Hope in the Midst of Tragedy
(Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Matt 21:33-46 par.)

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Abstract
The unity of the Bible is exemplified through the agrarian image of the vine/vineyard in the songs of Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6 and in the parable of Matt 21:33-46. The metaphor expresses a development and reinterpretation of the themes of judgment and promise, wherein God wills to accomplish his purposes for his people, despite his repeated frustration with human rebellion. God expresses his love for his people in a wholly vulnerable manner. Both Isaiah and Jesus underscore the truth that God could do nothing more than he had already done for his people; no blame can be attached to God. Where there is unbelief and rejection of the Beloved Son, there is tragedy and destruction. Where there is receptivity, there is joy, promise, fruitfulness and fulfillment.

Keywords
Isaiah, Matthew, parables, vineyard, judgment, promise

In loving appreciation for my father, Dr. Cullen I K Story, who always modeled Christian character and valued the unity and diversity of the Bible, with an ongoing concern for the context of the individual writers of Holy Scripture.

Introduction
Isaiah and the NT evangelists employ the horticultural metaphor of the vine/vineyard to express the divine will to accomplish his purposes for his people at successive stages, despite God’s repeated frustration of human rebellion. The agrarian image of the vine/vineyard illustrates the unity of the Bible in terms of historical connection, common vocabulary and themes, typology, promise-fulfillment and a unified perspective. Isaiah warns Judah that her fate is well-deserved (Isa 5:1-7) and prophesies an eschatological vineyard of promise (27:2-6). These themes of judgment
and promise are reinterpreted in the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Matt 21:33-46) that narrates the story in the light of the Jesus-event. While wicked tenants will be destroyed, a new people of God will emerge who will render fruit (21:43). The metaphor expresses God’s unified purpose that embraces both testaments by portraying a new word of God to each new situation. “On this pilgrimage there are many stops, many initial fulfillments, but each one of them becomes a point of departure again until all promises will finally be fulfilled at the end of time.”

The purpose of this essay is to develop the theme of a paradoxical hope in contexts of tragedy and judgment through the imagery of the vine/vineyard.

Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7)

The metaphor of the vine (of Ps 80) is used in similar fashion in the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) but with a different emphasis on the produce of the vineyard. God expected “good grapes” but was repaid with “stinking things”—therefore he will visit his vineyard with judgment. The expected “good grapes” were “justice” and “righteousness”; the disappointing result was “stinking things”— “bloodshed” and “a cry of distress” (Isa 5:7). The Song intends to force upon the listeners the conviction that their fate is well deserved.

The Larger and Immediate Context

The tone of the Song suggests a time of peace with calamity lying in the near future. The societal violence of Isa 5:7 of “bloodshed” and “the cry of distress” readily fits in with the decadence of the upper classes; clearly demonstrating their “pampered, [concern] only for material possessions and pleasures, (3:16-4:1; 5:11, 22) . . . without moral standards or trust in God (cf. 5:18-21).” The social evils of chapters 1-4 are made specific in the series of woes which follow the Song.


The metaphorical language from chapters 1-4 is repeated in the Song. A clear demonstration of this can be found in the theme of the vineyard’s abandonment in 1:8, “…the daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard.” Also, earlier speech concerning the women (3:16-4:1), corresponds to the detailed blame concerning the men (5:8-30). The short pithy sayings in 2:9, 11, 17 are found again in 5:15-30 and the debauchery and power of the men in 2:7, 15; 3:2-11 surface in the woes of 5:12-19. In addition, the expected “social justice” and “righteousness” (5:7) are the subjects of chapters 1-4 (especially 1:21). Further, judgment for the vineyard is noted in 3:14, when the Lord condemns the religious leadership of Judah and Jerusalem for devouring the vineyard. “The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people. It is you who have devoured the vineyard…” The verb “devour” בָּﬠַר (3:14) is repeated in the Song in 5:5, wherein God will be the primary agent in the vineyard’s destruction. In chapter 4, there is the promise that the “bloodshed” of Jerusalem (cf. bloodshed in 5:7) will be purged from her “by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning.” “The same principles are emphasized—the righteousness of Jehovah and his activity in judgment—but the form of judgment of which Isaiah had spoken in general terms looms nearer.”

Genre

Scholarship has produced divergent views concerning the Song with varying degrees of merit. Since this paper concerns the theological history of...
the people of God in the image of the vine/vineyard, we will not enter into detailed discussion concerning genre. We suggest that the Song is parabolic, with the inclusion of allegorical elements. The parabolic thrust of the Song is God’s establishment and provision for his people, his natural expectation for social justice and righteousness, his disappointment at the bitter results and his verdict of imminent judgment for the people of God. However, there are certain natural allegorical features: owner and planter = Yahweh Sabaoth; vine/vineyard = people of God (Israel & Judah); good grapes = social justice and righteousness; stinking things = bloodshed and a cry of distress from the oppressed; removal of the hedge = abandonment of Judah to foreign invasion.

Structural Analysis

The Song of the Vineyard is divided into four linked stanzas, which progress to the climax in verse 7, where Isaiah makes the identification precise.

Interpretation

STANZA I (5:1-2)

Introductory Formula (5:1a). The stanza provides the Song’s introduction, the relationship of the prophet to the Beloved, the care given by the Beloved for his vineyard, the Beloved’s expectation for good grapes and the bitter disappointment with the actual fruit. In Stanza I all of these activities occurred in the past, while Stanza II and III begin with the temporal conjunction, “and now” (וְﬠַתָּה), which embraces the present and imminent future. Isaiah impresses a truth upon the people of God of


6) The basic outline is suggested by Graffy apart from his extensive omissions from the MT. See also Paul Haupt, “Isaiah’s Parable of the vineyard,” AJSL 19 (July, 1903), 195. Kissane argues for three stanzas, but fails to note the effect of Stanza IV, True Meaning Revealed (v. 7), which drives the point home. Edward J. Kissane, The Book of Isaiah (Dublin: Browne and Nolan Ltd., 1941), 50.
which they are blind, that is their looming fate. “To arrive at this goal, Isaiah… utilizes a parable, which he drives home bit by bit until the clear application.”

The verb, “let me now sing” (אָשִׁירָה) with the enclitic “now” (נָה) is a cohortive, laying stress on the determination underlying the action. The same expression is found in verse 5, where God deliberates his action stemming from his disappointing produce. There is an alternation of persons in the Song which was a common device used by the prophets and poets; Heschel believes this oscillation is based upon intense sympathy and emotional identification with the divine pathos (homo sympathetikos). The prophet represents God, feels with God, sings of him, expresses his thoughts, feelings, hopes, and disappointment, but the distinction between God and the prophet is clear.

Owner’s Care for his Vineyard (5:1b-2b). A word play is noted with the “vineyard” (כֶּרֶם) and “horn” (קֶרֶן). The “vineyard” was situated in a promising location on a fertile hill. The word “horn” is used here in a geographical sense and would seem to point to a “foot-hill,” “small hill,” as in Gabelhorn or Matterhorn.

To the fertile hill is added the careful preparation of the field. Following soil preparation is the planting of the “choicest vine” (שׂרֵק), building of a watch-tower and the hewing out of a wine-vat. The vineyard was the object of solicitous care, a costly undertaking on Yahweh’s part.

Expectation and actual Results (5:2c). The normal expectation is “good grapes” (ﬠֲנָבִים); this is the way that normal vineyards respond to such careful preparation and planting. High expectations are met with high disappointment. The use of the waw consecutive יָﬠַשׂ indicates a logical contrast to Yahweh’s conduct and can be rendered, “Nevertheless” it only produced “stinking things” (בְּאֻשִׁים).

8) E. Kautzsch, A. E. Crowley, eds., Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar (GKC 2nd ed.; Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1910), 108b. It is used as self-encouragement as the result of inward deliberation.
10) The verb בָּאֲשׁ means “to have a bad smell, stink” BDB, 92.
STANZA II (5.3-4)

*Appeal for Judgment (5:3).* There is a rupture that takes place in verse 3 in the temporal expression, “and now” (וְﬠַתָּה)—also in v. 5). Stanza I deals with the owner and people of God-relationship in the past and Stanza III deals with the future; Stanza II serves as a bridge between the two. The owner elicits an appeal for judgment from the witnesses, which is actually self-condemnation.11

Yahweh raises two rhetorical questions, “What more?” and “Why?” or as Marti translates, “Why did I hope? Was not my hope fully justified or did it not have basis?”12 The self-evident answer to the first question is “absolutely nothing.” God could do no more than he had done. The second question can only be answered by denying Yahweh’s care (v. 7) or by denying the prevalence of violence and unrighteousness. The divine question and self-evident verdict both point to Yahweh’s bitter disappointment in the poor produce of God’s people.

STANZA III (vss. 5-6)

*Judgment of the Case (v. 5).* Since the answers are self-evident, the owner speaks as a judge while the men of Judah are guilty and silent; the conjunction, “and now” (וְﬠַתָּה), points to the divine verdict in the face of human silence.

*Applied Judgment (5:5b-6).* The general word, spoken to the elders and priests (3:14), is made explicit by the Hiphil infinitive absolutes, to announce, “what I am in the act of doing” . . . I will remove (הָסֵר), I will tear down (פָּרֹץ), dependent upon Yahweh’s statement of what he will do.13 Yahweh is already engaged in removing the vineyard’s hedge, tearing down the low stonewall bordering the vineyard. Burning and devastation follow with an assured result (“so that”) the vineyard will become a “trampling place” (מִרְמָס), vulnerable to ravaging by wild beasts or invading armies. By the owner’s command, the vineyard “shall not be pruned” or “hoed” and clouds will not provide necessary rain.

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11) The verb “to do, make, produce” (ﬠָשָׂה) is found four times in Stanza II (twice in Stanza I, once in Stanza III).
13) GKC, 116.
STANZA IV (v. 7)

*True Meaning Revealed (v. 7).* Stanza IV is linked to Stanza II by the identification of the people of God (collective sg.) and to Stanza I by the third person, and serves to interpret the persons, acts, expectations and bitter results.

*Identification of Protagonists.* The owner, who alone has the power to withhold rain, is identified as the Lord Sabaoth (see 1:9). The “vineyard of the Lord” is parallel to “the planting of his delight,” and is identified with “the House of Israel” and “men of Judah.”

*Identification of Expectation and Actual Results (5:7b).* The paronomasia (word-play) used to express the contrast between divine expectation and actual result is striking.

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<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Actual Results</th>
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<td>מִשְׁפָּט</td>
<td>מִשְ֝פָּח</td>
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<tr>
<td>“social justice”</td>
<td>“bloodshed”</td>
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<tr>
<td>צְדָקָה</td>
<td>צְﬠָקָה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“righteousness”</td>
<td>“a cry of distress.”</td>
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Through the Song, the prophet allows his hearers to draw the conclusion that their judgment is fully warranted in the light of Yahweh’s actions and care on their behalf and the bitter result of their produce. He announces divine judgment upon the recipients of privilege and blessing, for God expects responsible social conduct from whomever. Yet, the Eschatological Song of the Vineyard (Isa 27:2-6) says that judgment is not Yahweh’s final word. “The threats remain, but are conditional to men’s acts in response to them. They will come to pass, or be retracted according to what he desires. God, for his part, is always ready to retract them.”

Isaiah’s Eschatological Song of the Vineyard (Isa 27:2-6)

Since this Song does not contain a salvation-history, discussion focuses upon the points of continuity and contrast between Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard and the Eschatological Song of the Vineyard. It progresses beyond prophecy (Isa 5:1-7) to apocalyptic material.

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Points of Continuity. The similarity with the Song of the Vineyard is found in the opening line with the Piel intensive, וְשָׁנַּה, “sing of it,” which parallels the opening lines of Isa 5, “let me now sing.” The vineyard is described as a “pleasant vineyard” (חֶמֶד כֶּרֶם Isaiah 5); both songs contain the metaphor, “briars and thorns.” Yahweh is the owner in both songs. Further, identification of the vineyard is withheld until the songs’ conclusions (27:6; 5:7).

Points of Contrast. There is no juxtaposition of the prophet and Yahweh, and no mention made of the “choicest vine” (כַּרְכָּם). While the Song of Isa 5:1-7 looks to the visitation of wrath through Assyria, Isa 27:2-6 looks forward with hope to the eschatological visitation of Yahweh in blessing for the people of God and judgment against Israel’s enemies.

Yahweh’s attitudes to the vineyard are impressive, noted through several contrasts between the two songs:

27: 3 I, the Lord am its keeper (נֺצְרָה) in contrast to vineyard’s abandonment (5:5-7)

v. 3 Yahweh assumes the task of watering the vineyard in contrast to withholding rain (v. 6)

v. 4 Yahweh “has no wrath” in contrast to Yahweh’s bitter disappointment (vss. 1-7)

v. 5 Yahweh will “step upon” Israel’s enemies in contrast to abandonment to enemies (v. 5)

v. 6 Yahweh promises that Israel will take root in contrast to “no pruning or hoeing” (v. 6)

v. 6 Yahweh will burn “briars and thorns” away in contrast to Yahweh’s abandonment of the vineyard with the threat of “briars and thorns” (v. 6).

Why the change from destruction to promise? A clue is to be found in the two expressions, “in that day” (27:2) and “in days to come” (v. 6), which point to the period after “indignation has run its course” (26:20). Since the vineyard/people of God is now reconciled to Yahweh (שָׁלוֹם—twice in v. 5), it will bear much fruit for the benefit of all humanity. The Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) is now recast as a song of hope. “The song itself is meant to provide a contrast to the Song of the Vineyard in 5:1-7, and indeed, to be an abrogation of it, although the poet dealt with his task in
his own way, and made it more difficult by not resting content with merely reversing his message.\(^{15}\) The Eschatological Song of the Vineyard does not negate the historical message of 5:1–7, but looks far beyond immediate judgment to the “day to come.” For the people of God, this means hope in the promise of a new day when the people will be reconciled to God in peace.

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33–46)

Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine/vineyard to intensify 1) the tragedy of a people (Israel) that rejects their owner and his beloved son sent into the vineyard, and 2) the promise of a new people who will render fruit. The relationship between the divine owner and the vine/vineyard becomes far more personal and vulnerable in the sending of the beloved son into a perilous situation. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants builds upon the language of Isa 5:1–7 and Isa 27:2–6 and is clearest in Matthew’s version of the parable.

Larger and Immediate Context

In Matt 21:28–22:14, Matthew groups a trilogy of parables within the larger context of 19:2–25:46 that portray tragedy and promise. Within this block of material (19:2–25:46), the motifs of rejection and acceptance are crucial, whereby Matthew prepares the way for Jesus’ final rejection and crucifixion. The trilogy expresses a common structure: an offer or agreement is made with an attendant responsibility; the offer is refused or the agreement is broken by rebellion; finally there is judgment for the rebellious and hope for the obedient.

The trilogy of parables also stands together in expressing a similar emphasis: a special interest in salvation-history, a polemic against Israel, and instruction for the new people of God.

Structural Analysis

Similar to Isaiah’s Song, the parable narrates a story that builds upon the LXX of Isaiah 5, leading to an appeal for a verdict, followed by the unveiling of the parable’s true meaning.

Interpretation

Introduction to the parable (v. 23a). By the use of the imperative clause, “Hear another parable,” Matthew links the parable with the first parable (two sons), both of which take place in a vineyard. It is told within the hearing of all the people with a special directive toward the religious hierarchy.16

Introduction of authoritative owner/God (21:33a). The key figure is immediately introduced, “There was a certain householder”—the master of the house, who acts at the beginning and end, sends the servants, the son, and later comes in judgment.18 The identification of the householder with God as the dominant figure is natural.19

Owner’s possession, vineyard/people of God (v. 33b). The starting point for the connection between the people of God and the vineyard is the literary and theological use of the exact language of LXX of Isa 5:1-2 in Matt 21:33.

Owner’s actions on behalf of vineyard (21:33c-34). Three stages encompass the history of God’s activity on behalf of his people.

1) The careful planting and provision for the vineyard (planted a vineyard, hedge of protection, vat and tower from the LXX of Isa 5:1-2),20 highlights the careful and deliberate choice on God’s part to choose a people for himself.

2) The sending of the servants occurred “when the season of fruit drew near” (v. 34). The noun “time/season” (καιρός) implies a certain stress on the harvest as the decisive time of accountability of the people of God for their fruit or lack thereof.

Matthew reduces the number of grouped servants of the Markan parable to two, who may represent the former and latter prophets. The readers knew that Israel was described as the servant of the Lord; “…in particular…

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16) Mark designates the chief priests, scribes, and elders of 11.33.
17) Of the twelve occurrences of “householder” (οἰκοδεσπότης) in the NT, seven are found in Matthew.
outstanding figures in the history, such as leaders, rulers, and prophets [were] in an especial sense his servants.”

Jesus would have understood these servants as God’s messengers, i.e., the prophets. Standing in the same prophetic tradition and succession of the former prophets, the latter prophets and John the Baptist, Jesus is definitively marked out as the son—all have been rejected. This interpretation of salvation-history is supported by Matt 23:37, which follows the rejection/acceptance motif.

3) The sending of the son is the last hopeful action the divine owner can take on behalf of his vineyard and tenants; God expresses his love in a wholly vulnerable way. “A climax of iniquity is demanded by the plot of the story.” In this regard, the emphatic “afterward, finally” is used with a superlative force. Pierre Bonnard interprets the adverb as the “last chance for them to repent.”

Turner suggests that the expression “beloved” (ἀγαπητός) is the equivalent of “only” or “utterly unique” (μονογενής).

The calling of the only son (υἱός) is a calling to tread to the end the way which the prophets took and on which they met their deaths. The ἀγαπητός υἱός is the one martyr at the turning point of times whose death is an exercise of judgment on the whole world and lays the foundation of the new order of things.

This designation of only or utterly unique (beloved) son and the murder outside the vineyard have been understood by numerous scholars as the

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21) C. H. Dodd, The Parables of the Kingdom (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 126-7. Dodd’s suggestion runs counter to his usual tendency to dismiss allegorical elements.

22) Dodd, The Parables, 100.


creation of the early church ex eventu. However, the term could equally reflect the self-understanding of Jesus and the presupposition of early Christian proclamation as an inseparable unity. This is not the only instance in which Jesus the messenger is combined with his message.

When the parable is concluded, it is ironic and tragic that the leaders begin the actual process of fulfilling the prophesied rejection and murder of the Son of God (vv. 45-46).

Why should the Father send his only son into a dangerous confrontation with the tenants? What is the meaning of “they will respect” (21:37)? Derrett, along with Hengel and Dodd, try to maintain the true-to-life character of the parable as following laws of adverse possession, but in doing so, they lose the supreme appeal of the vulnerable and risky love of God. God is reluctant to believe that human beings can really resist the supreme appeal of love, “they will respect my Son” or “will respect me in the person of my Son.”

As with the agonized rhetorical question raised by Yahweh in Isa 5:4, the same forceful question is present in the parable of Matthew 21. God has chosen a people, has sent them the prophets, and now he has sent them his son. What more could he do? Again, the answer is an emphatic, “Nothing more!”

For Matthew’s church, this three-fold activity of God on behalf of his people builds towards the climactic tragedy, expressed through the

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polemical statement, “this is your last chance!” Schlatter comments: “The definite reference to Isa emphasizes the communal force of the parable. The demand, which Jesus places upon the community, does not come as something new; ... to whom much is given, responsibility is required, and what was given was the grace of God.”

Owner’s expectation (v. 34). The owner expects fruit—expressing his instructional concern for the Church (21:34, 41, 43). Matthew emphasizes the responsibility of the people of God in two ways: by the use of “his servants” and by “his fruits.” In this parable, fruit expresses the wider issue of human receptivity of God and his son Jesus, perhaps as “consequence, result” of their inner response.

John the Baptist and Jesus speak of the actions of people as their fruits. The decisive requirement is that they should bring forth good fruits. The acts of people are signs by which to know (ἐπιγνώσεσθε) their inner nature (Matt 7:16-20). As the value of a tree is estimated by its products, so the righteousness displayed in acts is a decisive standard for divine judgment (Matt 3:10; 7:19). The norm, “bearing fruit” is the new standard for the coming judgment. While Isaiah’s Song focuses upon social justice, the parable designates the new claim of God for the fruit of “obedience,” “repentance” and “trust” (Matt 21:28-32).

Actual results (21:35-39). The tragedy portrayed in this parable is the self-seeking, abusive, murderous motives and actions of Israel’s leaders.

Maltreatment of messengers (21:35-36). The thrust is clear, even to Jülicher, “Concerning the history of the prophets, Matthew only desires to express this one thought. God’s servants have altogether been given a disgraceful reception, if they come early or late, if they came too many or too few.”

While no time-frame is given for the various sendings of the servants, the presence of servants accentuates the rejection/acceptance motif in

50 Adolf Schlatter, Der Evangelist Mattäus, (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1948), 630.
51 The plural form is used in an all-inclusive sense (21:34).
54 See 22:10, “both evil and good”—a mixed community which points to the final separation—22:11-14—the appended story of The Man Without a Wedding Garment.
55 Jülicher, Gleichnisereden, 391.
56 contra Derrett, Hengel, Dodd’s suggestions over successive years.
Matthew’s Gospel (19:2-25:46), whereby Matthew prepares the way for Jesus’ final rejection and crucifixion in salvation-history. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas contains a version of the parable but it is not encased within a salvation-history that builds to the climax of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.37

_Murder of Son (21:39)._ The actual results, climaxed in the shameful murder of the son,38 are connected with the greed of the tenants. Jesus threatens the _status quo_ of the religious hierarchy; they must “get rid of the son so that they can be the sole authentic representatives of the Lord, and . . . rule comfortably the old vineyard of Israel.”39 The old tenants mistakenly assume that once the son is out of the way they will have the exclusive rights over the vineyard.

Matthew and Luke appear to have edited the parable to square with the facts of Jesus’ passion, that he was killed _outside_ of the city.40 Whereas the Synoptics agree concerning the motivation for the murder, Matthew and Luke intensify the allegorical referent. John’s gospel clearly states that Jesus was crucified outside the city (John 19:17-20). In the later reflection of Hebrews (Heb 13:12-13), Christians are to go “outside of the camp,” bearing the same disgrace that Jesus bore. In the parable, the motif of “casting out” is then developed with the allegorical reference to the stone which was “rejected” (21:42).41

The sequence of the abuse and rejection of: (1) the former prophets, (2) the latter prophets, and (3) the shameful murder of the only son, along with the subsequent desecration of the corpse—all portray the tragic and bitter history of the people of God. In the final sending of the son, the people of God were given their last chance to repent; it is tragic that Jesus was met with the very opposite of receptivity, trust, obedience or repentance.

_Dialogue: appeal for verdict (v. 40)._ Jesus now summons the listeners to an appeal for judgment. A verdict on the wicked tenants must be given. In Matthew 21, there is a new element not found in Isa 5:1-7; it is the promise of a new people of God who will render fruit.

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38) _Contra_ Derrett, Jeremias, et al who normalize the death of the son.
41) J. Dillersberger, _Matthäus_ (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1952), 73.
Verdict: judgment and promise (vss. 41-42). Judgment on the murderous tenants is severe. Matthew (v. 41) alone contains the expression, “He will evilly kill those evil men.” The condition created by the departure of the owner (v. 33) is resolved by his return (v. 40). In Matthew, the verb “to come” (ἔρχεσθαι) often refers to “the eschatological coming of God in judgment,” which is “traced back to a basic cause, man’s despising of God.” Having rejected God’s claim over them, the people and their rulers have forfeited their position and even life itself.

True meaning revealed (v. 43). God’s response of judgment and promise is expressed in kernel form in v. 41, which is then amplified in v. 43.

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<th>v. 41</th>
<th>v. 43</th>
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<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing the fruits of it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promise</td>
<td>He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.</td>
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The expression “on account of this” (v. 43) looks back to the infinite care and forbearance of God. God not only did everything possible for his people vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7), but had exceeded the limit of human possibility by sending his prophets and now his only Son. Just as the Song of the Vineyard expressed a bitter polemic, so the parable reinforces the same thought at a later stage of salvation-history, “your fate is well-deserved.” However, the word of judgment is not the final word; “because of your rejection of God’s supreme gift . . . God will turn to a new people.”

What is this “nation” or “people,” which are contrasted with the second plural, “you”? Matthew uses the noun, “nation/people” fifteen times, and the predominant form is the plural, ἔθνη, which in the majority of cases means “Gentiles.” Although many scholars interpret verse 43 as referring to a radical break from Jew to Gentile, the absence of the normal tech-

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45) See also Isa 27:2-6.
cal plural ἔθνη, points to a new people to whom the Kingdom of God is given. A clue can be found in 1 Pet 2:9, which contains the same quotation from Ps 118:22-23 and Isa 8:14 (appearing in Matt 21:42), which is immediately followed by the contrasting, “you”. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (ἔθνος ἅγιον).” Dillon remarks:

The central notion in the epistle text is the very idea that Matt seems to draw from our parable; in the very action of rejection by the unbelievers, God has laid the cornerstone of his house, the (new) chosen race, the royal priesthood, the ἔθνος ἅγιον, the people of his new covenant. One suspects that we are in the presence of an ecclesiological theme, perhaps widespread in the instruction of the early communities.46

Matthew draws out the application to the Parable of the Wicked Tenants by contrasting another people from the originally chosen people of God.47

The Kingdom of God here means “God’s present kingly rule as a gift.” The transfer of this kingdom from one people to another people makes no sense if merely regarded in political or racial terms. This new people of God is comprised of both Jew and Gentile, a universal Church formed of all nations (ἔθνη—pl. in Matt 28:19). “The passion and resurrection accounts serve the aetiological purpose of explaining the origin and continuing basis of the church’s existence as the people of God of the new covenant, as a missionary, baptizing and teaching community.”48

47) The issue of the “people” (ἔθνος) is sharpened in view of the widespread OT understanding in the OT.

Hebrew LXX
שניר = λαός κυρίου
קְגוֹי = τὰ ἔθνη

Thus, there is a sharp sting to the words in Isa 1:4 as the prophet bears down on an idolatrous people.

כָּבֵד שֵׁם עָבְד = שֵׁם עָבְד
וי שֵׁם עָבְד, שֵׁם עָבְד שֵׁם
וֹמֵה שֵׁם עָבְד שֵׁם
Shēm abd, Shēm abd Shēm
Woe to a sinning nation, a people heavy of crime

Both ἔθνος and λαός are here used of Israel, which normally means a racial distinction.

The pronoun “you” designates the religious hierarchy who stand in representative capacity for Israel. Verse 45 states that the chief priests and Pharisees perceived he was speaking about them. Isaiah 3:14 specifically indicts the ones “who have devoured the vineyard,” as the rulers, standing in representative capacity for Israel. The Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) deals with the whole of the people of God. It is not a case of either/or in Isa 5:1-7 or Matthew 21. If the parable is looked at as a self-contained unit, by the laws of logic, the parable would envision a change of leadership over the same religious community. If this be the case, then the Kingdom would be given over to other “tenants” and not to a “people.” The religious leaders are singled out since they stand in representative capacity for the unbelieving Jews however they sit on Moses’ chair (23:2), fill up the measure of their ancestors’ guilt (23:32); their motives and actions are singular and corporate in the death of the Son.

Judgment and promise (vss. 41-42). God’s response of judgment and promise is also expressed in the stone-metaphor (Ps 118:22-25), which will occasion marvel or destruction (crushing in Dan 2:23-24, 44-45). The warning of “falling” is addressed not merely to the Jewish leaders who are plotting the death of Jesus, but to anyone who takes offense at the person and claim of Jesus. The expression, “He who falls on this stone” suggests the guilt that is incurred through the rejection of Christ; the metaphor is consistent with the parable’s message.

Implications

Just as the Song of the Vineyard placed responsibility for the well-deserved judgment upon Israel, so the thrust of this parable expresses the same message, now with greater vehemence. Not only did God establish the vineyard, but he put up with the rejection, abuse and murder of his prophets. Both Isaiah and Jesus underscore that God could do nothing more than he had already done for his people; no blame can be attached to God. The anguished rhetorical questions naturally lead to similar answers of self-indictment. In the parable, the listener/reader feels the same question, “What more could God do for his people than to send his

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(beloved) son into a perilous situation?” The same divine “waiting”\(^50\) is more than apparent in the unbelievable long-suffering of the owner who still “waits” after successive groups of servants are rejected, abused, and killed.\(^51\)

God expresses his love in a wholly vulnerable manner, expressed in song and parable. Even in the context of murderous behavior, there is the divine promise of a new people who will render fruit to the divine owner (Matt 21:41, 43). Thus, the “stock image” of the vine/vineyard expresses the crisis event of Jesus’ coming. Where there is unbelief and rejection of the Beloved Son, there is tragedy and destruction. Where there is receptivity, there is joy, promise, fruitfulness and fulfillment. The note of hope still remains sure.

Isaiah’s two Songs (5:1-7; 27:2-6) and Jesus’ parable are united in the truth that hope is still to be found in the midst of tragedy and destruction. God’s decisions are amazing, for he goes to the utmost lengths to form a people for himself, even in the face of unresponsiveness, rejection, and rebellion. Correspondingly, Jesus signals a turning point in God’s activity with the human family as he turns to a new and inclusive people, composed of both Jew and Gentile, with the resolve that this new people must bear fruit. His standards have not changed and his offer of hope remains constant, even in contexts of judgment and destruction.

\(^{50\text{}}} \text{ἔμεινα}-\text{LXX of Isa 5:2, 4, 7.}

\(^{51\text{}}} \text{Scholars such as Filson and Gaechter have failed to see the real parallelism between these two passages in their assertion of only a minimal allusion. Floyd Filson, } \text{A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew} \text{ (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 228, Gaechter says “after Isa 5.2 is used it is totally abandoned.” Paul Gaechter, } \text{Das Matthäusevangelium} \text{ (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1957), 685.}