

Two ancient theologians' interpretations of the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18–22)

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This article is an investigation on how two theologians from the Early Church interpreted the withered fig tree, as narrated by the evangelist Matthew (Mt 21:18–22). The two theologians referred to are Origen of Alexandria, who belongs to the pre-Nicene era and represents the Alexandrian School, and Ps.-Chrysostom who belongs to the post-Nicene era, and represents the School of Antioch. Origen believed that when the fig tree withered, it referred to Israel's withering. This interpretation of the narrative surrounding the withered fig tree was very common in the Early Church. Ps.-Chrysostom makes it very clear that he cannot agree with this interpretation, which was quite common in the Early Church. He stated that it is wrong to liken the fig tree to the synagogue of the Jews. He argues that Jesus could not curse the synagogue, because he said that 'The Son of Man did not come to destroy, but to seek and save the lost' (cf. Lk 9:56). Moreover, if the synagogue withered, fruitful branches such as Paul, Stephen, Aquila and Priscilla could not have sprouted from the roots. These names are proof that God did not entirely reject the Jewish people. Ps.-Chrysostom then offers a different explanation to the question why the fig tree withered: He points out that Adam used the leaves of a fig tree to cover his nakedness. When Jesus caused the fig tree to wither, he wanted to show that he can give Adam a new garment of water and spirit that glistens like snow. Christ gave back to Adam what the serpent had robbed him of, namely 'the angel-like life, the luxuriance of paradise, the garment of incorruptibility' (PC. cp. 4).

Contribution: The primary goal of this article is to explore the exegetical practices of two ancient theologians who came from two different schools and from two different eras. This study shows how they interpreted the account of the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18–22), based on their respective theological perspectives.

Keywords: Matthew 21:18–22; Origen of Alexandria; pre-Nicene era; post-Nicene era; Alexandrian School; School of Antioch; Chrysostom; withered fig tree; early Church.

Introduction

The theme of this special collection is: *From timely exegesis to contemporary ecclesiology: Relevant hermeneutics and provocative embodiment of faith in a Corona-defined world*. With this in mind, the decision was taken to discuss two ancient theologians' interpretations of the withered fig tree as found in Matthew 21:18–22. In their exegesis of this New Testament account, these two theologians, Origen of Alexandria and Ps.-Chrysostom, analysed the story and arrived at two opposing conclusions. Both theologians applied the story hermeneutically to their own world through their embodiment of faith. The manner in which Origen and Ps.-Chrysostom handled this text is relevant even today in our own Corona-defined world. Their interpretation of this narrative also reveals their own theological and ecclesiastic views.

Origen is the author of one of the earliest extant commentaries on the Book of Matthew. He composed his *Commentary on the Book of Matthew* in Caesarea around the year 244 CE, or soon thereafter (Quasten 1975:48). Young (2008:854) describes Origen as the first 'great exegete of scripture who approached the task with real scholarship'. He was also the first theologian to write complete commentaries on the books of the Bible and also play a very important role in biblical scholarship (Skarsaune 2000:678–679). Origen discusses his exegesis of the withered fig tree in chapters 26–29 from Book 16 of his *Commentary on the Book of Matthew* (in: Gohl 2020). The Greek text and an English translation of chapters 26–29 from Book 16 of this work can be downloaded from: [https://www.academia.edu/35210397/Origen_of_Alexandrias_Commentary_on_Matthew_Book_16_An_English_Translation_Revised_2020_\(Gohl_2020\)](https://www.academia.edu/35210397/Origen_of_Alexandrias_Commentary_on_Matthew_Book_16_An_English_Translation_Revised_2020_(Gohl_2020)).

Note: Special Collection: From timely exegesis to contemporary ecclesiology: Relevant hermeneutics and provocative embodiment of faith in a Corona-defined world – Festschrift for Stephan Joubert, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

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Ps.-Chrysostom's homily is titled: *In parabola de ficu* (*On the parable of the fig tree*). Two parables of a fig tree are found in the New Testament, namely the parable of the 'barren fig tree' (Lk 13:6–9) and the parable of the 'sprouting fig tree' (Mt 24:32–35; Mk 13:28–31; Lk 21:29–33); however, the writing of Ps.-Chrysostom is not about either of these parables. It is a homily on the evangelist Matthew's account of the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18–22). According to Voicu (1986:88), some Armenian manuscripts placed this homily under the name of Severian of Gabala. However, Voicu argues that this view is not supported by the internal characteristics of the text. This homily was, in all probability, delivered around the year 400 CE and therefore, this sermon comes from the golden age of Greek patristic literature. Origen's interpretation comes from the pre-Nicene era, whilst Ps.-Chrysostom's interpretation is from the post-Nicene era.

Origen was ordained as a priest even though his adversaries objected and claimed that he was not allowed to become a priest as he had emasculated himself. Ps.-Chrysostom was possibly also a priest. Mr Voicu, the *scriptor graecus* at the Vatican Apostolic Library, indicated that there is no indication at all that Ps.-Chrysostom was a bishop (personal email to me, 30 October 2020). Origen was head of the Alexandrian School, and later established a new School of Theology at Caesarea. Ps.-Chrysostom was of Cappadocian origin, and according to Mr Voicu, he indicated that he believes that Ps.-Chrysostom had links with Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa bishop (personal email to me, 30 October 2020). Origen's commentary and Ps.-Chrysostom's homily, therefore, represent two opposing eras and, in all likelihood, also represent two opposing schools of thought. The Latin and Greek text of Ps.-Chrysostom's homily: *In parabola de ficu*, as well an English translation, can be downloaded from: https://www.academia.edu/32022846/Ps_Chrysostom_In_Parabolam_De_Ficu_PG_59_585_590_CPG_4588_Draft_Translation?auto=download. (Papadopoulos 2020)

I trust that my colleague and friend, Stephan Joubert, who is a New Testament scholar, and who has a strong interest in biblical interpretations, will enjoy reading how the story of the withered fig tree was understood by the above-mentioned two patristic scholars. There are, of course, many other references to the withered fig tree in patristic writings, but the three chapters from Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* and Ps.-Chrysostom's sermon on the withered fig tree are devoted in its entirety to this account.

A commentary versus a homily

The above two exegetical texts on the withered fig tree by the Evangelist Matthew do not only represent two different eras, and two different schools of thought, they also represent two different genres. Origen's writing is a commentary, and Ps.-Chrysostom's writing is a homily. However, there is a subtle difference between these two genres (cf. Mayer's [2008:570] discussion on what constitutes a homily). Many of

Chrysostom's¹ homilies are nothing other than verse-by-verse commentaries. Young (2008:852), therefore, refers to Chrysostom's homilies as 'homiletic commentaries'. It is, therefore, not always easy to distinguish between these two genres in patristic writings. Ps.-Chrysostom's homily is somewhat different, as there are indications that he is speaking to an audience. In the preface of his homily, Ps.-Chrysostom addresses his congregation as ἀγαπητοί [beloved]. He also shares an outlook from his own life experience with his audience which makes his discourse very personal, sharing how a tree in blossom or a flowing spring always attracts his attention. Ps.-Chrysostom then confesses how Matthew's narrative about a fig tree also drew his attention. He imagined himself to be in the narrative where the fig tree is.

There is also a glimpse of the liturgy of the service where this sermon was delivered, as Ps.-Chrysostom relates that his homily was preceded by the reading of Matthew's account of the withered fig tree. The use of the passive may indicate that a lector did the reading. It is known that writings were read aloud in public. According to Seal (2020:109), it often occurs that 'the audience was susceptible to the emotions conveyed in the composition'. He further finds that orators were trained to change the tone of their voices to bring about changes in emotion. Seal (2020:109) believes that lectors in the church might perhaps 'have borrowed some of the tactics of the professional speaker and adapted them for their public recitations'. Origen's commentary, on the other hand, reveals no human interaction, and appears to be a theological writing in an academic setting.

Jerusalem versus Bethany

Matthew introduces his account of Jesus and the fig tree by saying that this incident occurred when Jesus 'went out from the city unto Bethany' (Mt 21:17).² The city of Jerusalem and the town Bethany play an important role in Origen's interpretation of the withered fig tree. For Origen, Jerusalem (and the temple) resembles the Jewish nation, whilst Bethany resembles the Church. Origen (Or. cp. 25)³ says that the chief priests and the scribes in the temple in Jerusalem were indignant when they saw the marvellous things that Jesus had done, whilst the children in the temple cried out 'Hosanna to the Son of David' (Mt 21:15). Origen further states that this is the reason why the city fell (a few decades later) and why no stone remained on another (Or. cp. 26).

Origen interprets Bethany as 'house of obedience' and implies it stands for the Church (Or. cp. 26). Bethany is vastly different from Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Jesus had nowhere

1. There are several references to 'Chrysostom' in this article. It then refers to Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople (ca. 350–407). It is not a mere synonym or erroneous form for Ps.-Chrysostom. These two names refer to two different people.

2. The translation of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) will be used to refer to all Bible texts that are not quotations from Origen's or Ps.-Chrysostom's texts. Justin Gohl's translation of Origen's text, and Katherin Papadopoulos' translation of Ps.-Chrysostom's text will be used in this article (vide Gohl 2020 and Papadopoulos 2020). The reproductions of these two Greek texts by these two scholars will also be used as a basis for this article.

3. This abbreviation will be used to refer to Origen's text: 'Or.' for 'Origen', and 'cp.' for 'caput' or 'capita'.

‘where he could lay his head’ (Mt 8:20), but then Jesus went to Bethany and he spent the night there and rested. It proves that Jerusalem was hostile towards Jesus, whilst Bethany accepted Jesus and even provided a place for him to rest (perhaps with his friends, Lazarus and his two sisters).

Origen further states that it is remarkable that Matthew does not only say that Jesus went ἐξῆλθεν ἔξω τῆς πόλεως [‘went outside of the city’ = Jerusalem], he also adds καταλιπὼν αὐτούς [‘taking leave of them’]. For Origen, the latter phrase means that Jesus took leave ‘from the worthless and the sinners’ (Or. cp. 27). Origen then points out that when Matthew says that Jesus later on left Bethany, he does not use the words καταλιπὼν αὐτούς [‘taking leave of them’]. This again shows that Bethany supersedes Jerusalem. It can be deduced from this statement that Origen believed that no sinners were to be found in Bethany.

The withered fig tree

Origen suggests that the fig tree was ‘living’ (ἔμψυχος) when Jesus spoke to it and that it could hear Jesus’ words (Or. cp. 26). When Jesus spoke, the fig tree did not only wither, but it withered ‘immediately’ (παραρῆμα). The dry fig tree refers to Israel which withered (Or. cp. 26). Jesus continued to say that ‘as long as the present age remains in place, may there no longer be fruit on you’ (Or. cp. 26). This curse refers to the synagogue of the Jews which will be forever unfruitful (Or. cp. 26). Origen’s exegesis betrays his allegorical approach to texts, which was typical of the School in Alexandria, of which he was the head from the years 203 to 231 (Quasten 1975:38). This allegorical interpretation of the withered fig tree as a symbol of the synagogue was very common in the Early Church (see, e.g., Augustine’s interpretation of the same narrative in his *Sermo xxxix ad populum. Classis I. De Scripturis* (Migne 038, cols. 553–558).

Ps.-Chrysostom states explicitly that he disagrees with the common practice to interpret the withered fig tree as a symbol of the synagogue, or of Israel as a nation (PC. cp. 2–4). Voicu (2002:342) suggests that it seems quite reasonable to deduce from the sources used that Ps.-Chrysostom had direct knowledge of the works of Origen. It is, therefore, not far-fetched to assume that Ps.-Chrysostom had in fact read Origen’s *Commentary on Matthew* (which was written approximately 150 years earlier).

Ps.-Chrysostom labels the above-mentioned interpretation by other Biblical exegetes as ἠκριβωμένως [‘not having done it precisely’] (PC. cp. 2–4). Hill (1981) identified ἀκρίβεια as a very important principle of Chrysostom’s exegesis. According to Hill (1981:33), the word ἀκρίβεια means that ‘every item in the text of Scripture is valuable and therefore, not to be passed over heedlessly’. Hill explains that Chrysostom, therefore, believed that ἀκρίβεια in the Scriptures means that ἀκρίβεια should also be practised in our study of the Scriptures: ‘precision and care must mark the approach of any interpreter of what God has deigned to speak to us’ (Hill 1981:35). The same is likely to be true for how Ps.-Chrysostom

used the word. However, Ps.-Chrysostom is humble enough to declare that this is only his opinion: ὡς ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ [as it seems to me].

Ps.-Chrysostom added that the fig tree cannot be likened to the synagogue of the Jews, and that he will refute this interpretation (PC. cp. 4). Ps.-Chrysostom then offers several strong arguments to prove his case. He argues that Jesus would not have cursed the synagogue, since he said that ‘The Son of Man did not come to destroy, but to seek and save the lost’ (cf. Lk. 9:56) (PC. cp. 4). Moreover, if the synagogue withered, a fruitful branch, such as Paul, could not have sprouted from its roots. Many other fruitful branches also sprouted from the roots of the fig tree, namely Stephen, Aquila and Priscilla. These names are proof that God did not entirely reject the Jewish people.

Furthermore, Ps.-Chrysostom claims that God did not entirely reject the Jews, as stated by Paul in Romans 11:1–2:

I ask then, has the Lord entirely rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. The Lord has not rejected his people.

Furthermore, Ps.-Chrysostom argues that in the last days, the Jews too will be saved, as Romans 11:25–26 reads that when ‘the full number of the Gentiles has come in, at that time all Israel will be saved’ (PC. cp. 4).

When reading Ps.-Chrysostom’s homily of the withered fig tree, the build-up of tension can be felt, and it is assumed that his audience was waiting eagerly for him to share with them his view on the story of the withered fig tree. If the fig tree is neither a reference to the synagogue, nor to the Jewish nation, what then is the symbolic meaning of it? Ps.-Chrysostom eventually offers his explanation to the question why the fig tree withered: Adam used the leaves of a fig tree to cover his nakedness. That is why Jesus caused the fig tree to wither, so that he can give Adam a new garment of water and spirit that glistens like snow. Christ gave back to Adam what the serpent had robbed him of, namely ‘the angel-like life, the luxuriance of paradise and the garment of incorruptibility’ (PC. cp. 4). Ps.-Chrysostom’s interpretation of this narrative stands clearly in the more literal and historical approach of the School of Antioch.

‘In the morning ...’ (πρωῖ)

The opening verse of this Biblical account of the withered fig tree reads as follows: ‘In the morning (πρωῖ) when Jesus came back to the city, he was hungry (ἐπείνασεν)’ (Mt 21:18). Ps.-Chrysostom (cp. 5) focused in his commentary on the first word of this verse, namely πρωῖ [‘early in the morning’], and on the last word, namely ἐπείνασεν [‘he was hungry’]. According to Ps.-Chrysostom, Christ is the ‘dawn’, and the light of resurrection, as Hosea (Hosea 6.3 LXX) reads: ‘We will find him ready as “dawn”’. Furthermore, the darkness of death has to disappear in order to have ‘dawn’. Ps.-Chrysostom continues with his interpretation and argues

that in the New Testament the story of the fig tree, the glory of Christ and the 'heat' of his divinity drove away the darkness of death. This interpretation is based on Psalms 18:7 (= 19:6 LXX) which reads 'there is no one that will be hid from his "heat"'. Like building blocks, Ps.-Chrysostom builds one argument upon the other. From 'heat' he jumps to 'coldness' and points out that the 'chilliest' sin of the devil deadened people's hearts. This is the reason why the prophet prayed 'Test my kidneys and my heart' (Ps 25 [=26]:2 LXX). Ps.-Chrysostom then stays with the concept of coldness, and claims that 'all humanity had been fettered by the "frost" of impiety' (PC. cp. 5). This leads Ps.-Chrysostom to Psalms 125 (=126:4 LXX) which reads 'Return our captivity, O Lord, like wadies in the south'.

The concepts of 'heat', 'coldness' and the 'south' allow Ps.-Chrysostom to combine all three into one statement, he then adds that:

[J]ust as the 'warm south' wind, when it blows afresh, returns 'frozen' waters to (their) former nature, in the same way as the 'warm south' wind blowing afresh, (he) also restores us who have been deadened by the sin of the devil to the ancient nature of incorruptibility. (PC. cp. 5)

Again Ps.-Chrysostom justifies his conclusions by referring to the book of Song 4:16 (LXX) where the south wind and the Church, the bride of Christ, are invoked: 'Awake, O north wind, and come, O "south wind"! Blow through my garden, and let spices waft abroad' (PC. cp. 6). This is an interesting exegetical technique where each time the exegete uses a Scripture to justify his explanation; he then uses a word in that Scripture to jump to another Scripture verse. Hill (1981:35) argues that this technique is part of ἀκριβεία which has been discussed earlier in the text: The fact that the Scriptures fulfill the principle of ἀκριβεία demands any interpreter to also adhere to the principles of precision and care. It also supports the idea that Scripture should always provide its own interpretation.

'... He was hungry' (ἐπείνασεν)

As indicated above, Ps.-Chrysostom also commented on the last word (ἐπείνασεν) of the same verse. Ps.-Chrysostom elaborates on the irony that Jesus went to the fig tree because 'he was hungry' (PC. cp. 2). He calls it an ἀνεκφράστου καὶ ἀνεκδιηγίτου μυστηρίου ['an inexpressible and ineffable mystery'] (PC. cp. 2), because how can the 'nourisher of the whole world be hungry?' (PC. cp. 2). How can one who fed 5000 with five loaves, or who walked on water, or who changed water into wine, be hungry (PC. cp. 2)? Furthermore, how does this fit in with Isaiah 40:28 (LXX) who says that 'God everlasting will not hunger or grow weary'? Ps.-Chrysostom argues that the answer to these questions lies in the two natures of Christ. As a servant, Jesus was hungry, but as a master, he fed 5000 people; as a man, Jesus saw that the fig tree had no figs, but as God, Jesus withered the fig tree by his word (λόγος) (PC. cp. 2).

Origen also commented on Jesus' hunger, but he then allegorised it (Or. cp. 27). Origen regards Jesus' hunger as a

desire to see the fruits of the spirit in believers. Jesus loves the believers and wants to see the fruits of the spirit in them, such as joy, peace and longsuffering. As long as a believer bears these fruits, they will not be withered.

The fig tree, its fruit and leaves

Though it is said that the Alexandrian School was best known for its use of allegory, it was also found in the School of Antioch. Ps.-Chrysostom (or the school that he represents) also spiritualised the Scriptures. The spiritual meaning which the two schools assign to texts is always based on other verses from the Scriptures. They did not give haphazard spiritual meanings to elements of narratives.

In this narrative of the withered fig tree, for example, Ps.-Chrysostom pointed out that the fig tree has broad leaves, and therefore, it is a symbol of the wide and easy road that leads to destruction (PC. cp. 7). The fruit of the fig tree is sweet, which refers to the sweetness of pleasure. We should flee from this pleasure as after the deed it is bitter. Again Ps.-Chrysostom quotes a verse from the Scripture to substantiate his interpretation. He refers to Proverbs 5:3-4 (LXX) which reads as follows:

[F]or honey drips from the lips of a prostituting woman, and for a period pleases your palate. Later, however, you will find it more bitter than gall, and sharper than a two-edged dagger. (PC. cp. 7)

Ps.-Chrysostom compares the sweetness of the fig with the sweetness of a prostitute which eventually leads to death (PC. cp. 7).

Jesus found the fig tree abounding in leaves. For Ps.-Chrysostom, the many leaves are a symbol of 'blossoming with notions of sin' (PC. cp. 7). There was no fruit on the tree because it was winter, which is an indication that 'the devil had laid winter upon all humanity' (PC. cp. 7). Ps.-Chrysostom is allegorising various elements of the story. He continues to say that after Jesus had caused the fig tree to wither, he gave us a substitute: 'He planted the blossoming faith of the cross' (PC. cp. 7). The roots of the cross are on the earth, but the branches stretch up to heaven. The leaves are ageless and the fruit immortal (PC. cp. 7). Jesus was crucified on this cross and this 'became a death-bringing (θανατηφόρος) tree-climbing vine for the devil, but a life-bearing (ζωηφόρος) tree-climbing vine for us' (PC. cp. 8). This tree (δένδρον) brought forth 'fruits of immortality for those who believe' (PC. cp. 8). In Acts 5:30 and 10:39 and in 1 Peter 2:24, the word 'tree' is also used for the cross of Jesus, but then the word ξύλον [wood] is used.

Ps.-Chrysostom added that if Jesus 'had walked past the fig tree, the serpent would have a nest in the tree in perpetuity'. But Jesus prevented this by causing the fig tree to wither (PC. cp. 7).

Though Origen interprets the fig tree as a symbol of the synagogue and the Jewish nation that failed, he also says that it can refer to any person who is being withered, as opposed

to someone who is bearing fruit and is being cultivated in order to bear abundant fruit (Or. cp. 27). Therefore, there are different kinds of fig trees, and some of these trees grow ἐπι τῆς καλῆς καὶ ἀγαθῆς γῆς [‘on fine and good earth’] and bear abundant fruit. A fig tree that does not give fruit to Jesus when he is hungry will either be withered, or be cut down (Lk 13:7) (Or. cp. 27). Ancient theologians had no hesitation in assigning more than one interpretation to a Scripture verse. In fact, Origen says explicitly in this commentary that one passage can be interpreted in more than one way. Regarding the story surrounding the fig tree, Origen says that ἔτι δὲ μᾶλλον νοήσομεν [‘we may understand this [passage] even further’] (Or. cp. 27). Origen further advocated that this event can also show believers that they should bear fruit in trials. It may be that in the season before trials, we are adorned with abundant leaves, but when Jesus stops at our door outside the season and seeks fruit, we will wither (Or. cp. 27).

To summarise, it is clear from the discussion above that both Ps.-Chrysostom and Origen attribute extensive allegorical meanings to the fig tree. For Ps.-Chrysostom, the broad leaves of the fig tree refer to the wide road that leads to destruction, whilst the sweet fruit symbolises pleasure that also leads to death. For Origen, the withered fig tree is a symbol of a withered believer who does not bear fruit, whilst the abundant leaves show that believers should always bear fruit even amidst trials. Both exegetes base their allegorical interpretation on Bible verses, but their allegorical interpretations lead them to diverse applications.

Note also the annotation technique that these two authors use: they merely select key terms in the narrative (such as the fig tree), and then they haphazardly select features of the key term (such as the leaves or the fruit in the case of the withered fig tree) and interpret these features in light of other relevant Biblical verses.

May there no longer be fruit from you forever ...

It has already been indicated above that Origen interpreted Jesus’ words that ‘there may no longer be fruit from you forever’ as a condemnation of the unfruitful synagogue (Or. cp. 26). However, Origen further argues that these words Jesus spoke to the fig tree can also refer to someone who professes the faith and ‘seems to eat and drink in the name of Jesus’ but who could show no fruit when it is sought by the λόγος [word] (Or. cp. 28). Such a person will never again be able to bear fruit, because he is ‘empty of Christ’ (Or. cp. 27–28). The reason why Jesus caused the tree to wither immediately was to prevent the tree from deceiving people any longer (Or. cp. 28).

Ps.-Chrysostom interprets Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree as a reference to death. Before Jesus’ appearance, the fig tree bore fruits of death, but since his arrival that will no longer be the case (PC. cp. 7). That is another reason why the fig tree withered, as ‘death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your sting? Where O Hades is your victory?’ (1 Cor. 15:54–55).

If you have faith ...

After Jesus had cursed the fig tree, and it withered, Jesus said:

... if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea’, it will be done. (Mt 21:21, RSV)

Origen (cp. 26) relates this to mean that the disciples now received the same power even to cause a fig tree to wither. But it also means that the Spirit that was formerly ‘connected to’ the Jewish people, now transferred over to the gentiles (Or. cp. 26). Furthermore, Origen explained that those who hereafter listened to the disciples were freed from a βαρὺ τῆς κακίας ὄρος [‘heavy mountain of vice’], because Jesus cast Satan into the sea.

Matthew’s account versus Mark’s account

Shuve (2012:263) argues that the early Christians treated the Bible as a whole and regarded it as having a unified vision of God. It was only much later with the coming of historical criticism that scholars explored the theological peculiarities of each book of the Bible. Nevertheless, both Origen and Ps.-Chrysostom critically compared the narrative of the fig tree as told by Matthew with Mark’s account of the self-same story (Mk 11:12ff). Origen (cp. 29) then observes that the Evangelist Mark makes the remark that ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς οὐκ ἦν σύκων [‘it was not the season for figs’] and labels this remark of Mark as ἀπεμφαίνον τι [‘something incongruous’]. Lampe (1978:182) translates ἀπεμφαίνον as ‘incongruous’, ‘unsuitable’, ‘unseemly’ and ‘absurd’. Origen is indeed very critical of Mark’s remark, and gives the impression that he did not expect such a response from Mark and that Mark should have known better.

For Origen, the reason for Jesus’ words is obvious: The figs refer to the fruit of the Spirit, namely love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control (cp. 29). These fruits should always be found in the lives of believers, and not only when the season is favourable for them. A believer produces the fruit ‘out of season’ when they love a person whom they should actually hate. Similarly, when a believer rejoices in conditions that call for despondency and displeasure, they are bearing the fruit of the Spirit, namely joy, ‘out of season’ (Or. cp. 29).

Ps.-Chrysostom also refers to Mark’s remark that ‘it was not the season for figs’. Ps.-Chrysostom (cp. 3) deduces from this remark that this event took place in the winter; however, he then raises the question, asking why did Jesus curse the fig tree and cause it to wither? Why did Jesus not rather use his divine power to make the fig tree bear fruit? Ps.-Chrysostom then explains that all the works of Christ were beneficial. His works always had a μυστήριον [‘hidden meaning’] (cp. 3). Ps.-Chrysostom goes on to say that Jesus wanted to bring across the deeper meaning of that fig tree, which is that the fig tree

represents that which the serpent spoiled in paradise, namely our incorruptibility. Jesus now restores this incorruptibility for mankind.

Neither Origen nor Ps.-Chrysostom discusses an important discrepancy between Matthew and Mark's account of the withered fig tree. According to Matthew, the withering of the tree was 'immediate', whilst according to Mark, the disciples only noticed 'the next morning' that the tree had withered.

Exegetical practices

Above are several examples where Origen allegorised certain Scriptures. He is often seen as the 'father of allegory', but he did not 'invent' allegory. Long before Origen, Greek philosophers used allegory to interpret the writings of Homer and Hesiod (Breck 1976:198). Though Origen had the reputation in Church History of being an allegorist, in recent years, scholars have realised that this actually represents a very one-sided picture of him. There is definitely a shift in recent studies on how Origen is viewed as an exegete, as could also be seen at the *Colloquium Origenianum Octavum* in 2001 (in: Demura 2008:23–24). Drobner (2007:140) argues that 'Origen too began with the literal meaning of the biblical text, which he established on a philological-critical basis'. Demura (2008:23) shows in his article on Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew* how Origen 'expanded the critical principle of the Alexandrian philological tradition (interpreting Homer only by means of Homer) to his exegetical principle (Scripture should be interpreted from Scripture) ...'. An example can be found in the section above on 'Jerusalem vs. Bethany' where Origen uses one Scripture verse to explain another Scripture verse. Origen believed that the Scriptures had three senses, namely the literal, the moral and the spiritual. These three senses correspond to the concepts of body, soul and spirit (in: Young 2008:855). However, Young argues that the 'threefold sense' in Origen's interpretations is not always seen. Origen looks at the 'letter' of the text, and then indulges in typological, moral and spiritual interpretations.

The Antiochenes, on the other hand, reacted against allegorising the Alexandrian school, and interpreted texts philologically (Young 2008:853). They taught that the literal meaning of a text should be looked at, which they called the *ιστορία* [history]. Diodore of Tarsus, the founder of the Antiochene school, acknowledged that a text also has a 'higher' meaning which should be distinguished from the literal meaning. This 'higher' meaning was referred to as *θεωρία* [theory] (Skarsaune 2000:679–680). Ps.-Chrysostom agrees with this approach and responded as follows in his homily on the withered fig tree:

[I]n like manner, I too, when I see that the history (*ιστορία*) of the letter (*γράμμα*) happens to be radiant and very beautiful, I focus my mind (*νοῦς*) there, but I am drawn further by the contemplation (*θεωρία*) of the spirit (*πνεῦμα*) to show me greater wonders than the history (*ιστορία*) which is proclaimed. (PC. cp. 2)

Breck (1976:200) is found to be correct in that the Alexandrian interpretation should not be stereotyped as just allegorical and the Antiochene interpretation as just literal. Theologians from both schools have, as a goal, to search for the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures. Širka and Brdy (2012:144) state that there are more things in common than a difference between these two schools. Both schools accepted the fact that the Scriptures are inspired and wanted to ascertain the spiritual meaning thereof.

Intertextual nexus

The fig-tree was a very popular symbol in the early Church. It plays an important role in Augustine's conversion story in his *Confessiones* 8.12.28 (cf. Patterson 2016). Modern-day scholars often debate whether an inter-textual nexus between texts should be seen. Patterson, for example, discusses whether the fig tree in Augustine's account has any intertextual significance. He then rejects the argument that the fig tree is a reference to Nathanael's fig tree (Jn 1:48); however, he does see an intertextual nexus between this tree and the fig leaves of Genesis 3:7, the withered fig tree (Mt 21:18–22) and the good and bad trees of Mt 7:15–20 and 12:33–35).

Interestingly, Ps.-Chrysostom also sees a nexus between the fig tree story of Matthew 21:18–22 and other fig tree stories. In the discussion above, it can be seen how Ps.-Chrysostom linked the withered fig tree with the fig leaves which Adam and Eve used to cover their nakedness (PC. cp. 4). Ps.-Chrysostom argued that Christ caused the fig tree to wither to show that he can replace Adam and Eve's 'clothing' with a new garment. Ps.-Chrysostom also sees a nexus with the fig tree under which Nathanael was when Jesus saw him (Jn. 1:48). The nexus between the withered fig tree and Nathanael's tree is found in Habakuk 3:16–17 (LXX) where it reads that the prophet said: 'I will go up to a people of my sojourning. For a fig tree shall bear no fruit'. This same verse also explains why Jesus asked Zacchaeus to 'hurry and come down' (Lk 19:5). He should no longer be in this 'withered' tree. Thus, Ps.-Chrysostom sees an intertextual nexus between all the 'fig tree accounts' in the Bible.

Anti-Jewish polemics

Early Christian theologians often attacked their Jewish counterparts vehemently. Origen's attempts to use the account of the withered fig tree to show that God rejected the Jewish nation were nothing new. Numerous articles and books have been written on the anti-Jewish polemics that can be found in writings by early Christian writers. It is interesting to note that Ps.-Chrysostom steered away from this interpretation, and showed that God continued to use Jews such as Paul, Stephen, Aquila and Priscilla. Ps.-Chrysostom even declared specifically that 'God did not entirely reject the people of the Jews' (PC. cp. 4). However, he does mention that if the Jews did indeed become enemies of God, then it was merely, by means of their obedience, to show mercy to the Christians (PC. cp. 4).

Ps.-Chrysostom's hesitancy to blame the Jews was, however, not typical of his era. Many scholars today acknowledge the fact that the homilies of Chrysostom (a contemporary of Ps.-Chrysostom) contributed to anti-Semitic prejudice over the course of history (in: Mayer 2019:59). Johnson (1989:441), on the other hand, argues that the slander against Jews should be placed in its appropriate social and literary setting, namely 'that of polemic between ancient schools'.

Ecclesiology

Kelly (1977:401) expresses the view that is commonly held by scholars, which is 'as contrasted with that of the West, Eastern teaching about the Church remained immature, not to say archaic, in the post-Nicene period'. This can also be seen in the two texts that are discussed in this article: Origen does make a few remarks which betrays his ecclesiological views, whilst Ps.-Chrysostom gives us little insight into his ecclesiological views. However, it is also not fair to judge these two authors based solely on these two texts, as neither of these texts come from works that can be described as dogmatic in nature. Researchers should, therefore, guard against drawing conclusions based on the absence of evidence (also called *argumentum e silentio*).

Origen believes that the word Bethany means 'house of obedience' and implies that in the narrative of the fig tree, it stands for the Church (Or. cp. 26). According to Origen's ecclesiology, the church came into existence when Christ rested in Bethany, 'the house of obedience'. Bethany, therefore, stands in direct opposition to Jerusalem. Origen is in all likelihood incorrect in saying that Bethany means 'house of obedience', but it suits his ecclesiological and theological views. Origen believes that as Bethany stands in opposition to Jerusalem, similarly the Church stands in opposition to the temple. The Church replaced the temple. In the chapter (Or. cp. 27) that follows, Origen continues with the same argument and advocates that each one who obeys the word of God becomes a Bethany, in which Jesus lodges and rests. One may conclude from this remark that each believer who obeys the Word of God becomes a representative of the Church because it accommodates Jesus. Believers much reflect Jesus who rests on them.

Ps.-Chrysostom, on the other hand, regards the Church as 'the bride of Christ' (PC. cp. 6). The Church also inspires like the south wind. Ps.-Chrysostom uses an image to explain the task of the Church. Based on Psalm 147.7(147:18)LXX, it was believed that the south wind was warm. Ps.-Chrysostom then says that the south wind 'returns frozen waters to their former nature' (PC. cp. 5). He, therefore, highlights the transformative character of the church. Ps.-Chrysostom also hints at his ecclesiology when he says that 'churches exalt Christ who was crucified on it (the cross)' (PC. cp. 8). The ultimate goal of churches is 'to exalt Christ'. Ps.-Chrysostom then concludes his sermon with a doxology: 'To whom (be) the glory and the power, now and always, and into the ages of ages. Amen'.

Conclusion

The interpretation of the account of the withered fig tree by these two theologians shows how vibrant the exegetical practices were in the early Church. It also shows how one theologian questioned the interpretation of another theologian, and offered his own interpretation to counter the interpretation of his counterpart. However, there are also commonalities between the two interpretations of these two theologians, namely Origen of Alexandria and Ps.-Chrysostom. Both theologians agree, for example, that the Scriptures should be used to interpret the Scriptures. This was a principle that was inherited from Hellenistic philosophers who interpreted Homer. However, though both theologians used the Scriptures to interpret the Scriptures, it does not mean that they came to the same conclusion. It is also clear that it was quite acceptable for a theologian to assign entirely different interpretations to the same Scripture verse at different occasions, or to address different situations.

The writings of Origen and Ps.-Chrysostom also show that the exegetical distinction between the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools is not entirely clear cut. Examples of allegory and examples where the Scriptures are used to interpret the Scriptures can be shown in the interpretations of both authors. Based solely on these two documents, Origen has elaborated more on his ecclesiastical views than Ps.-Chrysostom has, and he is also more adamant in his condemnation of the Jews than Ps.-Chrysostom is. There is, in fact, almost no trace of this hostility in Ps.-Chrysostom's handling of the story regarding the fig-tree, although the story does open the possibility for him to criticise the Jews or the synagogue.

To conclude and to link up with the theme of this *Festschrift*: What would Origen and Ps.-Chrysostom have said to believers in a corona-defined world based on their interpretation of the withered fig tree? Actually, Origen's and Chrysostom's message would be very similar, despite their different approaches. We saw that it was Origen's view that believers represent Christ because Christ rests in them. It means that believers should also reflect the life of Christ in this world which is so full of insecurity because of the pandemic. Christ should become visible to the people of our world through the lives of the believers. Believers, and the Church, should be a place where people can find rest, as Christ found rest in Bethany. Chrysostom, again, would be able to argue that the Church should be like the south wind, and transform our lives. Believers should bring light and warmth to a dark world that suffers because of the pandemic. Furthermore, both theologians showed to us, based on the narrative of the withered fig tree, that we do not have to fear death that is brought about by the pandemic. Ps.-Chrysostom called Christ the 'dawn', and 'the light of resurrection'. The message that both theologians derived from the above narrative is that Jesus introduced a new dispensation. The old has passed. Jesus brought us life and incorruptibility, however, he expects us to bear the fruit of the Spirit, which

will lead to the exaltation of Jesus Christ. This will enable us to also conclude with Ps.-Chrysostom's doxology at the end of his homily: 'To whom (be) the glory and the power, now and always, and into the ages of ages. Amen'.

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