

(FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION ONLY)

EXEGETICAL NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

CHAPS. 15, 16. THE BOOK OF GLORY

1. *Chap. 15:1-16. The Vine and the Branches*

There is some difference of opinion over the structure of these verses. On balance we think that vv. 1-8 treat the extended metaphor (μα\sha\l) of the vine and the branches with vv. 9-16 explaining the metaphor.

The most likely background is the OT imagery of the vineyard as a symbol of Israel (rather than the oriental myth of the tree of life from Gnostic and Mandaean sources, as Bauer and Bultmann claim). Of particular importance is Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Is. 5:1-7). Other OT material includes Is. 27:2-6, where the fruitfulness of the vine is presented, and Je. 5:10; 12:10-11, which speaks of the judgment of desolation on Israel's vineyards. Other references include Ps. 80:9-16; Ezk. 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Ho. 10:1-2. On most occasions when historic Israel is in view, it is the vine's failure to produce good fruit that is emphasized, together with the threat of God's judgment on the nation.

In John the vine is identified with Jesus and his people. The close personal relationship between Jesus as the vine and the branches that abide in him goes beyond anything stated in the OT. Jesus' own teaching which John records builds upon but goes beyond the sum total of OT teaching.

(a) Chap. 15:1-8. The extended figure of the vine and the branches

15:1

Without any connection with the preceding or linking formula Jesus insists that he is the true vine.

ΔEgwv eijmi hJ a[mpelo" hJ ajlhqinhv. This is the last of the 'I am' sayings, and it differs from the preceding ones by adding the words, 'and my Father is the gardener'. Jesus' claim is that he is the 'true vine'. The use of the definite article with the noun in the predicate position after the verb 'to be' suggests, that Jesus *alone* is the vine (contrast John 1:1), while the adjective ajlhqinhv indicates that in contrast to Israel he is the one who brings forth good fruit. In principle, Jesus has already superseded the temple, the Jewish feasts, Moses and a variety of holy places. Here he supersedes Israel as the people of God. The description of himself as the true vine and the association of his Father as the planter and keeper of the vineyard indicate that Jesus is thinking in salvation-historical categories. As in chap. 10 he is the true Shepherd of God's flock (in contrast to false shepherds, Ezk. 34), so here he is God's planting. Note the important passage Ps. 80:7-8, 14-17 in which the themes of the vine and Son of Man are brought together. As the vine Jesus incorporates his people into himself. The themes of mutual indwelling and fruitfulness are prominent.

oJ pathvr mou oJ gewrgov" ejstin. As in Ps. 80, God plants and cultivates the vine. gewrgov" is a derivative of gewrgev "to cultivate land", and therefore refers to one who engages in agriculture or gardening — 'farmer, gardener'. In this context the word is often rendered as 'vinedresser'.

15:2

Two actions of the gardener are now described:

(1) pa'n klh'ma ejn ejmoi; mh; fevron karpovn ai[rei aujtoiv. First, he cuts off every branch in Jesus that bears no fruit. (Within Palestine this process occurs in February-March, so that in the vineyards it appears that only the stalks are left.) The branch that does not bear fruit is not simply a living, unproductive branch, but a dead one. This does not refer to Jews who were once in God's vine, Israel, and who have now been cut off, since it is hard to argue that Jews who did not trust in Jesus were once 'in him'. Nor is it likely that our Lord is referring to apostate Christians (in John true disciples are preserved to the end: 6:37-40; 10:28). To settle this question appears to push the imagery too far. 'The transparent purpose of the verse is to insist that there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit. Fruitfulness is a mark of true Christianity' (Carson). These branches have never borne fruit, so they are cut off. In the OT compare Je. 5:10.

(2) pa'n to; karpov; fevron kaqaiivrei aujto; i{na karpov; pleivona fevrh/. Secondly, the gardener prunes or trims every branch that does bear fruit. No fruit-bearing branch is exempt. (In Palestine this second stage of pruning occurs in August. The vine has put forth leaves. The vinedresser then pinches off the little shoots so that the main fruit-bearing branches get all the nourishment.) The purpose is that each branch will be even more fruitful.

Note the play on the two words ai[rei ('cuts off') and kaqaiivrei ('trims'), and the further play of the latter on kaqaroiv ('clean', v. 3). The verb kaqaiivrw and its cognate kaqarov" are appropriate in both an agricultural and a moral or religious context.

Ridderbos points out that the special care that the Father bestows in relation to the vine indicates that he is intimately involved in the mission of the Son. He is not simply engaged in a series of secondary actions.

15:3

The parable now turns to direct address. It is Jesus' word that has started these branches clean and fruitful. The cleansing power of the word of Jesus has already been effective. Jesus' teaching (lovgo") in its entirety (what he says and what he does) has already taken hold in the lives of these disciples. As such they are in a position to bear fruit.

15:4

Everything depends on remaining in him in order to bear much fruit.

meivnate ejn ejmoiv, kajgw; ejn uJmi'n. Carson observes that this sentence can be taken in three possible ways:

(1) *Conditional*: ‘If you remain in me, I will remain in you’ (NIV). The believer’s perseverance in remaining in Jesus is the occasional cause, not the ultimate cause, of Jesus’ remaining in the believer (cf. 8:31-32).

(2) *Comparison*: ‘Remain in me, as I remain in you’. The thought is coherent, although the ‘and’ is unusual. ‘I in you’ cannot be taken as an absolute promise regardless of the perseverance or fickleness of the apparent believer.

(3) *Mutual imperative*: ‘Let us both remain in each other’. The syntax of this is strange. Normally we would expect a hortatory subjunctive.

If the first reading, the conditional, has a slight edge, then the general sense is clear. No branch has life in itself. It is dependent for life and fruitfulness on the vine. The living branch is thus truly in the vine, while the life of the vine is truly in the branch.

ou{tw" oujde; uJmei" eja;n mh; ejn ejmoi; mevnhte. Jesus steps back from the vine imagery and addresses his readers directly. The clause refers to an organic, internal growth, driven by the pulsating life of the vine, and only this kind of growth produces fruit (Carson).

It has been suggested that the language of abiding is associated with new covenant theology. If this is so, then the ideas are not far from texts in the OT which look forward to the new covenant which promises a renewed heart or a right mind or the presence of the Spirit in the new covenant people, so that they will obey what God says (Je. 31; Ezk. 36).

15:5

The same thought returns here in the form of a promise, together with an ‘I am’ saying and a further admonition, ‘apart from me you can do nothing’. Note that the alternatives are present starkly: either one remains in the vine and is fruit-bearing, or is thrown away and burned.

fevrei karpou;n poluvn. What is meant by ‘fruit’? Some have suggested, love, or the fruit of the Spirit, or converts. Jesus’ expression is comprehensive and is not to be limited to any one of these. ‘Much fruit’ suggests everything that flows from the divine life of Jesus, and in the light of prayer in Jesus’ name for the Father’s glory (vv. 7, 8, 16) embraces all that comes in answer to prayer and points to all that arises from the believer’s life and witness. (Other instances of karpov" in John suggest all that is achieved through Jesus’ death [12:24], the harvest of missionary labours [4:35-38], and love for others [15:12-13]).

15:6

Jesus’ *ma\sha\l* deals with the fate of the branches that were cut off. The ending of such a parable on the theme of judgment is paralleled in the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt. 13:30).

The imagery of destruction is similar to that of Ezk. 15:1-8 where the prophet warned that if a vine (i.e. Israel) failed to produce fruit its wood was good for nothing but to be burned. Jesus assumes this, and warns his contemporaries (from Israel) of their imminent danger, and reinforces the point that he is the true vine, not Israel.

The negative *eja;n mhv ti" mevnh/*, ‘if anyone does not remain’, is the counterpart of v. 5, *oJ mevnwn ejn ejmoiv*, ‘whoever remains’.

ejblhvqh e[xw wJ" to; klh'ma kai; ejxhnavqh. 'He is cast forth as a branch and withers'. We expect to be told what happens to the branch. 'He' becomes the subject, in other words, the reality pushes through the metaphor.

There has been considerable discussion about the change of tenses mevnh/ (present) ejblhvqh . . . ejxhnavqh (aorists). The aorists have been taken as signifying immediacy (as soon as a person is no longer united to Jesus, at that moment he is cast out and withers), or is gnomic (a general usage, indicating what happens under the given conditions) or proleptic (treating the past as though it takes place in the future). The first is doubtful, while the latter two observations are correct but do not explain why the aorists have been chosen. However, following aspectual theory the essential idea of the aorist is that it focusses on completeness. So the branch that does not abide in the vine is thrown away and withers—the judgment is complete or decisive.

sunavgousin . . . bavllousin. The third person plurals are indefinite, and probably function in line with Semitic usage as equivalents to passives = 'is gathered and cast out. to; pu'r refers to the well-known fire of eschatological judgment. As noted above, many of the OT vineyard and vine passages which involve a rejection of Israel come to an end on a note of divine judgment.

15:7

In these verses the positive side of the vine imagery is developed. Jesus is speaking to his own, that is, to those who remain in him. The note of remaining in him, the vine, is not narrowly mystical. Nor on the other hand does 'abiding' simply collapse into obedience.

eja;n meivnhte ejn ejmoi; kai; ta; rJhvmatav mou ejn uJmi'n meivnh/. Indwelling involves a life lived in harmony with Jesus' revelation. The two clauses are getting at the same truth: Jesus and his revelation are virtually interchangeable (Brown). ta; rJhvmatav mou are his utterances which together constitute his 'word' through which they are made clean (v. 3). These words are to impact on the disciple's mind and heart.

o} eja;n qevlhte aijthvsasqe, kai; genhvsetai uJmi'n. There is a close relationship between obedience to Christ and the unseen area of true prayer. All of this is equivalent to remaining in the vine. The truly obedient believer is effective in prayer, for what he or she asks conforms to the will of God. Requests will be in harmony with what Jesus wants, so will be granted by the Father. The final words, 'and it shall be done for you', probably masks a divine passive: God will do it.

15:8

This verse forms a kind of conclusion, by returning to the beginning and summarizing the purpose of all that has preceded. 'Since the fruit of believers is a consequence of the Son's redemptive work, the result of the vine's pulsating life (15:4), and the Son's response to the prayers of his followers (14:13), it follows that their fruitfulness brings glory to the Father through the Son' (Carson).

ejn touvtw/ is explained by the i{na karpou;n polu;n fevrhte kai; gevnsqe ejmoi; maqhtaiv. 'That you bear much fruit and so be [not 'become'] my disciples'.

(b) Chap. 15:9-16. Explaining the imagery

Verses 9-16 are closely linked with vv. 1-8 and need to be understood completely within this context. The vine is not mentioned again apart from an allusion in v. 16. The verses explain and take up further some of the themes introduced by vv. 1-8.

15:9

This point of the explanation of the vine imagery in vv. 9-16 is immediately obvious where the theme 'remain in me' becomes 'remain in my love'.

kaqw;" hjgavphsevn me oJ pathvr. The kaqvw" is not only comparative but also causative, that is, it is the foundation of what follows (BDF § 453[2]). hjgavphsen ('he has loved'), an aorist, draws attention to the completeness or perfection of the Father's love. The Father's love for Jesus, then, is the basis of his love for the disciples. The corresponding hjgavphsa ('I have loved'), also an aorist, is presented as a completed thing, probably because the cross is in view: it is imminent.

meivnate ejn th'/ ajgavph/ th'/ ejmh'/. The aorist imperative of the verb looks at the 'remaining' as a complete act, as a global thing. Continued enjoyment of God's undeserved love turns, in part, on our response to it.

15:10

What it means to remain in Jesus' love is expressed in our obedience, just as the Son is obedient to the Father (8:29). Love is associated here with the commandments: the two are not incompatible or mutually exclusive.

This saying virtually repeats 14:15, 21, although there our love for Jesus is the source of our obedience to him.

kaqw;" ejgw; ta;" ejntola;" tou' patrov" mou tethvrhka kai; mevnw aujtu' ejn th'/ ajgavph'/. Jesus' obedience is the supreme example of the obedience which we owe. Further, our obedience is further conditioned by, and finds its deepest grounding in, the obedience of the Son himself to the Father. And this is in fulfilment of his mission to the world.

15:11

As he recapitulates what he has just said, Jesus moves to a climax and now promises the disciples his joy.

Tau'ta lelavlhka uJmi'n. Before taking up the issue of obedience in relation to the theme of mission Jesus recapitulates with the customary expression, 'these things I have said unto you', but moves on to the theme of joy.

i{na hJ cara; hJ ejmh; ejn uJmi'n hV kai; hJ cara; uJmw'n plhrwqh'/. Lest the constraints of unqualified obedience of vv. 9-10 may seem 'grey and joyless', Jesus insists that his obedience to the Father is the ground of his joy. To remain in Jesus' love is at the same time to share in his joy. To obey him leads to the same joy. In fact, the very purpose (i{na) of his laying down such demands is that 'their joy may be complete'.

This is a typically Johannine expression where 'joy' is in some senses equivalent to salvation. Joy is a subject of prolonged treatment in 16:20-24 (cf. 14:28). It flows from the

obedience and love of which Jesus has spoken. Their union with Jesus is the source of their joy. 'My joy' is like 'my peace' and is the gift of salvation. It is frequently associated with the saving work of Jesus (3:29; 4:36; 8:56; 11:15; 14:28).

5:12

Jesus now provides a further explication of 'my commandments'. The content of Jesus' commandment is described as the disciples' love for each other. Love for God (Dt. 6:4-5; cf. Mk. 12:29-31) or Jesus himself (14:15) is presupposed. Through an unbreakable chain love for God is tied to and verified by love for other believers (cf. 1 Jn. 4:11-21).

The i{na is epexegetical signifying the content of the commandment (Young, 138, speaks of it as a noun clause of apposition).

kaqw;" hjgavphsa uJma". The model of the disciples' love is Jesus' supreme act of love, his laying down of his life (specified in v. 13). It is the model of the intensity of their love (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16) and a model for the way of expressing love.

15:13

To explain what is meant by 'as I have loved you', Jesus refers to the greatest sacrifice friends can make for each other, the sacrifice of their lives.

The i{na-clause is epexegetical of tauvth" (BDF § 394). There is also the note of finality too.

fivlwn aujtou'. Many object that this self-sacrificing love for one's friends is of a lower standard than giving one's life for one's enemies. But this is not the point at issue. Throughout the passage the reference is to mutual relations among the disciples (cf. vv. 12, 17). Further, Jesus is speaking from the situation of his farewell as he departs to the Father. He is setting out an example for their future behaviour.

15:14

The act of love of which v. 13 speaks is constitutive of the group which Jesus loves. He does not mean that his friendship with them is dependent on their obedience to his commandments. It is not what makes them friends; their obedience is what characterizes them as friends. eja;n poihte ktl. describes the way one acts as a friend of Jesus. This friendship is not reciprocal, as though Jesus will be their friend if he does what they say.

The fivloi of Jesus are all Christian believers, not some esoteric group within the wider Christian community.

15:15

This verse further pursues the theme of Jesus' unique kindness to his friends as their Lord. If obedience is necessary, what distinguishes them from servants? Jesus makes revelation the distinguishing feature. Abraham and Moses, who were called friends of God, had amazing access to the mind of God.

o{ti pavnta a} h[kousa para; tou' patrov" mou ejgnwvrisa uJmi'n. Jesus' right to command is in no way diminished. Disciples are still dou'loi. However, he is at pains to tell his friends of his motives, plans and purposes. The word oujkevti ('no longer') introduces a

salvation-historical note (a point that is appropriate in the light of Jesus being the *true* vine). In the OT God's covenant people were not informed of God's saving plan in full measure. Now, although there is much that the disciples cannot grasp (16:12), within this constraint they are told everything Jesus has learned from the Father. Further, Jesus will send the Paraclete after the cross and resurrection in order to complete the revelation bound up with his person and work (14:26; 16:12-15).

15:16

The privileged position the disciples are in is because Jesus has chosen them. The revelation they have is not because they are wiser or better, or because they made the right choices.

ejgw; ejxexavmhn uJma". Christ has exercised his sovereign freedom to choose what and whom he will; he has called them out of the world to be his disciples and friends. Here the twelve who were the most intimate disciples are models, both in their having been chosen and having been sent to bring the word to others. Elsewhere all Christians are described as the 'elect' or 'chosen' (Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12).

e[qhka uJma" i{na uJmei" uJpavghte kai; karmo;n fevrhte. The purpose for which Jesus chose them is that they might be 'appointed to go and bear fruit', a statement that recalls the nature of their relationship with him as branches in the vine. The verb tivqhmi commonly occurs, with personal objects, in contexts where people are set apart for particular ministry (Acts 13:47). The 'fruit' primarily in view here is the fruit which emerges from mission, from the specific ministry to which they have been sent. In other words, it seems to mean new converts. However comprehensive is the nature of the fruit that Christians bear (see above on v. 5), the focus on mission and evangelism is clearly central.

The disciples who have been blessed with this revelation and understanding should win others to the faith, and their fruit should remain, oJ karmo;" uJmw'n mevnh/. This final thought takes us back to the themes of vv. 7, 8, namely, fruit and remaining. V. 16 appears therefore to form an inclusio with the earlier references.

i{na o{ ti a]n aijthvshte to;n patevra ejn tw'/ oinovmativ mou dw'/ uJmi'n. This i{na-clause, though grammatically co-ordinated, is logically subordinated to the first. Jesus attaches to the reality of their bearing ongoing fruit this prayer in his name. Apparently the means of fruitfulness for which they have been chosen is prayer in Jesus' name which the Father will hear and answer (cf. 15:7-8).