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Is Jesus the Vine or the Vineyard?

Reply to the "Idle Musings of a Bookseller"

In a recent communication, someone brought to my attention the blog "Idle musings of a bookseller", in which the Bookseller calls into question my discussion and results relating to the above subject in my book, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (WUNT 167), Tübingen: Mohr 2004 (pb repr. Baker 2007), pp. 247-261.

I had seen this piece earlier, but, firstly, since I cannot spend time replying to every opinion that is expressed in relation to my writings, and secondly, since I did not see any intrinsic value in the objection (no serious NT scholar would ever raise such objections), I had left it at that. But since some expressed opinions may disturb some of my well-meaning but not sufficiently critical readers, I decided to address it briefly, and I post my reply on my web site, just in case there may be any others, who, on reading the Bookseller's idle musings, may wonder, too.

The Bookseller charges me with tacitly bypassing the Septuagint (LXX) evidence (which supposedly disproves my thesis) in order to establish the interpretation I want. He writes:

What is conspicuous by its absence is any reference by him to the Septuagint. We know that the gospel writers were heavily dependent and strongly influenced by the Septuagint rendering of Hebrew words. So, how does the Septuagint render the Hebrew KEREM in Isaiah 5? Not by AMPELOS, but by the Classical word AMPELWN. That's right, throughout the entire song of the vineyard, the Septuagint translates KEREM with AMPELWN.

Firstly, it is true that I do not say in so many words which Greek word the LXX uses in Isa 5:1. However, if the Bookseller interprets this as an attempt on my part to hide from the reader important evidence against my thesis, he not only attributes to me unworthy motives but he also insults my intelligence. Anyone understands that this would be

a cheap trick, evident to everyone, which would also totally discredit my scientific standing. Would I be willing to take that risk? It is thus quite simplistic and naive to make such an assumption, and to think that he has caught the culprit so easily, through a mere look at the LXX evidence.

Secondly, I have stated clearly that the «vineyard» of Isa 5:1 (Heb כֶּרֶם [kerem]) lies behind Jn 15:1. My interest was not to prove whether the LXX had interpreted Heb כֶּרֶם correctly with ἀμπελόν, but to prove that the NT ἄμπελος had taken the meaning that in earlier Greek was expressed by ἀμπελών!

Thirdly, The Old Testament and Near Eastern backgrounds have been discussed in an earlier article of mine, entitled «Vine, Vineyard, and Jesus» (SEÅ 65, 2000, pp. 201-14), to which I also make repeated references, of which, however, the Bookseller says nothing¹.

Fourthly, in my book I have made countless references to the LXX. I must, therefore, be both aware of its relevance for the NT and for the development of Greek, wherever applicable.

Fifthly, there was nothing in the LXX that I would want to hide from the reader. That it uses ἀμπελών in Isa 5:1 to translate Heb כֶּרֶם and ἄμπελος in Jer 2:21 and Ps 80 (LXX 79):9 to translate Heb שׁוֹרֵק (sorek) and גֶּפֶן (gefen) respectively is not significant at all for the present problem, sc. the meaning of ἄμπελος in Jn 15:1. In using ἀμπελών for 'vineyard' and ἄμπελος for 'vine', the LXX has done nothing more than used these words «in their old, well established senses»². I have given a lot of evidence for the older meanings of all the words in question both before and after New Testament times. Thus, that the LXX adheres to the older Greek usage is not in any way significant or remarkable. So did many of the Fathers, and I have said so.

Sixthly, the important thing, instead, is how John uses ἄμπελος and κλήμα. Having established the fact that the shift in meaning in ἀμπελών, ἄμπελος and κλήμα had taken place already before the Christian era, the only way to establish whether John uses the terms in their older or

¹ Cf. *The Development of Greek*, p. 257, note 78: «On the OT background to this imagery and its relation to John, see my study “Vine, Vineyard, and Jesus”, SEÅ 65 (2000), 201-14, 3sp. 201-07».

² See my «Vine, Vineyard, and Jesus», SEÅ 65, 2000, 212, and *The Development of Greek*, p. 255.

newer significance is by exegeting his text. This I deem to have done and to have shown that John uses his terms in their new meanings.

Thus, when the Bookseller says:

Based on the Septuagint evidence, I would say that the traditional rendering of John 15 as vine/branch is correct.

it becomes evident that he does not understand linguistic evidence, nor what is evidence and what is not.

But he goes on to challenge the meaning of 'vineyard' for ἄμπελος also in Rev 14: 18-19, a text that even exegetes, who had no idea of the change of meaning that I discuss in my article and book, were forced by the exigencies of the context to render with 'vineyard'!³ The Bookseller says:

In fact, it appears that the winepress is outside of it, since it says that the winepress was EXWQEN THS POLEWS, not EN AMPELWNI/AMPELWi. Second, I would still prefer to stick with the Septuagint evidence, and simply say it is synecdoche, the one vine representing the whole earth/vineyard.

When the Book of Revelation in 14:19 says: καὶ ἐπατήθη ἡ ληνὸς ἔξωθεν [ἔξω Ν 051 1854 Μ] τῆς πόλεως «and the winepress was trodden outside the city», the Bookseller supposes that the πόλις «city» and the ἄμπελος of verse 18 are one and the same thing! And so, since the winepress is trodden outside the city, the winepress must have been outside the ἄμπελος. This, according to the Bookseller implies that the ἄμπελος is not a vineyard but a vine.

This is a strange way of finding out the meaning of Greek words. But on what exegetical principles can we identify the ἄμπελος with the city? On none at all.

On the other hand, if ἄμπελος here does have the meaning of «vineyard», then we can understand why the winepress is outside the city. It is outside the city, because the vineyard is outside it. For no ἄμπελος = «vineyard» is ever inside a city.

There is no need to say more. The Bookseller, in his idle musings, has not even attempted to offer any evidence against the linguistic

³ E.g. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 Vols., (Word Biblical Commentary), Vol. 3, 1998, p. 790. Cf. also Ἀγουρίδης, *Ἀποκάλυψις*, p. 351, who, of course, knows of the shifts in meaning.

evidence I have put forward for the new meanings of these words. He simply, perhaps imperceptively too, has been carried away by sentimentalism. Many Christians would resist an understanding based on formerly unknown evidence, simply because they have got so used to the traditional renderings. They have learned them from Sunday-School and they have heard them innumerable times from the pulpit, that it strikes them uncongenial to see the 'beautiful' image in John 15 take another form. Jesus as the Vine and they as the Branches, is so nice and cozy and warm, showing the very close fellowship they *feel* with Him. To make Him the Vineyard, a field planted with vines, is not sentimentally as attractive or rewarding. So, they must at all events preserve the tradition intact. How the details in the image fit in with one another and what their mutual logical relation is, such persons are not interested in. Thus, the great exegetical problems that the traditional interpretation involves, are never inquired into.

In scientific, exegetical work, sentimentalism and traditionalism have no place. This does not mean that all older interpretations are wrong, nor does it mean that all modern interpretations are correct. We must exercise our critical judgement in the right sense of the word⁴ both toward the one as well as toward the other. I am speaking of openness in inquiry, exegesis, and of the deft handling of concrete and hard evidence. We must be willing to follow the evidence wherever it leads. Only then are we honest and truthful, fit to do engage in the most important task in the world, sc. to interpret the Word of God.

⁴ In another connection I have written that many have «misunderstood the meaning of the Greek term 'criticism' (κριτική), taking it to mean 'negative remarks'. Criticism means the ability to *sift and weigh evidence* and to make *right judgments*, whether negative or positive!»