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Vines, Vineyards, and John 15

In recent years a novel interpretation of John 15 has begun to appear. On this interpretation Jesus is no longer seen as being depicted as the vine but as the vineyard and his followers no longer as the branches of the vine but as whole vines. This interpretation originated with the New Testament scholar, Chrys Caragounis, and his proposal can be found in three main places, the most recent and accessible being his essay in a volume that resulted from a conference on ethics in the Gospel of John in 2010 in Nijmegen.[1]

The Case for the New Proposal

In brief, Caragounis's proposal is as follows. Like other languages, the Greek language has a history of development in which words can change their meaning. A major stage of that development took place in the nine hundred years between the time of Alexander (335 BCE) and Justinian (565 CE). From the beginning of this period the Greek words *ampelos* and *klēma* underwent a shift in meaning, at least from the evidence of certain inscriptions and papyri, the former no longer referring to the vine plant but to the vineyard, the land on which it was planted, and the latter no longer referring to the branch on the vine but to the vine itself. Caragounis argues that this can also be seen in the Old Testament imagery on which the

[1]See '"Abide in Me." The New Mode of Relationship between Jesus and His Followers as a Basis for Christian Ethics (John 15)', in J. G. van der Watt and R. Zimmermann (eds), *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, WUNT 291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 250-63. This essay summarises and builds on a case beginning to be made in C. Caragounis, 'Vine, Vineyard, Israel, and Jesus', *SEÅ* 65 (2000) 201-14 and in C. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission*, WUNT 167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 247-61.

Gospel of John draws. There Israel can be depicted not only as a vine (e.g. Ps. 80:8-16; Jer. 2:21) but also as a vineyard (cf. esp. Isa. 5:1-7). Caragounis then claims that the background for John's use of this imagery must be Isa. 5:1-7, because its description of the vineyard is far more detailed than the description of Israel as a vine elsewhere, because the most detailed depiction of Israel as a vine in Ps. 80 also portrays the nation as a vineyard, and because the Isaiah passage is more in harmony with the details of John 15.[2] His next move is to attempt to show from an exegesis of those details that John is talking of a vineyard and its vines and this argument has four parts.[3]

(i) The use of *airein*, 'to take away,' in 15:2 is more appropriately applied to vines than to their branches and pruning is done not to the branches but to the vine itself by taking away those branches. (ii) The exhortation of 15:4 to abide is unnatural if referring to a branch in a vine because the branch is an integral part of the vine but makes more sense as applied to a vine in a vineyard because the vine is not a natural or integral part of a vineyard's soil. (iii) The language of being cast out in 15:6 involves uprooting. This cannot be predicated of a branch and so klēma here must be a vine that is uprooted from the vineyard. (iv) Only if Jesus is seen as the vineyard is the element of protection found here. A vineyard protects its vines through its hedges and Jesus will pray for his disciples' protection in 17:9-15. On the basis of these four points, Caragounis claims to have 'hopefully made it clear that what Jesus said was: "I am the vineyard, you are the vines."'[4] Despite Caragounis's credentials as a native speaker of modern Greek, who has written on the development of the Greek language, I do not find this case at all convincing for the reasons I shall give. I am therefore concerned that

[2] Cf. 'Abide in Me', 253.

[3] Cf. 'Abide in Me', 254-5.

[4] 'Abide in Me', 255.

this novel proposal has persuaded some recent interpreters of John[5] and hope this brief critique will help to prevent this interpretation becoming a trend.

Critiquing the New Proposal

LXX Usage of the Two Key Terms

The first point to be noted is that in assessing the most likely background for John's imagery in the Jewish Scriptures, we are of course dealing with the Greek version of those Scriptures. There is no dispute that in the LXX *ampelos* sometimes refers to a vineyard and sometimes to a vine and that context indicates which of the two is in view. It is not possible to tell from within these writings, however, whether there has been a chronological change from one to the other. In Isa. 5:1-7 both usages are found in the same passage, which begins and ends with vineyard imagery but also has a clear reference to the vine plant (5:2), named as a soreq vine, a choice vine. It appears to have probably derived this designation from the Valley of Soreq, which was a particularly fertile valley so that vines from there developed a reputation as choice because of their bountiful yield. In the Hebrew Bible such vines are mentioned three times — Gen. 49:11; Isa. 5:2; Jer. 2:21, but in the LXX Isa. 5:2 is the only one of these that retains the Hebrew term in transliteration - *ampelos sōrēch*. An equally good explanation of how *ampelos* can be used interchangeably of vine and vineyard to depict the people of God is synecdoche, in which the part stands for the whole, the mention of the vine invoking the rest of the vineyard. This appears to be what is happening in Ps. 80 (LXX 79) with its initial (vv.

[5] As varied in their approaches as e.g. L. Novakovic, *John 11-21. A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020) 141-9 and D. F. Ford, *The Gospel of John. A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 290-4, both of whom cite Caragounis and repeat some of his arguments about the exegesis of the text of John.

8-11) and final (vv. 14-16) depictions of Israel as a vine that surround a description of it, without actually employing *ampelos* again, that can only apply to the whole vineyard (vv. 12,13). Whatever may be said about *ampelos*, there is no comparable phenomenon in relation to *klēma*. Isa. 5 does not mention branches, while Ps. 80 (LXX 79) does contain the term *klēmata* but with the clear meaning of 'branches'. Throughout the LXX this term always refers to a branch and not the whole vine. So we have no evidence that the author of the Gospel of John was aware of a different use of *klēma* to mean 'vine' in any of his possible Scriptural sources.

Ezekiel's Vine Parables as the Primary LXX Source for John 15:1-11

What is even more telling is that Caragounis has clearly misidentified John's primary source as Isa. 5:1-7 and then made its treatment of a vineyard the lens through which to interpret John 15. There is little doubt that the main Scriptural background for John 15 is not the depiction of a vineyard in Isa. 5 but the vine parables of Ezek. 15:1-8; 17:1-10,22-24; 19:10-14.[6] Just as the major source for John 10's creative appropriation of shepherd and sheep imagery is Ezekiel 34, so the major source for its discourse on the vine and its branches is these parables in Ezekiel. There are far more shared vocabulary and themes between John 15 and Ezekiel's material than with any other Scriptural vine or vineyard passage, such as Ps. 80 (LXX 79):8-18; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; 6:9; 8:13; 12:10 or Hos. 10:1. LXX Ezekiel and John 15 have seven words in common. In addition to our two key terms – *ampelos* and

[6] Cf. also Gary T. Manning, *Echoes of a Prophet: The Use of Ezekiel in the Gospel of John and in Literature of the Second Temple Period* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 135-49, who, while acknowledging that John's vine imagery may also have links to other passages, convincingly shows that the verbal and thematic parallels clearly make Ezekiel's more developed vine parables the dominant Scriptural source for John 15:1–7.

klēma, there are *pherō* ('bear/produce'), *karpos* ('fruit'), *kathairō*, *katharos*/ *katharsis* ('prune, pruning'), *xērainō* ('wither'), *pur* ('fire'). The fate of the branches that fail to bear fruit is depicted in very similar terms. In the Ezekiel parables the vine's shoots or branches wither and then become fuel for the fire that consumes them, while in John 15 they also wither and are burned in the fire. Two other highly significant features of the similarities between John 15 and LXX Ezekiel should be noted. First, they are the only places in either testament to use cognates of *kathairō* to refer to pruning rather than cleansing or purifying. In the Hebrew text of Ezek. 15:4 the previous state of the wood from the vine that goes into the fire is not described but the LXX makes clear that this is wood that has been pruned – *kat' eniauton katharsin* ('at the annual pruning'). Secondly, and of direct importance for Caragounis's proposal, John 15 is the only passage in the NT to employ the term *klēma* and it does so in combination with these other terms from the Ezekiel vine parables where *klēma* is always the branch of the vine (*ampelos*) cf. 15:2; 17:6,7,23; 19:11. That should leave very little doubt that John uses it with precisely the same force.

The Chain of Reception from LXX Ezekiel through John to Early Christian Writers

We know, therefore, what the two Greek terms meant for the Greek translators of Ezekiel around the third and second centuries BCE and we know that, because of his dependence on Ezekiel, they retained these meaning for the evangelist around the end of the first century CE. This chain of reception is completed by the early Greek Christian writers in the second and third centuries CE who interpreted the terms in John 15 as vine and branches not vineyard and vines. This is conceded by Caragounis, who admits, '. . . the Church Fathers and other early Christian authors observed the old Attic distinctions between *ampelos* and *klēmata* as vine and branches'.[7] Strangely, he then attempts to discount the overwhelming evidence from

[7] 'Abide in Me', 259.

this period by claiming that their classical education left these writers unaware of the semantic shifts that had taken place around them and that in any case some of them had a theological reason for ignoring the shifts because they wanted to employ the imagery to illustrate their doctrine of Christ sharing the same nature as humans in the incarnation in the same way that the vine and the branches share the same nature. He does not seem to realise that, when it comes to exegeting John, the investigation is of literary evidence that made claim to authoritative status and of what occurred in the reception of particular documents not of what may be surmised from scattered demotic evidence in general. There is also no recognition that it would not have occurred to patristic writers to make use of John 15's imagery in discussing the incarnation unless they actually thought that talk of vine and branches was what was taking place in the Johannine Jesus's discourse. It is, to say the least, highly improbable that, in this chain of reception from LXX Ezekiel through John 15 to patristic interpretation, John's Gospel at the end of the first century CE is the only writing to employ the purported switched terminology. This would entail that John failed to interpret the LXX Ezekiel correctly and then the patristic writers failed to interpret the Gospel of John correctly.

Alleged Exegetical Difficulties for the Traditional Interpretation

The alleged exegetical difficulties Caragounis cites would have to be completely decisive to overturn the overwhelming case for the traditional interpretation in which the imagery of John 15 involves a vine and its branches. As we shall see, that is by no means the case. In regard to15:2 and Caragounis's first difficulty for the traditional interpretation, there really is no problem with the use of *airein*, 'to take away', with reference to branches. The fruitless branches are destined for the fire and so need to be taken away to be burned. Caragounis's

further observation that 'pruning is applied not to the branch but to the plant itself, the vine'[8] is simply wrong. As any viticulture manual will explain, pruning a vine involves pruning its branches. Early in the process clipping their wood and leaf growth helps to strengthen the trunk of the vine and later in that process shortening them and cutting back the number of buds to two or three enhances fruit growth.[9] It is precisely the pruning of the *branches* that enables them to 'bear more fruit'. The second alleged difficulty for the traditional view is that the exhortation to abide in 15:4, when applied to a branch in relation to a vine, is unnatural because the branch is in any case an integral part of the vine and the imagery would work better in regard to a vine needing to abide in a vineyard because a vine is not a natural part of the vineyard's soil. For the latter to be considered to work better in 15:4, even on Caragounis's own terms, there would need to be not simply a general reference to the vineyard but a more specific reference to the soil that supplies the life to a vine. This is of course absent. Two further observations may be made in response. The first is that this objection appears to be indulging in an overliteral reading of an analogy, where there are both continuities and discontinuities between the entities in the comparison and one would not necessarily expect every element of what is said about the relation of Christ to his followers to correspond exactly with the relation of a vine to it branches in the natural world. This particular feature has never troubled the majority of commentators. That having been said, the unnaturalness of the possibility of a branch not staying attached to its vine and therefore in

[8] 'Abide in Me', 254.

[9] C. S. Keener, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 2003), Vol. 2, 994-6, has an excellent summary of what ancient writers, such as Pliny and Virgil, said about what was involved in the pruning of the vine's branches and the optimum scheduling for such pruning.

need of the exhortation to remain might well be considered part of the force of the exhortation.[10] If to be united to Christ is the normative state for believers, there is a sense in which it should seem unnatural for them to ever contemplate actions that might jeopardise that relationship and so they need to be reminded of their side in this mutual relationship entailing the need to abide.

The third alleged difficulty for the vine and branches interpretation has no merit. It claims that the language of John 15:6 involves uprooting, a notion only applicable to a vine and not to its branches. But there is no verb that means uprooting in this verse which uses language of being cast out, withering, being thrown into the fire and burned. Strangely, Caragounis holds that *ekballō exō*, "to cast, throw, drive out," has to entail uprooting and therefore cannot be applied to a branch. But all sorts of items can be cast out without their having had to be uprooted and in this context it is withered and useless branches that are cast out into the fire. If one is looking for further connotations for the phrase, *ekballō exō,* they have nothing to do with uprooting plants but recall the language the evangelist uses for expulsion from a relationship or community. While being driven out is the fate of believers at the hands of the synagogue authorities (9:34), Jesus promises followers who remain in allegiance to him that he will never cast them out (6:37). Caragounis's fourth point against the traditional view and in favour of vineyard and vine imagery can be dismissed equally speedily. He states that only with the latter is the notion of protection, which we know, from the prayer of 17:11-15, Jesus held to be significant for his relationship with disciples, contained in this passage, because a vineyard by its hedges or walls provides such protection. But there is absolutely no reason to expect this notion to appear in our passage at all. It is

[10] After all, Paul has indulged in a similar discussion about what is natural and unnatural in relation to the olive tree and its branches in Rom. 11:16-24.

quite unrealistic to expect the imagery in an analogy to be able to be applied to every single aspect of the phenomenon it is attempting to illuminate.

Conclusion

There are no reasons, then, for abandoning the justifiably long tradition of reading John 15:1-11 in terms of Jesus as the true vine and his followers as the branches. Whatever was going on in the Greek language more generally in shifts of meaning for the two terms, the clear evidence is that this failed to influence the literary chain of interpretation that ran from LXX Ezekiel through John 15 to the major writers in the church's early centuries and there is therefore no reason at all for present day interpreters to think they need to adapt their interpretation of the text in the middle of this chain in order to account for alleged shifts in meaning of its main terms.

Though we have established the case for this reading of vine and branches on other grounds, it must also be said that this Gospel's Christological reconfiguring of Ezekiel's imagery for the people of God has greater force for its readers than using the imagery of the vineyard in relation to the vines. The latter highlights primarily the relationship of individuals to Christ as single vines planted in the soil of the vineyard. The traditional reading brings out better the intimacy of believers' relationship with Christ, because it emphasises graphically not only the distinction between the vine and the branches but also the unity, the mutual indwelling that constitutes the organic link between the two. It also better retains the corporate aspect of the new people of God who relate to each other, not as separate vines in the extended space of a vineyard but as those who are more closely linked through being part of the very same vine. In a narrative setting of preparation for his departure, this imagery enables Jesus to talk of continued connection and union as a consequence of departure. In a narrative setting of farewell that focuses also on the well-being of his disciples as a group,

this imagery illustrates that staying connected to Jesus means retaining connection to the others who are in the same vine. This corporate aspect of the imagery will be underlined by the reminder that remaining in Jesus's love entails keeping his commandments to love others and is part of the fruit-bearing of the branches (cf. 15:9,10,12,16,17).