:1 (1980): 174–82 & n. 17.

¹²⁴ Ovid, *Met.* 1.553–67; Barbara E. Stirrup, "Techniques of Rape: Variety of Wit in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*," *GR*, Second Series 24:2 (1977): 170–84; Kenneth Scott, "Humor at the Expense of the Ruler Cult," *CP* 27:4 (1932): 317–28.

¹²⁵ Jeffrey Wills, "Callimachean Models for Ovid's 'Apollo-Daphne,'" *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 24 (1990): 150–51 & nn. 20–21.

¹²⁶ Laurel Fulderson, "Apollo, Paenitentia, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Mnemosyne*, Fourth Series 59:3 (2006): 390–91, 396–99,

¹²⁷ Wills, "Models," 147–49.

shipwrecked crew on a strange island encounter alluring half-vines, half-women, who, when embraced, seize the man by his testicles and metamorphosize him into vines ready to fruit.

In the year the *Metamorphoses* appeared, Augustus exiled Ovid to the very farthest outpost of the Empire, never to return. Ovid was never a part of the formal Roman educational curriculum. Yet, perhaps because of Ovid's anti-imperial sentiments, though irredeemably smutty and irreverent,¹²⁸ Ovid found favor among Christians such that he was chosen along with Virgil to teach them Latin for the next 1700 years.¹²⁹

NERO AS DIONYSOS

While Augustus had put Dionysos off-limits for imperial imagery, Nero partially reversed Augustus' rule. Inspired by his great grandfather, Antony,¹³⁰ with Egyptian priest Chaeremon, as one of his tutors, an "Egyptomaniac," Nero gravitated to Dionysos and, of course, theater,¹³¹ of which Dionysos was its patron. The prologue to Lucan's *Pharsalia* (1.63–66) recites that for Nero, Bacchus/Dionysos was an alternative sources of imperial inspiration to Apollo.¹³²

¹²⁸ H. MacL. Currie, "Ovid's Personality," *CJ* 59:4 (1964): 151; Furley, "Koronisma," 27–28 n. 51 (Callimachus, who Ovid imitated, had not enough religion "to save a tomtit").

¹²⁹ Nicoll, "Cupid," 181–82.

¹³⁰ "Nero's imitation of Apollo/Helios derives in part from the solar theology of ancient pharaohs." Champlin *Nero*, 172–74 & n. 81.

¹³¹ Champlin, *Nero*, 173–74; Eva Matthews Sanford, "Nero and the East," *HSCP* 48 (1937): 86–89, 94–95.

¹³² Edward Champlin, "Nero, Apollo, and the Poets," *Phoenix* 57:3/4 (2003): 282. On the conflating of the sun, Apollo, and Dionysos, see Arnobius, *Ad Gent.* 3.173.

Seneca's Ode to Bacchus in his play *Oedipus* (403–508) “describes Nero behind the façade of Bacchus.”¹³³ Prior to his falling out with, and death at the hands of Nero, Seneca benefited enormously (it was though hypocritically) from his fawning association with Nero. Consequently, after his death, Seneca's reputation and writings fell out of favor among pagans. But, perhaps due, at least in part, to his late-in-life anti-imperial, anti-Nero stance and “martyrdom” by Nero, Christians adored Seneca. Christian legends about Seneca abounded; a convert, he corresponded with Paul; Jerome placed him among the Saints.¹³⁴

Pausanias links Nero to the story of Dionysos and the fig. On his Geek tour, Nero visited the lake where, instructed by Prosymnos, Dionysos had entered Hades. According to Pausanias, Nero brought along a great length of rope and lead weight to test whether, as claimed in the story, the lake where Hades was entered really was bottomless.¹³⁵

There in fact seem to have existed an ancient Attic cult in the region that commemorated the Dionysos story by phallus pole riding,¹³⁶ Pausaneus records that at the time of his visit they were still performing these (sacred) rites, which, respecting their privacy, he declines to describe.¹³⁷ And, late in the Empire, as the

¹³³ J. David Bishop, “Seneca's ‘Oedipus’: Opposition Literature,” *CJ* 73:4 (1978): 297–98

¹³⁴ Robert Benson Steele, “Seneca the Philosopher,” *Sewanee Review* 30:1 (1922): 79–94.

¹³⁵ Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.37.

¹³⁶ Csapo, “Riding,” 279, plate 8B.

¹³⁷ Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.37.

stereotype of “the Emperor,” Nero was represented on contorniates (worthless “carny” money) combined with salacious Dionysian images or symbolism.¹³⁸

NERO AS ALEXANDER

Nero had condemned criminals, including the Christians of Rome, executed while being forced to act in theatrical performances.¹³⁹ Thus, for example, the Christian story of Peter choosing to be crucified upside down was probably in reality a Roman-inspired performance to parody Jesus’ crucifixion.

Most remarkably, Nero himself acted in certain theatrical executions of Christians—acting as the charioteer strolling or in a cart and with the Christians in the role of flaming torches.¹⁴⁰ This scene strongly evokes a most popular comic skit of Dionysos’ mimic portrayal of Alexander’s conquest of India.¹⁴¹ Thus, not untypical of mime, we have mime within mime, within mime. “He” mimes Nero, who mimes Dionysos, who mimes Alexander.

Alexander had represented his conquest of India as repeating and exceeding Dionysos’ prior conquest, and the scene as parody entered Roman culture early from Etruscan influence and continued prominently in Roman art

¹³⁸ Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 691–704.

¹³⁹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Eusebius, *CH* 2.25; Kathleen M. Coleman, “Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments,” *JRS* 80 (1990): 44–73, especially 64–66; Champlin, *Nero*, 55, 123; Slater, “Problems,” 204; Laurence L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool for Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (New York: T.&T. Clark International, 2005), 100–01.

¹⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44. Nero frequently appeared in costume as the charioteer, which could represent Sol Invictus, Apollo, or Dionysos.

¹⁴¹ Plutarch *De Sera* 554; Athenaeus 14.630–34. Dionysos was a favorite subject of Roman pantomime. Slater, “Drama,” 189–212 & n. 56; Katherine Dunbabin “The Triumph of Dionysos on Mosaics in North Africa,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 39 (1971): 52–65.

and literature until the end of the empire.¹⁴² Portraying Alexander and his army, Dionysos in a chariot leads his army comprised of satyrs, maenads, nymphs, sileni, pans, and fauns, all dancing wildly to infectious martial music. Among these were the condemned “criminals” clad in bulky, gaudy costumes disguising the accelerants hidden beneath.

Dionysos’ clown army appeared supremely inept, incapable of conquering anyone.¹⁴³ Their weapons were phallic thyrsi and torches.¹⁴⁴ Fire was the signature weapon of Dionysos.¹⁴⁵ And, immolation by the *tunica molesta* (annoying garment) was a favorite Roman torture execution. The Romans possessed the technology to have the condemned on cue suddenly burst into flames thereby representing Dionysos’ surprisingly powerful Bacchic fury.¹⁴⁶

Evidently, as a result of these theatrical torture execution, in some of which Nero himself performed with the Christians, in Christian tradition, Nero

¹⁴² Wiseman “*Liber*,” 285–99.

¹⁴³ Slater, “Drama,” 200–205.

¹⁴⁴ Slater, “Drama,” 204. The Greeks learned to store fire in fennel stalks for transportation between sanctuaries. Edna M. Hooker, “The Significance of Numa’s Religious Reforms,” *Numen* 10:2 (1963): 115.

¹⁴⁵ Lucian, *Dionysos*; Ovid, *Fasti*, March 8. In the Talmud, fig wood was used for kindling for the fire upon the altar. *Tamid* 2a2–3a1 & nn. 34–37.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Rouselle, “Liber-Dionysus in Early Roman Drama,” *CJ* 82:3 (1987): 193–98; Paul McGinty, “Dionysos’s Revenge and the Validation of the Hellenic World-View,” *HTR* 71:1/2 (1978): 77–94; On Roman technology of torches and objects suddenly bursting into flame, see Roger D. Woodard, *Indo-European Sacred Space: Vedic and Roman Cult* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 228–30.

became immortalized “as the ultimate Evil incarnate.”¹⁴⁷ And, the epithet “shoots of fig” came to mean the martyred righteous and end of days.¹⁴⁸

As with the Christians’ surprising enduring affection for Ovid and Seneca, the story of Alexander’s conquest of India seems to have assumed a prominent place in Christian institutional memory. The longest epic poem to have survived from antiquity is the Christian Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* about Dionysos’s conquest of India bearing a shield emblazoned with the image of Jupiter and Ganymede!¹⁴⁹ A stunningly long and dreadfully tacky parody, the *Dionysiaca* survives not due to any literary merit, but rather because, in the style of Callimachus and Ovid, it obscenely mimed and mocked imperial Roman tradition.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Pseudo-Callisthenes’ *Alexander Romance* was antiquity’s most successful novel, published in 80 versions in 24 languages, exceeded in popularity and diffusion only by the Bible. A decidedly mediocre work, even for its genre, it contains some juicy seditious jibes.¹⁵¹

Parenthetically, one wonders what pious Christian monks thought when they copied obscene works like Nonnos’ or Ovid’s. Did they have any

¹⁴⁷ Rudich, *Dissidence*, 86.

¹⁴⁸ Richard Bauckham, “The Two Fig Tree Parables in the Apocalypse of Peter,” *JBL* 104:2 (1985): 269–87.

¹⁴⁹ Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 25:429–50. Even the Loeb translator comments how exceptionally tacky and tasteless this passage is, even for Nonnos.

¹⁵⁰ Liebeschuetz, “Mythology,” 204 (Dionysos’ “principal activity is to seduce virgins” without “the slightest consideration for their feelings or future well-being”); Arnobius, *Ad. Gent.* 6.306.

¹⁵¹ Ken Dowden, “Introduction,” *Alexander Romance*, in Reardon, *Greek Novels*, 651.

institutional recollection of the role authors like Nonnos, Ovid, or Seneca played in Christianity's fight for survival against Roman persecution?

WAS MARK'S AUTHOR IN THEATER?

Mime, of course, is theatrical, and there is reason to believe that Mark's author was connected with theater. In the first place, Mark's literary style¹⁵² is theatrical, consisting almost entirely of physical, visible action with no reflection.¹⁵³ In Mark, Jesus cures blindness by spitting in eyes, deafness by

¹⁵² For almost all of its history, Mark was considered for sacred scripture surprisingly poorly written, lowbrow, inelegant, clumsy, ungrammatical, and crude, by an author lacking a formal education, and inferior to the other canonical gospels. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 60–61; Brenda Deen Schildgen, *Power and Prejudice: The Reception of the Gospel of Mark* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 21, 44, 57–59; Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark's Audience: Literary and Social Setting of Mark 4.11–12* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1989), 21, 40; Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Bellingham: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 8–9, 35, 125–33, 140–42. Nevertheless, it was assumed that, as sacred scripture, Mark would *have to be* written in an “elevated style.” Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (trans. Willard R. Trask; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 41–49, 72, 154, 306, 556; Beavis, *Audience*, 35; Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001) 3; John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) 13–16; Gilbert Bilezikian, *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); Marcus, *Mark*, 65, 68–69, 94–100. Hence, virtually every genre was considered for Mark's model—novel, Hellenistic romance, history, drama, apocalyptic drama, tragedy, tragi-comedy, epic, biography, life, and unprecedented new invention. John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) 13–16; Bilezikian, *Liberated*; Marcus, *Mark*, 65, 68–69, 94–100. But, mime was not considered, presumably because it was considered too lowbrow. However, taken as popular theater, Mark's style improves considerably.

¹⁵³ Bilezikian, *Liberated*; Beavis, *Audience*, 31, 34–35; Shimon Levy, *The Bible as Theatre* (Brighton/Portland: Academic Press, 2000); Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, “Theatricality: An Introduction,” in *Theatricality: Theatre and Performance Theory* (eds. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–39; Josette Feval, “Theatricality: The

sticking his fingers in ears, something that does not occur in the other gospels (Mark 7:31–37; 8:22–25). In Mark 7:25, the Syro-Phoenician woman falls at Jesus’ feet; in Matthew 15:22–23, she merely cries out. Non-theatrical “talking,” “speechifying” scenes, such as the Sermon on the Mount and Lord’s Prayer, are absent from Mark.

Furthermore, Mark’s author may have had personal firsthand experience with large scale theatrical productions. Revealingly, much more so than the other gospels, Mark contains many scenes of enormous crowds, and details the steps required to control them. For example, desperate to touch or to be touched by Jesus (Mark 3:10; 5:27–31, 41; 6:56)¹⁵⁴ on several occasions crowds so press on Jesus that he and his disciples cannot eat (Mark 2.2; 3:20; 6:31). To avoid the crowd’s press, Jesus escapes by boat preaching to the crowd while aboard (Mark 3:9; 4:1; 5:21). (The image of a boat and sea (or lake) on stage is a theater classic as in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*.) The crowds line the shore (Mark 3:7–10), a configuration like the format of the Roman semi-circular theaters that used natural hill slopes for seats.¹⁵⁵ And, there is the typically Roman custom and preoccupation of feeding vast crowds (*panem et circenses*).¹⁵⁶

Specificity of Theatrical Language,” *SubStance* 31:2/3; #98/99 (2002): 94–108; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Disciples/Crowds/Whoever: Markan Characters and Readers,” *NT* 28:2 (1986): 115–17, 126–130.

¹⁵⁴ Collins, *Mark*, 276 & n. 113, 282.

¹⁵⁵ Catherine Clare Keane, “Theatre, Spectacle, and the Satirist in Juvenal,” *Phoenix* 57:3/4 (2003): 263.

¹⁵⁶ Jesus feeding immense crowds is characteristically Roman, not Jewish. John F. Donahue, “Towards a Typology of Roman Public Feasting,” *AJP* 124:3 (2003): 423–41.

Furthermore, mime was a major venue for the underclass to attack their powerful oppressors. The storylines, such as they were, often were parasitic, mere mimicry, simple retellings of well-known myths in parody.

To that end, Roman mime employed the literary device called temporal allusion, temporal reference, or a contemporary reference. Supremely popular in the first century, using this device, the action jumps from the time and place in which the story transpires (Jerusalem in the 30s, in our example) to the time and place in which the performance is given/the story is written/told (Rome in the 60s). Roman audiences were always expecting and craning for outrageous, salacious, seditious temporal references, especially against the emperor.¹⁵⁷ Cicero wrote, “there was never any passage in which something a poet said seeming to refer to our times the whole people did not notice or the actor himself did not indicate.”¹⁵⁸ The problem with temporal references as a literary device, however, is that they become lost in history and their meaning lost,¹⁵⁹ as is the case with Mark’s fig tree.

¹⁵⁷ R. W. Reynolds, “Criticism of Individuals in Roman Popular Comedy,” *CQ* 37:1/2 (1943): 37–45; Idem., “The Adultery Mime,” *CQ* 40:3/4 (1946) 77–84; Geoffrey S. Sumi, “Impersonating the Dead: Mimes at Roman Funerals,” *AJP* 123:4 (2002): 559–85; Shadi Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak: From Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 63–97; Champlin, *Nero*, 95; Idem., “Nero Reconsidered,” *New England Review* 19:2 (1998): 98–102; Suetonius, *Tib.* 45; *Nero* 39.3; *Galb.* 13; *Cal.* 27.4; *Dom.* 10.1; Seneca (Elder), *Contr.* 2.4.12–13.

¹⁵⁸ Cicero, *Pro Sesto* 118.

¹⁵⁹ According to George S. Kaufman, “The greatest single explosive laugh in Broadway history” was in response to a temporal reference by Grouch Marx, “I wonder what ever happened to Rhinelander?” Martin A. Gardner, *The Marx Brothers as Social Critics* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), 13. Likewise, many of the names in Dante’s *Inferno* mean nothing to us but were hilarious temporal references when Dante wrote. In Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* two disreputable

The greatest example of mime in Mark is the scene of Pilate and the crowd in which Pilate giving the crowd the choices of whom to free and whether to spare of have killed, which mimics the stereotypical scene of Caesar and the crowd at the games.¹⁶⁰ But, in the fig tree scene, Mark carries mime to the farthest limits by having Jesus himself, or rather “he,” act in mime of, of all people, Nero.

CONCLUSION: THE FIG TREE EXPLAINED

If it seems extraordinary that, as sacred Christian scripture, Mark would contain an obscene allusion, the times were most unusual. To quote Juvenal, “When the *princeps* is a lyre-player, a noble in a mime is hardly a surprise” (*Sat.* 8.198–99). And, obscenity was extremely common in mime. And, moreover, Mark’s fig tree story was evidently provoked by Nero’s unspeakable cruelty to the Christians of Rome that had them executed acting in mimes.

That the fig tree, the national symbol of Rome, might symbolize anything Jewish is absurd. Mark’s fig tree represents Rome. And, the person who curses and kills it is Nero. The story is told in the most popular genre of the time—mime, impersonation. Christians used the pagan myths of the sexual debaucheries of the pagan gods to oppose their pagan persecutors, with the story of Dionysos and the fig the most outrageously biting of all. In Mark’s story, told in mime, “he”/Nero/Dionysos greedily solicits sex/fruit from the tree, but the

Athenian contemporaries of Aristophanes are portrayed disguised as eunuchs hiding among the Persians. Perhaps the greatest temporal reference in history jumping out of a play is in Beaumarchais’ *Marriage of Figaro*, Act 5, Scene 3, Figaro’s seditious anti-aristocracy speech. (Note the “fig” in Figaro.)

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Simmonds, “Mark’s and Matthew’s *Sub Rosa* Message in the Scene of Pilate and the Crowd,” *JBL* 131:4 (2012): 733–54.

leaves are but a wig. Disappointed, he curses and kills the tree that symbolizes and represents Rome.

The evident inspiration for Mark's story was Nero's theatrical, mimic executions of Rome's Christians in which, among other skits, Nero performed as the charioteer with the Christians performing as burning torches. This scene evokes the Roman fiery popular mimic execution skit of Dionysos and his motley crew miming Alexander's conquest of India.

The evangelist turns Nero's mimic theatrical executions back on him and Rome. Using mime, the Messiah impersonates Nero destroying evil Rome, thereby vindicating Peter and his fellow Christian martyrs. Rather than an event in the life of Jesus in Jerusalem in the 30s, Mark's fig tree story is a temporal reference, a literary device exceedingly popular in Roman mime, to Nero and the Roman Christians in the 60s.

This interpretation supports the traditional view of Mark's Roman provenance, that Mark's author was indeed Peter's amanuensis and literary executor.

Finally, let me end with a disclaimer. I am not responsible for Mark's fig tree story. I did not write it, nor did I give it its obscene interpretation, which has been known in the tradition of German classics scholarship for over a hundred years and to the field of biblical scholarship at least since Telford's 1991 article. I have just added to the research and provided the explanation that makes sense of it, that it is written in mime. In my view, it is fortunate that we have this obscene story in the Christian canon because it gives us telling insight into the horrendous

circumstances of Nero's persecution of the Christians of Rome and the early development of Christianity.