

MISTAKE 38

UNDERSTAND BIBLICAL IDIOMS AND FIGURES OF SPEECH BEFORE YOU CITE THEM AUTHORITATIVELY AS EVIDENCE OF PREDICTIONS ABOUT THE LAST DAYS

This is a common mistake that we should be careful not to make: citing certain idiomatic expressions in Scripture, or certain figures of speech as proof of what we should expect the world to look like in the last days. Unfortunately, this is often done without an appreciation of what the Scripture actually is saying.

We will give some illustrations:

THE EARTH DWELLERS

The phrase “earth dwellers” in the Book of Revelation has been mistakenly claimed to prohibit humans from colonizing another planet before the return of Christ. In other words, the judgment of Christ is specifically for those who inhabit the earth. This we are told, precludes humans from living at any location outside of the earth. Since colonization of places apart from the earth is now being planned, it is argued that this is another reason why Christ must come soon.

However, this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of the term. After looking at all of the instances of “earth dwellers” in the Book of Revelation, Thomas Ice makes this conclusion:

The term “earth dwellers” refers to persistent unbelievers during the Tribulation who will not place their faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, no matter how clearly God’s plan of salvation is presented. In fact the more the earth dwellers resist, the greater the hardship they will endure as the wrath of God will be poured out on them in ever-increasing degrees. Rather than looking to God, who dwells in heaven, their focus will be on the Beast (the Antichrist), who will arise from the sea on planet earth. Many will turn away from the truth and not only follow a lie but will even delight in it. Such a display demonstrates that people left to their own fallen nature will never respond to God’s message of grace, regardless of the circumstances. The gospel message only impacts an individual in tandem with God’s grace. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’ ” (Rev. 22:17).

Today many people are trusting Christ as their Savior. Yet also evident is worldwide antagonism toward Christianity, making it easy to envision how quickly conditions will degenerate into the scenario outlined in the Bible’s prophetic literature. Thus it is important to note that unbelief can be obstinate and persistent and on the other hand to note how great and marvelous is God’s grace as He still offers salvation to everyone (Thomas D. Ice, *The Meaning of “Earth Dwellers” In Revelation*, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 166:633, 2009, p. 365).

Therefore, the term is referring to persistent unbelievers, it has nothing to do with specifying the geographical location of these unbelievers at the time of the end, namely people who happen to live on the earth. In other words, it does not disallow non-Christians residing on a space station, flying towards a destination other than the earth, or setting up a colony somewhere.

Hence, nobody has the right to claim that Christ MUST come back before any of the above occurs. The Bible certainly does *not* say that!

THE FABLE OF JOTHAM

Another example of drawing incorrect inferences from Scripture comes from the fable of Jotham, the son of the judge Gideon. When he was told that his brother Abimelech had killed all of his other brothers, and that the elders of Shechem had made this murderer king, he gave them this fable:

When it was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, “Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you. The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?’ Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.’

“Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and integrity when you made Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house and have done to him as his deeds deserved— for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian, and you have risen up against my father's house this day and have killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his female servant, king over the leaders of Shechem, because he is your relative— if you then have acted in good faith and integrity with Jerubbaal and with his house this day, then rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you. But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and devour the leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo; and let fire come out from the leaders of Shechem and from Beth-millo and devour Abimelech.” And Jotham ran away and fled and went to Beer and lived there, because of Abimelech his brother (Judges 9:7-21 ESV).

The Moody Bible Commentary explains the words of Jotham in this manner:

The lecture of Jotham to the elders of Shechem is the finest biblical example of a fable, a short prose or poetic morality lesson in which animals or plants behave like people. The stylized account of the trees searching for a king among the plants, only to settle on the bramble, is classic satire in fable form. The bramble, a noxious bush, represents Abimelech in the fable. The other trees, that would have been more qualified, were simply not willing to serve such a miserable constituency. So the story is a backhanded swipe at Shechem itself (John McMath, *Moody Bible Commentary*, Judges).

To sum up, Jotham's fable is about trees searching for a king. The trees try to find a suitable tree that will rule over them. They offer the kingship to the olive tree, the fig tree, the vine, then finally to the bramble. The first three decline but the bramble accepts.

IS THIS WHAT JESUS WAS THINKING ABOUT?

Since people and nations are described as trees in this fable, it has caused some to relate it to Jesus' reference to the fig tree, and all the trees, in Luke's gospel:

And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees (Luke 21:29 ESV).

Supposedly, since we have a biblical precedent of comparing nations to trees, it is claimed that this is precisely what Jesus was doing. In other words, the fig tree represents Israel and the other trees are representative of the various nations.

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Authoritatively As Evidence Of Predictions About The Last Days

RESPONSE

This equation of the trees with the various nations in Jesus' parable does not work for a number of reasons.

First, as we have indicated in Mistakes 16-18, as well as in Appendix 1, the fig tree is NEVER used in Scripture to refer to the nation of Israel.

Second, each instance of the fig tree in the New Testament refers to an actual tree. It is never used as symbolic for anything.

Third, Jesus gave a parable, namely a story that deals with reality. Indeed, it was well-known that when fig trees start showing their leaves then summer is soon arriving. Jotham, on the other hand, gave a fable, a story that does not have anything to do with reality. Indeed, trees do not talk to olive trees, vines, fig trees, or brambles!

Fourth, the trees in the fable do not refer to nations. Rather it is Jotham's sarcastic illustration of the stupidity of the people of Shechem to make a man ruler over them, a man who had just murdered all his brothers! As we continue to read the account in Judges, we find that his illustration is well-taken.

Consequently, we should conclude that when Jesus used the illustration of the fig tree and all the trees, He was giving an illustration from nature, not from talking trees who represented people seeking another tree to rule over them.

These two examples point out the folly of not understanding figures of speech in Scripture, or the different types of literature we find in the Bible.

We again emphasize that it is a mistake to interpret the Bible without appreciating the literary forms in which it is written as well as the meaning of idiomatic expressions.