

9. The Vineyard Farmers (or Tenants)

“Listen to another parable: **There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower.** Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘**This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.**’ **So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.**

Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end (*Gk. Evil men! Evilly will he be destroying them*),” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone (*or head of the corner*); the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

“**Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people (Gk. *ethnos* – ‘nation’) who will produce its fruit.** He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed (*Gk. ‘scattered like chaff’ or ‘ground to powder’*).” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them.

(Matthew 21:33-45 NIV; see also Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19)

The Vineyard is the Kingdom

Jesus spoke this parable during His last four days in Jerusalem, while He was teaching in the temple courts, just before His death at Passover of 33 A.D. The Landowner is Yahweh and the Vineyard represents His kingdom inheritance. In the Old Testament era, the nation and land of Israel represented God’s kingdom, especially as it was embodied in His capital city of Jerusalem, the place of His Name, represented in the Temple. The prophet Isaiah spoke of this quite clearly.

“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. **He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.** Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. **Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah,** judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?

Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.”

(Isaiah 5:1-7 NIV)

Isaiah gives us a clear description of Jerusalem as the centre of God’s Vineyard, referring to a wall, a watchtower and a winepress. Jesus uses these same words in the parable. These terms are used a number of times throughout the prophets in relation to Jerusalem and Israel. The watchtower or tower was very much a symbol of the Temple of God in Jerusalem, the fortress of God’s dwelling place, surrounded by the wall of the city.¹

The winepress was a symbol of judgment, used particularly in relation to the judgment of Jerusalem and the people of Judah in the Day of the Lord of 70 AD, but it was also applied to previous judgements on *all* nations who were to receive the judgment and wrath of God (e.g. Joel 3:12-14; Isaiah 63:2-6; Psalm 80:8-18 & Lamentations 1:15).

The Winepress of Wrath

One of the clearest texts in the NT concerning the judgment motif of the winepress is in the vision of Revelation.

¹⁴ I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, **and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold on his head** and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, “Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.” ¹⁶ So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

¹⁷ Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Take your sharp sickle and **gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.**” ¹⁹ The angel swung his sickle on the earth, **gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath.**

²⁰ They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

(Revelation 14:14-20 NIV; see also 19:15)

The apocalyptic imagery in this passage is describing the two harvests that were to occur at the conclusion of the age, at the coming of the Son of Man (I refer the reader back to the parable of The Wheat and the Darnel for further details on the symbolism of the wheat harvest and the conclusion of the age). In verses 14-16 above, we firstly have the depiction of the coming of Christ to gather and save his true servants, the Israel of God, the ripe grain, to gather them into his barn, the kingdom of God. This is essentially describing the redemption of the chosen remnant of Israel.

While on the other hand, in verses 17-20, we have the graphic depiction of the wrath of God being manifested upon the Jewish nation in the events of the

Roman/Jewish war of 67-70 AD. The vine of Israel, which was now ripe for harvesting, is pictured as being cast into the winepress of God's wrath where the grapes are trampled *outside the city*, with the result that the blood of the grapes flows out of the press to form a deep river of blood for a distance of 1600 stadia. And this crushing or treading of the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty upon that wicked generation was to be implemented by Christ himself as Yahweh, the defender of his covenant (Revelation 19:13-15; Isaiah 63:2-6).

The mention of this 'trampling' taking place 'outside the city' with the blood flowing for a distance of '1600 stadia' is of great significance, both biblically and historically. There is a specific connection to Christ's crucifixion occurring outside the city of Jerusalem, where he poured out his blood as the sacrificial Lamb of God, coupled with the rounded figure that relates to the land of Palestine. Also, the 'trampling' and the 'horses bridles' strongly points to ancient warfare, both infantry and cavalry.

Firstly, it is interesting to note that the Jewish historian, Josephus, records that, during the War, Lake Galilee, the river Jordan and the Dead Sea became as rivers and lakes of blood throughout the land of Palestine, becoming full of decomposing bodies (Wars, Book 3:10:9; Book 4:7:5-6; Book 6:8:5).

Kenneth Gentry had this to say about Revelation 14:17-20.

"Earlier we saw that John defines "the city" in Revelation as the place where Christ was crucified, i.e., Jerusalem (Revelation 11:8). This "harvest" occurs in "the earth," that is, in "the land" of Israel (Revelation 14:15-19; cp. Rev. 1:7) at the place where Jesus was crucified: "outside the city" (John 19:20; cp. Hebrews 13:11-13). All of this fits well with John's stated theme (Revelation 1:7). Interestingly, Israel's length as a Roman province was 1664 stadia – right at the figure John records. We learn this from the third-century Christian, Antonius of Piacenza, who wrote the *Itinerarium* wherein we find this size. John's imagery suggests that Israel will suffer a bloodbath that runs throughout the land. Josephus reports that "the whole of the country through which they had fled was filled with slaughter."

"...Thus, historically the bloody carnage occurred not only through the length and breadth of the land (1600 stadia, or 200 miles), but on both sea and on land. This fits other images in Revelation, such as the sea becoming blood (Revelation 8:8; 16:3). John dramatically visualises this as if blood were flowing to the depths of the bridles of horses. His imagery is stark -- and historical. The Slain Lamb (Revelation 5:5-8, 12) is pouring out his wrath (Revelation 6:16-17) upon those who crucified him (Revelation 1:7)."²

The people of God were supposed to bring forth the fruit of the vineyard – but instead of bearing good fruit, the fruit of righteousness, they bore bad fruit, the rotten fruit of wickedness. This had now come to a head in Jesus' time, as the people of Israel were about to reject the Messiah Himself, the Son of the Landowner - who would also return in judgment upon that generation as Yahweh Himself.

"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?"

(Jeremiah 2:21 NIV)

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Let them glean the remnant of Israel as thoroughly as a vine; pass your hand over the branches again, like one gathering grapes.” ”

(Jeremiah 6:9 NIV)

God’s Judgment on Jerusalem

God was the Owner of His land and His people, and the nation of Israel were His tenants (Leviticus 25:23). Even though Yahweh is the Owner of the whole world, it was God’s purpose that Israel was to be a kingdom of royal priests, His treasured possession and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). For hundreds of years before Jesus arrived on the scene, God had been sending His servants, the prophets, to His vineyard tenant farmers to collect His fruit, particularly as the era of harvest time was approaching. This time of harvest had to do with the era of the Messiah and the arrival of the kingdom of God.

The leaders of Israel, however, who represented the tenant farmers, proceeded to persecute these servants by beating them, killing them and stoning them. Then more servants were sent out, but this time the leaders of Judah beat them, killed them and stoned them. Last of all, God was now sending His Son to them to claim His rightful inheritance. Was Jesus respected and accepted by the tenants? NO! Instead, they saw Him as a threat to their positions of religious and political power, *for they knew Him to be the Heir to the kingdom inheritance.*

Notice that the Pharisees and the chief priests knew something of the meaning of Jesus’ parables, *for they knew it was about them* (Matthew 21:45). Therefore, they plotted to kill Him, eventually throwing Him out of the vineyard (Jerusalem) and murdering Him (which I believe occurred on the Mount of Olives, near the place of the Sacrifice of the Red Heifer³).

At this point in the parable, Jesus asked the crowd “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” He may have been speaking rhetorically, yet some of them replied, *“Evil men! With misery will he be destroying them, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”* Little did they know that out of their own mouths they were pronouncing God’s judgment upon the city of Jerusalem, which was eventually fulfilled in 70 AD.

Jesus then reminded them of the messianic prophecy in Psalm 118 concerning ‘the Stone that the builders rejected’. The people, via their leaders, who represented the builders of the kingdom, were about to reject the Chief Cornerstone of the building of God! Yet even their rejection of the Living Stone fulfilled the purpose of God to make Him Head of the corner of a new building of God, the new spiritual Temple – and it is marvellous in our eyes!

For those who fall on this living messianic Stone, they will be broken before Him as His humble followers; yet to those on whom it falls, they will be crushed in judgment, ground to powder and scattered like chaff in the wind. This in turn was a cross reference to the ‘Living Stone’ of Daniel 2 that was to crush the spiritual forces of darkness that controlled the kingdoms of the nations and establish the kingdom of the heavens as a mountain in the earth (Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45).

A New Temple, a New Priesthood, a New Nation

It was God's ultimate purpose and intention to fulfil his prophetic word to Israel through Jesus the Messiah. He would become the foundational Chief Cornerstone of a new spiritual Temple composed of the living stones of the chosen remnant of Israel – the true Israel of God, a holy nation. This called-out remnant (Greek *ekklesia*, assembly), also figuratively referred to as the Bride, would become the firstfruit offering to God of a new kingdom and nation of royal priests, composed not only of believing Jews/Israelites, but Gentiles also.

Both Paul and Peter made this abundantly clear (with Paul largely addressing Gentile believers & Peter largely addressing Jewish believers in the following texts).

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, **with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone**. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become **a holy temple in the Lord**. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

(Ephesians 2:19-22 NIV)

As you come to him, **the living Stone**—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—**you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood**, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

(1 Peter 2:4-8 NIV)

Now take note of the fact that Jesus, in the parable (verse 43), told the Jewish leaders that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to another people or nation (the Greek word here being *ethnos*). This echoed the words of Isaiah when he prophesied of the new nation and the new Jerusalem/new Mount Zion of a new creation that God would eventually make (Isaiah 62:1-2, 11-12; 65:1-2, 8-9; 66:8-10). And this new Jerusalem of the heavenly kingdom of God would become fully established at the coming of the Son of Man to destroy the old Jerusalem and its worldly Temple in 70 AD.

It is evident from the parable that the transference of the kingdom of God would occur when the Owner of the vineyard would come to judge his people (verses 40-41). Therefore, this event is identified with the Day of the Lord of 70 AD as per the rest of the NT.

The Arrival of the Kingdom

This also points to the fulfilment of some of the key visions in the book of Daniel. In Daniel chapter 2, in the dream of the Great Image, the kingdom of God (also

termed the kingdom of the heavens) is portrayed as being established by the Living Stone in the days of the ten kings of the fourth kingdom (that is, Rome; cf. 2:34-35, 44-45).

Then in chapter 7, in the vision of the Four Beasts, the kingdom of God is given to the Son of Man and his holy people after a three-and-a-half-year war led by a ruler of the fourth kingdom (that is, the Roman/Jewish war under Titus; cf. 7:7-8, 13-14, 23-27). This also occurs at a time of judgment in the heavenly court where the spiritual power behind the fourth 'beast' kingdom is destroyed in fire (7:9-12, 28; cf. Revelation 19-21). Also, in Daniel chapter 12, the-three-and-a-half year war (time, times and half a time) brings about the shattering of Israel and the completion of these prophecies for God's people (12:6-9).

Even though the nation of Israel was promised the rights to the original kingdom inheritance of God, as they were the vineyard, yet due to their rejection of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, the vineyard of Jerusalem was to be judged and destroyed. It was God's purpose all along that the vineyard (the kingdom) would be given to a nation (or people) who would produce the fruit at harvest time.

This new nation was to be the heavenly Israel, the overcomers of the assembly of Christ who belonged to the new heavenly Jerusalem. These are the royal priests who would become heirs of the world with Christ in a Davidic-Melchizedek priesthood, and they would inherit the kingdom promises (ultimately eternal life, that is, immortality) as sons of Abraham and sons of God, partaking of a better resurrection. This is the ultimate fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant to bless all nations through his Seed in a New Creation – a heavenly country, a heavenly city & a heavenly kingdom (Romans 4:13-17; Hebrews 3:1; 9:15; 11:16; 12:22).

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

(1 Peter 2:9-10 NIV)

"To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, **I will give authority over the nations**— 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'— just as I have received authority from my Father."

(Revelation 2:26-27 NIV)

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—**heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ**, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

(Romans 8:17 NIV)

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law... For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant,

that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

(Hebrews 7:11-12; 9:15 NIV)

As the writer to the Hebrews in the first century made clear, previous generations of God's true Israel had died in faith, not having received the promised inheritance (being in the sleep of death awaiting the better resurrection), and others had died since the first appearing of Christ. Nevertheless, the era was then very near when the living stones would be glorified together at Christ's return to fill His Temple with glory and power as they received the kingdom inheritance together – as the true Vineyard of the Lord Almighty.

This is the true Sabbath-rest of God, the New Creation (Hebrews 4:8-11). And the gates of Paradise, the New Jerusalem, have been opened for all nations since that time for others to answer the call of the kingdom of God (Revelation 21:24-27; 22:1-5).

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released **so that they might gain an even better resurrection**... These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. **God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.**

(Hebrews 11:35b, 39-40 NIV)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. **Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.**

(Romans 8:18-23 NIV)

Endnotes

¹ As in the case of the 'Tower of Babel' (Genesis 11:1-9), in ancient times a religious temple was viewed as a tower situated on top of a high place or mountain. God's Tower was in Jerusalem on Mount Zion-Moriah (reference: Ernest L. Martin, *The Temples That Jerusalem Forgot*, ASK Publications, 2000, pp. 256-261).

² Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Book of Revelation Made Easy* (American Vision Press, Second Edition 2010), pp. 101-102.

³ For further details see my archived article entitled *The Holy Hill, The Mount of Olives*.