An Aramaic Parable in a Greek Gospel: The Quest for the Original Meaning of the Vineyard Parable

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In studies of the emergence and influence of the Aramaic tradition in Jewish late antiquity Bruce Chilton has identified and discussed a number of important links between Jesus and the book of Isaiah.\(^1\) Of particular significance is Chilton's discussion of the light that Aramaic Isa. 5:1–7 sheds on Jesus' parable of the Vineyard and the priestly response to it (Mark 12:1–12).\(^2\) Chilton's exegesis is persuasive for a number of reasons. First, it takes into account the remarkable parallel between the meturgeman's understanding of Isaiah's song of the Vineyard and Jesus' parable of the Vineyard. Secondly, it explains why the ruling priests react to the parable the way they do. This coherence leads Chilton to conclude that the form of the parable that we have in the Synoptic tradition, especially in Mark and Matthew, and its context probably reflect the original setting and meaning. However, in recent years this interpretation has been challenged, especially by those who contend that the version of the parable of the Vineyard that we find in the Gospel of Thomas is closer to the original form and meaning. A number of factors demand further consideration.

1 Isaiah's Song and Vineyard Imagery in Hebrew Scripture

Before pursuing the matter further it will be helpful to elaborate on the two reasons mentioned above. The remarkable parallel lies in the observation that both Aramaic Isaiah and Jesus understand Isaiah's song as directed specifically against the temple establishment and not, as in the Hebrew, the people


of Israel in general. A synoptic review of the respective versions should makes this clear. I begin with the Hebrew version of Isa. 5:1–7:

1 Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He digged it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry! (translation of the MT according to the RSV)

The Greek version of Isaiah's song should also be cited, for it is an early witness to how the text was understood:

1 I will now sing for the beloved a song of the loved one concerning my vineyard: The beloved had a vineyard on a hill, on a fertile place. 2 And I put a hedge around it and fenced it in and planted a Soreche vine, and I built a tower in the midst of it and dug out a wine vat in it, and I waited for it to produce a cluster of grapes, but it produced thorns. 3 And now, man of Ioudas and those who dwell in Ierousalem, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more might I do for my vineyard, and I have not done for it? Because I waited for it to produce a cluster of grapes, but it produced thorns. 5 But now I will declare to you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be plundered, and I will tear down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 And I will abandon my vineyard, and it shall not be pruned or dug, and a thorn shall come up into it as into a wasteland, and I will also command the clouds, that they send no rain to it. 7 For the vineyard of the Lord Sabaoth is the house of Israel, and the man of Ioudas is a beloved young plant; I waited for him to produce justice, but he produced lawlessness—nor did he produce righteousness, but a cry! (translation of the LXX according to the NETS)