

God as friendly patron: Reflections on Isaiah 5:1-7

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Abstract

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This article focuses on the significance of the interrelationship between the fields of archaeology and history, rather than the rigorous application of literary criticism or historical analysis. By drawing inferences from both text and context an analysis is provided for a more informed reading of Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard".

1. Introduction

Realising only too well the importance of viticulture for the small plot farmers of the central highlands of ancient Israel, Isaiah employed the metaphor of the vineyard in one of the most impressive speeches ever made. The song of the vineyard has been described as the poetical masterpiece of Old Testament literature (Kaiser, 1981:96), and one could add: of theological aptitude. Every reader is challenged to participate in the song that narrates the simple story of a farmer's frustrated expectations, only to be drawn into deep self-reflection of his own conduct in life.

In this article the intention is to focus on the interface between archaeological data and the historical setting of the text, not on the literary critical or traditional historical issues involved. Making inferences by means of creative imagination and on account of some related information does serve some purpose in interpreting the text, the understanding of which depends, however, upon a far more comprehensive analysis (Hasel, 1991:30). A few remarks seem necessary regarding the literary aspects as well as the theological impact of the text.

2. Literary aspects

The text integrity of Isaiah 5:1-7 is undisputed. Interpreting the *hapax legomenon* *batâ* in verse 6 as an Akkadian loanword conveying the meaning of ruin (cf. 2:16 for an Egyptian loanword *sktj*) the Masoretic text can be retained intact. From a

literary point of view the text is a paragon of linguistic and stylistic ingenuity in all respects. Virtually all the outstanding features of Hebrew poetry are employed: wordplay, assonance, alliteration, rhetoric and chiasmic structure, alternation of accelerating or retarding tension, different metric accents, variance in tone and mood, etc. (Wildberger, 1980:166, Schoors, 1972:50). The author implements these effects to create a spirit of expectation and – to some degree – frustration among his audience (Williams, 1985:465). No wonder that Kaiser (1981:96) regards it as the poetic masterpiece of Old Testament literature.

The text is a well-defined literary unit clearly demarcated from its co-texts (Prinsloo, 1980:184; Willis, 1977:337). It reveals a brilliant structure that is concomitant with its progressive unfolding of message. While the text itself claims it to be a song about a vineyard, it is clearly meant to function as a parable. Niehr (1986:99) has identified about twelve different interpretations regarding its literary genre, ranging from a fable (Schottroff, 1970:90) to a protest song (Loretz, 1975:573). They all seem to fall into two main categories, namely those interpreting Isaiah 5:1-7 as a song and those interpreting it as a parable. The first group base their arguments more on the occurrence of stylistic devices and literary characteristics; the second concentrate more on content and specific situations. Both viewpoints reflect their respective hermeneutical preferences; that is to say, approaching Isaiah 5:1-7 either synchronically or diachronically. Scholars reflecting the first position such as Williams (1985:460) and Wildberger (1980:168) characterise it as an ancient love poem or wedding song on account of the metaphor of the vineyard frequently being associated with the wedding ceremony (Song of Sol. 1:6; 8:12). Correspondingly, the metaphor is employed to depict the relationship between Yahweh and his people (Amos 3:2; Isa. 27:2; Jer. 2:21; Ps. 80:9). Others who relate its *Sitz im Leben* to the sphere of jurisprudence characterise it as a self-condemnation (Graffy, 1979:400) or a juridical parable (Yee, 1981:30; Sheppard, 1982:45; Evans, 1984:82) that is embedded in a specific prophetic discourse or lawsuit. Both are, however, interested in the specific audience to whom this song was directed and in the communication skills which were employed to address the audience effectively.

Situation and audience call for the consideration of historical nature: firstly, some observations on account of recent archaeological excavations in the adjacent territory to the west of Jerusalem, and secondly, a few remarks emanating from the current focus on the patron-client relationship of Mediterranean societies.

3. Historical aspects

Fourteen years ago Edelstein and Gibson published a popular article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, called “Ancient Jerusalem’s food-basket”. This article comprises an account of their systematic survey of the archaeological remains of the inconspicuous settlements in the mountains west of Jerusalem (Edelstein &

Gibson, 1982:46). Their intention was to determine the characteristics of the area's agriculture; hence the appropriate title. It also coincided with renewed interest for the modes of existence of ordinary farmers and pastoralists based on the symbiotic relationship between agriculture and animal husbandry (Hopkins, 1985:176; Finkelstein, 1988:346; cf. LaBianca & Hopkins, 1988).

Shortly before archaeologists such as Zvi Ron (1966), Joseph Callaway (1983), Lawrence Stager (1985) etc., had already established that the construction of terraces was to be considered as the major technological innovation by the settlers of the highlands of Canaan since the beginning of the period generally known as the Iron Age (1200 BC to 586 BC). Along with new water conservation techniques, e.g. the construction of rock-cut cisterns, the gradual implementation of iron tools and the so-called dry farming method, it resulted in the dramatic increase of 600% in the population, as is evident from the large number of new villages (5 acres or less) that were established in this area at that time (Olivier, 1988:8). The larger population in such a relatively isolated region naturally had, in its turn, economic, political, social and most probably also religious implications, the consequence of which one is only too aware reading Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard".

Edelstein and Gibson (1982) found the remains of two wine farms in the Rephaim valley about 10 kilometers west of Jerusalem i.e. near the present suburb of Giloh. The first, Khirbet er-Ras was already in production during Isaiah's time. This farm was situated on the southern slopes of the Malha Hill and covered an area of 4,5 acres. It was enclosed by a packed stone wall about a metre wide. On its western side a paved path connected it with the adjacent farm. The foundations of a homestead of the typical Israelite four-room type (ca 10 x 13 m), various utensils, handmills, pottery fragments, an incomplete building, a wine-manufacturing installation and a nearby rock-cut cave which obviously served as a wine cellar were among the most important discoveries they made. The most striking feature of the farm was, however, its terraces. These were built of unhewn stone. They appear to have been partly restored in Hellenistic times but were otherwise used throughout the centuries until 1948; thus altogether twenty-six centuries, which indeed testify to the ingenuity of their original construction. Moreover, the discoveries at Khirbet er-Ras show that the purpose of terraces was mainly for the growing of vines and for the production of quality wine.

Investigations at the second farm, Ein Yalu, on the opposite side of the Refaim valley and of a much later origin, show that the terraces were 10-20 m wide and 100-250 m long, depending on the contours of the hill. The farmer also showed remarkable engineering skill in developing an intricate water system for irrigating his vineyard in the dry warm summers. This water system consisted of a well at the source, a cistern, a reservoir with a capacity of 3 500 cubic feet and a network

of water conduits. Similar agricultural structures have also been excavated at Sataf and at Manahat (Gibson *et al.*, 1991:29).

The excavations have revealed that the settlements were open villages and farms, and part of a broader network of settlements during the long history of human occupation. These farms were also terraced farms with man-made irrigation systems indicating that they were preplanned under supervision of some authority which represented the social organisation of the time (Edelstein & Milevski, 1994:23). This brings us to the second theme, namely the social system providing for the kind of relationship between the owner of the vineyard and the singer who performs the song. The Hebrew word used here for the owner of the vineyard, *yadid*, conveys the meaning of friend (TDOT V:446). This implies that the owner is the object of the singer's friendship and loyalty. It is, however, also evident that *yadid*, referring to Yahweh as subject, embodies the meaning of protector (TDOT V:447); hence that it describes a relationship in terms of the typical Mediterranean patron-client social system. Contrary to Gottwald (1992:82) Lemche claims it to be more significant than family or clan relationships (Lemche, 1994:119). Lemche argues that tribes disappeared, because they were superseded not by the state but by the patronage system. The king is simply reckoned to be the first and most important patron. The patron is the protector and benefactor of his clients in need. He would invest on their behalf far more than is expected as long as he is assured of their allegiance and trust. His favour is associated closely with honour and loyalty (Thompson, 1992:12). It would seem that the relationship between the owner of the vineyard and the singer resembles that of a patron and his loyal client. Only the singer remained loyal to the patron while all others became dissident.

The question is whether farmers of the hilltop villages should be regarded as clients of specific patrons? To answer the question it is necessary to take into account some aspects of the social and economic organisation of Mediterranean villages, a most significant feature of which would be joint responsibility. To minimise food production risks agriculture practices were diversified maximally and symbiotic relations were maintained with the pastoralists (Marfoe, 1979:8). Thus agrarian production of the small plots of arable land depended heavily on joint labour incentives by the local farmers sharing implements and tools, of storing surplus against drought and raids but also in joint efforts in terms of planning diverse labour activities in accordance with the geophysical, topographical, meteorologic characteristics and traditional practices (e.g. fallow) of their respective villages. Such intensive activities need, however, to be planned, coordinated and managed by an influential, skilful and wealthy community leader (Heyns, 1989:85). In a relatively isolated territory where bureaucratic interference was limited to the rather ineffective and occasional collecting of taxes such a person was entrusted with the care and well-being of

the whole community. The small plot farmers were frequently in need of advice, subsistence means and protection. By pledging their allegiance to a specific patron whose honour as the most important societal value is thereby served, the farmer could ensure some form of security and stability for himself and his family. It is highly likely that most of the farmers in a given territory were associated with a patron in one form or another. The patron seems to have served in most instances as the facilitator of rewarding reciprocal relationships between urban dwellers and the farmers of the surrounding villages. The focal point of interaction remained the market at the city gate where all activities found their goal (cf. Lemche, 1985:195).

Such is the backdrop against which Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard" is to be pictured. We may safely assume that the subject of viticulture (perhaps the song itself) was indeed a very familiar topic among his audience gathered that morning at Jerusalem's market, the greatest part of which would have consisted of the type of farmer described above, busy selling their products and, most likely, their wine. It was customary in the Middle East that professional singers were actively engaged at the market place where they entertained, brought news, made fun of people and sang about the great heroes of the past and about the benevolent patrons of the present. A well-known person in relatively small Jerusalem (Broshi & Finkelstein, 1992:51), Isaiah's behaviour as such a troubadour would certainly have created the right atmosphere of expectation among his inquisitive and jesting audience, who apparently knew the topic.

With dumbfounding ease he changed the role of singer (1-2) to that of public prosecutor (3-4) and subsequently judge (5-6) to get his message across. The structure of this song is also very interesting because it falls exactly in line with the different roles of the prophet. So let us pay some attention to the contents of this song, which eventually will become a parable.

4. Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard"

4.1 Introduction (v. 1a)

The prophet makes it clear that he is to sing his patron's song about his vineyard on behalf of his patron. This song concerns an ordinary vineyard described by the usual term *kerem* which also means orchard, or as was common at the time, a vineyard with a fig tree here and there, especially on the lower terraces in which the fronds of the vines could climb up, because vineyards trained onto trellises were unknown in those days (Borowski, 1987:104).

4.2 The prophet as a singer, about the owner and his vineyard (v. 1b-2)

The singer tells his audience of the favourable situation of the vineyard on a fertile ridge. It is not by mere chance that his patron had such a good piece of land. He had to work hard to develop it as such. First there was the chopping out of the shrubs, then the breaking up of the limestone rocks, and their subsequent removal in order to be used for packing the retaining walls which supported the hillside terraces, presumably like those at Khirbet er-Ras. Terraces retain soil moisture, prevent erosion of valuable top soil and allow the development of a good root system for the vines. Once the terrace walls were completed, humus-rich soil had to be carried there from the bottom of the valley (Hopkins, 1985:73). Only when the terraces were enriched with good soil could they be tilled and planted with vines. Obviously this farmer did not cut corners on vine quality. The best noble cultivars, giving heavy deep red wines were planted. As if this was not sufficient the farmer also built a tower for the vineyard attendant to keep out thieves and animals. At harvest time the farmer and his family would stay here overnight to save the time normally taken to walk the three or four kilometers to and from the village, and to enjoy the festivities (Isa. 9: 3) of late summer. He also hewed out a winepress in it where the whole wine-making operation took place. The excavations have shown that grapes were usually pressed in a hollow in the rock from where a small furrow led to a tank in which the juice was collected. Subsequently it was stored in large jars (between 20 and 40 litres) for fermentation in the underground cellars. The average capacity of such a cellar was approximately 6 000 litres.

If Isaiah's patron had already gone to all this effort, then he would still have to wait five or more years before the first grapes were ready for harvesting. What an upsetting disappointment then when the vines did not produce the expected crop! Instead of choice grapes they produced something similar to wild grapes. The Hebrew word alludes to a small sour berry of no value to anyone, giving off an unpleasant smell and rotting as soon as it is ripe; the word may also denote black rot (Borowski, 1987:160).

The prophet's song thus centres in the futile effort of his patron in terms of his labour, capital and time invested in his model vineyard. His expectations, however reasonable they might have been, turned into a terrible disillusionment. His vineyard and its fruits in no ways reflected the care and attention invested therein. The logical and obvious did not come to pass – the vineyard was a total failure.

4.3 The prophet as public prosecutor in connection with the vineyard (v. 3-4)

The singer now turns to his attentive audience. With the careful use of rhetoric he engages them into active participation, because he asks them questions to which they must respond. It was common legal procedure in Ancient Israel that the ordinary people (*vox populi*) gathered at the public meeting place at the city gate (where also the market was), were expected to voice their opinion in court cases in order to facilitate the decision of the judge(s). Like Nathan (2 Sam. 12) and the woman of Tekoah (2 Sam. 14) caused David to unwittingly pass judgement on himself so does the prophet set a trap for his listeners, thereby changing in a masterly way his role as singer for that of public prosecutor.

The inquisitive audience must have realised something more serious was developing in the song. Why did he ask of them for a court judgement and not for advice as farmers normally do? The two rhetorical questions in the song are simply formulated and even more simple to answer (cf. Judg. 11:25; Isa. 39:8). The answer to the first question had to be “nothing” and to the second “because it was bad”. Thus the prophet in his role as prosecutor rightfully determines that the owner of the vineyard fulfilled his duty in every way and cherished a reasonable expectation for his vineyard. The cause of his disappointment lay very definitely with the vineyard itself, thus the people’s tribunal consisting mainly of wine-farmers who ought to know!

4.4 The prophet as judge over the vineyard (v. 5-6)

Just like the second strophe, the third also begins with the typical “and now” which actually spells out the consequences of the preceding section. The prophet, after he has actively engaged his audience, moves on to take on the role of judge, thus passing judgement on the vineyard. His judgement comprises two aspects:

- (a) that which will be done to the vineyard and the results thereof,
- (b) that which will not be done to the vineyard and the results thereof.

In the first place (a) the thorn hedge will be removed by setting it alight. It was practice to stick thorn branches in between the stones of the terrace walls to keep animals out of the vineyards. Moreover, the surrounding wall will be broken so that all kinds of (wild) animals can trample the vineyard (Hos. 2:8). It is further possible that the breaking down of the terrace walls is also envisaged, thereby allowing the priceless topsoil to wash out. Thus the fruitful hill would become bare and lifeless – a symbol of chaos and desertion following the ordeal of divine retribution (cf. Zeph. 2:13f). The verbal forms in v. 5 betray something of the resolve with which this judgement is passed.

In the second place (b) the judgement entails that the necessary pruning and cleaning of the vineyard would be stopped. No further maintenance would be done. The weeds, thorns and thistles would be allowed to grow unhindered and uncontrolled along with the wild vine shoots (cf. Isa. 7:23-25, Prov. 24:30, 31). The once beautiful vineyard would become a ruin, a place of wild chaos, deserted of people and deprived of a hopeful future. Such is its judgement and curse.

Finally, the song becomes an inevitable threat of doom and death when the judge forbids the clouds to release their rain on the vineyards (cf. Isa. 5:10). Only then the audience would have realised who the real Judge is. Who else can cause or prevent rain but Israel's God Yahweh? Was this not clearly demonstrated by Elijah on mount Carmel? Now the audience knows who the real Owner is and sees Isaiah for what he is: the true prophet of God, acting on behalf of his Patron!

4.5 The unravelling (v. 7)

With powerful rhetoric and staggering literary ability Isaiah now proceeds to interpret the song which in the meantime has unobtrusively become a parable. His patron and owner of the vineyard is none other than Yahweh Himself, the vineyard is Israel, the fruits are injustice.

Acutely aware of the infinite distance between God and man (Isa. 6:5), i.e. the majesty and holiness of the Lord of Hosts in contrast with the unworthiness of Israel (Isa. 2: 11-17), Isaiah tells in this song/parable of the vineyard the whole story of God's salvation history in connection with his elected people. In essence it contains the complete theology of the Bible making lengthy dogmatic explanations unnecessary. Thus it states that the Owner created his vineyard on his own initiative. It continues to describe God's careful planning, investment, care and protection of the vineyard that was meant to be more than a mere pleasure garden among the lifeless and denuded hills. The vineyard had to yield fruit. One cannot find a better illustration than this of God's love, patience, mercy and care so lavishly bestowed upon Israel. Nowhere else on the other hand, is Israel's failure as God's chosen people, in spite of all His blessings and saving acts, better described than here, namely as a parody of God's grace.

The well known metaphor describing Israel as a vineyard of God (cf. Ps. 80:9-17; Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Matt. 21:33) is brilliantly employed by Isaiah to expose Israel's unwillingness to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord, i.e. to yield fruit in terms of righteousness and justice. Not to maintain justice is equivalent to the yielding of rotten fruit. The pericope following very aptly describes the very contradiction of a fruitful and righteous life, i.e. selfishness and greed, wicked desires for pleasure and pride, manipulation of the truth, law and justice, fostering of lies and slander, etc.

What righteousness means is to bear fruit in terms of loyalty and care to everyone. It is like the benevolent patron who gives food to a hungry orphan, water to a weary stranger, clothing to the poor, comfort to the destitute.

5. Theological aspects

Isaiah's song or parable presents a unique picture of God, namely that of a friendly Patron. The infinitely removed and holy God acts just like the patron of the farmers by protecting their interests, by granting them sufficient means when in need, by organising and managing their affairs and activities. The patron client-metaphor is an effective description of the relationship between God and his chosen people. This relationship is not based on family or lineage interests but on the patron's character and honour. It does not expect anything else than allegiance and loyalty from those taken care of and protected. The metaphor reveals the attitude and motivating force of God's concern with those in need. He is mercifully active on their behalf. He works hard in their interest, invests enormously in their prospects and takes care of their problems. In fact, He provides that which He expects.

The song further emphasises God's role as disillusioned Patron who is compelled to punish or to withhold his favour in order to maintain his honour. The intention of the song is to issue a warning to the clients. On the one hand it reflects the frustrated expectation of the Patron, but also his grief over injustice and bloodshed. His compassion with the needy and destitute overrules his involvement with his clients. He is the Patron who remains true to himself and to the universal norms of justice and disregards his own delights.

The song reveals the incomprehensible response of the clients. They misuse the Patron's favour, do not keep their commitments, act disloyally and evilly. Their conduct also shows the self-destructive nature of sin. By simply leaving them to act as they wish they would bring disaster upon themselves. The song contains a serious warning to those clients who do not adhere to the expected norms of the benevolent and just Patron.

The fact that righteousness was lacking amongst the Israelites forced Isaiah to sing his famous song about God's cherished vineyard that would be destroyed. It is interesting to note that Jesus used this same parable (Mark 12 and Matt. 21) to show that God's vineyard was, in fact, the whole world, and that He is the true vine (John 15:1) without whom no one can bear any fruit. And, like Isaiah, Jesus acted on behalf of his Patron.

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