

On the Vine Symbolism of Ezekiel 15

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The word of the Lord came to me: (2) "Son of man, how is the wood of a vine better than that of a branch on any of the trees in the forest? (3) Is wood ever taken from it to make anything useful? Do they make pegs from it to hang things on? (4) And after it is thrown on the fire as fuel and the fire burns both ends and chars the middle, is it then useful for anything? (5) If it was not useful for anything when it was whole, how much less can it be made into something useful when the fire has burned it and it is charred?

(6) "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat the people living in Jerusalem. (7) I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the Lord. (8) I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful, declares the Sovereign Lord." (Ezek 15:1-8)

Introduction

The vine symbolism of Ezek 15 opens up any number of associations with other passages of Scripture. The parallels among these passages take more than one form. Some passages show what Israel might have been (Jer 2:21; Hos 9:10). Others show what in fact would actually happen to Israel (Isa 5:1-7; 9:18-19; 10:17-19; Jer 2:22; Hos 9:16; 10:1; Nah 1:10; cf. Isa 7:23-25). Within the New Testament the most notable example of vine symbolism (John 15:1-17) does not have to do with Israel at all. It has to do with Christ.

In an earlier study we found a similar distribution of motifs in regard to biblical rock symbolism,¹ but there the Old Testament examples referred to the Father, or to God without reference to the distinction of personalities within the trinity, and the New Testament examples referred specifically to the Son. Here the contrast is between references to Israel in the Old Testament and the application of vine symbolism to Christ in the New Testament.

Below I make no effort to discuss the topic of vine symbolism comprehensively. Two points, however, are made. First, the distinction between types and symbols, which avoid conditionality, on the one hand and predictions having propositional content, which sometimes are conditional, on the other hand may not be as clean-cut as we had supposed. When the parallels with other passages are examined it is clear that the vine is a symbol that expresses a condition. Israel is first seen as a most desirable vine but turns into a corrupt vine (Hos 9:10; Jer 2:21-22). It ends by being included among the thorns and briers that are consumed on the day of the Lord (Isa 10:17; Nah 1:10). The choice vine was what Israel could have been. The thorns and briers are what it in fact became.

And second, the way God thinks of us is largely determined by how we in turn think of Him or His Son. God thinks of Israel as having become worthless because Israel has come to think of God in similar terms (Isa 53:2; Ezek 8:12; 15:4-5). Christ takes our place before the

Father, representing our needs to God, and our attitude toward Him shapes God's attitude toward us.

Vine Symbolism Relating to Israel

A variety of vines are used as symbols for the human family, including and with special reference to Israel. On the one hand there is the figure of a choice vine bearing luscious fruit. On the other hand there is the figure of a wild vine and finally briars and thorns. Occasionally the two figures are brought together (Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21-22)

Initial appearances: Israel
as a choice vine

The parable of Ezek 15 describes a situation that did not have to be. God started by thinking better things of Israel.

"When I found Israel,
it was like finding grapes in the desert;
when I saw your fathers,
it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig
tree.
But when they came to Baal Peor,
they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol
and became as vile as the thing they loved.
(Hos 9:10)

"I remember the devotion of your youth,
how as a bride you loved me
and followed me through the desert,
through a land not sown.
(3) Israel was holy to the Lord,
the firstfruits of his harvest;
all who devoured her were held guilty,
and disaster overtook them,"
declares the Lord.
(Jer 2:2-3)

"I had planted you like a choice vine
of sound and reliable stock.
How then did you turn against me
into a corrupt, wild vine?
(22) Although you wash yourself with soda
and use an abundance of soap,

the stain of your guilt is still before me,"
declares the sovereign Lord.

(Jer 2:21-22)

Consider the situation that God recalls with such nostalgic feelings in the middle passage quoted above. During their time in the desert Israel never ceased to complain. They drove the most humble man on earth--i.e., the one with the greatest patience--to distraction (Num 12:3; 20:9-11) and almost caused God to leave them as a body and limit His attention to a small remnant confined to Moses' own family (Exod 32:10). But for all their complaining they did follow God in the desert. And so now we see God wistfully recalling those earlier days when Israel loved Him enough to do what He said and follow Him, grumbling and discontented all the while but intact and as a body, through the desert into the goodly land of Canaan He wanted so much to give them. This is an altogether amazing display of generosity on God's part. He is ready to take His own advice and think about "whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable . . . excellent or praiseworthy" on our part (Phil 4:8). He is willing to look for such things in us.

There is another side to this. We will probably never realize how God feels when we relate with Him in the above manner. God routinely deals with people who think that trying to get things from Him instead of trying to get them elsewhere is conversion and represents a high level of spiritual enlightenment. And He is glad to do it. That is better than separation. But what human relationship could survive under an outlook so single-mindedly one sided as that which people bring to their relationship with God? We have asked God to content Himself with whatever satisfaction might come from doing good things for us. But how much more rich and rewarding the relationship could be! When we obey however grudgingly God is ready to praise us for it, if the above passages are accepted as evidence. But when we return ready, willing, and heart-felt obedience--when our hearts, like Mary's, are fed by heavenly streams until they overflow with a desire to do something, however inadequate, for the Savior²--that is pleasing to God. We do not need to disobey in order to remain under grace (Rom 3:8). Obedience is not sin. It does not displease our Father when His children do what He says.

Israel as an illustration of the rebellious world

As long as God could see Israel in terms of what they might become the symbol accurately reflected His thinking. But the potential was not realized. And so instead of choice vines we start reading about briers and thorns.

In that day, in every place where there were a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briers and thorns. (24) Men will go there with bow and arrow, for the land will be covered with briers and thorns. (25) As for all the hills once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briers and thorns; they will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run. (Isa 7:23-25)

The above passage probably does not have symbolic intent. And yet it provides a link between two groups of passages that do have symbolic intent. The passages that speak of Israel in glowing terms as a vine that could bear abundant fruit fall within one category. Those that speak of the finally impenitent as briers and thorns fall within another category. At this point

Israel becomes, not a symbol of what the whole world might have become through Christ, but of what would actually happen to it.

Surely wickedness burns like a fire;
 it consumes briers and thorns,
 it sets the forest thickets ablaze,
 so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.
 (19) By the wrath of the Lord Almighty
 the land will be scorched
 and the people will be fuel for the fire;
 no one will spare his brother. (Isa 9:18-19)

The light of Israel will become a fire,
 their Holy One a flame;
 in a single day it will burn and consume
 his thorns and his briers. (Isa 10:17)

Whatever they plot against the Lord
 he will bring to an end;
 trouble will not come a second time.
 (10) They will be entangled among thorns
 and drunk from their wine;
 they will be consumed like dry stubble.
 (Nah 1:9-10)

When Isaiah speaks of the Lord's "thorns and his briers" (Isa 10:17) he is not talking about thorns and briers. Let no one mistake his intent. The prophet is talking here about Israel and all the rest of the world as regards those who are impetinent and rebellious within it (see also Isa 3:14-15; Mic 7:1-2). Sin and sinners are ultimately destroyed in the same way that fire devours "the forest thickets" (Isa 9:18), "his thorns and his briers" (Isa 10:17), or "dry stubble" (Nah 1:10). "The peoples will be burned as if to lime; like cut thornbushes they will be set ablaze" (Isa 33:12), i.e., like thornbushes that have had time to become completely dry. When one wants to clear land it does not take forever to burn away the thorns. They burn quickly and thoroughly. This figure must be taken in the context of the more positive vine symbolism of Hos 9:10 (quoted above). Doing so provides a basis for understanding the nature of God's "strange act" (Isa 28:21, KJV) when he destroys sin and sinners at the end of the age.

The Lord will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim,
 he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon-
 to do his work, his strange work,
 and perform his task, his alien task. (Isa 28:21)

If we make God's destruction of the wicked just one more example of what He has always done in the past, how is it strange or alien? There is something about what He does on this occasion that is different from anything He has done before. Always His disciplinary actions have combined justice with mercy (Ps 85:10-13). But mercy by the time referred to has run its full course. Offering it again would serve no useful purpose. Otherwise He would be glad to

delay a little longer so that mercy can have its effect. But by the time Isa 28:21 applies He will already have done that. So now mercy is withdrawn and only justice remains. It is the first time in all His dealings with the human family that this has been the case. When God destroys the wicked His work is strange in the sense that it is unmixed with mercy. This does not make it unjust. Justice might be alien to us, but not to God. On this occasion, however, He reveals Himself in justice alone, unmixed with mercy.

Eternal life is the gift of God (Rom 6:23) and it is not bestowed on those who reject it. It is not the case that some receive this gift so they can live forever in heaven and that others receive the same gift so they can live forever in hell. That is just another form of universalism. Those who are lost receive the just wages of their sin, which is death. Eternal death is not the same as eternal dying. Eternal dying, so long as it remains incomplete, implies eternal living. From this I conclude that the process leading to the eternal death of the wicked is not endless. Its results are but the process itself is not. It occupies a limited period of time and is brought to full completion. God does not leave unfinished work.

Vine Symbolism Relating to Christ

The vine was one of the symbols Christ used to illustrate His relationship to the church. Of all the figures He used to convey this relationship, this is the one that Ellen G. White says is "most striking and appropriate."³ But any symbol can be misunderstood if one chooses to misunderstand it.

Initial appearances: a root
out of dry ground

Just as Israel gave early promise of being a fruitful vine, so Christ appeared in the opposite light. First impression led to wrong conclusions in both cases. Israel failed to live up to its potential and Christ, who appeared in so unassuming a manner, provided life for all the world if any would relate to Him as the branch to the vine.

"I am the true Vine." The Jews had always regarded the vine as the most noble of plants, and a type of all that was powerful, excellent, and fruitful. Israel had been represented as a vine which God had planted in the Promised Land. The Jews based their hope of salvation on the fact of their connection with Israel. But Jesus says, I am the real Vine. Think not that through a connection with Israel you may become partakers of the life of God, and inheritors of His promise. Through Me alone is spiritual life received.⁴

To the leaders of the Jewish nation the true Vine--the One to which all the ancient vine symbolism that they applied to themselves had in fact been pointing--was "like a root out of dry ground" (Isa 53:2).

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
(3) He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isa 53:2-3)

By rejecting the Son the Jewish nation was rejecting the Father who had sent Him. Their leaders put Christ to death and when He died "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split" (Matt 27:51). These facts either have significance or do not. In my view the meaning is clear. The temple had served its purpose. It was no longer a basis on which man could approach God. A few years later all Jerusalem was destroyed along with the temple. And yet Paul writes, "I ask then, Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom 11:1). But God did remove the last of Israel's special privileges. This is a distinction we need to understand. Jews today can be saved just like any Gentile, i.e., on the basis of faith in Christ. Such faith places all persons everywhere on an entirely equal footing before God. If anyone believes, he can be saved. If he does not believe, he cannot be saved. There is no second method being held in reserve to help those into heaven who refuse to enter by the means God has provided (John 10:7-9).

The life giving union of vine and branch

It was when Christ was about to take leave of His disciples that He gave them the beautiful emblem of His relation to believers. He had been presenting before them the close union with Himself by which they could maintain spiritual life when His visible presence was withdrawn. To impress it upon their minds He gave them the vine as its most striking and appropriate symbol.⁵

If a person from any race or background, and regardless of what his past may have been, will relate to Jesus as the branch to the vine he will find full and free entrance into Christ's kingdom. Another part of the symbol that should be pointed out, however, is that branches cannot be pushed in and pulled out at random if they are to bear any fruit. Each branch must remain. The relationship must be a growing and lasting one.

Conclusion

Just as the Son provides the only means by which man can approach God, He also provides the only means by which God relates to man. The way that we think of Christ determines the way we are thought of by His Father. Christ is the only available connecting link between heaven and earth and the link extends in both directions equally. There is no second way to salvation (Acts 4:12).

In the case of Ezekiel's people, who were under the judgment of God by the time the prophet wrote, the imagery of a vine devoid of fruit and already useless, then charred on both ends and burnt in the middle, shows more than God's attitude toward them. It shows one of the reasons for His attitude. The people of Jerusalem had come to see God in the same way that He now viewed them. Otherwise they would have listened when He spoke to them and the impending disaster could have been averted. Here then we have insight into the people's attitudes toward God. There are two parallel facts to consider here and the one must be allowed to explain the other.

We must acknowledge that Ezekiel's Jewish contemporaries were getting back only what they gave. God was not punishing them with undue severity. But merely failing to go beyond that minimal standard is not what God intended. He had better things in view. I conclude that even God cannot give things to people who will not receive them. None of God's dealings with mankind is unilateral. An element of mutuality runs through them all. It is this element of mutuality gone wrong that the present chapter so sadly illustrates.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹Hardy, "The Old Testament Basis for New Testament Rock Symbolism," *Historicism* No. 4/Oct 85, pp. 16-38.

²"Christ delighted in the earnest desire of Mary to do the will of her Lord. He accepted the wealth of pure affection which His disciples did not, would not, understand. The desire that Mary had to do this service for her Lord was of more value to Christ than all the precious ointment in the world, because it expressed her appreciation of the world's Redeemer. It was the love of Christ that constrained her. The matchless excellence of the character of Christ filled her soul. That ointment was a symbol of the heart of the giver. It was the outward demonstration of a love fed by heavenly streams until it overflowed" (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages: The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Life of Christ* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1940), p. 564.

³Idem, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 5:230.

⁴Idem, *Desire of Ages*, p. 675.

⁵Idem, *Testimonies* 5:230.