

TEMPLE TITHE-EVASION AND THE GRAPES OF WRATH

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John Steinbeck's title of his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* was culled from *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." Allusions to grapes and wrath are found throughout the Bible. For example in Joel 3:13, "Put in the sickle, for the *harvest* is ripe. Go in and tread, for the *wine press* is full...for their *wickedness* is great." (See also Isa. 63:3, Lam. 1:15, Rev. 14:19.) The complex metaphor involving grapes and vineyards, judgment, and wickedness is also employed by Jesus in the *Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and the Son* (Luke 20:9-19, also Mt 21:33-46, Mk 12:1-12, Thomas 45:1-15). In this parable, Jesus utilized the vineyard imagery of Isaiah 5 to declare judgement on the vineyard tenants—who represented the Temple authorities—by demanding fruit of the vineyard. While Steinbeck uses "grapes of wrath" implicitly as a metaphor for judgment against oppression, Jesus employs the metaphor explicitly as he links the temple with the vineyard, causing the temple leaders (the deceitful "sharecroppers" and tithe-evaders) to squirm.

Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and the Son

Recall with me the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and the Son (Mt 21:33-46; Mk 12:1-12; Lk 20:9-19; and *Thomas* 45:1-19). According the Gospel sources, this parable was told by Jesus in the Temple area just before Passover (just after tithes were due) with Isaiah 5 employed as the immediate Biblical background. An owner planted a vineyard, leased it to tenant farmers, and tried to collect the fruit due him. The tenant farmers abused the servants coming to collect and killed the son of the owner to try and inherit the vineyard. Psalm 118:22 is invoked—"the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" and is followed by another stone-saying (see below); both sayings claim the stone prevails. The parable closes with the chief priests and others trying to lay their hands on Jesus because they "perceived that [Jesus] had told this parable against them."

Jesus' "one-two punch" — Demanding fruits and the triumph of the Son

Historically, Christian interpretation of the parable has tended to foster anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism by understanding Jesus as opposed to the Temple or the Jewish people. Yet a likely reading of this parable simply pits Jesus against the Temple *authorities* and *not* the Temple or the Jewish people. According to this reading, Jesus judged the Temple authorities for withholding the fruit (meaning "tithe," see below) to God and pronounces the triumph of the son. Jesus carries a "one-two punch": demanding fruit for God as well as declaring the prevailing son. His first jab was the judgement against the tithe-evaders withholding "fruit" from the vineyard, while his second hit comes as the son and stone claim a prevailing victory against anyone, despite the intentions of the greedy priests. This parable is simply an intra-Jewish critique of temple economic policy and a claim of messiahship.

The Vineyard Image in late Second Temple Judaism

Let us flesh out this one-two punch in its socio-historical context. First we will bring to light the link between temple and vineyard and then second, clarify the nature of the criticism. Often the vineyard has been seen to be the Jewish people, Israel, or spiritual Israel, but here the image is quite clear: the vineyard represents the Jerusalem Temple and the tenants of the vineyard as the Temple authorities. Within late Second Temple period Judaism (first-century C.E.), there is a rich exegetical tradition of linking the vineyard and the Temple. A number of sources imply this ancient vineyard-temple association: (1) document 4Q500 found at Qumran (4Q500), (2) the

Isaiah *targum* (a loose Aramaic translation of the book) and (3) other Rabbinic literature, which is more difficult to date.¹

Let us turn to Isaiah 5. The Targum (loosely) rendered Isaiah 5:2's (the) 'tower' (*migdal*) as 'sanctuary,' (*mikdash*) and the 'wine press' (*yekev*) as an 'altar' (*midbach*)—both changes in the Aramaic Targum are clearly alluding to temple imagery.

Similarly, Joseph Baumgarten found that 4Q500 threw "light on the ancient exegesis of this prophetic metaphor."² Note in 4Q500 the temple images of "gate of the holy height" and "streams of your glory." The latter are understood as referring to the flow from the altar in the Temple. 4Q500 reads in its fragmentary form:

1]...[
 2]may your [mulb]erry trees blossom and ...[
 3]your winepress [bu]ilt with stones[
 4] to the gate of the holy height [
 5]your planting and the streams of your glory ...[
 6]... the branches of your delights ...[
 7] your [vine]yard.³ [

Baumgarten has convincingly argued this text to be a blessing about "God's vineyard" directed to God concerning the Temple. In 4Q500, the Targum, and the VTS, the link between vineyard and temple is clear, and such a link focuses Jesus' critique towards the vineyard tenants or,

in other words, the temple authorities.

Similar Critiques of the Temple

Before we turn directly to the parable of the Vineyard Temple and Son (Luke 20:9-19 and parallels), we must view contextually this (general) critique of the Temple. From sundry places, we know many ancient Jews were sharply critical of the Temple. Many shared Jesus' critique of the exploitative Temple authorities. Isaiah 3:12-15 held the Judaeen leadership responsible for producing bad grapes from the vineyard. And the Targum to Isaiah 5:7-10 sharpened the criticism of the Judaeen leaders with added words like "oppressors, oppression, and posses." Much of the criticism of the temple authorities was economically based. We will return shortly to this fifth chapter of the Isaiah Targum passage. A similar economic critique of the temple authorities comes from Baba ben Buta, a contemporary of Herod the Great.⁴ Here Baba ben Buta is reported to have gone into the courtyard of the Temple and found it barren of sacrificial animals since the Temple authorities had driven the prices of the animals for sacrifice so high. He condemned those who desolated the house of God and bought 3000 animals for the people.⁵ Jochaim Jeramias summarized this type of intra-Jewish critique: "we learn that the influence of the new aristocracy depended on their power politics, exercised sometimes ruthlessly ...sometimes by intrigue...and that by this means they were able to control the most important

¹ Tosefta Sukkah 3:15 follows similarly, "And he built a tower in its midst, this refers to the Hekhal; He dug a winepress in it, this refers to the altar; And he dug a winepress in it, this refers to the channel." So George Brooke summarized, "The winepress has a double referent: the altar and the channel in which the sacrificial blood flows away." Brooke, 1995: 272. Cf. bSukkah 49a. All cited by Baumgarten, 1989: 2. See also Tosefta Me'il 1:16.

² JOSEPH M. BAUMGARTEN (1989), "4Q500 and the Ancient Conception of the Lord's Vineyard," *JJS* 40:1, 1-6.

³ English translation: GEORGE J. BROOKE (1995), "4Q500 and the Use of Scripture in the Parable of the Vineyard," *DSD* 3:2, 268-294 at 269. For another English translation, see (Brooke, 1995: 400).

⁴ This dating is according to the Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 3b-4a and Josephus' *Antiquities* 15.261-270.

⁵ y. *Besa* (*Yom Tov*) 2:4, 61c. Compare with *m. Ker* 1:7 (Danby 564) where R. Simeon b. Gamaliel I, a first generation Tanna [according to Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 74] decries the price of a pigeon; see Aus, 15-16).

offices in the Temple as well as the taxes and money....”⁶ It seems that the economic oppression described in the Targum to Isaiah and the extortion reported by Baba ben Buta are both poignant and typical examples of why the temple authorities were often criticized.

The Economic Meaning of Jesus Demanding Fruit

We have looked at the link between temple and vineyard, highlighted other Jewish literature critical to the Temple, and now we will bring out two ancient Jewish passages, which offer a plausible context for the owner’s demand of “fruit” from the “vineyard.” These two passages are from the Targum of Isaiah and an ancient Jewish commentary on Deuteronomy called *Sifre*, most likely late in the Tannitic period (200 BCE-220 CE).

Fruit of the vineyard seems to be directly linked in meaning to the tithes from the Temple, both in our parable and in the Isaiah Targum. The Isaiah 5 passage describes a vineyard and in 5:10, the fruit vintage has a meager production: “For ten acres of vineyard will yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.” But it is only in the Targum that we are told *why* the vineyard produces so little: “For because of *the sin that they did not give [withheld] the tithes...*”⁷ (5:10). This Targum passage voices an economic critique of the vineyard and demonstrates the link between tithes and fruit.

Our second source comes from *Sifre* an ancient commentary on Deuteronomy. In *Sifre* 105, the Temple authorities justified their withholding of the tithes for themselves by shrewdly interpreting Deuteronomy 14:22.

The Sages said: The (produce) stores for the children of Hanan were destroyed three years before the rest of the Land of Israel because they failed to set aside tithes from their produce, for they interpreted *Thou shalt surely tithe . . . and thou shalt eat* as excluding the seller, and *The increase of thy seed* as excluding the buyer⁸

Reuven Hammer commented, “These were stores set up by a wealthy priest to sell items used in sacrifices. [The priests] followed their own interpretation and left the tithing to the farmers who raised the produce.”⁹ “The (produce) stores for the children of Hanan” refer to nothing else but the same family as the chief priest Annas in Lk 3:2 and Jn 18:13. Jesus may have had a concern that *all*, including the priests, should follow the biblical injunction to tithe. Biblical tithing injunctions are complicated due to differing and ambiguous commands. Two ways of harmonizing these commands seem to have existed in late Second Temple period Judaism.¹⁰ One of the many tithes (three is the usual Rabbinic formulation) is described by S.M. Lehrman, “Tithes are of three kinds (a) that given to the Levite, who in turn gives a tenth thereof to the priest (Num. XVIII, 26)...”¹¹ Since there were no Levites in the first century CE, the priests took it all and then often were not giving any to God. It seems the priests were receiving tithes without acknowledging God through a subsequent tithing of their own; they justified this through their interpretation of Deut 14:22 above.

To sum up the economic meaning of Jesus demanding fruit. Such subversive tithing practices by the priests may be the impetus of Jesus’ parable of the Vineyard Tenants and Son. If this is the case, the owner’s demand for “fruit from the vineyard” should be read as “tithes from the Temple.” Such a historical

⁶ Commuting on b. Pesach 57a. Jochaim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 196. See also *Antiq.* 20, 8.8/174-81 and t. *Minhot* 13:21.

⁷ Bruce D. Chilton, 1987. *The Isaiah Targum*. Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 11. Additional criticisms of the priests in the Isaiah Targum occur at 22:12-25 and 28:1-29.

⁸ Reuven Hammer, *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (New Haven: Yale Univ Press, 1986), 152.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 434. Compare Talmudic connections P. Pe 1:6 and B. BM 88a.

¹⁰ E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: 5 Studies* (London: SCM Press, 1990). A summarial look is in E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* (Trinity Pr Int, 1992). See also the important articles in Gedaliah Alon, “Philo’s Halacha,” in *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977). Joseph M. Baumgarten, “Tithing,” in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. H. Schiffman and J. C. VanderKam (New York: Oxford, 2001), 947-948.

¹¹ *Socino Talmud*, Zearim, Pe’ah, 7 n11. On the third kind of tithe, he commented “tithes are not given from Pe’ah.”

view contextually dovetails with Jesus' "cleansing of the Temple." Jesus was concerned (viz. "den of robbers" in Luke 19:46 and parallels) about some kind of wrongful selling which resulted in him driving out only with his words in Luke's version—those who sold "saying to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be a house of prayer"; but you have made it a den of robbers.'"¹² Although I have argued for a plausible and specific historical view contextually of the VTS, the critique against the scribes and the high priests may have been more general: demanding the fruits of obedience from the temple authorities¹³ and implicitly claiming stone-sonship. Both *Sifre* and the Aramaic translation of Isaiah 5:10 show disapproval of the priestly family of Annas or priests and dovetail with Jesus' critique in Luke 20:9-19. All three texts allude to judgement for the tithe-evaders. In a way, the temple authorities and chief priests were the sharecroppers of the temple-vineyard; by not giving of their produce based on shrewd biblical interpretation, the owner called to end their sharecropping days and announced the tithe-evaders eviction.

Economic Context of the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and Son

Immediately following the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and the Son, Jesus is questioned on paying taxes to Caesar and turns the question of taxes into a teaching on images (Luke 20:20-26). Asked about paying taxes, Jesus asked *them* a question: "who's image is on this coin?" thereby implicitly invoking Genesis 1:26-27 where humanity is "made in God's image, after God's likeness." They were amazed by this Jesus' twist, "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's [image], and to God the things that are God's [image]" for the implication was evident—their entire lives were demanded since they were in God's image. Paul echoes this overarching attitude required before God in 1 Cor 3:16, "you are God's temple." Contrasting the Temple authorities that weaseled out of paying even their tithe, Paul and Jesus demanded at least a tithe if not wholesale giving.

The Second Punch: The Triumph of the Son

The first of the one-two punch—the demand for fruit is followed by the second—the triumph of the Son. Two sayings concerning the stone follow the narrative portion of the parable. Luke 20:17 quotes Psalm 118:22: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." Luke's scriptural quotation and the narrative portion of the parable are inextricably linked by the wordplay between the "son" (Hebrew *ben*) sent to collect the fruit and "stone" (Hebrew *aben*) rejected. This wordplay—*only* able to be made in Hebrew—is pervasive in ancient Jewish literature and serves to build the climax of the parable with the centrality of the Son. The second stone saying in verse 18, "Every one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but when it falls on any one it will crush him" may be ambiguous in some ways but is not in one momentous way—either way the stone wins! A similar saying is recorded in a later Jewish commentary on Esther: "If a stone falls on a pot, woe to the pot! If a pot falls on a stone, woe to the pot! In either case woe to the pot!"¹⁴ Jesus used the stone imagery to declare the son's victory and this triumphant stone motif is recorded in passages like Dan 2:34, Act 4:11; Romans 9:32-33; Hebrews 13:6-16; 1 Pet 2:4-7; Barnabas 6:4; and Midrash Esther Rabbah 7:10. The triumphant Son visited the doorstep of the tithe-evading temple authorities and prophesied their eviction.

Conclusion

We have read the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and Son in light of other vineyard literature—4Q500, *Sifre*, Isaiah Targum—and the payload has been generous. David Stern commented, "What our study of the New Testament parables in the light of the Rabbinic meshalim (Hebrew for parables) has shown is that the parable can be read intelligibly and fruitfully within their [i.e. Hebrew/Semitic] literary contexts, and that if read this way, the results are consistent with what we know about the form and

¹² Lk 19: 45-46. Only with Mark and Matthew do we have reports of overturning tables; with John, a whip.

¹³ Compare "fruits of obedience" in Lk 3:9.

¹⁴ Esther Rabbah 7:10. In this passage both Psalm 118:22 and Daniel 2:45 are cited.

function of the mashal from Rabbinic literature.”¹⁵ By reading the Parable of the Vineyard Tenants and the Son in the context of other Jewish literature of the time we can see how Jesus heightens the tension between his movement and the religious leaders just before Passover. Jesus called them to acknowledge the ownership of God, he demanded fruit of the vineyard-temple, and he spoke poignantly of the Son’s rejection, their judgment and his triumph. The grapes of wrath had prophetically visited the vineyard priests.

¹⁵ David Stern (1989), “Jesus’ Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen,” in *Parables and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press), 42-80 at 73.