

Reversing Genesis 3,6-7: Adamic Traditions in the Cursing of the Fig Tree (Mk 11,12-14.20-25; Mt 21,18-22)¹

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Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, an account that appears only in Mark (11,12-14.20-25) and Matthew (21,18-22)², has received considerable attention from modern scholarship³. The only agreement discernable among modern interpreters regards the oddity of the passage and, as a consequence of this, its symbolic nature. The scene is unusual in more than one aspect. What stands out is the fact that Jesus' behavior is uncharacteristically irrational and also that this irrationality is pointed out by the narrative itself. Ever since Origen this oddity has suggested to most interpreters

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² The closest Lukan parallel is the parable of the fruitless fig tree (Luke 13,6-9). On the similarities and differences between the Mark-Matthew story and Luke's parable see de Q. Robin, *The Cursing*, 276-281; Donahue and Harrington, *Gospel*, 331. For a review of these and other explanations see Kinman, *Lucan Eschatology*, 672-675.

³ Beside general commentaries on the entire gospels, the following studies are the most prominent among those dedicated specifically to this pericope: Esler, *Incident*, 41-67; Moulton, *Jesus' Goal*, 561-572; Böttrich, *Jesus*, 328-359; Kinman, *Lucan Eschatology*, 669-678; Ellul, *Dérives*, 69-76; Telford, *Barren Temple*; Cotter, *For It Was Not*; Giesen, *Der verborrte*; Derrett, *Fig Trees*; Kahn, *La parabole*; de Q. Robin, *The Cursing*.

that the story has a symbolic-allegorical meaning. Yet, this is where the agreement between ancient and modern interpreters stops. While ancient interpreters uncovered in the story symbolic connections with Adamic traditions, modern interpreters have consistently dismissed them⁴.

This paper builds both on the agreement and the parting of the ways between the ancients and the moderns, and argues, with the ancient interpreters, that a major source and referent of the symbolism of the pericope is the Adamic lore (both biblical and extra-biblical) of ancient Judaism. This possibility has not been explored yet in modern studies⁵.

The text

The text in Mark (longer than Matthew's) deserves a full quote:

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again". And his disciples heard it... As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Master, look! The fig tree which you cursed has withered". And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any

⁴ Thus Davies and Allison, Matthew 19-28, 151.

⁵ The only exceptions are occasional detections in the Mark-Matthew story of allusions to Genesis 3 in Ellul, *Dérives*, and in Wojciechowski, Marc 11.14, although neither study draws the conclusion that a significant referent of the pericope lies in Adamic traditions.

one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses”⁶.

This Markan pericope differs in several regards from its parallel in Matthew, but they are not so significant as to abate the argument advanced here⁷.

Scholars are divided on the interpretation of this narrative. However, the vast majority of them remark the oddity of the story. To list just a few unusual elements which will bear on the argument advanced here:

1. It is odd that Jesus is depicted as hungry⁸. Not only does the context in Mark imply that he had just enjoyed the hospitality of the people in Bethany⁹, but he is not depicted as hungry anywhere else in Mark. In Matthew he is hungry only one other time, during the temptation (Mt 4,2-4).
2. If Jesus did not receive full hospitality in Bethany, it is odd that the disciples are not hungry as well¹⁰.
3. Jesus’ behavior is uncharacteristically irrational. In the words of Richard T. France, “such a raw display of power for a purely destructive purpose... is quite out of keeping with the character and behavior of the Jesus of the gospels”¹¹. The irrationality of Jesus’ behavior is only amplified by Mark’s remark (missing in Matthew) that “it was not the season for figs”¹². As William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison point out, this particular exacerbation of Jesus’ irrational behavior “has vexed interpreters since Origen”¹³.

Scholars have also noted that, on the one hand, the fact that the story leads in both Mark and Matthew to a parenthesis on prayer invites reading it as an

⁶ For this and other biblical quotations I follow the RSV translation. The Greek text is from the 27th edition of Nestle and Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

⁷ They are reviewed in detail in Telford, *Barren Temple*, 69-84.

⁸ See for example the remarks in Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 525.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Giesen, *Der verborrte*, 95.

¹¹ France, *Matthew*, 791.

¹² Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 327.

¹³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 147.

illustration on the power of faith¹⁴ and that, on the other hand, the oddity of the story suggests that there is a symbolic-allegorical dimension to it¹⁵. There also seems to coalesce a general agreement that the symbolic value of the episode is one of judgment and punishment. Beyond this point, there is no consensus in modern scholarship on what the object of the symbolic punishment is. It is identified as Israel in general¹⁶, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem¹⁷, or the Temple¹⁸, all these objects of the punishment being provided by the broader context of the pericope. It has also been argued that the story is a symbol of the eschatological judgment against both the nation and the Temple¹⁹.

I agree with the predominant conclusion of modern scholarship that the incongruous elements of the narrative suggest that the story is symbolical. My contention is that several elements of the episode place it in proximity to late ancient Adamic traditions. The fig tree plays a prominent role in these traditions. Not only did the protoplast cover himself with fig-leaves after the fall, a tradition already attested in Gen 3,7, but the same fig that provided the leaves was also the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the only tree willing to share its fruits with Adam and Eve after the fall.

Adam traditions

An analysis of the interpretive developments of Genesis 3 will elucidate the Adamic elements of the gospel pericope. The most extensive of these developments is arguably the literary corpus known under the title *Life of Adam and Eve*²⁰, which has extant versions in Greek, Latin, Armenian,

¹⁴ Kinman, *Lucan Eschatology*, 669-670.

¹⁵ Thus Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 327, 331.

¹⁶ This seems to be the take of most modern commentaries. See Giesen, *Der verborrte*.

¹⁷ For the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, see Yarbrow Collins, *Mark*, 526.

¹⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 153-154; Telford, *Barren Temple*; Moulton, "Jesus' Goal"; France, *Matthew*, 791-793.

¹⁹ Marshall, *Faith*, 160; Derrett, *Fig Trees*; Kahn, *La parabole*.

²⁰ For succinct introductions to this corpus, see particularly Stone, *History, and de Jonge and Tromp, Life*.

Georgian, Slavonic, Romanian, and Coptic²¹. While all of them follow the same general storyline, they also differ at many points in the narrative. As I have pointed out elsewhere²², this corpus is notoriously difficult to date. The predominant cautious conclusion in current scholarship is that the *terminus ante quem* of the Greek *Vorlage* is the beginning of the fourth century C.E.²³. However, it has been previously noted that the corpus contains many traditions attested in earlier writings.

All recensions, with the exception of the Latin, contain a story which illustrates the main role of the fig tree in the fall of the first humans. The Greek version reads:

And in that very hour my [Eve's] eyes were opened, and I knew that I was naked of the righteousness with which I had been clothed, and I wept and said to him [the devil]: "Why have you done this that I had been deprived of the glory (with which I was clothed)"²⁴? ... But he descended from the tree and vanished. And I began to seek, in my nakedness, in my part [of paradise] for leaves to hide my shame, but I found none, for, as soon as I had eaten, the leaves showered down from all the trees in my part, except the fig-tree alone. I took leaves from it and made for myself a girdle and it was from the same plant of which I had eaten²⁵. (Life of Adam and Eve 20:1-5)²⁶

²¹ The Greek texts are edited in Levison, Texts, and Tromp, Life. For the Latin see Meyer, Vita; for Armenian, Stone, Penitence, and also Stone, Texts, 70-81; for Georgian, the French translation in Mahé, Livre. Only the longer recension of the Slavonic manuscripts has received a critical edition to date: Jagić, Slavische. In 1925 Jordan Ivanov published another manuscript of the longer recension, MS 433 of the National Library in Sofia, which was apparently unknown to Jagić (Ivanov, Bogomilski).

²² Bunta, Adam and Eve.

²³ Stone, History, 53-58.

²⁴ The phrase "with which I was clothed" is attested only in some Greek manuscripts, those belonging to the text forms IA and II in Levison's classification (see Levison, Texts, 73).

²⁵ The phrase "and it was from the same plant of which I had eaten" appears only in the Greek manuscripts belonging to the text forms IA and II (Levison, Texts, 74). However, it is also present in the Armenian, Georgian, and longer Slavonic versions.

²⁶ The English translation is from Anderson and Stone, Synopsis, 58E. The Greek text is in Levison, Texts, 73-74.

The text identifies the forbidden tree with the fig that provided the leaves for cover after the fall. The identification is also attested in *Testament of Adam* 3,4, composed between the second and fourth century C.E.²⁷. The tradition is most probably an interpretive development of Gen 3,6-7, which mentions the protoplasts' donning of fig leaves immediately after their eating from the forbidden tree:

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. (Gen 3,6-7)

The proximity of the two references to a tree (the forbidden tree and the fig), the noticeable lack of a differentiation in the story between the two trees, and the unexplained, sudden specificity of “fig” apparently led ancient interpreters to the conclusions that Adam and Eve took leaves from the same fig tree from which they had just taken fruits.

This interpretive process unfolds more clearly in *Genesis Rabbah*, a midrashic collection slightly contemporary and probably related to the Jerusalem Talmud²⁸:

R. Jose said: They [i.e., the fruits of the forbidden tree] were figs. [. . .]²⁹ A statement from its context (דבר למד מענינו), thus: This may be compared to a royal prince who sinned with a slave girl, and the king on learning of it expelled him from court. He

²⁷ On the *Testament of Adam* see Robinson, *An Examination*; idem, *Testament* (for date see p. 900); Levison, *Portraits*, 22-28; Stone, *History*, 85-87, 95-97; de Jonge and Tromp, *Life*, 83-85.

²⁸ For general remarks on the probable date of *Genesis Rabbah* see Stemberger, *Introduction*, 279-280. For contextual issues see Alexander, *Pre-Emptive*, 230-244; Becker, *Texts*, 145-60; idem, *Die grossen*.

²⁹ Here the translation adds: “He learns the obscure from the explicit”. But I have not found this phrase in the most important Hebrew manuscripts.

went from door to door of the slaves, but they would not receive him; but she who had sinned with him opened her door and received him. So when Adam ate of that tree, He expelled him and cast him out of the garden of Eden; and he appealed to all the trees but they would not receive him. What did they say to him? Said R. Berekiah: ‘Behold, a deceiver who deceived his Creator, who deceived his Master!’ as it is written, *Let not the foot of presumption come unto me* (Ps 36,12), which means, the foot that presumed against its Creator; *And let not the hand of the wicked shake me* (ib.); i.e. let it not take a leaf from me. But because he had eaten of its fruit, the fig-tree opened its doors and received him, as it is written, *And they sewed fig-leaves together*, etc. (Gen 3,7). Of what species was that fig-tree? R. Abin said: It was the *berath sheva* ‘, so called because it brought seven (*shiv ‘a*) days of mourning into the world. R. Joshua of Siknin said in R. Levi’s name: It was the *berath ali*, because it brought lamentation and weeping into the world. (*Gen. Rab.* 15:7)³⁰

The interpretive process that led to the reading of Gen 3,7 (the fig tree that provides the leaves for cover) into Gen 3,6 (the forbidden tree) is a clarification from context, a common interpretive method in ancient Judaism and Christianity³¹. The context (ענין), as Alexander Samely argues convincingly, “signifies not so much the thematic context as the very different notion of ‘textual proximity’”³². In other words, ענין is not the context of the story *as a whole*³³, but more specifically an unambiguous phrase/word that explains a related, but ambiguous phrase/word located in

³⁰ Translation from Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 123-124. *Genesis Rabbah* is critically edited in Theodore and Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit*. This edition must be consulted together with Sokoloff, *Genesis Rabba*, which follows a more reliable manuscript tradition, and idem, *Geniza Fragments*. See also Visotzky, *On Critical Editions*, 156, n. 6.

³¹ On interpretive methods employed in rabbinic literature in general, see the illuminating study Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation*.

³² Samely, *Rabbinic Interpretation*, 44.

³³ Stemberger, *Introduction*, 20.

nearby proximity³⁴. In this particular case the fig tree of Gen 3,7 explains the unidentified forbidden tree in the previous verse. It is significant that *Gen. Rab.* 15:7 knows a tradition very similar to the one attested in the *Life of Adam and Eve*; according to both these texts after the fall all the trees refused to comfort Adam and share their fruits with him, save for the fig tree, the tree of his fall.

b. San. 70b reaches a similar interpretation:

R. Nehemiah said: It [the forbidden tree] was the fig tree, for whereby they transgressed, they were taught to make amends (שבדבר שקלקלו בו נתקנו), as it is written, and they sewed fig leaves together”. (*b. San.* 70b)³⁵

The exegetical assumption at work here and in the nearly identical *b. Ber.* 40a³⁶ is that the instrument of a transgression and the instrument of the ensuing amendment are one and the same. Therefore, if Adam amended through a fig tree, he must have transgressed through the same fig. This seems to be a more particular application of the same interpretive principle as in *Gen. Rab.* 15:7, דבר הלמד מענינו. However, *b. San.* 70b differs from *Gen. Rab.* 15:7 in understanding Adam’s covering with fig leaves as amendment for sin and not as the persistence of sin.

b. San. 70b is not the only rabbinic source to interpret the donning of fig leaves as amendments. *b. Eir.* 18b identifies the covering with fig leaves as an atoning ascetical practice:

R. Meir said: Adam was a great saint. When he saw that through him death was ordained as a punishment he spent a hundred and thirty years in fasting, severed connection with his wife for

³⁴ I go here slightly beyond Samely, who sees this principle being “perhaps more closely linked” to a discourse deixis (Rabbinic Interpretation, 43-44). However, he does concede that what triggers the interpretation is rather “the textual proximity... first, and the deictic opportunities in the textual neighborhood second” (ibidem, 44).

³⁵ Translation and Hebrew text from Epstein, Talmud.

³⁶ “R. Nehemiah says it [the forbidden tree] was the fig tree, so that they repaired their misdeed with the instrument of it (שבדבר שנתקלקלו בו נתקנו), as it says, And they sewed fig leaves together”. Translation and Hebrew text from Epstein, Talmud.

a hundred and thirty years, and wore clothes of fig [leaves] on his body for a hundred and thirty years. (b. Eir. 18b)³⁷

Intriguingly, just like for Rabbi Meir, for Irenaeus and other early Christian authorities, the covering with fig leaves is a commitment to an ascetic celibate life, at least temporary (cf. *Adv. Haer.* 3.23).³⁸ The identification of the forbidden tree with the fig from which the protoplasts took their leaves, although not the only rabbinic tradition on the nature of the forbidden tree, also appears in *Gen. Rab.* 19:6, *Eccl. Rab.* 5:11, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 20, *Pesikta Rabbati* 42:1, and *Pirke de rabbi-Eliezer* 20.

The identification of the forbidden tree with the fig is not attested as widely in early Christianity. Partly to blame for this is the fact that the question about the genus of the forbidden tree seems not to have been asked as often among Christians as among the rabbis. Undoubtedly the prevalence of attitudes such as the ones displayed by Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa contributed to this silence. Augustine for one argues against assumptions that the paradisiacal trees were not actual realities, but at the same time to him these realities do not have their actual meaning in themselves, but point to or signify other realities³⁹. For all practical purposes, this shifts the interpretive focus away from the *signifiant* to the *signifié*, away from the physical reality of the forbidden tree to its external meaning. Augustine himself has no interest in identifying the genus of the tree, but only in establishing its meaning.

Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, mentions in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, composed probably shortly before his death in 394, that some (τινες) declare that the forbidden tree was a fig. He himself cannot agree with them. He does not take issue with

³⁷ Epstein, Talmud.

³⁸ See also Tertullian, *De pubicitia* 6.15, *De anima* 38.2. These sources attest to the pre-talmudic origins of this association of the garments of leaves with continence. See also the perceptive remarks in Chadwick, *Studies*, IX, 43.

³⁹ He makes the following succinct statement in *De genesi as litteram* 8.4.8: “Aliud quam erant illa omnia significaverunt, sed tamen etiam ipsa corporaliter fuerunt. Et quando a narrante commemorata sunt, non erat illa figurata locutio, sed earum rerum expressa narratio, quarum erat figurata praecessio” (PL 34:375).

the particular genus assignation, but rather with the literalism of the interpretation undergirding this assignation, in other words, with the assumption that the forbidden tree was an actual tree and the fruit was a physical fruit. He himself believes that the tree and its fruit must not be understood literally⁴⁰. Given that he, like Origen, generally associates Judaism (and Hellenism) with literalism⁴¹ and doesn't usually miss an opportunity to express this association, it is safe to assume that the unnamed "some" (τινες) against whom he argues here are other Christians.

Despite these two prominent attitudes⁴², early Christianity, as Gregory's diatribe indicates, did speculate on the nature of the forbidden tree and knew the tradition according to which it was the fig of Gen 3,7. The earliest Christian text to identify the forbidden tree as a fig seems to be Methodius of Olympos' *Symposium* 10.⁴³ The text was most probably composed in the second half of the third century⁴⁴. Methodius finds in the allegory of the trees in Judg 9,8-15 a deliberate allusion to Gen 3,6.

⁴⁰ Langerbeck, GNO 6, 10 lines 4-6.

⁴¹ See Cohen, *Beginnings*, 190.

⁴² The fact that the short passage on the fig tree in Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* appears in many medieval manuscripts with catenae on Genesis speaks to its popularity. A list of the manuscripts is available in Petit, *Catenae*, II, 95.

⁴³ Older studies in general (e.g., Ginzberg, *Legends*, V, 97), but also recent scholarship (e.g., Pearson, *Gnosticism*, 46), mistakenly take Tertullian's *Against Marcion* 2.2 to refer to this tradition. The Latin text, from the critical edition by Evans, Tertullian, 90, reads: "Aut quis dubitabit ipsum illud Adae delictum haeresim pronuntiare, quod per electionem suae potius quam divinae sententiae admisit? Nisi quod Adam nunquam *figulo* suo dixit, Non prudenter definxisti me. Confessus est seductionem. Non occultavit seductricem. Rudis admodum haereticus fuit. Non obaudiit, non tamen blasphemat creatorem, nec reprehendit auctorem, quem a primordio sui bonum et optimum invenerat, et ipse, si forte, iudicem fecerat [a primordio]". *Figulus*, which I placed in italics, was translated in the Ante-Nicene Fathers collection as "fig-tree": "Except that Adam never said to his fig-tree, 'Why hast thou made me thus?'" It is probably this mistranslation that has led to this common mistake in scholarship. I have not found any ancient text in which *figulus* would mean fig tree. Fig tree is commonly *ficus*. *Figulus*, related to the verb *figulo*, to form or shape, means potter (as it does in Vulgate Ps 2,9) or, in the broader usage of Christian texts, maker. The obvious point of the passage is that Adam never tried to place the blame for his mistake on God, his "potter"/"maker".

⁴⁴ Musurillo, Methodius, 5-9.

The “sweetness” and the “good fruit” of the fig tree in Judg 9,11 evoke the forbidden tree of the Genesis text, described in similar terms as “good for food” and “a delight to the eyes”. Therefore, the tree allegory in Judges, Methodius contends, “likens the fig tree to the commandment (έντολή) given to man in Paradise, for after he had been deceived, he covered his nakedness with fig leaves”⁴⁵.

In the allegory of the trees in Judg 9,8-15, Methodius continues, the fig-tree, as I have said, because of the sweetness and beauty of its fruit, has been taken as a type of the delights of Paradise (έν τύπω τής έν παραδείσω τρυφής); the devil, however, led man astray (άποβουκολήσας) and took him captive (ήγρευσε) by means of his imitations of it (τοϊς άντιμίμοις αύτής), persuading him to cover the nakedness of his body with fig leaves, that is, with sensual pleasure from the friction they would cause (διά τὸ κνησιμῶδες τρυφή φιληδόνω). (Symposium 10.5)⁴⁶

For Methodius the tree allegory of Judg 9,8-15 is clearly an interpretation of Gen 3,6-7. The point here is that Judg 9,8-15 takes the fig tree as a τύπος of the delight of Paradise, while in Gen 3,6-7 the devil uses “imitations” (άντίμιμος) of the fig tree to deceive the first human twice, by “leading him away” and by “taking him captive”. Essential to our line of research is this double deception. Clearly by the latter verb Methodius means the clothing with leaves, and by the former, the partaking of the forbidden fruit. Both were done by means of a fig tree, presumably one and the same tree.

There is further meaning in this complex imagery and it hinges on two words τύπος, type, and άντίμιμος, imitator, counterfeit. Herbert Musurillo noted decades ago that “Methodius is closest to Origen [whose work he knew very well, we may add] in his allegorism”⁴⁷, and, I submit,

⁴⁵ *Symposium* 10.2. Translation from Musurillo, Methodius, 143; Greek text from Debidour and Musurillo, Méthode, 288.

⁴⁶ *Symposium* 10.5. Translation from Musurillo, Methodius, 146; Greek text from Debidour and Musurillo, Méthode, 296.

⁴⁷ Musurillo, Methodius, 18.

he uses the first term very much like Origen. Launched into Christian scriptural hermeneutics by Paul (cf. 1 Cor 10,6-11), the word τύπος actually received its classical definition in Origen. As Peter Martens has shown, more often than not the term is misread in Origenian studies as an antithesis to allegory⁴⁸. Rather, Martens' close analysis of Origen evidences that for the Alexandrian, who uses Paul extensively on the issue of hermeneutics, the term τύπος

has a positive connotation, i.e., the figure in question, be it a person, place, or thing, indicates another higher reality, what Origen invariably terms the ἀλήθεια... The idea is that Scripture is composed in a manner symbolic of another (higher) reality.⁴⁹

Τύπος is then best understood as that of which the Scripture, as a fundamentally symbolic text, is made. For Origen the text of the Scripture is a series of τύποι. It follows that the meaning of it, the ἀλήθεια, is carried deep within the τύποι and is retrievable only by means of ἀλληγορία. Similarly, Methodius' point here is that the fig tree of Judg 9,8-15 is the τύπος for the delights of Paradise. But what is Methodius trying to say by ἀντίμιμος? The term means imitation, counterfeit copy, and feeds Methodius' point about diabolical deception, which continues with a second example of deception as follows:

Again, those who were saved from the Deluge by the wine of spiritual joy he made fun of, getting them drunk with a drink that resembled (ἀντιμίμω) the other, stripping man naked of his virtue.⁵⁰

Methodius understands that his point is difficult and promises clarity.

But what I am saying will become clearer as I go on. The power that is set against us always tries to imitate (μιμείται) the outward forms (σχήματα) of virtue and righteousness, not to encourage

⁴⁸ Martens, *Revisiting*, 283–317.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 300, 302.

⁵⁰ *Symposium* 10.5. Translation from Musurillo, *Methodius*, 146; Greek text from Debidour and Musurillo, *Méthode*, 296.

their practice, in truth (κατὰ ἀλήθειαν), but for the purpose of hypocritical deceit. He is outwardly made up with the artifices of immortality, that he may entice to death those who are trying to escape death. Thus he would like to be taken for a fig tree or a vine and bring forth sweetness and joy, transforming himself into “an angel of light” (2 Cor 11,14), beguiling many with a façade of piety.

Thus in Scripture we find two sorts of fig trees and vines: “figs that are good, very good, and the bad figs, very bad” (Jer 24,3); and “wine that may cheer the heart of men” (Ps 103,15), as well as a wine that “is the wrath of dragons and the wrath of asps, which is uncurable” (Deut 32,33). But ever since chastity established her reign over men, the error was exposed and crushed, and Christ the Archvirgin put it to flight. But now that chastity gained control over mankind, the true olive and the true fig (ἡ ἀληθινὴ συκὴ) and the true vine bring forth their fruit, as also the prophet Joel teaches us (Joel 2,21-23).⁵¹

It is now clear that ἀντίμιμος is like a negative ἀλήθεια, to use Origen’s vocabulary. The deceit uses the same outward appearances (σχήματα), which we could call τύποι, and makes them lead to a counterfeit truth, to ἀντίμιμος.

But Methodius has subtly moved here from reading a parable (Judg 9,8-15) to reading real life, first Adam’s actions in Paradise, then the postdiluvian drunkenness of Noah. Methodius is no longer offering a mere hermeneutics of texts, but also of life, of reality. Methodius reads a text that does not simply explain another text, but one which rather explains a fundamental and ongoing reality—diabolic deceit. The devil corrupts reality and turns it into fake types, imitations of the authentic ones, which deceitfully carry the human being to the unreal truth of sin.

It is possible that another early Christian identification of the forbidden tree with the fig occurs in Epiphanius’ *Ancoratus*, composed in

⁵¹ *Symposium* 10.5. Translation from Musurillo, Methodius, 146; Greek text from Debidour and Musurillo, *Méthode*, 296.

374⁵². In a refutation of Origen's non-physical understanding of paradise, Epiphanius lists all the things and beings in paradise mentioned in Genesis 2 and 3:

If therefore there is no sensible paradise, there is no spring; if there is no spring, there is no flowing water; if there is no flowing water, there are no four rivers; if there is no Phison, there is no Geon and there is no Tigris; if there is no Tigris, there is no Euphrates; if there is no Euphrates, there is no fig tree, no leaves, no Adam, no eating, no Eve (εἰ οὐκ ἔνι Εὐφράτης, οὐκ ἔνι συκῆ, οὐκ ἔνι φύλλα, οὐκ ἔνι Ἀδάμ, οὐκ ἔνι <τὸ> φαγεῖν, οὐκ ἔνι Εὔα); if there is no Eve, there is no eating from the tree; if there is no eating from the tree, there is no Adam; if there is no Adam, there are no people, but then truth is a tale and all are allegories. (Epiphanius, Ancoratus 58:7)⁵³

The peculiar word order in the phrase “no fig tree, no leaves, no Adam, no eating, no Eve” suggests that Epiphanius, just like Methodius, takes the fig tree to be the tree from which the protoplasts took both the forbidden fruit and the leaves to cover themselves after the fall.

The Medieval Greek catenae on Genesis⁵⁴ contain a short commentary on the forbidden tree, attributed in some manuscripts to Theodoret of Cyrus and in others to Theodore of Mopsuestia⁵⁵. The text appears also in some manuscripts of Theodoret's *Questions on the Octateuch* and it is printed in the earliest editions of Theodoret's work⁵⁶. In 1948 R. Devreesse challenged the

⁵² For a recent comprehensive introduction to Epiphanius' life and works see Williams, *The Panarion*, xiii-xxxiii.

⁵³ My translation of the Greek text from Holl, Epiphanius.

⁵⁴ The only comprehensive editions are those of Petit, *Catenae*, and idem, *La chaîne*.

⁵⁵ The fragment is printed in Petit, *Catenae*, II, 99-100 (#96); PG 80:125B-C (inserted into Theodoret of Cyrus' *Questions on the Octateuch: Genesis 28* with the attribution ΘΕΟΔΩΡΟΥ); PG 66:640B-C (as part of Theodore of Mopsuestia's *Commentary on Genesis* from *Catenae Nicephori*). The manuscripts are listed in Petit, *Catenae*, II, 99. The oldest seem to date from the ninth century: Petit, *Catenae*, II, XXI-XXIV.

⁵⁶ For the early editions of Theodoret's *Questions on the Octateuch* that contain the text on the forbidden tree see Petruccione and Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, lvii-lxvi.

attribution to Theodoret and suggested that the text most probably belongs to Theodore of Mopsuestia⁵⁷. Subsequent research has generally accepted Devreesse's proposals and the text was excluded from Theodoret's *Questions on the Octateuch* in subsequent editions⁵⁸. The text professes the idea that the forbidden tree was a fig and finds textual support for it. The first half of it reads:

When, sewing the leaves together, they heard the voice of God walking, they hid under the tree, quite clearly not another, but the one from which they sewed the leaves. This was the one that they had received the commandment about. As the prophet says, "they hid themselves in the middle of the woods of paradise" (Gen 3,8). Having eaten of it, they sewed the leaves together, because of the shame that came over them for their nakedness. These were fig leaves (Gen 3,7). Undeniably then the tree about which they had received the commandment was a fig. (Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary on Genesis)⁵⁹

The text seems to use an exegetical principle similar to the rabbinic מענינו דבר למד: the forbidden tree can be identified with the only other tree mentioned in the immediate context, the fig tree. Support for this exegetical move is found in the biblical text itself. The interpretive logic runs as follows: since Adam and Eve hid right after taking leaves from the fig tree (3,7), they must have hidden under the fig tree. Therefore, the fig tree must have been then in the middle of paradise, since, according to Gen 3,8, Adam and Eve hid in the middle of paradise. Furthermore, since, according to Gen 3,3, the forbidden tree was in the middle of paradise, the fig tree must have been the forbidden tree.

⁵⁷ Devreesse, *Essai*, 21, n.4.

⁵⁸ Petit is convinced that the text is not Theodoret's, but she is more cautious about the attribution to Theodore (Petit, *Catena*, II, CIV). The text that traveled in the Middle Ages under the title *Theodoret's Questions on the Octateuch* is now commonly viewed as incorporating the work of other Christian authorities. For this see Petit, *Catena*, II, LVIII-LXV; Petruccione and Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, lvii-lxxiii. The latest critical editions of Theodoret's *Questions* without the text discussed here are Petruccione and Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus*, and Fernández Marcos and Sáenz-Badillos, *Theodoret of Cyrensis*.

⁵⁹ My translation of the Greek text in Petit, *Catena*, II, 99-100.

The tradition that Adam and Eve hid *under* the fig tree is an exegetical development that departs from the biblical text. According to Gen 3,8 Adam and Eve hid “among (MT בתוך/ LXX ἐν μέσῳ) the trees of the garden” and not *under* any specific tree. The exegetical development is quite early and widespread. It is already attested in the first-century CE *Apocalypse of Abraham* 23:6, in which Adam and Eve stand “under a tree”⁶⁰. Adam also hides under a fig tree in the Gnostic *Testimony of Truth* 46:22⁶¹ and *Pirke de rabbi-Eliezer* 20⁶². The shorter Slavonic and the Romanian recensions of the *Life of Adam and Eve* make the same exegetical assumption. The Romanian, which here does not differ from the shorter Slavonic in significant ways, reads:

And after I ate my heart was violently troubled and all the leaves of the trees fell on my side (of paradise). I went under the tree from which I had eaten... And our eyes were opened and we saw ourselves naked and uncovered. And our hearts burned with desire. And it so happened that all the leaves fell from all the trees that were in paradise. Only those of the fig tree did not fall. And we sewed some of its leaves and made garments and covered ourselves. (Romanian *Life of Adam and Eve*)⁶³

The Romanian version suggests that the forbidden tree, under which Eve hides, is also the fig tree from which the protoplasts take leaves⁶⁴.

The argument in the second half of the passage in *Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on Genesis* is more complex and the argument is somewhat elusive:

But some do not accept this—due, it seems to me, to a two-fold simplicity—supposing that it is necessary that the tree be

⁶⁰ Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 700.

⁶¹ See translation in Robinson, *The Coptic Gnostic Library*, III, 161.

⁶² Friedlander, *Pirkê*, 166.

⁶³ This is my translation of the Romanian manuscript BAR 469 (the library of the Romanian Academy).

⁶⁴ The motif of seating under a fig tree occurs often in early rabbinic (e.g., *Gen. Rab.* 62:2) and Christian (e.g., John 1,48) literature. The possibility of this leitmotif carrying Adamic connotations must be ascertained individually for each occurrence.

something different (καινόν τι), and do not take into account that it is not by the nature of the tree (τῆ ποιότητι τοῦ ξύλου), neither by the novelty of the food (τῆ καινότητι τῆς βρώσεως) that sins are judged, but by the giving of the commandment (τῆ δόσει τῆς ἐντολῆς), the transgression of which, through whatever it may be, has a matching reproof (ἴσην... τὴν μέμψιν). (Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary on Genesis)⁶⁵

The key to the passage lies in the meaning of ἴσην... τὴν μέμψιν. The nature of the “equality” between reproof and transgression, which is not immediately clear⁶⁶, becomes evident only through the symmetry of the argument. The second half of the sentence— “[they] do not take into account that it is not by the nature of the tree, neither by the novelty of the food that sins are judged, but by the giving of the commandment, the transgression of which, through whatever it may be, has a matching reproof”—clearly explains and answers the first half— “[they] do not accept this [teaching] supposing that it is necessary that the tree be something different”. It is now obvious that the phrase “matching reproof” (ἴσην... τὴν μέμψιν) addresses the assumption that the forbidden tree is “something different” (καινόν τι). The argument here is that the instrument of the punishment will also be the instrument of the transgression. The second half of the sentence actually discusses instruments of transgression, or rather instruments by which a transgression is identified as such, hence the use of datives⁶⁷. This point mirrors closely the talmudic opinion נתקנו בר שקלקלו בו שבדבר noted above. The argument is that the primeval deed of Adam was deemed a transgression (this is the meaning of κρίνεται here) not because of the quality or nature of the tree that Adam ate from, neither because of the fruit, but simply because it transgressed a commandment. For the author of this text, most probably Theodore of Mopsuestia, the

⁶⁵ My translation of the Greek text in Petit, Catenae, II, 99-100.

⁶⁶ This is why the Latin translator in PG takes ἴσην τὴν μέμψιν to be about equality in significance: *cujus transgressio quantulacunque pari reprehensione digna est* (PG 80:126C).

⁶⁷ This is also, I believe, the meaning of the elusive ἐφ’ ὅτου at the end of the second sentence and I indicated its instrumental connotation in translating “through whatever”.

ones who do not perceive the obvious lexical connections in the biblical text and the logical symmetry between punishment and transgression are guilty of twofold un-sophistication (εὐήθεια).

The same argument resurfaces in strikingly similar vocabulary in the sixth century *Commentary on the Octateuch* by Procopius of Gaza:

Therefore, not bearing the noise, they hid under the tree about which they received the commandment and from which they also ate. This is made clear when it says: “in the middle of the woods of paradise” (Gen 3,8). As soon as they ate they, feeling the sensation of shame in nakedness, girded themselves, culling leaves from it. It’s said that it was the fig tree and not some different tree, as some declare foolishly. For not the nature of the tree holds the transgression, but the giving of the commandment. (Procopius of Gaza, *Commentary on the Octateuch: Genesis*)⁶⁸

In the introduction to the *Commentary* Procopius admits that his work is a compilation⁶⁹. Recent scholarship has evidenced the great extent to which the commentary simply reworks earlier texts⁷⁰. The compilatory nature of the text is obvious in the above quote, which is most probably a rephrasing of Theodore’s text analyzed above.

The texts analyzed here, drawn from such varied cultural contexts and periods (rabbinic, pseudepigraphic, patristic, and Gnostic) and show-

⁶⁸ My translation of the Greek text in PG 87/1:197A. Procopius’ *Commentary* has only two outdated editions: Mai, *Classicum*, 1-347, based on the *Vat. gr.* 1441 (16th century), and PG 87/1. The PG text from col. 21 to col. 365A follows Mai’s text, with the sole exceptions of the bracketed fragments, which are taken from *Catena Nicephori/Catena Lipsiensis*, published in 1772-1773 in Leipzig. From col. 365A the PG edition follows only *Catena Nicephori/Catena Lipsiensis*. *Catena Nicephori/Catena Lipsiensis* is a compilation of two different manuscripts, one from Athens, the other *Munich gr.* 358. Its value is limited. Petit considers *Munich gr.* 358 as the best and oldest manuscript (Petit, *Catena*, I, XXI, XXXI).

⁶⁹ PG 87/1:21A-23A.

⁷⁰ For recent discussions on Procopius’ use of sources see ter Haar Romeny, *Procopius of Gaza*, 173-190; Petit, *Fragments*, 349-354; Dorival, *La postérité*, 209-226. Several lists of texts that Procopius shares with Greek catenae are available in Petit, *Catena*, I, 310-316; idem, *La chaîne*, I, 329-333; II, 242-246; III, 411-418; IV, 493-500.

ing an unusual degree of concurrence in both exegetical principles and actual interpretive insights indicate a widespread Adamic lore centered on the tree of the fall. An essential question is: how far back in time does this lore go? The evidence provided here seems to converge on the first century C.E., the time of the composition of the fig-tree pericope. Yet, in an earlier article I argued that the prominence of tree language in the understanding of Adam and humanity in general goes back at least to Daniel 4⁷¹. Elsewhere I have suggested that Adamic traditions become prominent after the Babylonian conquest and undergird Ezekiel 28⁷². Also recent studies have shown the prominence of Adamic tradition among the Qumran community and other pre-Christian Jewish sources⁷³.

This widespread Adamic tradition brings into clearer focus the Gen 3,6-7 reverberations of our pericope. Through several of its elements, some of which function as obvious “textual irritants” (which I will explain below), the pericope echoes Gen 3,6-7 in a contrasting or reversed manner. First, Jesus’ unsatisfied hunger, which is odd to begin with, as I mentioned above, contrasts sharply with Gen 3,6, a story of eating in which hunger plays no role whatsoever⁷⁴. The inverse parallelism with Gen 3,6-7 is only highlighted by what the two stories do share, namely

⁷¹ Bunta, *The Mesu-Tree*, 364-384. See also Levison, *Portraits*, for a review of the earliest Adamic texts.

⁷² Bunta, *Yhwh’s Cultic Statue*, 222-241.

⁷³ Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory*.

⁷⁴ Donald A. Hagner has argued convincingly that there is a subtle parallelism in Matthew between 21,18-22 and 4,2-4 (Matthew, II, 605). For example, Jesus’ desperation is highlighted by his reaction to the tree’s barrenness and contrasts sharply with his refusal in Mt 4,2-4 to use his powers to gratify his hunger during his temptation. Also, Mt 4,2-4 is the only other passage in Matthew in which Jesus is described as hungry. The temptation narrative as a whole evokes major elements of Adamic traditions, particularly as extant in the *Life of Adam and Eve* corpus. First, Jesus fasts for 40 days, as does Adam in the *Life of Adam and Eve* literature. Second, the first of Jesus’ temptations is food. Not only was food the object of Eve’s first temptation, but, according to the Latin, Armenian, and Georgian texts of the Adamic corpus (9:4-5), food is also the first thing with which Satan tempts Eve the second time. Third, there is a subtle (and reversed) parallelism between Satan’s refusal to worship Adam in the Adamic story of the fall of Satan (cf. the Latin, Armenian, and Georgian *Life of Adam and Eve* 12-17)

the motif of quest or desire. In the no-hunger Genesis story the object of desire turns out to be too easily available, and in the hunger Gospel story the object is not available at all.

Second, both Mark and Matthew stress that the fig tree had “nothing but leaves”. The phrase, as France notes, “stands out as a surprisingly emphatic way of saying ‘no fruit’”⁷⁵. The emphasis creates another sharp contrast with the appealing fecundity of the tree in Gen 3,6. Furthermore, the second reference to “leaves” in the pericope, a strong textual irritant as a detail the story does not need, naturally takes the reader back to the fig leaves of Gen 3,7. The same *דבר הלמד מעניינו* reading strategy has already been found at work both in other Christian and in Jewish interpretations of Genesis 3.

Third, Davies and Allison note perceptively that the mention of leaves in the gospel pericope “means that the tree’s appearance is deceptive: the leaves should be a sign of fruit”⁷⁶. Similarly, France states succinctly that the tree “offered promise without fulfillment”⁷⁷. A parallel imagery of deception plays out in Gen 3,6-7: the fecund tree does not deliver that for which it looks promising. The deception continues in the protoplasts’ postlapsarian life, according to the Adamic traditions behind the *Life of Adam and Eve* corpus. In these texts there is a sharp contrast between the fig tree’s willingness to share its leaves with Adam and Eve and the fact that the fig tree does not yield any food to the starved protoplasts. In this context, the fig tree’s offering of leaves is emphatically contrasted with the most pressing need of the first humans for food⁷⁸. The parallelism of this tradition with our pericope is striking.

Finally, Jesus’ curse, as worded in both Mark and Matthew, *μηκέτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἔκ σοῦ μηδεὶς καρπὸν φάγοι*, is odd in at least three aspects:

and Satan’s request in the gospel story that Jesus worship him. The Latin and Georgian versions of the fall of Satan add that Satan believes that Adam should bow down to him.

⁷⁵ France, Matthew, 792.

⁷⁶ Davies and Allison, Matthew, 151.

⁷⁷ France, Matthew, 792.

⁷⁸ Scholars have previously noted that food and hunger play a major role in the *Life of Adam and Eve* corpus. E.g., Stone, *The Fall*, 55; Stone, *Penitence*, 430, xiii-xiv.

first, it mentions the fruit (καρπός) that the tree does not have in the first place; second, it implies that someone did eat from the tree before (cf. μηκέτι), which is never assumed in the rest of the storyline; third, the curse is realized beyond its wording: the fig tree is withered from its roots (ἐξηραμμένην ἐκ ριζῶν). All of these unusual elements—the unexpected and emphatic reference to “fruit”, the implication that someone did eat from the fig tree before (implication that goes beyond the storyline of the pericope), and the use of μηδεῖς—allude to Adam’s eating of the forbidden fruit of paradise. Furthermore, the withering of the tree being first and foremost realized in a complete loss of leaves echoes the covering of the protoplasts with the leaves of the fig tree and it stands in an intriguing parallelism with the tradition found in the *Life of Adam and Eve* according to which the trees of paradise withered after the fall, with the exception of the fig tree.

Ancient interpretations

Ancient interpreters have not missed the Genesis reverberations of the pericope. One of the earliest references to the gospel story appears in the *Refutation of All Heresies*, an early third century work commonly attributed to Hippolytus of Rome⁷⁹. The author illustrates the Docetist understanding of God with a comparison to a fig tree. Within this context he presents an intriguing reading of the Mark-Matthew narrative:

(The Docetæ maintain) that God is the primal (Being), as it were a seed of a fig-tree, which is altogether very diminutive in size, but infinite in power. (This seed constitutes, according to the Docetæ,) a lowly magnitude, incalculable in multitude, (and) labouring under no deficiency as regards generation. (This seed is) a refuge for the terror-stricken, a shelter of the naked (γυμνῶν σκέπην), a veil for modesty (αἰσχύνης ἐπικάλυμμα), (and) the sought-for produce (καρπὸν ζητούμενον), to which

⁷⁹ On Hippolytus and the corpus attributed to him, see Cerrato, Hippolytus, and Brent, Hippolytus.

He came in search (for fruit), he says, three times, and did not discover (any). Wherefore, he says, He cursed the fig-tree, because He did not find upon it that sweet fruit (γλυκὸν ἐκεῖνον καρπὸν)—the sought-for produce (καρπὸν ζητούμενον). (Refutation 8.1)⁸⁰

The text merges the cursing of the fig tree in Mark and Matthew with the parable in Luke 13,6-9, which mentions a seeking of figs over three consecutive years, but in which no cursing takes place. Moreover, the description of the fig tree as “a shelter of the naked” and “a veil for modesty” alludes to the garments of fig-leaves that Adam dons after the fall in order to cover his nakedness (cf. Gen 3,7), but it does so in markedly ascetical terms, similar to the vocabulary we found in *b. Eir.* 18b and Irenaeus’ *Adv. Haer.* 3.23. Given this allusion, I would suggest that the “sought-for fruit” (καρπὸν ζητούμενον) refers both to the pericope of the cursing of the fig tree and to the forbidden tree of paradise, highlighting the very parallelism between the two stories through the desire motif that I noted above.

Other early sources place the consonances between the cursing of the fig tree and Genesis 3 in even clearer focus. For example, the fourth century Ephrem writes in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*:

When Adam sinned and was stripped of the glory in which he had been clothed, he covered his nakedness with fig leaves. Our Savior came and underwent suffering in order to heal Adam’s wounds and provide a garment of glory for his nakedness. He dried up the fig tree in order to show that there would be no longer any need of fig leaves to serve as Adam’s garment, since Adam had returned to his former glory, and so no longer had any need of leaves or garment of skin. (Commentary on the Diatessaron 16.10)⁸¹

⁸⁰ Translation from ANF. I consulted the Greek text in Marcovich, Hippolytus.

⁸¹ Translation from Brock, St. Ephrem, 69. Ephrem’s *Commentary on the Diatessaron* has two modern translations: French (Leloir, Ephrem) and English (McCarthy, Saint Ephrem’s). For a recent presentation of the extant manuscripts, see Lange, Portrayal, 1-4.

For Ephrem the meaning of the cursing of the fig tree is the stripping of Adam's fig leaves and the recovery of the garments of glory lost in the fall. For Ephrem the fig leaves of both Genesis 3 and the gospel pericope stand for the condition of postlapsarian humanity, an idea that he expresses again in *Hymns on Paradise*: "he [Adam] became like the fig tree, being clothed in its vesture: Adam, like some tree, blossomed with leaves" (*Hymns on Paradise* 12.10)⁸². In stripping the tree-Adam of leaves, which for Ephrem are both the leaves of Genesis 3 and of our pericope, Christ returned humanity to its prelapsarian state.

Gregory of Nyssa shows the same sensitivity to the parallelism between our pericope and Genesis 3 and offers a similar interpretation:

You cursed, and blessed; You banished us from Paradise, and recalled us; You stripped off the fig-tree leaves (ἐξέδυσας τὰ φύλλα τῆς συκῆς), an unseemly covering, and put upon us a costly garment. . . (In diem luminum/In baptismum Christi oratio)⁸³

Although the cursing of the fig tree story is not mentioned explicitly, the expression "you stripped off the fig-leaves" is a clear allusion to it. Gregory's interpretation, like Ephrem's, intends to make sense of the problems inherent in the gospel narrative.

A similar interpretation of the cursing of the fig tree appears in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical lectures*:

At the time of the sin Adam and Eve clothed themselves with fig leaves; consequently Jesus made the fig tree the last of His signs. When He was about to go to His passion, He curses the fig tree—not every fig tree, but that alone, *due to the typos* (οὐ πᾶσαν συκῆν, ἀλλ' ἐκείνην μόνην διὰ τὸν τύπον)—saying, "May no one ever eat fruit of thee henceforth forever" (Mark

⁸² Brock, St. Ephrem, 164. For a fuller exposition of Ephrem's understanding of the fig leaves, see Brock, *The Holy Spirit*, 48-52.

⁸³ Translation from NPNE. Greek text in Heil, GNO 9.1, 221-242, here p. 241. For a succinct recent introduction to Gregory's life and works see Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 1-57.

11,14). Let the doom be cancelled. Because of old they clothed themselves with fig leaves, He came at a season when fruit is not found on the tree. Who is unaware that in winter the fig tree does not bear fruit, but is clothed in leaves only? Was Jesus ignorant of that which all know? No, but though He knew, He came as though He were seeking, not unaware that He would not find, but making *the typos of the curse* (τὸν τύπον τῆς κατάρας) apply only to the leaves. (Catechetical lectures 13:18)⁸⁴

The passage is quite straightforward, but it necessitates an explanation. I have corrected the translation in the words in italics. The translation used here has in those two instances “for the sake of the figure” for διὰ τὸν τύπον and respectively “the figurative curse” for τὸν τύπον τῆς κατάρας. This, I find, is a serious misreading of the word τύπος. Based on the elucidation of this term offered above, what Cyril of Jerusalem is saying here is that the cursing of the tree is a τύπος that points to ἀλήθεια. In cursing the fig tree, which, he remarks, means specifically a loss of leaves (as we noted above), Jesus presents us with a τύπος whose ἀλήθεια is “the cancellation of the curse”.

It is only proper to complete this review of ancient interpretations of the pericope with Methodius, who captivated much of the first part of this paper. Toward the end of his interpretation of Judg 9,8-15, interpretation which I analyzed above at some length, he says the following:

The true vine and the true fig tree were not yet able to afford us (ἡμῖν) the nourishment that would give us life; whereas the false fig tree blossomed with all kinds of flowers to deceive men. But when the Lord dried up those false and spurious trees, saying to the bitter fig tree, “May no fruit grow on thee henceforth forever” (Mt 21,19), then those that were true fruit-bearing trees flourished and blossomed with “food unto justice” (Joel 2,23).⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Translation, with corrections of mine in italics, from Stephenson and McCauley, *The Works*, 16. Greek from Reischl and Rupp, *Cyrilli Hierosolymorum*.

⁸⁵ *Symposium* 10.5. Translation from Musurillo, *Methodius*, 147; Greek text from Debidour and Musurillo, *Méthode*, 298.

Methodius' perception of the role deceit plays in the pericope of the cursing of the fig tree is noteworthy. Just earlier in his interpretation he found the same deceit in Gen 3,6-7. Methodius sees in the curse the end of the power of ἀντίμμος; the fig tree of Gen 3,6-7 is dead, the deceit is undone, the world becomes true, authentic, affording "us" life.

Methodius' ascetical interpretation of the pericope ultimately works itself out in the reader, who discovers himself/herself as having been the ultimate target of the reading and interpretive process all along; the accurate perception of both text and world as τύποι replete with ἀλήθεια is a self-discovery.

Final thoughts

There is almost universal agreement among ancient and modern interpreters that the story of Mk 11,12-14.20-25/Mt 21,18-22 contains several atypical elements and that these are best taken as markers of a symbolic meaning. Yet, this is where the consensus between the ancient and the modern interpreters stops. While the former perceived clear Adamic traditions in this symbolism, the latter see no such things. The question arises: Why such contrast? Where does this parting of the ways come from? By way of concluding this study, I would venture a response.

Modern voices extract the symbolism exclusively from the broader context of the pericope and are generally quite oblivious to other ways in which the text could work. Such broader-context readings at best detect the meaning that the passage receives from its final narrative context. Yet, this approach presents obvious shortcomings. For one it cannot account for the possible verbal transmission of the story either by itself or within entirely different contexts. If the *Gospel of Thomas* is any indication for the early transmission of the Gospel stories and sayings as self-standing *logia*, and a growing number of scholars would argue that it is⁸⁶, and if the verbal transmission of the Gospel (and by this I do not mean a book, but a message) cannot be overestimated, as more recent research has em-

⁸⁶ See especially DeConick, *Recovering*.

phasized⁸⁷, it is reasonable to assume that at least one central meaning of the cursing of the fig tree is present within the story itself, not by links to any broader narrative, but by intertextuality. In other words, the meaning of the text lies in its connection to other texts.

Second, somewhat impaired by these narrative interpretive practices (which are due, in my opinion, to hermeneutical mindsets and reading practices and sensitivities originating in the 18th century offices of German universities),⁸⁸ the modern readings of our pericope are insensitive to how an ancient text is built. Essentially, the ancient reading strategies exposed above were also composition strategies. The ancients wrote like they read, or more specifically, they wrote based on how they first read; and this primacy of reading is significant.

My point is not that texts function insularly, but on the contrary, I contend that texts function very much like cultures. Not only do texts reach other texts as the “always-already-read,” that is, “through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by... inherited interpretive traditions”⁸⁹, but they also exist in relation to each other as “nodes within networks”⁹⁰. Moreover, to take Michel Foucault’s idea further, a text is inasmuch a product of a network as a producer of a network. This means that texts exist in the more fluid and inclusive shape of textual networks or cultures. To apply to texts an insightful analysis commonly applied to cultures, a text is a transcultural “contact zone”, a place where “disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple, with each other”⁹¹. Of course, one must keep in mind that there is no such thing as pure cultures; for this reason all texts, just like all cultures, are “contact zones” of other

⁸⁷ See particularly Bauckham, *Jesus*.

⁸⁸ These hermeneutical mindsets, which amount to the destruction of the traditional Scripture, are exposed by the wonderful study of Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture*.

⁸⁹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, ix-x.

⁹⁰ “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands. . . Its unity is variable and relative” (Foucault, *Archaeology*, 25-26).

⁹¹ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 181.

texts/cultures. It follows then that the act of reading is always a form of inculturation. Texts are best “read” both in and through the cultures that produced them and in and through the cultures that they produce. What I hope to have achieved in this paper is to show that our pericope is a culture deeply formed by Adamic traditions, a culture in which the figure of Adam looms large and therefore one which reverberates with strong Adamic overtones.

Given this culture nature of texts, the earliest interpreters are in a privileged position to detect these overtones, which undergird a text beneath all of its obvious elements to which far-removed cultures can only hope to have a limited access. I would submit that this is the primary reason for which, as Allison over-cautiously notes, “their exegesis... sometimes hits a target that we have missed”⁹².

More recent scholarship has unveiled the “textual irritant” as the common hinge for such undergirding⁹³. Briefly put, these are textual oddities—either odd formulations or glaring omissions—that elicit from the reader particular attention and point the reader to deeper meanings and complex intertextualities. In other words, this is exactly the meaning of *typos* that I submitted above. Two things are of note here. First, these “irritants” were not only reading strategies, but also writing strategies, as I just pointed out. In other words, they are not simply perceived in or projected into the text from without, but are placed within the text by the author. Second, it is precisely at “textual irritants” that modern historical-critical exegesis is set up to fail, as it is fundamentally based on the conviction that, with all the historical data in place, a text can be figured out at its face value, as a text⁹⁴. By contrast, the ancients

⁹² Allison, *Studies*, 131.

⁹³ To my knowledge the term was first proposed by James Kugel (see especially his *In Potiphar’s House*). For more on this device see Boyarin, *Intertextuality*; Stern, *Midrash*, 132-61.

⁹⁴ To put it more bluntly, historical criticism is predicated on the intellectualist belief (and belief it is) that it can “really” understand what the Bible says once it reads it. I use quotation marks because my words draw on the tongue-in-cheek statement of *Dei Verbum*, “the interpreter of the Sacred Scriptures... ought to investigate carefully what the

view the Bible as fundamentally elliptical; it said much in a few words and often omitted essentials, leaving the full meaning to be figured out by readers alert to the tiniest irregularities in the text. The process of fully understanding a biblical text thus consisted of bringing out all possible nuances implied in the precise wording of each and every sentence. With regard to biblical narrative, this often meant “deducing” background details, conversations, or even whole incidents that were not openly stated in a narrative text, but only suggested by an unusual word, an apparently unnecessary repetition, an unusual grammatical form, and so forth.⁹⁵

In a few words, the observer becomes participant, the reader becomes author. This is the ultimate fundament of ancient hermeneutics, both Jewish and Christian. And by contrast this foundation of ancient hermeneutics brings the ultimate shortcoming of modern historical criticism into the clearest focus: what it misses in its very act of interpretation is the interpreter.

Our pericope, as I hope to have shown, presents many such textual irritants, to list only the most significant: Jesus’ “hunger” (which, as I pointed above, is odd and unusual), his irrational quest for figs when “it is not the season for figs”, the emphasis that the fig tree had “nothing but leaves” (an odd, circumlocuting way of saying “had not fruits”), and Jesus’ oddly worded curse “May no one ever eat fruit from you again”. To extrapolate Kugel’s insight, it is precisely at these points of the pericope that modern historical-critical exegesis is set up to fail. Yet, it is precisely these textual irritants that form the very pillars of the entire structure of the text.

All these textual irritants in our pericope, I have argued here, suggest that the story reverses Gen 3:6-7 and presents Jesus as recovering Adam’s original state. The earliest interpreters, unsurprisingly, did not miss these Adamic reverberations of the text.

hagiographers *really* intended to mean” (interpret Sacrae Scripturae... attente investigare debet, quid hagiographi *reapse* significare intenderint). My translation of the official text from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/.

⁹⁵ Kugel, In Potiphar’s House, 3-4.

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