



Origen and Jerome as Exegetes of the Parables from the Gospel of St. Matthew – Elements in Common and Differences

Rev. Mariusz Szram¹

Abstract: The article is an attempt to examine the degree of dependency of Jerome's exegesis of the parables from the Gospel of St. Matthew on the exegesis of the same texts by Origen. The primary sources are Jerome's *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew* written in 398 AD, when he was already opposed to the Alexandrian, and Origen's *Commentary* on the same Gospel. A detailed comparative analysis of the exegesis of the selected parables led to the following conclusions. The differences between the approaches of both authors are limited to three issues: (1) Jerome's interpretations reflect the spirit of the post-Nicene period, marked by Trinitarian disputes; (2) The Stridonian dissociates himself from all associations with Origen's dubious theological suggestions, such as the pre-existence of souls or apocatastasis, which can be noticed concealed in the exegesis of the Alexandrian; (3) Jerome's comments are short and concisely convey the main spiritual meaning of the parables in question, but this difference in the length of comments is quite secondary. Despite the above differences the reliance of the Stridonian on the Alexandrian is significant. Jerome's elaborations are very similar to those of Origen in terms of exegetic methodology and spiritual content extracted from the text of the Gospel. Even if Jerome does not accept all the solutions proposed by the Alexandrian, he is in constant dialogue with him and remains in his work an Origenist dependent on the allegorical orientation of exegesis.

Keywords: Origen; Jerome; Gospel of St. Matthew; parables; patristic exegesis

Saint Jerome's *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew* was written in 398 AD, this is to say when he was already opposed to Origen. Notwithstanding this fact the admiration for the Alexandrian's exegetical methods prevailed². Admittedly, the Stridonian describes his commentary

¹ Rev. Prof. dr hab. Mariusz Szram, Chair of Greek and Latin Patrology, Section of Church History and Patrology, Institute of Theological Sciences, Faculty of Theology, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland; e-mail: m.szram@wp.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-8646-6295.

² Cf. É. Bonnard, *Introduction*, in: Saint Jérôme, *Commentaire sur Saint Matthieu*, v. 1, SCh 242, Paris 1977, p. 39-41; M.H. Williams, *Chromatius and Jerome on Matthew*, in: *Chromatius of Aquileia and his age*, ed. P.F. Beatrice – A. Peršić, Turnhout 2011,

as historical (*historica interpretatio*) with “flowers of spiritual sense interwoven only here and there” (*breviter et interdum spiritalis intelligentiae flores miscui*)³, but this recognition of Origen’s exegesis is clearly noticeable in his preference for the allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament texts, evoked in the passages of the Gospel of St. Matthew; in the frequent use of arithmology and etymology to explain numbers and proper names appearing in the biblical text; and above all in the spiritual orientation of the interpretation, aimed mainly at the spiritual benefit of the reader. In addition, Jerome himself in the preface to his *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* considered as the most important inspiration Origen’s *Commentary* on the same Gospel and homilies which he had read years earlier, as well as the non-existent today commentary of Didymus the Blind – the main continuator of Origen’s exegesis in the Alexandrian environment – along with the commentary of Hilary of Poitiers, certainly reliant on Alexandrian exegesis and transplanting many of its solutions into Latin⁴.

Nevertheless, Émile Bonnard in the introduction to the edition of Jerome’s *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* in the *Sources Chrétiennes* publishing series assesses the impact of the analogous Origen’s *Commentary* on the exegesis of the Stridonian as moderate (*modéré*) and emphasizes that wherever it appears, Jerome – probably due to his antagonistic approach in the Origenistic dispute – eschews from signalling that the interpretation derives from Origen and presents it as his own⁵. Bonnard’s opinion is only feasible due to the partial retention of Origen’s commentary, of which the French publisher is well aware. Bonnard also does not perform any detailed analyses which would confirm his statement, limiting himself to only a few minor examples.

The following article is an attempt to examine the above-mentioned issue⁶. Based on several comparative analyses, common elements and

p. 193-194, 201-203, 224-225; B. Czyżewski, *Orygenesowe elementy egzegezy i nauki w komentarzu Do Księgi Jonasza św. Hieronima*, BPTH 2 (2009) p. 139, 149.

³ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei*, Praefatio. See: D. Scardia, *Introduzione*, in: *Girolamo. Commento a Matteo*, ed. D. Scardia, *Opere di Girolamo* 10, Roma 2022, p. 12-20.

⁴ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei*, Praefatio.

⁵ Cf. Bonnard, *Introduction*, p. 44-45.

⁶ Recently, Lorenzo Perrone examined the influence of Origen’s exegesis on Jerome on the example of homilies to the book of Psalms by both authors. Cf. L. Perrone, *Mysteria in psalmis: Origen and Jerome as Interpreters of the Psalter*, in: *The Bible in the Patristic Period*, ed. M. Szram – M. Wysocki, *Studia Patristica* 103, Leuven – Paris –

differences in the approach to the text of the Gospel of St. Matthew will be highlighted. Next, an assessment will be made of the type and extent of Origen's influence on Jerome in terms of commenting on the mentioned Gospel. For this purpose, fragments of the *Commentaries* of both authors will be compiled, containing the exegesis of Jesus' parables, which are particularly susceptible to allegorical interpretation because of the literary genre they represent.

However, before proceeding to a more detailed analysis, further attention should be paid to the fundamental convergences and distinctions in the general methodological approach of both exegetes to the biblical parables. The first observation concerns a similar treatment of this mode of expression. Origen emphasizes that the parables – due to the specific literary genre and because they were inspired by God's Spirit – are intended to convey a deep meaning. It may take many forms and man's imperfect cognitive capabilities have only limited access to it⁷. Jerome shares this way of thinking, refining it by the use of wording typical of Origen, which appears primarily in the homilies of the Alexandrian⁸. Namely, Jerome is convinced that through parables God feeds listeners with various nourishments, depending on the digestive abilities of each recipient. So, in the Gospels there are various parables and different ways of understanding them, adapted to spiritual needs and perceptual capacities of readers⁹.

The second remark concerns the difference in general approach to the parable as a literary genre and what it expresses. Jerome treats all Matthew's parables equally, without dividing them into any groups¹⁰. Origen, on the other hand, introduces a terminological distinction between the concepts of "parable" (παραβολή) and "similitude" (ὁμοίωσις), referring to the words of the Evangelist Mark: "To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it?" (*Mark* 4:30). According

Bristol 2021, p. 59-86. Cf. also M. Wysocki, *Hope Found, Hope Lost in the Interpretations of Israelites' Wilderness Wanderings. Two Sides of One Story: Origen's 27. Homily on the Book of Numbers and Jerome's Letter 78*, *VoxP* 67 (2017) p. 727-742.

⁷ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 12. See: G. Piscini, *L'interprétation des paraboles chez Origène: originalité, codification et variations d'une méthode exégétique*, "Revue des Etudes Tardo-antiques" 5 (2015) p. 37-38.

⁸ Cf. Origenes, *Homiliae in Numeros* 27.

⁹ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 31-33.

¹⁰ Cf. *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. D.K. McKim, Leicester 1998, p. 45.

to the Alexandrian, each parable is a form of similitude (by analogy to the phrase beginning most parables in the Gospel of Matthew – “the kingdom of heaven is like...”), but not every similitude must be a parable. Similitude is therefore a broader concept – a generic name, and parable is a narrower concept – name of a species. Origen, though, introduces some confusion while using the term “similitude” also in a narrower sense as a species: “Similitude, being the genre to which the parable is subject, includes as a species both a parable and a similitude, which is called the same as its generic term”¹¹. In exegetical practice the Alexandrian focuses on this narrower meaning of the term “similitude”. In the opinion of Origen, the main difference between the two types of utterances, which are parable and similitude, is their purpose: parables are for a wide audience, and similitudes are for a small groups of pupils (cf. *Matt* 13:34-36)¹². In addition, the Alexandrian points out that the similitude does not cover all the features of the object to which it relates to, but only those that one wants to pay attention to at any given moment¹³. Similitudes are shorter, parables more complex. The Alexandrian defines as similitudes of the narrow sense of a species only the three shortest stories: the one about a hidden treasure (*Matt* 13:44), about a merchant looking for beautiful pearls (*Matt* 13:45-46) and about a net full of fish (*Matt* 13:47). In his opinion, whether a given statement is a similitude is determined primarily by its pithy character and straightforward imaging.

We will now consider the interpretation of Jesus’ parables by both authors in the order in which they appear in Matthew’s Gospel, especially considering those to which the commentary of both Origen and Jerome has survived.

1. Interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (*Matt* 13:37-43) – similar symbolism, differences in doctrinal issues and in relation to the current historical context

Origen and Saint Jerome agree on the general spiritual symbolism of this parable, made clear by Christ himself. For both exegetes weed stands for the perverse teachings sown by the devil until the end of the world

¹¹ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 4.

¹² Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 4.

¹³ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 11.

depicted in the image of the harvest, during which evil will be removed and the righteous will shine like the sun in the Father's Kingdom¹⁴.

Nonetheless, the interpretation of both authors differs in details. The main reason for this distinction was probably Jerome's polemic with Origen's apocatastasis hypothesis, expressed here by the Alexandrian not *expressis verbis*, but in a veiled way, though distinguishable to a vigilant reader. For Jerome the righteous who shine at the end of the time like the sun are the saints of the Church forever separated from the condemned sinners¹⁵. Origen, on the other hand, emphasizes that all righteous, including those who needed purification after death, should ultimately shine like one sun. Origen does not claim that they will also include converted sinners who deserve condemnation. He emphasizes, however, that the act of throwing into a burning furnace concerns evil that will be destroyed, not the people who acted evil. They will realize that they have listened to the teachings of Satan in earthly life, will remain at a lower level than the righteous and will enjoy their light¹⁶. In this way, the Alexandrian cleverly avoids claims of eternal punishment for the damned, but these traces of undermining it were probably unacceptable for Jerome. So here we have an instance of the use of Origen's exegesis method by the Stridonian and the simultaneous rejection of unorthodox theological conclusions to which it could lead¹⁷.

The second difference between Jerome and Origen's interpretation of the parable of the weed is no longer associated with a polemic with the Alexandrian, but with the historical and doctrinal context in which the commentary of the translator of Vulgate was made. Jerome remains true to Origen's principle that biblical exegesis should be adapted to current spiritual and doctrinal needs, and properly in the name of this principle his explanation of the parable is somewhat different than that of the Alexandrian. Unlike Origen, who treats the weed as an allegory of all evil, without indicating any examples, Jerome, who lived in the fourth century, marked by the development of great Trinitarian heresy, sees in the weed a clear symbol of heretical teachings and only in this key does he explain the whole parable. Jerome's conclusion is unambiguous: sheaves

¹⁴ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 2-3; Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 37-43.

¹⁵ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 37-43.

¹⁶ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 3.

¹⁷ Cf. Williams, *Chromatius and Jerome on Matthew*, p. 200; Czyżewski, *Orygenesowe elementy egzegezy*, p. 147-149.

of corncockle thrown into the fire mean that every heretic should burn in hellfire¹⁸.

2. Interpretation of the parable of workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) – a similar direction of spiritual exegesis, differences in approach to questionable philosophical and theological hypotheses

Origen and Jerome agree on the need to allegorically explain the personal and time circumstances set out in the parable of the workers employed to work in the vineyard at different times. Jerome also accepts, although not in full, the solution proposed by the Alexandrian, adding from himself – as we will see – another possibility of interpretation, according to the exegetical principle used by Origen, based on Philo of Alexandria notions, proclaiming that many different spiritual meanings can be extracted from the same biblical text¹⁹.

According to Origen, the day in the parable means the duration of the history of the earthly world (“our entire present age”), although the Alexandrian smuggles his hypothetical idea of many successive ages or worlds in without developing it in detail²⁰. He even evokes the idea of the pre-existence of souls in a somewhat suppressed way, wondering whether a place outside the vineyard where workers were waiting idly for being hired does not mean a place where souls are staying before entering the bodies²¹. The basic explanation of the parable by Origen, with whom Jerome also agrees, is:

The first group is Adam’s group at the beginning of the creation of the world; for the host went out early in the morning and hired, so to say, Adam and Eve to cultivate a vineyard of God’s worship; the other is Noah’s group and its covenant; the third is Abraham’s group, including the patriarchs up to Moses; the fourth is Moses’ group and all of God’s economy concerning Egypt and

¹⁸ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 37.

¹⁹ Cf. N.R.M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews. Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine*, Cambridge 1976, p. 107-111; M. Szram, *Duchowy sens liczb w alegorycznej egzegezie aleksandryjskiej (II-V w.)*, Lublin 2001, p. 57-62.

²⁰ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaicum* 15, 31.

²¹ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaicum* 15, 35.

laws issued in the desert; and the last group, which was called around eleven o'clock, means the coming of Jesus Christ²².

Origen is convinced that the basic measure of payment for work is the price of salvation, which is symbolized by one denarius promised to all by the host. A higher fee would already cause the employee to strive for his own fame bordering on pride²³.

The Alexandrian also refers to his favourite arithmological technique, using in his exegesis the symbolism of numbers²⁴. According to him, the five-time calling of the workers means connection with the five senses:

in the first calling there is a sense of touch, therefore: "The woman replied to the snake: God said: You shall not eat it or even touch it" (*Gen* 3:2-3); the second calling contains a sense of smell, which is why it was said about Noah: "the Lord smelled a nice smell" (*Gen* 8:21); Abraham's vocation includes a sense of taste, which is why when he hosts angels he puts out flatbreads of the purest flour and a fat calf in front of them (cf. *Gen* 18:6-8); Moses' vocation includes a sense of hearing when God's voice was heard from heaven (cf. *Exod* 9:23); and the sense of sight, the most precious of all senses, is associated with the coming of Christ, when people saw Christ with happy eyes (cf. *Matt* 13:16; *Luke* 10:23)²⁵.

Jerome will not take on this sophisticated allegorizing. The Stridonian, on the other hand, will partly accept the second possibility of interpretation of the whole parable proposed by Origen, less universal and more connected with the spiritual life of every human being. According to this proposition, the Alexandrian refers to the imaging contained in the parable to various periods of human life and to the moment of joining the faith and the Church:

according to this parable, all life is [one] day. And so the workers hired by the host early in the morning mean those called to perform the work of the kingdom of God from childhood and the earliest age; those who have started wor-

²² Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 15, 32 (own translation). Cf. J.M. Tevel, *The Labourers in the Vineyard: The Exegesis of Matthew 20,1-7 in the Early Church*, *VigCh* 46/4 (1992) p. 356, 358-362.

²³ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 15, 35.

²⁴ Cf. Szram, *Duchowy sens liczb*, p. 306-329.

²⁵ Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 15, 33 (own translation).

king from three o'clock mean beginning to worship God at a young age; sent to the vineyard about six o'clock means mature people; while those called to the teachings of God around nine o'clock mean elders who worship God, when they have endured in their youth the heat and burden of deeds carried out until old age; finally, those who are called to work in the vineyard around eleven o'clock mean old men who are on the verge of death. Therefore, because the will is taken into account, and not the time during which someone worked in faith, therefore equal payment of salvation is given to all who have fulfilled their duty from calling (...). The vineyard according to this interpretation is probably a church, while the market and what is outside the vineyard are places and matters outside the church²⁶.

Jerome basically adopts Origen's interpretative direction but differs from him in some details. He presents the Alexandrian's primary exegesis, referring the hours of calling workers to epochs in the history of salvation, stating – as in the parable of the unforgiving debtor – that there are people who explain the parable of the workers in the vineyard in this manner yet without saying *expressis verbis* that it is first of all Origen²⁷. As I mentioned above, the Stridonian still does not accept and develop Origen's exegesis of five hours as an image of the five human senses, and even less the allusion to questionable hypotheses about many worlds or the pre-existence of souls.

Jerome adds a dissimilar explanation of the parable, which connects in a not completely clear manner the universalist interpretation, referring to slightly different eras of history than those described by Origen, with the second interpretation of the Alexandrian, linking the hours of calling the workers with periods of human life. According to Jerome's exegesis:

the workers of the first hour are Samuel and Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, all can say with the psalmist: "From my mother's womb You are my God" (cf. *Ps* 21:11). And the workers of the third hour are those who from their youth began to serve God. The sixth hour labourers are those who took the yoke of Christ in their mature age; the nine o'clock workers are those who have done so in old age; finally, the eleventh hour workers are those who did it in old age; yet everyone receives an equal reward, although their work is different²⁸.

²⁶ Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 15, 36-37 (own translation).

²⁷ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 20, 1-2.

²⁸ Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 20, 1-2 (own translation).

Jerome, more than Origen, emphasizes in his exegesis the end of the parable: “The first will be last and the last first”, referring to the idea of the Church as a new Israel: “Jews from the leading position fall back to the margin, and we out of a periphery become the guide”²⁹. He also refers to Luke’s parable of the prodigal son, in which his older son also envied his brother’s forgiveness and accused his father of injustice, just as the workers called at the earlier hours envy the pagans entering the Church³⁰. Interesting and not occurring in Origen’s work, although very similar to the Alexandrian’s way of thinking, is also Jerome’s explanation of the symbol of one denarius as the promised payment. The Stridonian draws attention to the fact that the denarius features the image of the king, i.e. the image and likeness of God as a true king. So there can be no greater and more perfect payment for man than allowing closeness with God Himself³¹.

To sum up in few words the exegesis of the parable of the workers in the vineyard by both authors, one should note the regularity also repeated in the case of comments to other parables. Jerome accepts the direction of spiritual exegesis and the solutions proposed by Origen, while dissociating himself from dubious philosophical and theological hypotheses. If he adds from himself – as in this case – new ways of interpretation, they are rooted in the exegetical way of thinking of the Alexandrian and could successfully come out from under his pen.

3. Interpretation of the parable of the vineyard (*Matt 21:33-43*) – a similar approach towards discovering the spiritual meaning of individual words, but a slightly different interpretation of their symbolism

The parable of killing the son of a vineyard owner, which caused it to be passed on to other farmers, was interpreted in detail by the exegetes of interest to us somewhat differently, but the fundamental approach to the biblical text is again analogous. Origen considered as general and imposing as the first impression (περίνοια) the interpretation according to which the parable is a picture of God sending, after the preparatory

²⁹ Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 20, 1-2 (own translation).

³⁰ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 20, 15.

³¹ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 20, 13.

period of the Law and Prophets, his own Son – Jesus Christ to the chosen people symbolized by the vineyard, and due to the fact that He was rejected, the rest – the believing part of nation – was given to the new rulers, i.e. the Apostles. The Alexandrian however, calls this explanation superficial and continues searching for a more comprehensive interpretation (ἐπαναβεβηκυῖα) based not on the shifting meaning of the parable, but on in-depth spiritual analysis of the details present in the literal layer of the text (κατὰ λέξιν)³². At the same time, he applies two of his favourite principles to this interpretation: the belief that each word has a spiritual meaning and cannot be omitted, and the search for the deepest spiritual import of words by comparatively analysing their senses in all possible places of Scripture where they occur. For example, he points out that in the parable God has been called not only the host but also a man and tries – by referring to other biblical places and comparing, as he says, spiritual with spiritual (cf. *1 Cor 2:13*) – decide what it may signify. In the Alexandrian's belief it is an indication that "God adapts a human way and shows human character in order to help people"³³. Origen also analyses in detail the symbolism of the buildings around the vineyard, which can mean not only the chosen people, but also the teaching contained in the Scripture understood as the Kingdom of God, directed through the chosen nation to all people: the words of the Scriptures and the signs they contain are the wall; the press is the depth of these teachings, accessible to the discerning soul; the tower is the most elevated teaching of God and Christ³⁴. The vineyard understood in this way is the word of God planted in every human soul, which produces spiritual fruit in some people, and is destroyed and killed by others³⁵.

Jerome, performing his own exegesis of the above parable, like Origen, believes that the spiritual sense of individual words should be explored, although he interprets their symbolism in a slightly different way. For instance, the buildings in the vineyard are associated with the history of the chosen people: the wall surrounding the vineyard is the care of angels, the press is an altar, and the tower is the Jerusalem Temple³⁶. The essential elements of the Stridonian's interpretation however, remain common with

³² Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 6. See: Piscini, *L'interprétation des paraboles chez Origène*, p. 43, 47-48.

³³ Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 6 (own translation).

³⁴ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 7.

³⁵ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 8-12.

³⁶ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 21, 33.

those of Origen: the vineyard is above all an image of the people of Israel, but also an image of the teachings of the Holy Scriptures understood as the Kingdom of God³⁷, taken from Jews and passed on to converts from among pagans, and God was not by accident called a man³⁸.

4. Interpretation of the parable of the great banquet (Matt 22:1-14) – very similar spiritual exegesis, difference in approach to questionable doctrinal hypotheses

Very alike conclusions come from the comparative analysis of the next parable of the invited to the feast. Origen once again presents firstly a simple – as he describes it – understanding (περίνοια, ἀπλούστερον)³⁹. The wedding feast of the royal son is the restoration of the bride, or the Church, to Christ – his bridegroom. The invited guests were the Jews who, despite being instructed by the prophets, refused to come to the Church. The departure of the messengers on the crossroads means the search for feast participants by the Apostles outside Israel, i.e. among the Gentiles. Everyone was invited – the good and bad, but only those who dress in the wedding garments of virtues and good deeds will be admitted to the feast, while the bad people will be rejected and left to their fate of suffering⁴⁰. Origen completes this general interpretation of the parable with detailed explanations, seeking deeper thoughts. He returns to the conviction expressed in explaining the previous parable that it is by no means accidental that the author of the Gospel adds that the king giving the feast is human, which means that God who directs people acts like a human and experiences human feelings⁴¹. However ultimately as Origen points out, “the kingdom of heaven will cease to be similar to a man when envy, discord and other passions and sins cease, and when we cease to act only in humanly manner (cf. *1Cor* 3:3) and we will be worthy to hear from God: «I said: You are gods» (*Ps* 81:7)”⁴². By the way, the

³⁷ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 21, 42-43.

³⁸ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 21, 33.

³⁹ Cf. Piscini, *L'interprétation des paraboles chez Origène*, p. 44-45.

⁴⁰ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaëum* 17, 15-16. See: M.C. Pennacchio, *La parabola degli invitati al banchetto (Mt 22, 1-14)*, in: *Le parabole del regno nel Commento a Matteo. Lettura origeniana*, ed. M. Maritano – E. Dal Covolo, Roma 2009, p. 75.

⁴¹ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaëum* 17, 17-18.

⁴² Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaëum* 17, 19 (own translation).

Alexandrian again slips in the hypothesis of a final punishment, which does not have to last forever: “as long as things [in us] deserve to be digested by fire, so long is our God consuming them. And when etching fire consumes what it should, then God will no longer be our etching fire (cf. *Deut* 4:24), but only light (cf. *1John* 5)”⁴³. Origen also points out that in the mystical sense concerning the human soul, the married bride, servants sent for guests and people invited to the feast form groups of souls of varying degrees of perfection⁴⁴. The feast itself symbolizes, according to the Alexandrian – like the vineyard from the previous parable – the food of the word of God, and the fat oxen killed on this occasion signify the rich allegorical meaning of the biblical text. People able to understand it are invited to the feast as the first⁴⁵.

All of the elements of Origen’s interpretation return in Jerome’s⁴⁶. For obvious reasons, the Stridonian does not raise the issue of the eternity of final punishments, thus dissociating himself from the Alexandrian’s hypotheses making this view questionable. Commentary on the above-mentioned parable is one of the best examples of Jerome’s explicit referring to Origen’s exegesis of Matthew’s parables.

5. Interpretation of the parable of two sons (*Matt* 21:28-32) – identical understanding on the historical-redemptive and moral-ascetic plane

Commentaries by Origen and Jerome to the parable of two sons – the one who did not want to fulfil the will of his father, but came to his senses and did it after all, and the one who on the contrary committed himself to fulfilling it but did not live up to the promise – is also an example of a total agreement in interpretation of the two exegetes. Both the Alexandrian and the Stridonian suggest two possible ways of understanding this parable. The first way, connected with the history of salvation, refers the first son to converts from paganism, the second – to the sons of Israel, overtaken in zeal of faith by the newly called believers of Christianity. The second possibility of interpretation, typically moral and ascetic, concerns the spiritual life of each person. Both authors believe that the para-

⁴³ Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 19 (own translation).

⁴⁴ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 21.

⁴⁵ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 22-24.

⁴⁶ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 22, 1-13.

ble illustrates two Christian approaches to the demands of faith: making good progress despite discouragement and lack of internal development contrary to initial promises⁴⁷.

6. Interpretation of similarities about treasure, pearl and fish nets (*Matt 13:44-47*) – the same semantic interpretation, difference in the length of the comment

As mentioned at the beginning, Origen defines the three shortest parables addressed – in his opinion – not to crowds, but to disciples, as similitudes in the narrow sense of a species. These are the similitudes about a hidden treasure (*Matt 13:44*), a merchant looking for beautiful pearls (*Matt 13:45-46*) and a net full of fish (*Matt 13:47*). Origen's exegesis of them is quite extensive in contrast to the laconic interpretation of Jerome. In fact, however, there is a clear kinship in the way both authors think. In the first similitude the role in which the treasure was hidden has identical meaning for both exegetes. It means either the books of the Scriptures in which wisdom about the Saviour has been hidden or the person of Christ in whom the Word of God is hidden⁴⁸. Both meanings are favourite themes characteristic of the Alexandrian's exegesis, so the reference to Origen's commentary by Jerome seems obvious.

Comparison of interpretations of the similitude about pearl by both authors leads to similar conclusions. Beautiful pearls for them are the teachings contained in the books of the Law and the prophets, and the most precious pearl symbolizes knowledge of the Saviour and the mystery of His passion and resurrection⁴⁹. Again, Jerome confines himself to a brief explanation, while Origen adds an extensive erudite argument on various types of pearls⁵⁰ and reflections on the long process of reaching full knowledge of Christ on the basis of Old Testament writings, especially the prophetic ones⁵¹. The essence of exegesis is, however, the same in both cases.

⁴⁷ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 17, 4-5; Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 21, 28-30.

⁴⁸ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 5; Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 44.

⁴⁹ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 8; Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 45.

⁵⁰ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 7.

⁵¹ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 9-10.

What is more, the third of the similitudes about the net cast into the sea has in Origen's and Jerome's case the same interpretation of meaning. First, the prophets, and then the Apostles, cast a net of evangelical teachings into the sea of the mundane world, using it to gather both good and bad people. Their separation between the saved and the damned will take place at the last judgment⁵². Origen adds an extensive introduction to this interpretation, explaining – probably in the context of a polemic with Gnostic anthropological determinism – that the anger and goodness of people symbolized by fish is not found in their various natures, because human nature is single, but in bad or good choices of free human will⁵³. Attention is drawn to Origen's lack of any reflection on the fire for the unjust: both any suggestions of temporality, transiency and therapeutic character of the fire, known from the youthful work of *De principiis*, as well as any references to its eternity or irreversibility. This brings Origen's exegesis even closer to Jerome's. Based on observations of many sinful people in the Church, the Alexandrian expresses even fear that there may be more of them than the good ones in the end⁵⁴.

7. Interpretation of the parable of the unforgiving debtor (Matt 18:23-25) – a similar starting point for exegesis, yet different conclusions

This parable shows a diverse approach to the commented biblical text by Origen and Jerome, and the differences are more apparent than in the case of exegesis of other Matthew's parables. The beginning of the commentary does not seem to indicate any major discrepancies. The starting point is again the same for both exegetes, which may indicate that the Stridonian was partly inspired by the Alexandrian's interpretation. Both Origen and Jerome agree that the parable of the ruthless debtor is a pictorial representation of the following message: we must forgive all people who have hurt us, otherwise God will punish us ultimately for the sins he had previously forgiven⁵⁵.

⁵² Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 12; Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 47-49.

⁵³ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 11.

⁵⁴ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 10, 13.

⁵⁵ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 6; Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 18, 23. See: E. van Eck, *Honour and debt release in the parable*

Later on in the commentary, however, the paths of both exegetes diverge. Origen, according to his custom, announces the search for a sublime mystical interpretation (ἀνωτάτω διήγησις) and tries to find the spiritual meaning of every detail contained in the text (κατὰ λέξιν)⁵⁶. The beginning of the parable – “the kingdom of heaven is like a king” (*Matt* 18:23) – is for the Alexandrian an opportunity to recall one of his favourite theses, namely that the kingdom of God is not a place, but the person of Jesus Christ – true Wisdom, reigning in the soul of man in which sin no longer reigns⁵⁷. He then links the parable in question with the parable of the talents (cf. *Matt* 25:15), seeing in the debts of both these parables the pledge of virtues that people received to develop and multiply in earthly life.

Origen dwells over the eschatological dimension of God’s judgment on a ruthless ruler. He weaves into his exegesis, which is not common in his exegetic writings, a thread related to the theory of the consecutive worlds, referring to Platonism and Stoicism. The final judgment and retribution will occur swiftly and regardless of time, as if outside of it. This resolution, however, will take into account the time of many centuries/worlds, probably going beyond the period of the present earthly world⁵⁸. Origen sees in the person of the servant, who owed the king many talents, the image of great sinners and perhaps even the devil himself, who destroyed many people⁵⁹. The Alexandrian however, continues to get confused in his arguments, emphasizing his own helplessness. For if Satan were that unforgiving debtor then it should be assumed that God had forgiven him and he remained merciless. Who, in turn, would be the debtor of Satan, who owed him one hundred denarii: could he be a man of sin or a devil, or neither, but someone else, a man or someone subordinate to the devil? Here Origen surrenders humbly, stating that only God’s wisdom can explain it, but he has no particular view on it⁶⁰.

of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23–33): A social-scientific and realistic reading, “HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies” 71/1 (2015) p. 1; M.F. Wiles, *Early Exegesis of the Parables*, SJT 11 (1958) p. 295-298.

⁵⁶ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 6. See: R.Scognamiglio, *La parabola dei due debitori (Mt 18, 21-35)*, in: *Le parabole del regno nel Commento a Matteo. Lettura origeniana*, ed. M. Maritano – E. Dal Covolo, Roma 2009, p. 33-52; Piscini, *L’interprétation des paraboles chez Origène*, p. 50-53.

⁵⁷ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 7.

⁵⁸ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 9.

⁵⁹ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 10.

⁶⁰ Cf. Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaeum* 14, 11.

Unlike Origen, Jerome is not attempting at any more or less complex spiritual interpretation of the parable. His exegesis is clearly structured in opposition to the solutions proposed by Origen, so paradoxically, he again points to the inspiration of the Alexandrian's commentary, this time tending to criticize his solutions despite never mentioning Origen's name *expressis verbis*. Hence Jerome refers to the Alexandrian's interpretation of the debtor as Satan: "I know that the one who owed ten thousand talents, some interpret as the devil. They want his wife and his children, destined to be sold, if he persevered in wickedness, to be interpreted as bad thoughts and stupidity"⁶¹. However Jerome, does not allow such exegesis at all unlike Origen, who hesitates over its sense. In recapitulation, in the spirit of invective, the Stridonian states: "This is neither a church interpretation, nor worthy of acceptance by prudent people"⁶².

In this particular parable, it seems that Jerome wanted to distance himself again from Origen's veiled references to questionable theories about consecutive worlds and about the probable possibility of Satan's salvation. However paradoxically, he showed that he could not remain indifferent to his Alexandrian precursor and could not conduct his exegesis independently. Jerome remains faithful to the basic meaning of the parable proposed by Origen and criticizing in a hidden way his proposals for allegorization of this biblical text, he does not propose anything original from himself. In this way he somehow fits in with the thinking of Origen who while employing rhetorical exaggeration complained that there was no mind capable of connecting with the mind of Christ enough to embrace the secrets contained in the parable.

8. Interpretation of the parable of the leaven (*Matt 13:33*) – alleged influence of Origen's exegesis on Jerome

Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare in detail the exegesis of all parables recorded in the Gospel of Matthew because of the incomplete text of Origen's *Commentary*. For example, it would be very interesting to compare the interpretation of both authors of the parable about the kingdom of heaven as leaven, which acidified three measures of flour (cf. *Matt 13:33*), because Jerome clearly explains this parable in the spirit

⁶¹ Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 18, 24 (own translation).

⁶² Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* III 18, 24 (own translation).

of Origen's exegesis. By leaven he understands the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, which the Church, symbolized by a woman, puts in a human person. In this context, he understands the number "3" in a typically Origen's way as a symbol of a man transformed by the word of God, composed of spirit, soul and body, or as the image of three transformed soul authorities understood in a Platonic way: rational, emotional and lustful⁶³. This very anthropological understanding of the number "3" by the Alexandrian is evidenced by the preserved Greek fragment from the lost part of Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*⁶⁴ and statements from other extant his works⁶⁵.

However it is difficult to suspect that Origen also inspired the second dogmatic interpretation of the parable proposed by Jerome, although the Stridonian introduces it by means of rhetorical procedure very often used by Origen: „I will add one more explanation, and leave to the inquisitive reader the choice which one suits him best". According to this interpretation, leaven is man's faith mixed in by the Church in the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, symbolized by three measures of flour. As a result, man knows one God in three people who are equal in substance, just as every measure of flour has the same nature. It seems that this interpretation is in some disagreement with Origen's ante-Nicene subordinationism, expressed in the imprecise emphasis on equality and consubstantiality of divine persons. Rather, we are dealing here with an explanation from times of Jerome, created for the use of anti-Arian disputes and in defence of the Nicene term ὁμοούσιος. Interestingly, Jerome is unenthusiastic about the above explanation. Although he calls them pious (*pious sensus*), he points out that the questionable explanation of the riddles contained in the parables can never serve to confirm the authority of dogmatic truths (*numquam parabolae et dubia aenigmatum intelligentia potest ad auctoritatem dogmatum proficere*)⁶⁶. Such Jerome's opinion would probably be unappealing to Origen and his followers of the Alexandrian tradition, since confirmation of dogmatic truths, especially those currently disputed with heretics, by means of far-fetched exegesis of biblical texts, was used by them and considered a normal and commendable phenomenon.

⁶³ Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 33.

⁶⁴ Cf. Origenes, *Fragmenta in Matthaeum* 302.

⁶⁵ Cf. Origenes, *Homiliae in Exodum* 3, 3; Origenes, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* 7, 10; Origenes, *Scholia in Lucam* 13. See: Szram, *Duchowy sens liczb*, p. 130, 192.

⁶⁶ Cf. Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei* II 13, 33.

9. Conclusions

In the light of the performed comparative analyses of Origen and Jerome exegesis of the selected parables found in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, it should be stated that the dependence of Stridonian on the Alexandrian is significant. The Vulgate translator remains under the spell and influence of the spiritual biblical exegesis of the author of *Hexapla*. Jerome's elaborations are very similar to those of Origen in terms of exegetic methodology and spiritual content extracted from the biblical text, symbolized by the images in the parables.

The differences between the approaches of both authors relate to three issues. First, Jerome's interpretations reflect the spirit of the post-Nicene period, marked by Trinitarian disputes, although the Latin exegete is opposed to drawing the meaning of the biblical text for the purposes of confirming and defending disputed dogmatic truths. Secondly, the Stridonian dissociates himself from all correlations with Origen's dubious theological suggestions, such as the pre-existence of souls or apocatastasis, which can be noticed in a veiled way in the Alexandrian's exegesis. The third difference is purely formal: Jerome's comments are short. They concisely convey the main spiritual meaning of the parables in question. In the case of Origen, we are dealing with an extensive analysis of terms and concepts, as well as the entire historical and cultural context that lies behind the theological and spiritual connotations associated with the analysed biblical text of the parable. As a result, this difference in the length of both authors' comments is quite secondary, in essence they lead to almost identical spiritual conclusions.

Trying to weigh the common elements and differences, it should be emphasized once again that Jerome remains in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew* a faithful follower of Origen as to the allegorical method used and the spiritual meanings extracted with its help from the biblical text. Even if he does not accept all the solutions proposed by the Alexandrian, he is in constant dialogue with him. Therefore, the quoted at the beginning statement of Émile Bonnard about the moderate influence of Origen on Jerome's *Commentary* seems to be a certain underestimation of the scale of the phenomenon.

Bibliography

Sources

- Hieronymus, *Commentarii in Evangelium Matthaei*, ed. É. Bonnard, Sch 242, 259, Paris 1977-1979.
- Origenes, *Commentarii in Matthaëum*, ed. E. Klostermann – E. Benz, GCS 40, Origenes Werke 10, Leipzig 1935.
- Origenes, *Fragmenta in Matthaëum*, ed. E. Klostermann – E. Benz, GCS 41/1, Origenes Werke 12/1, Leipzig 1941.
- Origenes, *Homiliae in Numeros*, ed. L. Doutreleau, Sch 415, 442, 461, Paris 1996-2001.
- Origenes, *Scholia in Lucam*, PG 17, 311-370.

Studies

- Bonnard É., *Introduction*, in: Saint Jérôme, *Commentaire sur Saint Matthieu*, t. 1, Sch 242, Paris 1977, p. 9-50.
- Czyżewski B., *Orygenesowe elementy egzegezy i nauki w komentarzu Do Księgi Jonasza św. Hieronima*, “Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia” 2 (2009) p. 139-150.
- Eck E. van, *Honour and debt release in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Mt 18:23–33): A social-scientific and realistic reading*, “HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies” 71/1 (2015) p. 1-11.
- Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. D.K. McKim, Leicester 1998.
- Lange N.R.M. de, *Origen and the Jews. Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine*, Cambridge 1976.
- Pennacchio M.C., *La parabola degli invitati al banchetto (Mt 22, 1-14)*, in: *Le parabole del regno nel Commento a Matteo. Lettura origeniana*, ed. M. Maritano – E. Dal Covolo, Roma 2009, p. 75-104.
- Perrone L., *Mysteria in psalmis: Origen and Jerome as Interpreters of the Psalter*, in: *The Bible in the Patristic Period*, ed. M. Szram – M. Wysocki, Studia Patristica 103, Leuven – Paris – Bristol 2021, p. 59-86.
- Piscini G., *L'interprétation des paraboles chez Origène: originalité, codification et variations d'une méthode exégétique*, “Revue des Etudes Tardo-antiques” 5 (2015) p. 35-65.
- Scognamiglio R., *La parabola dei due debitori (Mt 18, 21-35)*, in: *Le parabole del regno nel Commento a Matteo. Lettura origeniana*, ed. M. Maritano – E. Dal Covolo, Roma 2009, p. 33-52.
- Scardia D., *Introduzione*, in: *Girolamo. Commento a Matteo*, ed. D. Scardia, Opere di Girolamo 10, Roma 2022, p. 7-60.
- Szram M., *Duchowy sens liczb w alegorycznej egzegezie aleksandryjskiej (II-V w.)*, Lublin 2001.

- Tevel J.M., *The Labourers in the Vineyard: The Exegesis of Matthew 20,1-7 in the Early Church*, "Vigiliae Christianae" 46/4 (1992) p. 356-380.
- Wiles M.F., *Early Exegesis of the Parables*, "Scottish Journal of Theology" 11 (1958) p. 287-301.
- Williams M.H., *Chromatius and Jerome on Matthew*, w: *Chromatius of Aquileia and his age*, ed. P.F. Beatrice – A. Peršić, Turnhout 2011, p. 193-226.
- Wysocki M., *Hope Found, Hope Lost in the Interpretations of Israelites' Wilderness Wanderings. Two Sides of One Story: Origen's 27. Homily on the Book of Numbers and Jerome's Letter 78*, "Vox Patrum" 67 (2017) p. 727-742.