



I Am the Vine

A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Jesus instructed His disciples that in Him they were to bear fruit. He would be their source and supply.

Watchtower overlooking grain fields near the valley of Lebonah in Israel.

By Paul E. Kullman

ENCOURAGED? Surprised? Perplexed? What do you think Jesus' disciples felt when they heard the Master say, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vineyard keeper," and then "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me" (John 15:1,5)?¹ Maybe they felt a little bit of all of the above.

The vine was the first cultivated plant mentioned in Scripture, a fact that meant viticulture (the cultivating of grapes and vineyards) dated at least back to the time of Noah (Gen. 9:20). Although the Hebrew word for "vine" could refer to many types of vines, the term most commonly referred to either a vineyard or grapevine.² Vineyards produced fresh grapes, which could then be dried into raisins or currants or squeezed for fresh juice, vinegar, and wine. Growers put all parts of the vine to use: people ate the leaves and used the discarded vines to feed livestock, to make ink, or to tan leather.³

Vineyards in the Old Testament

Many Old Testament texts mention a vine, a vineyard, or its fruit. For instance, while being held in Pharaoh's prison, Joseph interpreted a fellow prisoner's dream, one involving a vine and grapes (Gen. 40:9-13). Although the text does not mention a vineyard, grapes evidently grew extremely well in the land of promise. When the 12 spies were in Canaan, "they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes, which was carried on a pole by two men" (Num. 13:23). Later, protesting Moses' leadership during the wilderness wanderings, Dathan and Abiram said, "you didn't bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey or give us an inheritance of fields and vineyards" (16:14). A generation later, God, speaking through Joshua, reminded His people how He had fulfilled His promise: "I gave you a land you did not labor for, and cities you did not build, though you live in them; you are eating from vineyards and olive groves you did not plant" (Josh. 24:13). Centuries later, knowing that her husband, King Ahab, wanted a particular vineyard, Jezebel had two "wicked men" (*scoundrels*, NIV; 1 Kings 21:10,13) kill its owner, Naboth, so her husband could have it. And of the virtuous woman Proverbs says, "She evaluates a field and buys it; she plants a vineyard with her earnings" (Prov. 31:16).



Above: Grinding stone set up for use.

Left: Terra-cotta wine or water jar from the 2nd-3rd centuries A.D.

Merchants would fill a storage area in the belly of their ships with sand and stand containers called *amphorae* by driving the point into the sand.



Laws—Vineyards were valuable and work intensive; God thus established laws and ordinances to protect them. He instructed Moses at Sinai: "When a man lets a field or vineyard be grazed in, and then allows his animals to go and graze in someone else's field, he must repay with the best of his own field or vineyard" (Ex. 22:5). Planting a vineyard exempted a person from military service (Deut. 20:6). To help alleviate hunger, the Lord commanded vineyard owners: "You must not strip your vineyard bare or gather its fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and the foreign resident" (Lev. 19:10). This gave blessed and successful Israelite vineyard owners a means to share gratefully their abundance with poor and needy countrymen. The Law would also called for the land (including vineyards) to be left dormant every seventh year (25:3-5).

Symbols—The Old Testament used vineyards to symbolize prosperity, peace, and permanence. Describing the calm and abundance during Solomon's reign, the Bible says, "Throughout Solomon's reign, Judah and

Israel lived in safety from Dan to Beer-sheba, each man under his own vine and his own fig tree”

(1 Kings 4:25). Ezekiel spoke of the children of Israel returning from captivity to re-inhabit their homeland: “They will live there securely, build houses, and plant vineyards” (Ezek. 28:26a).

In contrast, the destruction of a vineyard or a vineyard’s failing to produce fruit could symbolize the Lord’s judgment. Declaring His judgment on Judah, the Lord said, “There will be no grapes on the vine, no figs on the fig tree, and even the leaf will wither. Whatever I have given them will be lost to them” (Jer. 8:13b). And describing those living in Jerusalem at the coming Day of the Lord, Zephaniah said the people, because of their sin, would not enjoy the benefit of their labors, including the wine of their vineyards (Zeph. 1:13).

Most commonly, though, the Old Testament used grapevines to symbolize Israel itself. The psalmist declared, “You uprooted a vine from Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared a place for it; it took root and filled the land” (Ps. 80:8-9). Maybe the best-known text describing Israel as a vine comes from “the parable of the vineyard” (Isa. 5:1-7). In the parable, God is the vinedresser, the gardener; His people are the vines. God cleared the fertile field, built a protective watchtower, and planted “the finest vines.... He expected [the vineyard] to yield good grapes, but it yielded worthless grapes” (v. 2). In other words, in spite of all God had done, Israel was unfaithful. God, therefore, was bringing judgment: “I will remove its [the vineyard’s] hedge, and it shall be consumed [destroyed, NIV].... I will make it a wasteland” (vv. 5b-6a).

The parable is clear, though, in describing Israel:

The bad fruit is not the responsibility of the vinedresser, who took careful pains to plant and take care of the vine.... It is the vine itself that is at fault. It produced bad grapes in spite of all the advantages it had. As a result, the vines will be destroyed.⁴

The Disciples’ Understanding

Against this backdrop, Jesus made statements about Him being the vine and His Father the vinedresser (John 15:1-8). The contrast between Jesus’ words and the declarations in Isaiah are stark. Whereas Israel had sinned, Jesus was sinless (Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:5). When the Lord of Hosts looked to His vineyard, Israel, hoping to find justice and righteousness, He found instead “bloodshed” (ESV) and heard “cries of wretchedness” (Isa. 5:7). God’s people had not been obedient to what He had wanted them to do; instead they had been quite the opposite. Jesus, however, submitted Himself fully to the Father’s will and was “obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8b; see also Luke 22:42).



Above: Winepress dated to the 6th cent. B.C.

Right: Hellenistic

figurine of a satyr holding a wine skin on his shoulder; dated 3rd–2nd centuries B.C.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / KRISTEN HILLER (4/5/21/22)

STRAINER: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (3/1/2/89)

SATYR: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO / DAVID ROGERS / METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART / NYC (3/4/21)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/64/21)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID HAYES (62/8/ 63430017)

Upper left: Bronze and silver wine-strainer with calf-head terminal excavated in the South-West Palace at Nimrud. Dates from 5th cent. B.C.

Above: Small vineyard at Tekoa.

Left: Winepress on the Island of Delos, southeast of Athens. Winemakers would place a soft wicker basket filled with grapes on the pedestal and stack stones on top, thereby obtaining the juice from the grapes.

What would the disciples think? They likely would have been perplexed as they heard Jesus describe Himself as the vine. They would have been familiar with Isaiah's parable in which the vine was destroyed. Jesus went on, however, to make the distinction clear. He was the vine—they were the branches, and they were to abide in Him (John 15:5). In Jesus' "I am" statement, the vine would not be destroyed. Those who did not abide in Him, those who were unproductive branches, however, would be gathered and burned (v. 6).

The disciples might have also been perplexed as they thought of the vine as being the link between the vine-dresser and the branches—between holy God and sinful man. Paul stated clearly Christ's role as this link: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, Himself human" (1 Tim. 2:5).

Jesus instructed His disciples, then, that in Him they were to bear fruit. He would be their source and their supply. As they relied on Christ and obeyed His commands, fruit would come. Rather than disappoint the Father by providing "worthless grapes" (Isa. 5:2,4), Jesus' followers would bring the Father, the "vineyard keeper," glory as they produced "much fruit" and thereby proved they were His disciples (John 15:1,8). Would Jesus' disciples have been surprised upon hearing they would be able to give the Father glory in this way? Maybe. Encouraged that Jesus was their source and strength? Absolutely! 🍇

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. John C. H. Laughlin, "Vine" in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1392-94

3. Irene Jacob and Walter Jacob, "Flora; Vine" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:810.

4. "Vine, Vineyard" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, gen. ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 915.

Paul E. Kullman is a freelance writer living in College Station, Texas.