

Bethphage

Names (also known as)

- Bethphage (Greek)
- Kefr et-Tor (Arabic)
- Abu Dis (Arabic Alternate)
- Vilula (Jerome)

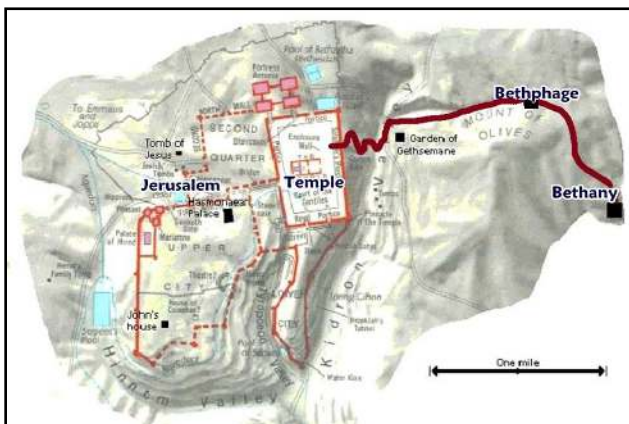
Etymology

Bethphage – “house of unripe figs” (Thayer) or “fig house” (Strong). The unused root of the Hebrew word for ‘fig’ means to be torpid, that is, crude; an unripe fig.

Location/Description



Eusebius of Caesarea (Onom 58:13) located it on the Mount of Olives. It was likely on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and the limit of a Sabbath-day's journey from Jerusalem, that is, 2,000 cubits. As is normally the case, a church of the Apostasy is found at a likely location.



The traditional route of Christ riding into Jerusalem

Bethphage must be on slopes of the mount of Olives as Jesus “went” in the “way” after departing Bethphage (Luke 19:36) being “nigh” but on “descent of the mount of Olives” (Luke 19:37).

The Talmud further describes Bethphage as “the outmost part of Jerusalem” but “adjacent the valley of Shaveh.”

Scriptural references

Matt. 21:1; Mark 11:1; Luke 19:29.

Brief history

In ancient times both Bethany and Bethphage were known for their hospitality to invite pilgrims coming to Passover. A vacancy was indicated by the presence of a towel, curtain or sheet in the door. Bethphage was a walled village considered to be within the suburbs of greater Jerusalem, and was marked as the “gate of Jerusalem”. The Old Testament feature of having judges sitting in the gate, and other forms of jurisprudence continued at Bethphage on behalf of the city of Jerusalem.

The names of Bethphage, Bethany and the Mount of Olives all suggest a time of rich agriculture, but this was not the case from the time of Roman occupation where the trees were cut down for siege material. This continued in Crusader times for the same reason, and in Turkish times due to heavy taxes imposed on trees. On visiting Jerusalem in 680 AD, Arnulf found almost a complete absence of trees except for a few vines and olive trees.

Scriptural importance

The enacted parable of Bethphage and Bethany

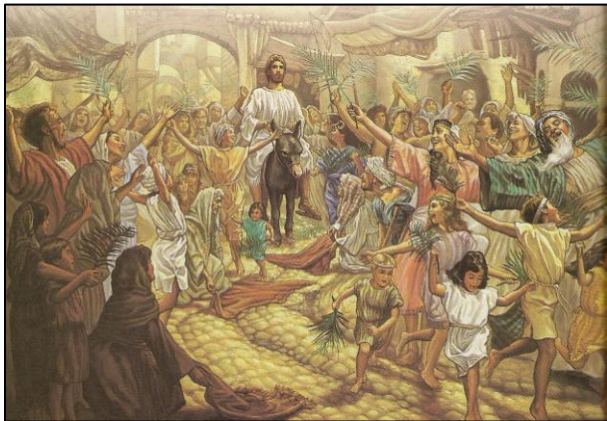
Having cured blind Bartimaeus (“the son of the polluted” – as Jews regarded Gentiles) in Jericho (“the city of palm trees” – a symbol for the nations – Ex. 15:27; Rev. 7:9), Christ arrives at the Mount of Olives (the first of 3 trees to feature in Mark 11:1). He arrives first at Bethphage (“the house of figs” – the fig tree being the symbol for Israel) and from there sends two disciples to Bethany (“the house of date palms”) to collect an ass and the foal of the ass (although Mark only mentions the unbroken

colt representing the Gentiles – Gen. 49:11). This is perfectly consistent with the Divine method – to the Jew first (Bethphage), and then to the Gentile (Bethany). Both Jew and Gentile are joined in the olive tree (Rom. 11:16-17) and will be seen together in the Kingdom – Zech. 4:3.

Every phrase of Mark 11 is pregnant with meaning in the context of the temporary falling aside of Israel so that the Gentiles might be called (Rom. 11:11-25). Such phrases as – “and as soon as ye be entered into it, ye shall find a colt tied, whereon never man sat; loose him, and bring him” speak eloquently of the response of the Gentiles to the preaching of the Gospel. Gentiles, unbroken by law, and not subject to any control (like the colt), were in fact “tied” (bound under sin – Rom. 11:32), and were outside the house (“by a door without”) and needed to be loosed and brought to Christ.

Accordingly, in the enacted parable, Christ bypasses the ass of Israel and chooses the unbroken colt of the Gentiles. He always knew this from the prophecy of Jacob – Gen. 49:11.

On the 10th of Abib, Christ rode the colt into Jerusalem to fulfil Zech. 9:9 on the way to the cross (in 5 days), thus ensuring the ultimate fulfilment of Zech. 9:10 when he will “speak peace unto the nations.”



It is no wonder that the branches spread in the way were palm branches (John 12:13), and that on inspection of the temple and its perverse traditions he departs unimpressed to stay the night in Bethany (by interpretation the house of the nations).

The cursing of the fig tree on the 11th Abib and its drying up by the next day; the cleansing of

‘the court of the Gentiles’ of the paraphernalia of Jewish ritual and the robbery involved; the pausing of the Mosaic system; the declaration of God’s house as “a house of prayer for all nations”; and the constitution of the new covenant (the Abrahamic) with the response to Peter – “have faith in God”, all have their place in this beautiful enacted parable that revolves around Bethany.

The final element is a reference to Zech. 14 in Mark 11:23 - **“That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.”**

The mountain in view is the Mount of Olives and it will be cast into the Dead Sea when Christ again returns to Bethany from whence he left to go to his Father (Luke 24:50; Acts 1:11).

The cursing of the fig tree

When on 11th Abib, Christ and his disciples came from Bethany (the place representing the Gentiles in the enacted parable), the Lord was hungry and seeing a fig tree sought some fruit from it. Though “the time of figs was not yet”, the fig tree is unique among fruit trees. After winter, deciduous fruit trees shoot forth leaves and then in most cases the fruit follows, but not with the fig tree.



The ‘dead’ fig tree first produces buds (the syconium) that are the future fruit (seen in the photo at left), and then the leaves appear from the same ‘bulge’ as

seen at right. When the fig tree has developed mature leaves the syconium (‘false fruit’) is developed enough to provide a source of food to needy humans and animals. It is immature and bitter, but nourishing. That this is the case is demonstrated by the clear testimony of Mark

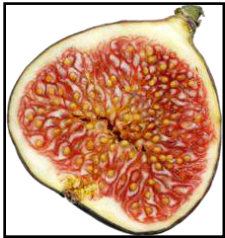


11:13 – **“And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find anything thereon: and when he came to it,**

he found nothing but leaves.” Christ’s expectation was that there would be something edible on a fig tree covered with leaves, but he was disappointed. The photo below was taken in mid March in the northern hemisphere and shows a fig tree in the early stages of producing fruit buds and then leaves. The fruit is large enough to be picked, while the leaves are in the early stages of development. This fascinating fact shows why Christ did not have an unreasonable expectation of finding something edible on the tree.



A fig "fruit" is a type of multiple fruit known as a syconium, derived from an arrangement of many small flowers on an inverted, nearly closed receptacle. The many small flowers are unseen unless the fig is cut open as seen in the photo at left. Like the pomegranate, the fruit of the fig tree symbolises many incorporate in one – the Christ body – his ecclesia.



The fig tree is one Biblical symbol for the nation of Israel (Joel 1:7,12; Hos. 9:10). God called the nation of Israel in Egypt His firstborn son among the nations – Ex. 4:22 – **“Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn.”** The principle of many in one is evident in this description.

What is the lesson to be learnt from Christ coming to this fig tree in expectation of finding fruit?

Israel was God’s chosen nation to whom He had given His law and the covenants of promise. There should have been “fruits fit for

repentance” (Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8) found by their Messiah when he came on the scene, but there was “nothing but leaves.” Adam and Eve used fig leaves to cover their shame (Gen. 3:7). They created their own ‘religion’ just as the Jews of Christ’s time did, but it could not deal with matters of conscience.

Christ condemned the fig tree, saying – “No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever (*aion* - Diag. “to the age”). The cursed fig tree of Israel was not to provide fruit until the Millennial Age. This would come at the end of the Gentile Age that would follow the end of Judah’s Commonwealth in AD 70.

Significantly, the fig tree of Israel is alive and has leaves again. Revived in 1948, in fulfilment of Luke 21:24-29, the State of Israel still does not bear any fruit “fit for repentance.” But its time will soon come according to Christ’s promise – Luke 21:28-31 – **“And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand.”**

Sources:

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(Compilers – Peter Boon and Jim Cowie)