

The Vine

by Lynn Andrew

Details in Scripture are fascinating, and the study of them constitutes a sort of bottom-up theological science that ignores and even disparages generalizations, which seem to the literalist a mushy confusion of distinctions. Regardless of that, among the gems and nuggets in every Bible student's collection are some that defy systematic classification. The Vine, for example.

Jesus said he is the Vine and apart from him his disciples could do nothing. Fine. That makes perfect sense to the individual Christian who clings to Jesus as his personal savior. The fact that Jesus is a Jew does not come into the equation. The fact that Yahweh had already appropriated the metaphors of the vine and the vineyard seems irrelevant in one's personal relationship to God.

The vine symbol was first applied to Israel. For example in Isaiah 5:7, it is plainly stated that the foregoing metaphor is about Israel, Yahweh being the vineyard's developer and owner. Israel is likened to a vine back to Psalm 80:8, where it is rooted in the birth of the nation. Isaiah makes a song of it in 5:1-6. The figure is used over and over again to represent Israel and Judah (Isaiah 3:14, 27:2-6; Jeremiah 2:21, 5:10, 6:9, 8:13, 12:10; Ezekiel 15:2-6, 17, 19:10-14; Hosea 9:10, 10:1; Joel 1:7). Almost always the context is degeneration, ruin, and destruction: the vine that began well was disappointing as it developed; its fruit was unacceptable, and it ended very badly. The exceptions are Isaiah 27:2-6 and Hosea 14:7, which look ahead to the day of Israel's glory when the vine will be restored by Messiah.

Jesus applies a vineyard metaphor to the Kingdom to illustrate or-

der (Matt 20) and transition (Matt 21) in the Kingdom.

So the vine and the vineyard are flexible figures variously representing Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, Jesus, and the Kingdom. Now the question is whether the common metaphor means that these things are in some sense the same things: is this an indication of a unity at some higher level? Jerusalem is the city of the great King. There is a very close identification of Jerusalem with Jesus and of Jerusalem with Judah, and all these are brought together in the New Jerusalem. When Jesus spoke of the Vine that was himself, was he encompassing these other things too?

Exactly in the middle of the last 27 chapters of Isaiah (the "New Testament" portion of Isaiah's book), is the eminently controversial chapter 53 that depicts the suffering Messiah (if you are a Christian) or the suffering Israel (if you are a Jew). It should not disturb any of us to observe the context of chapter 53 and realize that it fits Jerusalem too.

Everything must come together at the top. It may be possible to infer the top from the bottom, but there will be problems in doing so: anomalies that do not tie in because they tie in directly to the top. Miracles are like that.

Bible literalists nevertheless believe in a top-down universe. Evolutionists try to explain everything starting from the bottom—as far away from the source as possible. Yet Bible literalists also like the bottom-up approach to studying the Word, which appears to be a modern trend perhaps inspired more by the scientific method than by inspired theology. That's fine as far as it goes. Jesus himself said that every detail in the Law and Prophets is important (Matthew 5:18). But creation does not hang on underpinnings; it is suspended from above.

Likewise, the details of scripture depend on the top. Love the Lord your God—all the commandments hang on this. There is structure and harmony to be found at the bottom, which is a manifestation of the genius at the top, but the strands from which it is suspended are worth studying and following to their source.

God used Israel to reveal himself to the world. But if you stop there, you miss almost everything. Israel is far more than that. Israel, though it died when the Jews put their King to death, is being resurrected in the third millennium. The church is a branch grafted onto the vine. The vine is Jesus Messiah. The resurrecting Israel, when she comes to life, will receive her King. Ultimately we are citizens of New Jerusalem which has the names of 12 tribes of Israel written on her gates.

Before Jesus presented himself as Israel's King, by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, he instructed his disciples:

"... you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her.
Loose them, and bring them to me." (Matthew 21:2)

Shortly thereafter he was rejected and crucified. He loosed his special tie to Israel and became the vine himself.

But it will not always be so. Someday Jesus will again tie himself to Israel, then to judge the nations, fulfilling a prediction from the mouth of his ancestor Jacob when he prophesied over his twelve sons:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor a ruler's staff from between his feet ...
Binding his foal to the vine
and his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he washed his garments in wine
and his clothes in the blood of grapes. (Genesis 49:10,11)

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