

EXPOSITION from the Pulpit commentary: Isaiah 5,1-7

Israel rebuked by the Parable of a Vineyard. This chapter stands in a certain sense alone, neither closely connected with what precedes nor with what follows, excepting that it breathes throughout a tone of denunciation. There is also a want of connection between its parts, the allegory of the first section being succeeded by a series of rebukes for sins, expressed in the plainest language, and the rebukes being followed by a threat of punishment, also expressed with plainness. The resemblance of the parable with which the chapter opens to one of those delivered by our Lord, and, recorded in the three synoptic Gospels (Matt. 21:33–41; Mark 12:1–9; Luke 20:9–16), has been frequently noticed.

Ver. 1.—Now will I sing to my Well-beloved. The prophet sings to Jehovah a song concerning his vineyard. The song consists of eight lines, beginning with “My Well-beloved,” and ending with “wild grapes.” It is in a lively, dancing measure, very unlike the general style of Isaiah’s poetry. The name “Well-beloved” seems to be taken by the prophet from the Song of Songs, where it occurs above twenty times. It well expresses the feeling of a loving soul towards its Creator and Redeemer. A song of my Well-beloved. Bishop Lowth translates “A song of loves,” and Mr. Cheyne “A love-song;” but this requires an alteration of the text, and is unsatisfactory from the fact that the song which follows is not a “love-song.” May we not understand the words to mean “a song concerning my Well-beloved in respect of his vineyard”? Touching his vineyard. Israel is compared to a “vine” in the Psalms (Ps. 80:8–16), and the Church of God to a “garden” in Canticles (4:12; 5:1); perhaps also to a “vineyard” in the same book (8:12). Isaiah may have had this last passage in this mind. My Beloved hath a vineyard; rather, had a vineyard (ἀμπελὺν ἐγένεθ' ἡ τῷ ἡγαπῶμεν ὦ, LXX). In a very fruitful hill. So the passage is generally understood, since keren, horn, is used for a height by the Arabs (as also by the Germans, e.g. Matterhorn, Wetterhorn, Aarhorn, etc.), and “son of oil” is a not unlikely Orientalism for “rich” or “fruitful.” With the “hill” of his passage compare the “mountain” of ch. 2:2, both passages indicating that the Church of God is set on an eminence, and “cannot be hid” (Matt. 5:14).

Ver. 2.—He fenced it. So the LXX., the Vulgate, Aben Ezra, Jarchi, Rosenmüller, Lowth, Kay, Gesenius, Knobel, and Mr. Cheyne prefer to translate, “he dug it over;” while the Revisers of 1885 have suggested, “he made a trench about it.” The word occurs only this place, and has no cognates in Hebrew. And gathered out the stones (comp. ch. 62:10). In the stony soil of Palestine, to collect the surface stones into heaps, or build them into walls, is of primary necessity for the improvement of the land. Conversely the stones were put back, and scattered over the land, by those who wished to “mar” it (2 Kings 3:19, 25). Planted it with the choicest vine (comp. Gen. 49:11; Jer. 2:21). The sorêk seems to have been a particular kind of vine, reckoned superior to others. The etymology of the word indicates that it was of a deep red colour. Built a tower (comp. Matt. 21:33). Towers had to be built in gardens, orchards, and vineyards, that watch might be kept from them against thieves and marauders (see 1 Kings 17:9; 18:8; 2 Chron. 26:10; 27:4, etc.). Made a wine-press literally, dug a wine-press. The excavation was made to contain a vat, above which was the “press,” worked by men, who wrung the liquor out of a great bag containing the grapes. (See the Egyptian rock-paintings, passim, where the operation is represented repeatedly.) It brought forth wild grapes. The natural, not the cultivated fruit, and worthless product.

Ver. 3.—The prophet’s “song” here ends, and Jehovah himself takes the word. As if the story told in the parable had been a fact, he calls on the men of Judah and Jerusalem to “judge between him and his vineyard.” Compare Nathan’s appeal to David by the parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam. 12:1–4).

Ver. 4.—What could have been done more? Comp. 2 Kings 17:13 and 2 Chron. 36:15, where God is shown to have done all that was possible to reclaim his people: “Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to the Law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets;” “And the Lord God of their fathers sent unto them by his messengers, rising up early, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, until there was no remedy.”

Ver. 5.—And now go to; I will tell you; rather, and now, I pray you, let me tell you. The address is still smooth and persuasive up to the word “vineyard.” Then there is a sudden change; the style becomes abrupt, the tone fierce and menacing. “Let me tell you what I will do to my vineyard: break down its hedge, that it be, grazed on; destroy its wall, that it be trampled underfoot,” etc. The hedge ... the wall. Vineyards were usually protected either by a hedge of thorns, commonly of the prickly pear, or else by a wall; but the rabbis say that in some cases, for additional security, they were surrounded by both. God had given his vineyard all the protection possible.

Ver. 6.—I will lay it waste; literally, I will make it a desolation (comp. ch. 7:19, where a cognate term occurs). Active ravage is not so much pointed at, as the desolation which comes from neglect. There shall come up briars and thorns. The natural produce of neglected ground in Palestine (see Prov. 24:31). The “thorns and briars” symbolize vices of various kinds, the natural produce of the human soul, if God leaves it to itself. The words are scarcely to be taken literally, though it is probably true that “no country in the world has such variety and abundance of thorny plants as Palestine in its present desolation” (Macmillan, ‘Min. of Nat.,’ p. 103). I will also command the clouds. Here at last disguise is thrown off, and the speaker manifestly appears as Jehovah, who can alone “command the clouds.” The “rain” intended is probably that of his gracious influences.

Ver. 7.—For the vineyard, etc. The full explanation of the parable follows immediately on the disclosure in ver. 6. The vineyard is “Israel,” or rather “Judah;” the fruit expected from it “judgment and righteousness;” the wild grapes which alone it had produced, “oppression” and the “cry” of the distressed. His pleasant plant; literally, the plant of his delights; i.e. the plantation in which he had so long taken delight. He looked for judgment, etc. Gesenius has attempted to give the verbal antithesis of the Hebrew, which is quite lost in our version—

“Er harrete auf Recht, und siehe da Unrecht,
Auf Gerechtigkeit, und siehe da Schlechtigkeit.”