The Cursed Fig Tree (Matt 21:18-20a): A Symbol of Religious Externalism

Rowland Onyenali (CMF)

Introduction

One of the most enigmatic of the miracles of Jesus is the cursing of the barren fig tree. A consideration of the presentation of this miracle in the gospel of Mark 11:12-14 has led many commentators to regard it either as secondary[1] or as legendary.[2] This is mainly because of Mark's little note that it was not the season of figs (Mark 11:13). The argument is that the narrative seems to impact on the intelligence of Jesus, whose omniscience has been shown in many parts of the gospels (cf. Mark 2:5-12). To this end, S. Wells, the author of *The Skeptics' Annotated Bible*, labelled this story an absurdity and said in a sarcastic tone: "Jesus kills a fig tree for not bearing figs, even though it was out of season. He did this to show the world just how much God hates figs".[3] On the same note, Cranfield writes: "Apart from its sheer physical impossibility and evident absurdity... the act depicted is irrational and revolting: Jesus curses a fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season".[4] Similar considerations led Nineham to conclude that "... it approximates more closely than any other episode in Mark to the type of "unreasonable" miracle characteristic of the non-canonical Gospel literature".[5] These, and similar comments show an incorrect understanding of the message behind the cursing of the fig tree.

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[1] Cf. M. Goguel, *Jesus and the Origins of Christianity* (New York: Haper & Row, 1960), 400.

[2] R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition,* trans. J. Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 218.

[3] S. Wells, *Skeptics' Annotated Bible* (2006). On-line at http://www.Skepticsannotatedbible.com. Accessed 21/08/2018.

[4] C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 13-14.

[5] F. W. Danker, "Postscript to the Markan Secrecy Motif", *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXVIII (January, 1967), 25.

Another approach, which may not be entirely correct, is to study the narrative from the point of view of realism. This is the approach taken by many scholars, including R. K. Harrison. Commenting in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Harrison explains that various kinds of figs grew in Palestine during the first century. One very important aspect of fig growth has to do with the relationship between the leaf and the fruit. Harrison notes that the tiny figs, known to the Arabs as *taksh*, "appear simultaneously in the leaf axils".[6] This *taksh* is edible and "is often gathered for sale in the markets".[7] Furthermore, "when the young leaves are appearing in spring, every fertile fig will have some *taksh* on it.... But if a tree with leaves has no fruit, it will be barren for the entire season".[8] This approach is an effort to understand the text from a geo-cultural perspective. It is important to note that the gospel writers did not write in a vacuum. They employed the cultural realities around them to communicate the message of the gospel. But with regard to the cursing of the fig tree, we want to underline that the message is more symbolic and theological than any other approach given to it. This is the argument of this paper.

Perhaps Matthew has preserved the significance of this miracle more than Mark. His understanding of the symbolic message behind the cursing of the fig tree made him to remove the remark that it was not the season of figs. Judging from this and the literary context of the miracle, one is led to concede that in Matthew's mind, the cursing of the fig tree is a symbolic representation of the fate that awaits those who claim faithfulness but are unable to bear corresponding fruit. This is a recurrent theme in Matthew's narrative. Hence, our interest is on Matthew's *performance* of the parable. We begin with the literary context of the pericopé.

Literary Context

The importance of literary context or setting in a story cannot be overlooked. This is because of the understanding that "settings in the

[6] R. K. Harrison, "Fig, Fig Tree", G. W. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:302.
[7] Harrison, "Fig, Fig Tree", 2:302.
[8] Harrison, "Fig, Fig Tree", 2:301-302.

story are never presented for their own sake and are always at the service of the plot and/or theme".[9] Abrams writes that "the overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs".[10] But what we are referring to here is the literary context, that means, the place where Matthew has incorporated this story in his literary scheme. Context determines meaning. The *Sitz in der Literatur* of stories should be given due attention.

To be incorporated into the literary macro-context of our pericopé is the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem.[11] This begins the controversy between Jesus and the Jewish religious authority which continues until Matt 22:14. The next episode begins with Matt 22:15 with the plan of the Jewish leaders to entrap Jesus with the question about the payment of taxes. The implication is that despite the chapter division, the events beginning with the cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:18-19) to the punishment of the man without the wedding garment (Matt 22:1314), function as a unit and expose the dangers of lack of fruit bearing. It can only lead to disaster. This is central to Matthew's theology.

The cursing of the barren fig tree in Matthew is situated between Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (Matt 21:12-18) and the controversy with Jewish leadership (Matt 21:23-27), leading to the Trilogy of Parables (Matthew 21:28–22:14). This is the micro-context of our pericopé. The sandwiching of the cursing of the fig tree between the cleansing of the Temple and the controversy with the Jewish religious establishment puts our pericopé at the centre of the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders that has been following the development of the Matthean narrative. This is unlike Mark, where the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14) precedes the cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15-17).

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[9] E. S-B., Shim, *The transfiguration of Jesus According to Mark: A Narrative Reading*. D Th thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1994, Stellenbosch University. Accessible at scholar.sun.ac.za.

[10] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th edition (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 284.

[11] If we follow the Pentateuchal division of the gospel of Matthew, our pericopé falls within the fifth part beginning from 21:1. "This entrance (21:10) seems to mark an important turning point in the ministry of Jesus. For the exposition of this point see D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33b, 591.

If we are correct that the placement of our text at the centre of the controversy in Jerusalem is a Matthean theological profile, then we are justified in looking at the importance of the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders as the main focus of our text. This is because the cleansing of the Temple has enabled Jesus to accuse the Jewish leaders of turning the house of God into a den of robbers (21:13).The proximity between the cursing of the fig tree and the cleansing of the Temple suggests that the two events have the same significance.[12] The cleansing of the Temple itself could be seen as a prophetic action (cf. Mal 3:1-2)[13] since the cleansing of the Temple is always associated with the restoration of Israel (Cf. 2 Kings 18:4-8; 22:3–23:25). If this be the case, the exclamation, "this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee" (Matt 21:11) has placed the stress on the identification of Jesus as a prophet. "Nazareth" only plays a secondary role in this identification. His prophetic role is then concretized with the miracle of healing in the Temple (21:14). This action then introduces the High Priests and Scribes as opponents to Jesus.[14] Later, the Trilogy of Parables (21:28–22:14) would focus on the inability of the Jewish leaders to bear the appropriate fruit of the kingdom. Therefore, the message of our text points to the importance of bearing fruit and the consequences of lack of it. Any tree that fails to bear fruit will experience the same fate as the cursed fig tree.

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[12] See D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew,* Sacra Pagina, 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 297; R. H. Hiers, "*Purification*", 85. Matthew seems to heighten the authority of Jesus by narrating the withering of the fig tree immediately after the cursing.

[13] See Harrington, *Matthew*, 295. The words of Jesus in this section repeat the prophetic assertions of Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:1). His actions here contradict those of David, who attacked blind cripples and decreed that the blind and the crippled cannot enter the Lord's house (see 2 Sam 5:8; cf. Lev 21:18-19). See R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982), 413. A similar prejudice against the unclean is to be found in 1 QSa 2:5-22; 1 QM 7:5-6; CD 15:15-17. So also B. Repschinski, *The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew: Their Redaction, Form and Relevance for the Relationship between the Matthean Community and Formative Judaism* (Gottingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 189.

[14] The reaction of the Jewish leaders in 21:15 seems to be informed by the miracles of Jesus in the Temple. See W. D. Davies/D. C. Allison, Jnr., *Matthew 19-28, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Cambridge, T & T Clark, 2004), 141; M. Konradt, *Israel, Kirche und die Völker im Matthäusevangelium*, WUNT 215 (Tubingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 134.

This message seems to be central throughout the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem. It is also central to us if we understand the symbolism of the text.

Text of Matt 21:18-20a

The short text under consideration is:

> In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they were amazed.

Source and Redaction

The agreements between the two narratives in Mark and Matthew are obvious: they have the same spatial setting (moving from Bethany to Jerusalem) and the same plot (Jesus' hunger; seeing a fig tree; Jesus finds nothing but leaves; so Jesus curses the fig tree; the withering of the fig tree; the disciples' discovery of the withered fig tree). As already pointed out, the major difference between Mark's and Matthew's narratives is the Matthean removal of the Markan remark that it was not the season of figs. This, for us, is Matthew's theological interpretation of this episode to imply that the bearing of fruit is nothing seasonal. It is a clarion call that the tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down. This theme is already present in Matthew's version of the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt 3:10). We shall return to this motif later.

A tabular presentation of the two narratives and the adjoining texts will help us understand clearer the differences between them. We have included the context because of our understanding that the context is the key to the meaning of the story.

Table 1

Matt 21	Mark 11
1-11 Entry into Jerusalem	1-11 Entry into Jerusalem
.....	12-14 cursing of the fig tree
12-17 cleansing of the Temple	15-19 cleansing of the Temple
18-20a cursing and withering of the fig tree	20 withering of the fig tree
20b-27 the question about Jesus' authority	21-33 the question about Jesus' authority

Beginning from the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem and reading through the confrontation with the Jewish religious establishment concerning the authority of Jesus, one discovers a two-day scheme in Matthew as opposed to Mark's three-day scheme. Another major difference is the withering of the fig tree immediately after Jesus' pronouncement of the curse in Matthew. This is against Mark who records that the withering of the fig tree was noticed on the next day.

Matthew 21			Mark 11		
First day					
Entry → Temple → Bethany			Entry → Temple → Bethany		
vv.10-11	vv.12-16	v.17	v.11	v.11	v.11
Second day					
Entry → Fig tree → Temple			Fig tree →Temple → Bethany		
v. 18	vv.19-20a	v.23	vv.12-14	vv.15-19	v.19
Third day					
Fig tree → Temple					
vv.20-25	v.27				

Justification for a Symbolic Interpretation: The Fig Tree as Stock Metaphor

There are a number of OT passages that interpret the fig tree as a symbol of the nation of Israel. These include Isa 28:3-4; Jer 8:13; Hos 9:10, 16; Joel 1:7, 12; Mic 7:1.

Isa 28:3-4: "Trampled underfoot will be the proud garland of the drunkards of Ephraim. And the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is on the head of those bloated with rich food, will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer; whoever sees it, eats it up as soon as it comes to hand".

Jer 8:13: "When I wanted to gather them, says the LORD, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them".

Hos 9:10: "Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors. But they came to Baal-peor, and consecrated themselves to a thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up, they shall bear no fruit. Even though they give birth, I will kill the cherished offspring of their womb".

Joel 1:7.12: "It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white. The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple-all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people".

Mic 7:1: "Woe is me! For I have become like one who, after the summer fruit has been gathered, after the vintage has been gleaned, finds no cluster to eat; there is no first-ripe fig for which I hunger".

All of these passages "use the withering of the fig tree as a symbol for eschatological judgment on Israel…"[15]

[15] J. Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 789.

A Narrative Critical Reading Matt 21:18-20

Narrative analysis begins with the assumption that "an author writes a narrative from beginning to end, and it must be approached as a unified utterance".[16] According to M. A. Powell, the central question of narrative analysis is: "How does the implied author guide the implied reader in understanding the story"?[17] Powell goes on to assert that "the goal of narrative criticism is to read the text as the implied reader … to read in this way, it is necessary to know everything that the text assumes the reader knows and to "forget" everything that the text does not assume the reader knows".[18] An extreme view of this line of thought is developed by Fowler, who suggests that, "the Gospel is designed not to say something about the disciples or even to say something about Jesus, but to do something to the reader".[19] To explain further, he asserts:

> Lest we become nervous about what Mark may be thereby asserting about the twelve apostles, the historical pillars of the early Christian church, let us recall that this narrative does not claim to be history. It is not even referentially oriented. Rather, it is pragmatically or rhetorically oriented. It is not "about" its characters; it is "about" its reader. The Gospel writer's chief concern is not the fate of either Jesus or the Twelve in the story but the fate of the reader outside the story.[20]

This extreme view is a denial of the historical basis of the biblical narratives. For us, rather, the historical dramas are an invitation to us to wake up and confront the text that confronts us in a living and lively confrontation. This is the only way the word can take a contemporary flesh and dwell among us. Therefore, instead of looking at the Jewish leaders as the ones the figure of the cursed fig tree points to, let us look at how the text addresses us.

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[16] F. J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 31.
[17] M. A. Powell, *What is narrative criticism? Guides to biblical scholarship New Testament series* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 23-24.
[18] Powell, *What is narrative criticism?* 20.
[19] R. M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis, Trinity Press, 1991), 79.
[20] Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 80.

Bearing of Fruit as Doing the Will of the Father

As already indicated, the theme of bearing of fruit was already introduced in the Matthean version of the preaching of John the Baptist. In John's preaching, any tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Matt 3:10). In this context, the bearing of fruit equals authentic repentance. The claim to Abrahamic lineage is no excuse for judgment.

Jesus takes on the same theme of the importance of fruit bearing towards the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:15-20). These six verses mention fruit seven times. If we add "grapes" and "figs" into our word-count for fruit, then we have a total of nine mentioning of fruits in this short passage. The good fruit is contrasted with bad fruit. And in context, the referent is the distinction between the good prophet and the bad prophet (v. 15). Although they appear as humble as sheep, they are ravenous as wolves. A further explanation of what the bearing of good and bad fruits means is given by the explanation of the imagery employed by Jesus in this pericopé. In Matt 7:21-23, the focus is on the contrast between the proclamation of "Lord! Lord!" and the doing of the will of the Father (*to thelēma tou Patros*). The word *thelēma* in the LXX especially refers to the divine will (cf. Psa 39:9; Sir 43: 16; 1 Esdras 9:9; etc.). "Apart from representing God's creative designs for the universe and his salvific plan for mankind, it does concretely express the commandments to be obeyed".[21] Starting from the OT, one sees that doing the will of God carries with it blessings. Disobedience to God's will can only bring disaster. In Psa 40:6-8, the psalmist understands that doing the will of God is better than burnt offering. The wonderful imagery of the tree planted by the side of the river as representing the one who does God's will (cf. Psa 1:1-4) substantiates such an understanding. This idea is carried forth in 4 Macc 18:16, where there is a tree of life for those who do God's will. We need not spend time recounting the warnings of the prophets to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah about the punishment attendant on disobedience to Yahweh. It is a recurrent theme in almost all of the biblical prophets. It is then

[21]Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer* (Baltimore: St. Mary's Seminary), 236 n. 73); R. Onyenali, *The Trilogy of Parables in Matthew 21:28-22:14: From a Matthean Perspective* (Frankfurt: Peterlang, 2013), 98.

significant that Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount by noting that those who hear his words and act accordingly are like the wise man, who built his house on rocks. He is protected from the storms and other elements (Matt 7:24-25). At the other extreme are those who hear the word and do not act accordingly. What awaits them is a terrible collapse (Matt 7:27).

The importance of doing the will of the Father is also the central question in the first parable of the trilogy of parables in Matt 21:28–22:14. In the first parable (Matt 21:28-32), Jesus presents the story of two sons and their father. The father approaches the first son and makes a command for him to go to the vineyard and work (21:28). The response of the first son was a complete defiance to the father. But he later changed his mind and went (21:29).[22] Then the father approaches the second son, making the same demand. This one makes a profound "I will, sir" but does not go (21:30). The question then is who among these two did the will of the father. The answer of the Jewish leaders that the first son was the one that did the will of the father (21:31)[23] prompted Jesus to apply the parable to them. Their refusal to repent through the preaching of John the Baptist, unlike the tax collectors and sinners, means that they are now behind in the race towards the kingdom of heaven. The son, who refuses

[22] A few mss (B Θ f^{13} sa^{mss}bo) reverse the order of the two sons, putting second the one who said he would not go but afterwards went. This means that in the answer of the Jewish leaders in v. 31 these mss changed *"ho prótos"*, (the first), to *"ho eschatos"*, (the last), or "*ho husteros*", (the latter).

[23] The text-critical problems involved in this parable between v. 29b-31b are too complex. The UBS text takes note of this complexity by labeling the reading "C", which means that the members of the committee could not easily decide which variant to place in the text. See K. Aland/B. Aland, *Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), 312-316. Other works that deal with the textual problems in this parable include B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 4th edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 44-46; J. M. D. Derrett, *The Parable of the Two Sons*, 109-16; reprinted in ID., *Studies in the New Testament*, 76-84; J. R. Michaels, "The Parable of the Regretful Son", *Harvard Theological Review*, 61, 1 (January 1968), 15-26; J. Schmid, *"Das Textgeschichtliche Problem der Parabel von den zwei Söhnen, Vom Wort des Lebens*, Festschrift M. Meinertz (Münster: Westf., 1951), 72-76; I. H. Jones, *The Matthean Parables: A Literary and Historical Commentary* (Brill-Leiden, 1995), 393-96.

to go to the vineyard, stands for the Jewish leaders.[24] Their initial proclamation of obedience to God is undermined by their refusal to believe in the messengers of God. We interpret the symbolism of the vineyard to be the same as that of the fig tree. The symbolic usage of the vineyard motif in the OT implies that what is at stake is not a normal command by a *pater familias* for his sons to work in a family farm. Our parable points to obedience to God as the master of the Vineyard. In the OT, it has become a fixed metaphor to describe Israel as the vineyard of God.[25] "This metaphoric representation is also evident in the writings of the Qumran community".[26] In the same way *ergázomai - ergasía - ergatés - érgon* seem to have acquired both theological and metaphorical connotations. In Matthew's Gospel, they seem to equate working for God's kingdom.[27] Therefore, work in the vineyard is a command to be obedient to the commandments of God.

Bearing of Fruit and the Kingdom of God

Already, we have seen how the bearing of fruit is linked to entrance into the kingdom of God. In both the preaching of John the Baptist and in the Sermon on the Mount, this theme is central and decisive for membership among the followers of Jesus. In the parable of the Two Sons, there is a connection between the bearing of fruit and doing the will of the father.

This connection is heightened in the parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33-46). In this parable that narrates the preparation of the vineyard by the owner and the leasing of the vineyard to tenants (v. 33), as well as a two-fold sending of his servants (vv. 34-36) and then his son (v. 37) to collect his share of the produce of the farm and the bad

[24] F. W. Beare has suggested that the son who fails to go to the vineyard could not stand for the Jewish leaders since they "would be astonished to have it suggested that they were not working in the vineyard of God as they had promised". See his *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1981), 424. But he seems to be contesting against the real aim of the narrative.

[25] Cf. Isa 3:14; 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer 12:10: Ps 80: 9f; Hos 10:1; Joel 1:7; Ezek 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14. See also C. L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 189, who refers to the vineyard as "stock symbol for Israel".

[26] Onyenali, *Trilogy*, 69. There is, for instance, the metaphor of planting for the present (1QH 8.5) or for the eschatological community (1QH6.15; 8.6).

[27] For instance, in 9:37; 10:10 and 20:1ff. See U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* III (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1985-2002), 154.

treatment meted on these messengers, our attention is drawn to the reaction of the vineyard owner (vv. 41) and the application of the parable, especially v. 43 where the application of the parable mentions the production of fruit as a basic criterion for inheriting the kingdom of God. In v. 41, the Jewish leaders respond to the question posed by Jesus in v. 40. The question bothers on what the vineyard owner would do to the wicked tenants when he comes. Unsuspectingly, the Jewish leaders supply the answer that would turn out to be self-incriminating. This is unlike in Mark and Luke where Jesus supplies the answer to this question. This makes the Matthean version to be a classical parable[28] and to fall under what scholars have come to regard as juridical parable.[29] In Matt 21:31, Jesus had already allowed the Jewish leaders to pass judgment on the two sons. Here, the same strategy is employed.[30]

But of greater importance is the application of our present parable. We focus on the verse dealing with the transfer of the kingdom. A synoptic comparison shows that the theme of the transfer of the kingdom to another nation is the most important adaptation Matthew has made to the parable of the Wicked Tenants.[31] This transfer is because of the inability of the Tenants to render the required fruit to the vineyard's owner. These tenants are recognized as the Jewish leaders with the construction "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to another nation producing its fruit" (v. 43). This brings us to the heart of the Matthean gospel. R. T. France has argued that, "the mention of another "nation" to replace "you" in the tenancy of the vineyard takes us to the heart of the issue of the true Israel, which underlies this whole section of the Gospel,

[28] K. Snodgrass sees this as keeping with classic parable form. See his *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants*, WUZNT 27, (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1983), 61. Also C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1936), 127. H. J. Klauck points out that a parable ending with a rhetorical question answered by the person who asked it is a singular phenomenon. See his *Allegorie und Allegorese in synoptischen Gleichnistexten* (Munster: Aschendorff, 1978), 288.

[29] A juridical parable is a parable that "constitutes a realistic story about the violation of the law, related to someone who had committed a similar offence with the purpose of leading the unsuspecting hearer to pass judgment on himself". U. Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a juridical Parable", *Bib*. 48 (1967), 220.

[30] Other examples are the parable of Nathan to David (2 Sam 12:5-7) and the parable of the vineyard in Isa 5:1-7.

[31] Cf. Onyenali, *Trilogy*, 132.

and in conjunction with the other two parables in the group, it enables the reader to reach a far-reaching understanding of what the vineyard parable implies rather than is possible from Mark and Luke when they record it alone".[32] It could be argued that the motif of producing good fruit which appears in this verse places it in a central position in the interpretation of the parable and this cluster of parables, if not the entire Matthean Gospel.[33] Kloppenborg has concluded that "…the editing of the parable [by Matthew] emphasizes the owner's (=God's) proprietary interest in the 'harvest', which likely refers to good works or righteousness".[34] Surely the vineyard features as stock metaphor for the house of Israel. One needs only look at such passages as Psa 80:8-9,[35]Hos 10:1, Isa 27:2-6 and Jer 2:21[36] to confirm this submission.

The conclusion that God is interested in righteousness is also echoed in the other eschatological parables of our gospel (cf. Matt 25:1-13; 14-30; 31-46). All these parables tend to point to the disaster that awaits all who fail to produce good fruits. We see this in the picture of lack of oil from the foolish "virgins", lack of economization of the talents by the "servants" and the absence of mercy in the "goats". In all these, the punishment would be "I do not know you" (25:12), "throw him out into the dark where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30), and "these will go to eternal punishment" (25:46). All these are expressions of a curse on those that fail to bear corresponding fruit. In the parable of Matt 21:34-46, lack of production of fruit, or to put it more correctly, the inability to render the fruit of the vineyard will lead to a transfer of the kingdom to another ethnos that would produce its fruit. This "new ethnos

[32] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 808. A. Plummer argues thus: "…whatever may be Mt's authority for this verse (43), there is no doubt that it is part of the original text of this Gospel". See his *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St Matthew* (London: Paternoster, 1909), 299.

[33] The need to bear fruit is also present in Matt 3:8-10//Luke 3:8-9; Matt 7:16-20; Matt 12:33//Luke 6:43-4; Matt 13 8//Mark 13:8; Matt 13:26; 21:41.

[34] Kloppenborg, *Tenants*, 197.

[35] Snodgrass, *Wicked Tenants*, 75, n. 14, argues that Psa 80:9-20 may be very significant to the parable of the Wicked Tenants.

[36] The imagery of a vineyard destroyed by shepherds is used to describe Israel in Jer 12:10; in Ezek 15:2 the prophet uses the imagery of a withered vine to describe Israel given over to fire and flame; also a vine that was once in flourishing condition is used of Israel in Ezek 19:10-14.

is not an ethnic ethnos but an ethical one".[37] It is not the gentiles as opposed to the Jews.[38] It rather refers to a new group of leaders for Israel.[39]

We can thus conclude with W. J. C. Weren that: "Matt 21:43 is not meant as a characterization of a particular, empirically definable group but describes the criterion that in the final judgment is applied to all groups. This means that the criticism levelled at the chief priests and the Pharisees also contains a word of warning to disciples of Jesus who are just as unproductive as they are".[40] This warning is that just like the fig that fails to bear fruit, any unfruitful follower of Jesus would be visited by divine punishment. Finally, the parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matt 22:1-14) effectively caps the symbolic meaning of the entire section. A realistic reading of the parable makes no meaning especially with regard to Matt 22:7 and Matt 22:11-14. The man without the appropriate wedding garment stands for every Christian who fails to render the fruit of the Christian credo. His punishment is relatable to the cursing of the fig tree.

Conclusion: Lack of Fruit and Divine Judgement

Perhaps the conclusion of the previous segment is an apt introduction to the application of our study to the church in Nigeria. As already noted, the people at the centre of Jesus' rebuke are not the whole Israelite nation. The Jewish religious leadership is the focus of the text. Already, this group has constituted an opposition to Jesus starting from the beginning of his ministry. The response of Jesus is through symbolic

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[37] Onyenali, *Trilogy*, 163.

[38] Cf. R. J. Dillon, "Towards a Tradition History of the Parables of the True Israel (Matthew 21,33-22,14", *Bib.* 47 (1966), 20; Schmid, *Matthäus*, 305

[39] A. Saldarini finds in ethnos reference to a new group of leaders for Israel when he writes: "the ordinary meaning of ethnos that fits Matthew's usage is that of a voluntary organization or small social group". Cf. A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 60.He further contends that the ethnos–bearing fruit (21:43) is a new group of tenants or leaders of Israel who will give the owner his fruits at the right time. He concludes that the vineyard, which is Israel, remains the same, with the implication that in this parable sub-groups within Israel are blamed or praised. See also Lohmeyer/Schmauch, *Matthäus*, 315.

[40] W. J. C. Weren, "The Use of Isaiah 5,1-7 in the Parable of the Tenants (Mark 12,1-12; Matthew 21,33-46)", *Bib.* 79 (1998), 24.

actions and parables. The Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32), the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33-45) and the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14) all make the same accusation as the symbolic Fig Tree (Matt 21:18-20a). They accuse the Jewish leaders of inability to bear the fruits appropriate to the kingdom and also warn the followers of Jesus not to fall into the risk of empty creedal flamboyance. This is applicable to the Church in Nigeria.

There is no doubt that things are not well with the Church in Nigeria. Surely, this is a blanket statement that could be defended by pointing out that the church cannot be healthy in a sick environment. Politically, economically, morally and otherwise, our environment is stinking. And if we cannot be agents of environmental sanitation, then we should be bold enough to look ourselves in the face and tell ourselves the simple truth, namely, we need to wake up. The wake-up call should begin from the leadership of the church. But anytime the issue of church leadership crops up, one immediately sees the readiness to pass the buck: the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) members accuse the president; the CWO president accuses the laity council chairman, the laity council chairman accuses the parish priest, the parish priest accuses the dean of the diocese, the dean accuses the bishop, etc. But someone must have to admit that his/her table needs to be cleaned up before pointing accusing fingers.

As I was concluding this paper, many events started rolling over each other in the universal church and in the Catholic Church in Nigeria. We need not mention the deviation from the preaching of the core gospel values of holiness and sanctity of life to a materialistic concentration by our priests and laity. We also need not mention the series of revelations of end-time nature that erupted from the Church in America concerning clergy abuse of young children entrusted to their care. I am aware that child-abuse is not present only in the church, but such revelations naturally question what we represent and what we preach. They raise searching questions concerning the attention we pay to the initial and ongoing formation of our agents of evangelization. The Catholic Church can boast of well-trained and educated priests and laity, at least from the intellectual angle. Most religious congregations have well-informed priests and sisters, at least from the point of view of bookish knowledge. The Catholic Church in Nigeria can be proud of having the most vibrant

clergy, religious and laity in Africa. We have sprawling cathedrals and churches of gothic nature. Our church vestments and sacred vessels can rival those of the Solomonic Temple. While Christianity worldwide is gradually turning itself inside out because of some self-inflicted injuries accruing from lack of correspondence between our creedal proclamations and evident discipleship, Christianity in this country is being pushed to the backwaters of irrelevance. Something must be done and fast too.

It seems to me that we invest too much on material things to the neglect of the spiritual formation of our members. Do we think that the money we invest in building big cathedrals and churches is more important than investment in the training of personnel to man these churches? If we take a simple example: how much is the budget of each diocese for the formation of seminarians each year? What is the percentage of this compared with the expenses for church buildings, halls, etc.? Almost every diocese and religious congregation wants to have her private university. Is this structural growth adequately matched by a corresponding internal renewal of the agents of evangelization? Do we equip the libraries in our seminaries with quality books to ensure proper formation of our priests-to-be?

What about the formators in the seminaries? Do we realize the harm caused when our well-trained priests refuse to teach in the seminaries because of the poor maintenance of seminary personnel? We have priests with double doctorate degrees teaching in Kindergarten abroad because what they receive in the seminaries at home cannot fuel their cars, not to talk of repairs. This is a simple example that could be multiplied. At the end we lack the best hands to handle the most sensitive function of forming priests for the church. If the experience of the church in the West cannot teach the church in Nigeria anything then nothing can teach us.

And what happens in the parishes? How many of our parish priests pay attention to the core teachings of the church? How many of our priests are now swaying back to the teachings, the music and the ideologies of the traditional African religion? Is something wrong with the formation of our priests today? The warning of Jesus to the people who brought him the message of the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with that of their sacrifices (Luke 13:1-9) is a warning to us all: “Unless you

repent, you would likewise perish". What happens to the tree that refuses to bear good fruit? It would be cut down and thrown into the fire. And if the fig tree has only leaves and no fruit, it should not expect to escape the curse of the master.