

The Drama of the Vineyard

(Ezekiel 13:1-23)

^{15:1} And the word of the LORD came to me:

² “Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest?

³ Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it?

⁴ Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel.

⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:

Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

⁷ And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them,

and you will know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them.

⁸ And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord GOD.”

^{4b} When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? ⁵ Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything!

The Vineyard and Ezekiel 15

At the eleventh hour he came,
But his wages were the same
As ours who all day long had trod
The wine-press of the Wrath of God.

When he shouldered through the lines
Of our cropped and mangled vines,
His unjaded eye could scan
How each hour had marked its man.

(Children of the morning-tide
With the hosts of noon had died,
And our noon contingents lay
Dead with twilight's spent array.)

Since his back had felt no load,
Virtue still in him abode
So he swiftly made his own
Those last spoils we had not won.

We went home delivered thence,
Grudging him no recompense
Till he portioned praise of blame
To our works before he came.

Till he showed us for our good—
Deaf to mirth, and blind to scorn—
How we might have best withstood
Burdens that he had not borne! ¹

¹ Rudyard Kipling, "The Vineyard," *Sunday Express* (Sept 19, 1926).

This poem by **Rudyard Kipling** is a stark, soldier-like meditation on **the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard** (**Matthew 20**). That story, however, only comes after 39 previous books of the Bible where the vineyard becomes a massively important biblical theme. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* begins,

Israel was a land of vineyards. Even today, traveling through the central hill country of Israel during the right season, one can see abundant evidence of fruitful vines. The fruit of the vine, of course, is the grape, whose juice, when fermented, produces wine. Perhaps then it is not surprising that the vine and the vineyard, so characteristic of this country's agricultural fertility, serve as potent images for the land itself.²

Today I want to take you on a **journey through the vineyard** in the Bible to discover a deep biblical theology of something you may or may not have contemplated before. Why? My main reason is because **Ezekiel 15** is a **judgment oracle** about Israel as the vineyard. But it is a **short text**, eight

² **Leland Ryken** et al., "Vine, Vineyard," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 914.

verses of tightly woven Hebrew poetry. The passage consists of two parallel strophes (stanzas), held together by a center which focuses on the burning judgment of God upon Israel the vine.

A Stanza I (vv. 2–4a) ← description

B vv. 4b–5 (burning) ← **absolute center**

A' Stanza II (vv. 6–8) ← application

Both of these stanzas are, in turn, their own short parallel chiasmic structures, meaning that the first stanza helps to interpret the second:

Stanza I (vv. 2–5) — Micro-chiasm #1

A Question of superiority (2)
("How is the vine wood better...?")

B Useless for any work (no peg)
(3)

A' Escalating uselessness after fire
(4a)

Stanza II (vv. 6–8) — Micro-chiasm #2

A Application of superiority question
(6b) ("Like the vine... so Jerusalem")

B Escapees still devoured by fire
(7a)

A' Recognition formula + land desolate (7b-8)³

Because it's so short, I've decided that I want to put it into [the context of an entire biblical theology of the vineyard](#), so that you can hear the story not only of the judgment

³ See the analysis in [Lawrence Boadt](#), "The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet's Persona," *CBQ* 59.1 (1997): 16-21 (1-21).

found in Ezekiel, but of how he comes to this analogy that Israel is a vine and further, what happens to the vine after the judgment. That story is your story, for as Paul says, you have been grafted into that vine (**Rom 11:7ff**). I'm going to do it in my own chiastic way thereby making Ezekiel 15 the center of this sermon.⁴

The Vineyard: A Seven Part Biblical Theology

Part I: Vine Planted in Eden

The first time a vineyard formally appears in the Bible is **Genesis 9:20**, “Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard.” Noah has just come down off the mountain of Ararat where the ark had landed. He has offered a wonderful sacrifice, a pleasing aroma to God (**8:20-21**). For it, God ratifies the covenant that he had made with Noah prior to the Flood with a great promise that he would never again flood the whole earth because of man, even

⁴ A God plants the first vineyard-garden in Eden
B Transplanting a wild vine from Egypt
C Vine degenerates — sour, toxic berries
D **Total destruction by fire (Ezek 15)**
C' Sucker rises from charred rootstock
B' Nations Engrafted onto True Vine:
A' Vine becomes a forest of life in a return to Eden

though every intention of man's heart is evil from his youth (21-23; 9:9; cf. 6:5, 18).

As the story of Noah's vineyard unfolds, we discover that he drinks from *the fruit of the tree* (21). Inside the tent comes Ham who "*sees the nakedness of his father*" (22), likely a euphemism for sleeping with his mother (cf. Lev 18:7). After bragging about the act to his two brothers, they come and *cover their parent with a garment* (9:23), refusing to look upon the sin. When Noah awoke and saw what had happened, he pronounced *a curse* upon Ham's son Canaan (25), while pronouncing a covenant blessing upon his other sons Japheth and especially Shem through whom *the seed* of Abraham would come (26-27).

Perhaps you could hear in how I told this story *echoes of the earlier story of Adam and Eve* who ate from the *tree*, discovered they were *naked*, God *cursed* them, while also giving the covenant *blessing* to Eve of the seed and *covering* their sin. This is no accident as even the beginning of the vineyard story sees Noah, a man of *the ground* who *works* the ground as Adam was supposed to do (9:20; 2:15), *planting* a vineyard just as God has planted a garden (9:20; 2:8); fruit that was *pleasant* but dangerous (9:20-21; 2:9, 16), while at the end of the story the two brothers walked in backwards so as not to

see the “face” (*panim*) of their father’s nakedness just as Adam and Eve hid from the “presence” (*panim*) of God (3:8). In fact, there are dozens of parallels between Gen 1-3 and 6-9 that confirm that Noah is being viewed as a new Adam.

My interest today is in [the vineyard](#). When you take the combination of a garden being planted and a vineyard being planted, a man working and keeping the garden and a man of the soil working the ground for his vineyard, trees that are pleasant and wine that is for joy (Ps 104:15), nakedness and nakedness and so on, this is becomes apparent that [Noah’s vineyard](#) is becoming [the biblical theological parallel of the Garden of Eden](#). And while the Garden is not said to be a vineyard, it has all the characteristics of the vineyard theme found later in Scripture—from a vine by streams of water (Gen 2:10; Ps 1:3), to a special tree and a special vine (Gen 2:9; Isa 5:1-7, Ps 80), to a special walled-off area (Gen 3:24; Isa 5:2, 5), to a place of precious resources and abundance (Gen 2:11-12; Isa 5:1).

So [what is the Garden of Eden](#)? I think it was certainly a literal place. Translated at “*paradeisos*” (paradise) in the Greek, remember, God “planted” the Garden in Eden in the east (Gen 2:8). As such, [Isaiah 5:1-2](#) could easily describe what God did when he planted his Garden. “[Let me sing for my](#)

beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it.” The **vinedresser** selects the best hillside, digs, clears stones, plants the choicest rooted vines, builds a wall and tower.

But the Garden was more than this. It was **the idyllic dwelling**, as the same dictionary above puts it, the “**touchstone of ... beauty, abundance, and the satisfaction of human need. Next to heaven, it is the preeminent image of human longing.**”⁵ It is something all humanity longs for, not just Christians or Jews or the Bible. Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his interrupted dream poem *Kubla Khan* put it wonderfully:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea...
close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And dr[a]nk the milk of Paradise.⁶

⁵ Leland Ryken et al., “Garden,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 315.

⁶ **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, “**Kubla Khan: Or, a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment**,” (London: John Murray, 1797, 1816).

The poem itself takes a dark turn that leads to a most interesting interpretation still debated by fans of the rock band that brought this song to life for a new generation in the 1970s. But more on that later.

Part II: Israel Transplanted

This thought of [darkness](#) is what quickly arises in the Genesis story, as our first parents, each in their own sinful ways, partake of the forbidden fruit and plunge our race into curse, ruin, and death. The misery is reinforced by the image of old Noah, a man who has just seen every human being on earth violently drown in a global cataclysm, save for his family. It appears that the old soul has become lost in his depression, despair, and self-pity, perhaps from losing so much—friends, broader family, home, city, entire way of life. Even the very earth he once knew is no longer recognizable. So he gets drunk and in this way his fall parallels the fall of the Adam.

Before moving to the main storyline of the vine in the OT, it is interesting that in Song of Solomon, [200 keepers](#) of Solomon's vineyard are in [Baal-hamon](#). This very easily

could be a reflection on the 200 Watchers of 1 Enoch who descend on Mt. Hermon, known as *Baal-Hermon* in **Jdg 3:3**. It's a likely word play alluding to the Watchers whose descent into that very location became the great failed vineyard of the song that is now handed over to the true King. The meaning would be alluding to the giving of the nations over to the heavenly beings who are supposed to care for the Father's vineyards around the world, but fail. So the King will receive it all. But **that's foreshadowing** to the end of our story.⁷

It is out of this long darkness that came upon the earth, generations of it to be sure, that the main storyline of our vineyard picks up. **Isaiah 5:1-2** that I read earlier isn't actually about the Garden of Eden. Rather, it is about **the nation of Israel**. The first time **Israel is called the vine** appears in Psalm 80. It begins ever so gently, **"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock"** (**Ps 80:1**). The shepherd and sheep imagery then gives way to the vine. **"You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its**

⁷ On this idea, see the unpublished commentary by **Caleb Song**, *The Unveiling: a Supernatural Reading of Song of Solomon* (2025).

shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. I sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River (Euphrates)” (8-11).

Throughout Ezekiel, the nations will be likened to trees and vines, just as their angelic caretakers are in the Song. *Assyria* will become the great cedar (Ezek 31:3), where all the other nations are called the “trees of Eden.” *Tyre* is made of the trees of Lebanon (27:5), the oaks of Bashan were its oars, its deck of pines are from Cyprus (6). It was “in Eden, the garden of God” (28:13), an anointed guardian cherub on the holy mountain walking among the stones of fire (14). *Egypt* itself will be called the cosmic lotus tree or vine (Ezek 31:6-9). In other words, the nations of the world—the nations that came out of Babel—are trees and vines.

It is really quite important to state therefore that in this metaphor, *Israel is not unique in being a vine*. What is unique is that YHWH uproots His vine, covenanted with centuries earlier through the Patriarchs, from another nation’s garden and transplants it into His own soil! *Israel is his vine*. Notice again Isaiah’s language. “Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard” (Isa 5:1). Israel is his vineyard built on the fertile hill of Mt. Zion. It was a *stock transplanted*, a shoot imported to a new land and God was

going to domesticate it. Like Noah, this also echoes Adam, the man who was not created in the Garden, but “put” there by God ([Gen 2:8](#)).

Part III: Israel's Sour Grapes and Toxic Berries

Isaiah's parable of the vine begins well, but sadly, it [quickly devolves](#) into a tragedy. After doing all the necessary things to prepare his new vineyard and then transplanting the new vine from Egypt, we learn that God “[looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes](#)” ([Isa 5:2b](#)). The great Vinedresser stands there, almost aghast, as he addresses his people. “[And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?](#)” ([3-4](#)). What is the image of a [wild grape](#)? Technically, the term *baushim* refers to [a stinking thing, a putrid berry](#). These are not just wild. They are viciously bad, small, hard, thick-skinned, often toxic berries that stink when crushed. The LXX translates it as “[thorns](#).” The NAS has “[worthless ones](#).” The Isaiah Targum, knowing this is a

metaphor explains the real problem, “They made their deeds evil.” That’s very telling!

There are several passages both prior to the Assyrian captivity like Isaiah and the Babylonian captivity like Ezekiel that say it. “Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built...” (Hos 10:1). “I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?” (Jer 2:21). A little later and Ezekiel will say, “Your mother was like a vine ... planted by abundant waters ... fruitful and full of branches ... now she is transplanted ... her fruit is plucked off...” (Ezek 19:10-13). Moses had already predicted it all: “Their grapes are grapes of poison; their clusters are bitter. Their wine is the poison of serpents...” (Deut 32:32).

This is Adam, fallen into sin. This is Noah, drunk in his tent. This is Moses striking the rock a second time. This is David sleeping with his friend’s wife. And those are the righteous ones! This is all of the sins of all of the people of Israel lumped together in a vineyard. All the grapes are rotten. They’ve fallen to the ground. They stink. They are worthless. And all that after God’s great care and affection

for his vine that he had transplanted so long ago. So what should he do?

Part IV: Destruction by Fire

That takes us to **the consequences**, or as God says through Isaiah over 100 years earlier, “**And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard**” (**Isa 5:5**). Here is where we want to look specifically at Ezekiel 15, though there are many other passages we could use. As with most of the oracles in Ezekiel it begins, “**And the Word of the LORD came to me**” (**Ezek 15:1**). The Son of God asks Ezekiel in his pre-incarnate Word of God form: “**Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest?**”

It’s a question of **superiority**, but it is rhetorical and ruthless. It’s expected answer is silence. They aren’t actually superior at all! Ezekiel, you are walking through the forest and you come across a vine that is parasitically growing up among the other trees. It’s soft. It’s brittle. It’s full of knots. It climbs other trees and literally chokes them. It’s grapes are wild, tiny, very sour, foul smelling, and inedible when eaten raw.

But never mind the fruit! What about **the wood** all by itself? Does it surpass any other wood? The rhetorical question spins on itself. “**Is wood taken from it to make anything?**” (3). No. It is gnarled, crooked, twisted like a serpent. What can you make that is useful out of it? A **tent peg**? “**Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it?**” A tent peg might be an example of the smallest, simplest, most minimal useful object you could imagine making out of something like that. But no, you can’t even make that. Besides being crooked, it is also brittle and hollow and would shatter or bend like a straw before being used. It is useful only for **firewood**. And so that will be what will happen to this vine. “**Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel**” (4a).

That takes us to **the center of our short passage**, the tip of the arrow, the bulls-eye that the prophetic oracle is aiming at. “**When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything!**” (4b-5).

Let’s consider just a few reminders of where we’ve been. When **Israel’s priests** have profaned my holy things and no longer distinguish between the holy and the common (5:11;

22:26), when **its princes** shed blood and devour people to make unjust gain (7:27; 11:6–7), when **its prophets** white-wash every atrocity with ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace (13:10, 16), when **its elders** commit detestable abominations inside my own house while telling themselves ‘The LORD does not see’ (8:12), when **its women** sew magic bands on their wrists and veil the heads of the innocent to hunt souls (13:18), when **the whole land** has become full of bloodshed and the city full of perversity (9:9), when even **Noah, Dan[i]el, and Job** together could not save a single son or daughter because of the abominations done in her midst (14:14–20), how could the very shoots of this vine be anything but stinking and poisonous, and the wood itself good for nothing but the fire?

That’s a **devastating critique of Israel’s sin and human sin**. When **Adam** created in uprightness commits his sin, failing to act as God’s prophet, priest, or king; when **Noah** blameless in his generations is saved only to get drunk in his tent and give away the birthright; when **Moses** strikes that rock the second time and his brother and sister grumble, when **David** kills his best friend because of his adultery... when the best of Israel, its very representatives do this, how much more everyone else? And this is the choicest of all

vines, for none of the other vines of this world were ever taken by the Lord and put into such a glorious position, dressed and cared for, pruned and watered as God did for his people. This is a bleak, dark picture.

The chapter begins to unravel its parallel message. “Therefore thus says the Lord GOD” (6:1). This mirrors the Word of the LORD coming to the prophet in vs. 1. God’s word is about to be heard. “Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (6b). If the opening of the previous stanza raised the rhetorical question of superiority, this side now shows that the superiority of that vine, whatever it might have been, is all for naught. Jerusalem and its inhabitants will be given to the fire for fuel. It is a worthless encroaching wicked vine. It must be destroyed.

The LORD tells him, “And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them” (7a). The language here is of two fires that are presented as one. It’s historical crisis is what brought Ezekiel into captivity in the first place. “The first burning refers to the siege of Jerusalem in Zedekiah’s time (597 BC;

2 Kings 25:1–4). The second burning adds a judgment that the people will face after the fall of Jerusalem.”⁸

The problem was that each time Babylon came knocking, those who were left thought they were now safe. God was no longer angry and their own survival was proof. This is why they never reformed their ways. They didn't think they needed to. They simply weren't listening to the prophets. They were deluding themselves.

In 605, Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt and then comes to Jerusalem. He takes royal youths such as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah and some temple vessels. No siege, no fire, no destruction (See [Dan 1:1-4](#); [Jer 46:2](#)). Some seven years later in 597, the second deportation occurs. Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem for three months. King Jehoiachin surrenders. 10,000 people are taken into captivity, including the king, queen, court officials, craftsmen, and Ezekiel ([2Kg 24:10-17](#); [2Chron 36:9-10](#)). Ezekiel is now prophesying that it's not over. But the people refuse to believe him.

As we will see in a later chapter, Nebuchadnezzar will return in final destructive fury. There will be a third deportation. Zedekiah will rebel and the temple, palace, and most

⁸ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 434.

of the city is literally **incinerated** (586). Until this final moment, the people continue to hope in a lie. But they will learn. Block puts it this way, “The survivors may not treat their escape as a sign of his goodwill. His face is set against them as well, and the fire of his fury will inevitably catch up with them and consume them. The escapees will continue their apostasy, and Yahweh’s wrath will continue to hound them. The concluding recognition formula declares that when this happens, the present exiles will recognize in the destruction of Jerusalem a manifestation of Yahweh, who has set his face against his own people.”⁹

That’s how Ezekiel himself basically concludes, “... and you will know that I am the Lord, when I set my face against them. And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord God” (Ezek 15:7b-8). God has taken his entire vineyard, cut the entire thing to the ground and burned it. This is what happens in horticulture: The **vinedresser** takes an axe, chops every trunk at ground level, piles all the wood, and sets fire to the whole vineyard. The above-ground plant is completely destroyed and reduced to ash. This is the only way to eradicate virus, deep

⁹ Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 458.

fungal infection, or total genetic reversion. **Fire purifies all things.**

Part V: The Sucker Shoot

I did not want to leave us here today. And that's why I've decided to preach a *biblical* theology of the vineyard, rather than just its destruction. For you need to know that the **destruction is not the end**, even as it wasn't the beginning of the story. To know the beginning of the story is, in a life-changing way—if you will believe it—the end of the story. But before we get to the end, we must progress our way back out, after the destruction of this special vine in Ezekiel 15.

Q. If a fire completely burns a vineyard to the ground, **is that the end** of the story? No. Within weeks or months, bright green **suckers** (water shoots) erupt from the still-living rootstock beneath the charred up stump. These shoots are **genetically the same vine**, but now clean and vigorous!

It is tempting to continue the story by going **seventy years into the future**, when Israel returns to the land. Surely, this is the sucker shoot? It was a miracle that God would even bring them back home, at least some of them. They had

lived several generations in Babylon now, but there was a yearning for Jerusalem. For Jerusalem was, in a remarkable way, a kind of Eden in its idyllic symbolism. God brought Ezra and Nehemiah home, but things quickly devolved, just as they had before. So God sent **more prophets**, post-exilic prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These prophets' very existence meant that **the sin had returned** and something else must have been in mind in the pre-exilic prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah.

Enter Isaiah. The famous prophecy reads, “*A shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit*” (Isa 11:1). A fruit-bearing branch? We actually find this kind of prophecy all over the place. “*In that day the branch/sprout of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors*” (4:2). This one is in the immediately preceding context of Isaiah 5's vineyard! Then there's **the suffering servant** of Isaiah 53, “*He grew up before him like a young plant/like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground.*” The ground is dead, yet the sucker rises.

We see it again in many decades later in Jeremiah, “*I will raise up for David a righteous Branch*” (Jer 23:5). In just a

couple of chapters, Ezekiel will say, “I myself will take a *tender sprig* from the top of the cedar... and plant it on a high mountain... it will bear branches and fruit and become a noble cedar” (Ezek 17:22-24). After the exile it continues, Zechariah, “I will bring my servant *the Branch...*” (Zech 3:8). “Behold, the man whose name is the Branch he shall branch out from his place” (6:12).

These prophecies are often explicitly about a vine. The word used in the suffering servant is the word for a vine sucker (“tender shoot”). In Psalm 80, which we saw earlier is the first place we find Israel being called a vineyard, “The vine you have planted... the son (or shoot) you have raised up for yourself... let your hand be on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have made strong” (Ps 80:15-17). The vine is the right hand of God, the Son of Man!

Just how do you suppose the NT interprets these things? Jesus shall be called “a *Nazarene*,” a wordplay on *neser*, branch, from Isaiah 11:1. “The *root* of Jesse ... shall come” (Rom 15:12), directly quoting Isaiah 11:1, 10 about Jesus. “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, *the Root* of David has conquered” (Rev 5:5).

It is into this that you need to hear perhaps the most stunning of all the NT claims concerning Jesus and the vineyard. In **John 15:1** he says, “**I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.**” The prophecy was that a shoot would rise up from the dead, burned soil. This shoot would actually bear fruit. The shoot that would do this, God predicted, would be the inheritor of the promises. It would be True Israel.

There is so much putting false hopes in a fallen people and nation in our day called Jews or Israel, even as people put false hopes in presidents and politicians and other countries such as America. Others are fighting about who really is Israel—the modern nation, Jews, the church? Beloved, Jesus tells us that he is the True Vine. He is True Israel. What is Israel? Jesus is. **His Father is the Vinedresser**, directly alluding to Isaiah 5. He has sprung up from the ground after all was dead and burned away. He alone is the vine through which all branches will now bear good fruit. Not a fallen nation, not a fallen people, but the Messiah. The claim of the NT that so many of these very same people reject is that **he is the Vine, he is Israel**. This is not replacement. It is resurrection, a rootstock growing up through the ashes.

But it is also a miracle, because the promise directly tied to this is that this promised branch *is the very Lord himself*. “I will raise up for David a righteous Branch ... and this is the name by which he will be called: *YHWH our Righteousness*” (Jer 23:5-6). The Branch is the LORD. This is consistent with the OT, if you know what you are looking at. Deut 33:16 calls God the “*thornbush dweller*,” a reference to the burning bush in which dwelt the Angel of the LORD. Wisdom (which is personified in Christ in whom is found all wisdom is “*a tree of life to those who lay hold of her*” (Prov 3:18). As he says in Hosea, “I am like an *evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit*” (Hos 14:8). As you can see, the tree, the branch, the vine is the LORD. But if the Vine-dresser is the Father, then the vine himself must be the Son. Have you seen and understood that in Christ all the promises are yes and amen? Did you realize that from the toxic smelly acidic fruit of the wild vine that was Israel that God was burning it down so that the True Vine might rise in its place, clean and vigorous and full of good fruit which is his perfect life and obedience to God in all things where all others have fallen short?

Part VI: Regrafting the Shoot

And **why did God do this?** Yes, it was to send the True Vine into the world. Yes, it was to glorify the Son in all things. And that surely would have been enough simply to let the vine grow and show itself for what it is before a dying decaying rotting forest of a world. But that wasn't the whole story. It isn't the whole story.

Out of the total devastation and complete judgment of Jerusalem, the old vine was completely burned away. That's the imagery. This imagery in the Bible is a kind of **already-not yet** as it regards the nation, because its final devastation came in the incineration that was the Roman devastation of Jerusalem in 70 AD. This was itself predicted by Jesus who cursed the **fig** tree that was Israel.

From the charred rootstock, one single new sucker erupts. Messiah rises from the stump of Jesse. The Vine-dresser lets that one sucker grow and removes every other shoot. What does Jesus say next in John 15? **“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away” (John 15:2a)**. It doesn't matter the **birthright**. It doesn't matter **the name** you are born with. Jesus is the entire new vine who came

directly out of the old stock that was burned up through the line of David and Jesse. Jesus is the only Vine that bears fruit.

Yet, the Vinedresser is not finished. He is now busy **grafting in** wild olive/grape shoots into the new, living vine. But what does this mean? How does this work? In **horticulture**, the vinedresser first cuts a healthy, fruit-bearing scion (a short piece of one-year-old wood from the desired cultivar—one of many possible varieties of plant that can produce slightly different kinds of fruit). He sharply trims its base into a wedge. On the established rootstock or trunk of the good vine, he slices a clean cleft or makes a T-shaped incision in the bark. The scion is then carefully inserted so that the cambium layers (the thin green ring just under the bark where sap flows and cells divide) of scion and stock are in direct contact. The joint is tightly bound with raffia or tape and sealed with wax or grafting compound. Within weeks **the two pieces grow together into one living plant**: the wild or new shoot now draws all its life, sap, and strength from the proven root and trunk, and soon begins to bear the good fruit that the stock was chosen for. In biblical terms, we (wild olive shoots) are cut from a worthless tree and grafted into Christ, the true vine, so that His life flows into us and we bear His fruit.

This then is what Christ begins to tell his disciples. “... and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:2b-5).

It is fascinating that **twelve Jews** whom we call the disciples must be said to be grafted into the vine. I thought the vine was Israel. No. The vine is *True* Israel. The old vine has been burnt to the ground. The metaphor is meaningless without this. Therefore, any Jewish person who wants to be part of the vine, must come to Christ. This is what Jesus is telling them. He is True Israel. He is the True Vine. Even his own Jewish disciples must be grafted in as branches, though they were in fact branches from the original OT vine.

Jesus **starts with Israel**, because **those are the shoots which are growing up around him**. Obviously, also, because these shoots are of the same original stock. God chose this vine originally because he wanted to, out of all the other

trees and vines of the world. And he loves his vine—he never stopped. But he also knows that no Jew can ever bear good fruit apart from life in the Vine. Not truly. Not finally. It can grow and look like it will—for a time. But only the True Vine Jesus has done all that the Father has commanded. He alone has borne the fruit and not been kicked out of the garden or left to be burned as worthless wood.

But God didn't stop there. There are **other shoots growing up** all around the world. In his love, the Father predetermined that he would graft many different shoots onto this vine. They are the strongest, healthiest suckers. They are proven varieties, resistant rootstock, tasty and wonderful. But why? Not because of anything in them. Rather, because they too will have **their life in the vine**.

The Apostle goes into a very long discussion of this in Romans 11 where he talks about himself as the apostle to the Gentiles (*ethnesin*) to whom he goes so that they might be grafted into the vine. What vine? **Christ!** He does this, he says, to make the Jews (lit: his fellow *sarx* or flesh) jealous. Why? So that some of them might be brought back in. As he says that Gentiles who do not finally look to Christ can be cut off from the vine, even as those who were once cut off

can be grafted back in. For just as the Father originally transplanted Israel out of Egypt into his land, so also he can do the same for anyone—Jew or Gentile today through faith in Christ.

Part VII: Edenic Return and the Forrest of Life

And that leads to the climactic point as we return to the beginning. The point of the Garden-Vineyard was that it was a [utopia](#) to which all humanity yearns. Coleridge's poem is about [Xanadu](#). At first glance, Xanadu seems like it is Eden—paradise. It was actually Kublai Khan's summer palace in Mongolia (Xanadu/Shangdu [上都] actually means "Upper Capital"). Marco Polo visited it and described it as grand.

But in [the poem-dream](#), as you actually should expect, Xanadu becomes a doomed pleasure-dome floating over chaos. [For the nerds out there, this is a different place from [Shambhala](#) (sung about by Three Dog Night), a much closer mythical parallel to what people imagine Xanadu to be, i.e. something like Eden. And in fact, this got so confused that the two words merged to become [Shangri-la](#).

(~~Xanadu~~/Shangdu+ ~~Shambha~~[ri]la).]¹⁰ What's fascinating is that Rush popularized this poem in their epic prog-rock song "Xanadu." The official lyrics have the last line saying with the poem, "For I have dined on honey dew, And drunk the milk of Paradise." But the official song has another line, not mentioned in the lyric notes. "*Whoa, is it Paradise?*"¹¹ So is it good or is it bad? Fans have been arguing that one for decades.

I bring it up here for a very good reason. Just what is it that we humans actually think is paradise? Xanadu is one answer. Shambala another. Garden of the Hesperides, Glæsisvellir, the fourth world emergence of the Hopi, or Hawaiki. Karl Marx and he'll give another answer. Ask a California leftist or a Boulder hippie and they'll give you something pretty similar. MAGA will be an opposite answer. *Whoa, is it paradise?* Just what is the ultimate goal of the vineyard and being grafted into the vine?

It's really quite simple. It is to have a world-wide vineyard replanted row by row until the whole earth is bursting

¹⁰ Even MORE nerdy. Coleridge's poem with Rush's interpretation becomes the ultimate cautionary tale: the most beautiful place in the universe is also the worst place you could ever be trapped. Meanwhile, the 1980's Xanadu, with Olivia Newton John and the nine roller-skating Greek Muses in a roller-disco hall help you find love with the help of Gene Kelly and ELO in what might just be the cheesiest utopia ever invented—which means you also do not want to be trapped here, even if Olivia is there!

¹¹ Rush, "Xanadu," *A Farewell to Kings*, Anthem (1977).

with abundant, sweet grapes, finally becoming the paradise vineyard of the eschatological dream ... in Christ the Vine. And that's it. The watchers were worthless caretakers. The nation's kings were tyrants who trampled their own gardens. Christ alone opens the way to Eden, Christ alone gives us the fruit of the tree of life. **But beware.** For the one not found in the Son of God—an angel is coming. “The angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God” (Rev 14:19).

The end of the Apocalypse holds out a much better hope for all who trust in Christ. And it is very good news. For there is another angel. And, “The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will

need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:1-5).

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a spring locked, a fountain sealed.
Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits,
henna with nard,
nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes,
with all choice spices—
a garden fountain, a well of living water,
and flowing streams from Lebanon.
(Song 4:12–15)

And that is the story of God’s Vineyard.

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