

Vines and Vineyards



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of the First Century

Grape and pomegranate motif, Capernaum synagogue, is common theme.

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The importance of vineyards in the first century can be seen in five references by Jesus. The most familiar reference likely is his extensive teaching in John 15 ("I am the vine, ye are the branches"—v. 5). However, other references show more clearly how much the vineyard was familiar and essential in the economy. Workers for vineyards had to be hired and paid (Matt. 20:1-7). A father who owned a vineyard expected his sons to help him work it (Matt. 21:28-32). The produce of a vineyard was so valuable that people were tempted to rob or even to kill for it (Matt. 21:33-41). Space in a vineyard was precious, and leaving an unproductive tree would be hard to justify (Luke 13:6-9).

Jesus spoke of vineyards, then, much as we might refer

to stores or service stations—things so familiar that everyone could be expected to understand immediately.

The vineyard was not a recent development in Jesus' day. Grapes have been one of the major crops of Palestine throughout history. The spies whom Moses sent to explore the land brought back a very large cluster of grapes as proof of the fertility. Time and again Old Testament writers listed grapes, olives, and grain together as the essential produce of the land. In fact, Denis Baly has pointed out that the Hebrews never established lasting settlements except in areas where all three crops could be grown.¹

Preparing a vineyard was a difficult undertaking. Isaiah described this work in some detail in his well-known parable of the vineyard (5:1-7). Matthew 21:33 also lists similar agricultural steps, showing that the process of

growing grapes changed little over several centuries. The ground had to be cleared of large rocks, and the soil had to be tilled. Ordinarily a wall or hedge was built around the area. The rocks were used in building this wall when they were plentiful. Quite often a watchtower needed to be built, again often using rock cleared from the field. A vat to press the grapes was common. In a suitable situation, the vat was cut out of the rock of the hillside. In Old Testament times a person who operated a vineyard made such an essential contribution to the community that he was exempt from military service (Deut. 20:6).

Vineyards usually were located on hillsides, which sometimes were terraced. The common practice was to use flat ground for grain (wheat and barley), and hillsides for grapes and olives. Vineyards depended mostly on rainfall for water. Though Palestine has almost no rain from May to September, grapevines can draw water from the ground and so survive well in dry climates.

In both Old and New Testament times, vines were allowed to spread out along the ground or sometimes to grow on rock walls. Forked sticks were placed under clusters of grapes to lift them up. In New Testament days, however, another method introduced by the Romans also was used—trellises for the vines.

Pruning might come at two stages. Early in the season, branches might be cut off that had no blossoms. A more radical pruning might be practiced at the end of the season. Vines would be cut back to main stems so as to improve the next year's crop.

Grain was planted in the fall and harvested in late spring or early summer. Grapes matured during the long, dry summer. Farmers had time to attend to them then, since grain already was harvested. From the time that green grapes become edible in July, fields were guarded against animals and thieves. Not only the round stone watchtowers mentioned by Isaiah and Jesus but also tents and temporary booths were used in Bible times. According to some interpreters the Hebrew Feast of Booths is related to this practice. The grape harvest in August or September was a time of rejoicing in Bible days; it was a major festival of the year.

Grapes were used in four ways in Bible times. Some were eaten fresh at harvest time, and some scholars comment on the large quantities that were eaten then. Some were dried and kept as raisins. Others were processed into a heavy liquid used for sweetening. Some were pressed for juice.

Vats for pressing grapes were built frequently in or near vineyards. As mentioned earlier, a vat might be cut out of the solid rock of a hillside. A typical installation included a larger, higher vat (for pressing the grapes) connected to a smaller, lower one (for collecting the juice). Grapes

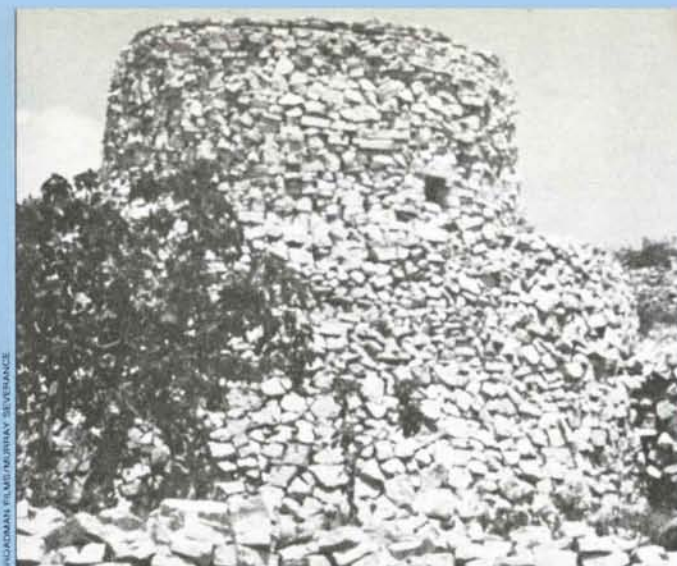
often were pressed by walking on them, and some vats were large enough for more than one person at a time to tread. However, other forms of pressure also were used. Apparently, the same presses sometimes were used for both grapes and olives. To press olives required greater force than was possible with human feet. A large weight, moved by some kind of simple machine, would be necessary in those cases.

Several kinds of excellent grapes are grown in Palestine today. We cannot know exactly what varieties were known in the ancient world, but use of several terms in the Old Testament suggests that several kinds were known.

In the first century the vine was an important symbol for Israel. In several Old Testament passages Israel is God's vine or vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7). As a symbol, the vine was employed frequently in synagogues as a decorative motif. It was richly evocative. The vine represented the good things of earthly life; it proclaimed that Israel was as significant to God as the vine⁴ was to men.

Below: Relief from Capernaum synagogue shows grapes and wine container. *Opposite, top:* Watchtowers were used to spot thieves and animals.

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Against all of this background we must see Jesus' statement that he is the true vine (John 15:1). We miss the thrust if we overlook the little word *true*. Israel might love to call herself God's vine, Jesus was saying, but *he* is God's actual vine. The branches of this true vine are not those of physical birth (Israel) but those who have been born again (Christ's disciples). John 15, like many other passages in John, is a deliberate contrast between the Jewish claim to be God's children through biological descent from Abraham and Jesus' teaching that God's true children are those who are reborn spiritually. ○

⁴Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), p. 164.

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Below: Statue of a woman holding wine container, Rome.



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