

The Parable of

THE BARREN FIG-TREE

Luke 13:6-9

by

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The eagerness of men to be the first narrators of evil tidings, an eagerness which must spring from a certain secret pleasure in these,¹ although one most often unacknowledged even to themselves, may have moved some to hasten to the Lord with tidings of a new outrage which Pilate had committed. The bearers of this report understood rightly that He was speaking, in the words which conclude the last chapter (ver. 58, 59), of the terrible judgments which men draw down upon their own heads through their sins; but, as is the manner of most, it was only for others that they found a warning here. Of the outrage itself,--which, however, agrees well with the quarrel between Herod and Pilate (Luke 23:12), and may have been either its cause or its consequence,--there is no notice elsewhere; for we cannot accept the scattering or slaying by Pilate of some fanatical Samaritan insurgents, recorded by Josephus,² and here adduced by some earlier commentators, as the event referred to. But we know that a revolt, or at the least a tumult, was always dreaded at the great festivals, and various precautions taken against it; a very small spark serving to kindle into a blaze the smouldering elements of Jewish resistance to the hated Roman dominion, and to provoke measures of severest retaliation on the part of the Roman authorities.³ Among the numberless atrocities which ensued, it is nothing strange that this, which must have been but as a drop of water in a great ocean, should remain unrecorded. Some outbreak of that troublesome insurrectionary spirit for which the Galileans were noted,⁴ may have been the motive or excuse for this massacre; which yet cannot have been perpetrated in Galilee, where, a subject of Herod (Luke 23:7, 22), these men would not have been exposed to Pilate's cruelty, but at Jerusalem, which also was the only place where sacrifices were offered (Lev. 17:8, 9; Deut.

1 Two languages at least bear melancholy witness to the existence of such a feeling, having a word to express this joy at calamities:--the German, Schadenfreude; and the Greek επιχαίρεκακία.

2 *Antt.* xviii. 4.1.

3 *Antt.* xx. 5.3.

4 The Galilæans Josephus describes as industrious and brave; they were held in a certain contempt by other Jews, partly as less pure in blood, many heathens being mingled among them, whence their country is called 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Matt. 4:15; see 1 Macc. 5:15, Γαλιλαία αλλοφυλων),--and partly as less strictly orthodox (John 7:52; see 1:46; Acts 2:7), and departing in many observances from the tradition of Jerusalem. They spoke a harsh broad dialect (Matt. 26:73), characterized by a confusion of gutturals, and not always intelligible to a native of Jerusalem (Lightfoot, *Chorograph. Cent.* lxxxvi. 87). Keim (*Jesu von Nazara*, vol. i. pp. 307-318) has an exceedingly interesting chapter on Galilee and the Galilæans.

12:26, 27; John 4:20). The language in which their slaughter is reported is significant; they were men *'whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices;'* thus blood was mingled with blood, their own with that of the slain beasts which they offered;⁵ the narrators possibly urging this as evidence of the peculiar anger of God against those who so perished. If men might be safe anywhere, or at any time, it would be at the altar of God, and in the act of offering sacrifices to Him. But here, they would infer (just as Job's friends inferred some mighty guilt upon his part from the mighty calamities which overwhelmed him), there must have been some hidden enormous guilt, which turned the very sacrifices of these men into sin,--not a propitiation of God, but a provocation,--so that they themselves became piacular expiations, their blood mingling with, and itself becoming part of, the sacrifices which they offered.

But whether the tellers intended this or not, the Lord at once rebuked the cruel judgments which they certainly had formed concerning those that perished: *'Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things?'* He does not deny that they were sinners, justly obnoxious to this or any other severest visitation from God, but only that the blood-bath in which they perished marked them out as sinners *above all* their fellow-countrymen; and then He leads his hearers, as was his wont (see Luke 13:23; John 21:22), to take their eyes off from others, and to fix them upon themselves; *'I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish'*--not those Galileans alone, but all of them as well. This is the meaning for ourselves of the calamities which befall others; they are loud and earnest calls to repentance. Instead of exalting ourselves above and against the sufferers, as though we were more righteous than they, and therefore exempt from like tribulations, we shall rather acknowledge that whatever befalls another, might justly have befallen ourselves. When, too, we have learned to recognize in ourselves the bitter root of sin, we shall be prompt to confess that whatever deadly fruit it bears in another, it might have borne the same or worse, under like temptations, in ourselves. But when this is felt, it will be no longer possible to triumph over the doom of any sinner. The thoughts of one, thus taught to know himself, will fall back on his own life and on his own heart. He will see in the chastisement which has overtaken another, the image of that which might justly have overtaken himself; and a message of warning, if also for others, yet first for himself. For he will not deny, as neither does Christ here deny, the intimate connexion between suffering and sin; but it is the sin of the whole race which is linked with the suffering of the whole race; and not of necessity the sin of the individual with his particular share and portion in this the world's woe.⁶ So far from denying this connexion, the more the Christian conscience is unfolded in

5 A tumult in the temple itself, pitilessly quelled in blood by Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, some thirty years before this, is related at length by Josephus (*Antt.* xvii. 9.3).

6 Strauss (*Leben Jesu*, vol. ii. pp. 84-90) terms the faith in a connexion between sin and suffering, a 'vulgar Hebrew notion,' from which this passage might at first seem to clear the Lord, but which Matt. 9:2, John 5:14 lay again at his door, or at theirs who profess to report his words. Christ affirms, and all Scripture affirms, that the sum total of the calamity which oppresses the human race is the consequence of the sum total of its sin; nor does He deny the relation in which a man's actual sins may stand to his sufferings. What He does deny is, the power of other men to trace the connexion, and thus their right in any particular case to assert it. And this, instead of being a 'vulgar Hebrew

him, the more close will this connexion appear. At every new instance of moral and physical evil which he encounters in a world that has departed from God, he will anew justify God as the author of all good, even when He asserts Himself negatively as such, in the misery of man as he is a sinful creature separated from his God, no less than positively, in the blessedness of man as he is redeemed and reunited with God.

Our blessed Lord, more fully to illustrate the truth He has in hand, Himself brings forward another instance of a swift destruction overtaking many persons at once: *'Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men'--or literally, 'debtors above all men'* (Matt. 5:25; 6:12; 18:24; Luke 7:41)--*'that dwelt in Jerusalem?'* As little in this case were cruel judgments to find place. But while none might attribute a preeminence in guilt to those who were crushed by that falling tower, yet here also, in sudden and strange catastrophes like this, all were to recognize a call to repentance; partly as these should remind all of the uncertainty of life, how soon therefore their own day of grace might end; but chiefly as awakening in them a sense and consciousness of sin. For all discords of outward nature, of fire and flood, of earthquake and storm, all fearful accidents, like that of the falling tower, are parts of that subjection of the whole creation to vanity, consequent on the sin of man (Rom. 8:20, 21); all speak to sinners in the same warning language, *'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.'* The near resemblance between these two calamities just instanced, and the doom which actually did overtake the rebellious Jews, the nation which refused to obey this bidding and to repent, can scarcely be accidental, and demands that we shall give to that *'likewise'* of the Lord all its force. It was indeed *'likewise'* that they perished; for the very same forms of violent death overtook them. As the tower in Siloam fell and crushed eighteen of the dwellers in Jerusalem, exactly so multitudes of its inhabitants in that last siege and assault were crushed beneath the ruins of their temple and city; numbers also were pierced through by the Roman missiles,--or more miserably yet, by the swords of their own frantic factions,--in the courts of the temple, in the very act of preparing their sacrifices,⁷ so that literally their blood, like that of these Galileans, was *'mingled with their sacrifices,'* one blood with another.

Those two calamities then are adduced as slight foretastes of the doom reserved for the whole people of the Jews. If they would lay to heart the warning, and bring forth fruit meet for repentance, that doom might even now be averted: but if not, then these beginnings of sorrow should usher in at length the crowning calamity which would make repentance impossible. In the meanwhile, in the fact that hitherto the strokes descended upon them for warning, and not the stroke for excision, they should see proof of the long-suffering of God, not willing that any should perish: and to use Olshausen's words,--'the

notion,' is a most deeply rooted conviction in the universal human heart, inextricably entwined in all language--a truth which men may forget or deny in their prosperity, but which in the hour of calamity they are compelled to acknowledge, extorting as it does this confession from them: Our sin hath found us out (Gen. 42:21; cf. 1 Kin. 17:18; Judg. 1:7). Strange that the barbarous islanders of Melite should have been in moral intuition so far ahead of the learned German Professor (Acts 28:4). Hengstenberg (*Authentic d. Pentateuches*, vol. ii. p. 577 seq.) has some good observations on the subject.

7 Josephus, *B.J.* v. 1.3: 'Many even fell in front of the sacrifices.' Cf. ii. 2.5.

discourse of Jesus, severe and full of rebuke, is closed by a parable, in which the merciful Son of man again brings the side of grace prominently forward. He appears as the Intercessor for men before the righteousness of the heavenly Father, as He who obtains for them space for repentance. This idea of the deferring of the judgment of God, so to leave men opportunity to turn, runs through all Scripture; before the deluge, a period of a hundred and twenty years was fixed (Gen. 6:3); Abraham prayed for Sodom (Gen. 18:24); the destruction of Jerusalem did not follow till forty years after the Ascension of the Lord; and the coming again of Christ is put off through the patience of God (2 Pet. 3:9).'

We have then a parable here concerning the long-suffering and the severity of God. *'He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard.'* "The peculiarity of the image--that of a *fig tree* in a *vineyard*,--however unlike to the European notion of a mass of unbroken vine-clad hills, is natural in Palestine, where, whether in cornfields or vineyards, fig-trees, thorn-trees, apple-trees are allowed to grow freely wherever they can get soil to support them.⁸ The vineyard here must be the world, and not, as in the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, the kingdom of God: in the midst of the world the Jewish people were set that they should bear much fruit, that they should bring much glory to God (Deut. 4:6). But the parable, though directly addressed to them, is also of universal application; for as Israel was the representative of all and each who in after times should be elected out of the world to the privileges of a nearer knowledge of God, therefore a warning is here for the Gentile Church, and for each particular soul.⁹ Compare Matt. 3:2; John 15:2.

'And he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none.' There is a wonderful fitness in the simple image running through all Scripture, which compares men to trees, and their work to fruit,¹⁰--the fruit of a tree, just as the works of a man, being the organic utterance and outcoming of the inner life, not something arbitrarily attached or fastened on from without (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:8; John 15:2, 4, 5; Rom. 7:4). The three kinds of works whereof Scripture speaks may all be illustrated from this image: first, *good works*,¹¹ when the tree, having been made good, bears fruit after its own kind; then *dead works*,¹² such as have a

8 Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*, p. 413.

9 Such application of it Ambrose makes (*Exp. in Luc.* xiii. 171): 'That which was spoken of the Jews should, I think, be taken as a warning by all men, and especially by us, bidding us not to occupy, while barren of merit, the fertile soil of the Church: our duty it is, since we are favoured even as pomegranates, to bring forth inward fruits--the fruits of modesty, the fruits of union, the fruits of mutual charity and love--seeing that we are all enfolded in the one bosom of our mother the Church: that neither the wind hurt us, nor the hail beat upon us, nor the fires of lust inflame us, nor the storm dash us to pieces.'

10 Bengel (*in Matt.* vii. 16): 'The fruit of a man, as that of a tree, is that in which he abounds, as the result of the nature, good or bad, which permeates all his inner faculties. A doctrine compiled from various sources and hanging upon the tongue is not a fruit; but all that which any teacher from his own heart brings forth and produces, alike in word and deed, as something which flows from his inmost being, like the milk which a mother supplies from her own breast, this is indeed a fruit. On this same subject Augustine has an admirable sermon (*Serm.* lxxii.).

11 'Works of God' (John 6:28), 'fair works' (Tit. 2:7), 'good works' (1 Tim. 2:10), 'works of faith' (1 Thess. 1:3).

12 'Dead works' (Heb. 9:14), and sometimes 'works of the law' (Gal. 2:16).

fair outward appearance, but are not the genuine outgrowth of the renewed man,--fruit, as it were, fastened on externally, alms given that they may be gloried in, prayers made that they may be seen; and lastly, *wicked* works,¹³ when the corrupt tree bears fruit manifestly after its own kind. Here it is, of course, those good fruits which are looked for but are not found; both the other kinds of fruit the Jewish fig-tree only too abundantly bore.

What is here parabolically related was on another occasion typically done in a kind of *sermo realis* by the Saviour: when in the last days of his ministry, 'seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon' (Mark 11:13). But He then, as the master of the vineyard now, '*found none.*' Long since the prophets had upbraided their people, that having been ordained to bring forth much fruit to the glory of God, they had fallen short of the purpose for which they were set in the world; bringing forth either bitter fruit or none (Isai. 5:2, 7; Jer. 15; and, if our Version is to stand, Hos. 10:1); and now the greatest of the prophets implicitly repeats the charge.

'Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none.' By these '*three years*' Augustine understands the times of the natural law,--of the written law,--and now, at last, of grace. Theophylact: '*Christ came thrice, by Moses, by the prophets, and thirdly in his own person; He comes, when application of the parable is made to the individual,--in childhood, in manhood, in old age.*' Olshausen finds allusion to the three years of the Lord's open ministry; but Grotius had already observed against this, and with reason, that if the '*three years*' are chronological, the '*one year more,*' presently granted, must be chronological also; whereas not *one*, but *forty* years of grace were allowed to the Jews, before the Romans came and took away their name and place.--'*Cut it down*' (see Isai. 5:5, 6; Matt. 7:19; Luke 19:41-44); '*why [also] cumbereth it the ground?*'¹⁴ which '*also,*' helping to explain the sentence passed upon the tree, the Authorized Translation has missed; but not so the Revised. Why should the tree remain, when, besides being itself barren, it '*also*' injured the soil in which it stood; for that '*Why cumbereth it the ground?*'¹⁵ implies something more than that

13 'Evil works' (1 John 3:12), 'works of darkness' (Rom. 13:12), 'works of the flesh' (Gal. 5:19).

14 Ἰνα τι καὶ τὴν γῆν καταργεῖ; Ut quid *etiam* terram occupat? (Vulgate); or better, Quare *insuper* terram reddit sterilem? Warum macht er *auch noch* das Land unfruchtbar? (De Wette). Gregory the Great (*Hom. 31 in Evang.*): 'For after it has destroyed itself, the question arises why is it *also* to cumber others?' Bengel: 'Not only is it of no use, but *also* it diverts the moisture which the vines would otherwise suck up from the earth, it keeps off the sun, and occupies the ground.'

15 Καταργεῖν, a favourite word with St. Paul, occurs twenty-six times in his Epistles; and only here besides in the N.T. It is rendered in the Authorized Version in fourteen different ways! '*Cumbereth,*' which the Revised Version has retained, is hardly an adequate rendering, though this in part from a change in the meaning of that word since that Version was made: '*mischiefeeth*' I should have preferred. The *occupat* of the Vulgate is equally inadequate. *Impedit*, of the older Latin Version, was better, for the tree is charged not merely with being negatively, but positively evil; it marred and mischiefed the ground in which it stood. Gregory the Great: 'Above ground the tree is unfruitful, and below the surface the soil is made barren. The shade of the unfruitful tree grows ever thicker, and the sunlight is never allowed to reach the soil.' Corn. a Lapide: 'It renders the soil sluggish and barren, not only by its shade, but

it occupied the room which might have been filled by another and a fruit-bearing tree. The barren tree *mischiefed* the land, 'troubled' it, as Bishop Andrewes renders the word, spreading injurious shade, and drawing off to itself the fatness and fertility which should have gone to trees rendering a return. It was thus with the Jewish Church, which not merely did not itself bring forth fruits of righteousness, but through it the name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles (Rom. 2:24); the Jews hindering in many ways the spread of the knowledge of God among other nations, through the mischievous influences of their pride and hypocrisy (Matt. 23:13, 15); what was thus true of a Church being not less true of each separate sinner; who is not merely himself unprofitable to God, but by his evil example, by his corrupt maxims, is an obstacle and a stumbling-block to others in the way of godliness.--On that '*Cut it down*' St. Basil bids us note the love which breathes even in the threatenings of God. 'This,' he says, 'is peculiar to the clemency of God toward men, that He does not bring in punishments silently or secretly; but by his threatenings first proclaims them to be at hand, thus inviting sinners to repentance.' That proverb which so finely expresses the noiseless approach of the divine judgments, 'The gods have feet of wool' (Di laneos habent pedes), true for others, is *not* true for those who have a listening ear. Before the hewing down begins, the axe is laid at the root of the tree (Matt. 3:10); laid there that it may be ready at hand for immediate use; but laid there also, that, if possible, this sign and prophecy of doom may avert the actual fulfilment of the doom¹⁶ (2 Chron. 33:10).

The vine-dresser, who pleads for the tree, and would fain avert its doom, '*Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it,*' is the Son Himself, the Intercessor for men (Job 33:23; Zech. 1:12; Heb. 7:25), already in type and figure foreshown to men (Exod. 32:7-11; Num. 11:19; 1 Sam. 7:9; Amos 7:2; Dan. 9:16-19); not indeed as though the Father and the Son had different minds concerning sinners, the counsels of the Father being wrath, and of the Son mercy; for righteousness and love are not qualities in Him who *is* Righteousness and who *is* Love; they cannot, therefore, be set one against the other, since they *are* his essential being. But in our anxiety to escape this error, we must not fall into the opposite, letting go the reality of God's wrath against sin,--the reality of the sacrifice of Christ, not merely on the side with which it looks towards men, but also on that which looks towards God; this sacrifice being indeed a propitiation of God, and not merely an assurance of God's love towards sinners. How these two truths shall be reconciled, and those two errors shunned, is shown in those words: 'The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev. 13:8); 'foreordained before the foundation of the world' (1 Pet. 1:20). The sacrifice, though of necessity outwardly brought to pass in time, found place in the purpose of Him who offered, and of Him who accepted it, before all time, or rather, out of time; so that we can never conceive of man as not contemplated by God in

also by its roots, by which it forestalls and takes from the neighbouring vines the moisture of the soil.' Even so we have in Shakespeare

'The noisome weeds that without profit suck
The soil's fertility from wholesome flowers.'

¹⁶ Augustine: 'If he had desired to destroy, he would have held his peace. For no one who desires to strike says, "Behold."' Chrysostom (*De Pœnit. Hom. 7*): 'He threatens punishment that we may shun tempting punishment. He frightens by words, that he may not have to chastise by deeds.'

Christ. There was no change in God's mind concerning the sinner,¹⁷ because He who beholds the end from the beginning, had beheld him from the first as reconciled and reconstituted in his Son (Rom. 16:25, 26). From this point of view we may regard the high-priestly intercession of Christ as having been effectual even before He passed into the heavens, there to appear before God for us; for to that intercession all the long-suffering of God toward sinners is to be referred: the *proetermission* of sins through the forbearance of God (Rom. 3:25) under the Old Covenant, to be followed by a *remission* of them when the designed sacrifice had been actually accomplished:¹⁸--'the earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: I bear up the pillars of it' (Ps. 75:3). Some of the Fathers see here an allusion as well to the intercessory work, which the Church, in its healthy members, is ever carrying forward on behalf of its sick, or that of the Church for the world.¹⁹ No doubt such intercession has a real worth before God (Gen. 18:23-33; 20:7; Exod. 32:11; Job 42:8; 1 Sam. 12:19, 23; 2 Kin. 19:4, 20; Jer. 15:1; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; Jam. 5:14-18; 1 John 5:16); nor need such be absolutely excluded here; yet, this must first and chiefly be referred to that one Intercessor, on whose intercession that of all others must ultimately rest. It is plain, too, that *He* must be meant, for He only to whom all judgment is committed could have received the command, '*Cut it down;*' to men it could in no case have been given (Matt. 13:29, 30).

This great Intercessor pleads for men, yet not that they may always continue unpunished in their sins, but only that their sentence may for a while be suspended; so to prove whether they will turn and repent; even as the vine-dresser here begs for the barren tree, not that it may be suffered always to stand (for, on the contrary, he allows its doom should it abide unfruitful, as righteous and good),²⁰ but asking for it one year of grace: '*If it bear fruit, well;*²¹ *and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.*' During this year he '*will dig about it, and dung it;*' will hollow out the earth from around the stem, filling up the space about the roots with manure;²² as one may now see done to the orange trees in the south of Italy. By these appliances is signified that multiplication of the means of grace which is so often granted to men and nations in the last period of their probation, and just before those means are withdrawn from them for ever. Thus, before the flood, they had Noah, a 'preacher of righteousness,'--before the great catastrophes of the Jewish people some of their most eminent prophets, as Jeremiah before the taking of Jerusalem by the

17 Augustine (*Serm.* ccliv. 2): 'The compassionate solicits the compassionate. For He who was willing to show himself compassionate, himself brought forward one to intercede with himself.'

18 On the distinction between the πάρεσις (Rom. 3:25) and the ἀφεσις αμαρτιων, see my *Synonyms of the New Testament*, §33.

19 As Augustine (*Serm.* cx. 1): 'The vinedresser who makes intercession is the type of every saint who, himself within the Church, prays for those who are outside it.'

20 Augustine (*Serm.* cx. 4): *Dilata est securis, noli esse securus*, 'The fall of the axe is delayed, but be not thou free from anxiety,' and elsewhere: *Distulit securim, non dedit securitatem*, 'He delayed the fall of the axe, He did not give freedom from anxiety;' passages in which the play of *securis* and *securus* can hardly be reproduced.

21 We have the same suspended sense, with εὐ, or some word similar understood, Luke 22:42; and Thucydides, iii. 3.

22 Augustine, *Serm.* ccliv.; cx. 1: 'The manure of the husbandman is the sorrow of sinners.' Cf. Ambrose, *De Pœnit.* ii. 1.

Chaldeans,--and before its final doom they enjoyed the ministry of Christ and of his Apostles. This last is intended here; that richer supply of grace, that freer outpouring of the Spirit, which should follow on the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord. So Theophylact: 'Though they were not made better by the law and the prophets, nor yielded fruit or repentance, yet will I water them by my doctrines and passion; it may be they will then yield fruits of obedience.' No doubt if the history of men's separate lives were written as large as that of nations and Churches, and we could thus read one as plainly as the other, we should oftener perceive that what is true of the one is also true of the other: we should mark critical moments in men's lives to which all the future is linked, on which altogether it turns,--times of gracious visitation, which above all it behoved them to know, and not suffer to escape unimproved. Such a time of visitation to the Jewish people was the Lord's and his Apostles' ministry (Luke 19:42); then was the last digging about and manuring of the tree which had continued barren so long. But it abode in barrenness; its day of grace came therefore to an end; and, as here is threatened, it was inexorably cut down. In the parable, indeed, our Lord does not positively affirm that the tree will remain unfruitful to the last, but suggests the other as a possible alternative: '*If it bear fruit, well;*' for thus the door of repentance is left open still; the free will of man is recognized and respected, and none are left to suppose that they are shut up, except by their own evil will, in unbelief and hardness of heart,²³ that any but themselves can make inevitable their doom.

²³ Rosenmüller (*Alte und Neue Morgenland*, vol. v. p. 187) quotes from an Arabian writer this receipt for curing a palm-tree of barrenness: 'Thou must take a hatchet, and go to the tree with a friend, unto whom thou sayest, I will cut down this tree, for it is unfruitful. He answers, Do not so, this year it will certainly bear fruit. But the other says, It must needs be,--it must be hewn down; and gives the stem of the tree three blows with the back of the hatchet. His friend restrains him, crying, Nay, do it not, thou wilt certainly have fruit from it this year, only have patience, and be not overhasty in cutting it down; if it still refuses to bear fruit, then cut it down. Then will the tree that year be certainly fruitful and bear abundantly.' Compare Rückert, *Brahmanische Erzählungen*; S. de Sacy, *Chrest. Arabe*, vol. ii. p. 379); the same reappearing in the collection of tracts *De Re Rustica*, entitled *Geoponica*.