

The Genre and Metaphorical Layers of the Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1–7)¹

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Abstract

The genre of the Song of the Vineyard has been a topic of some debate, particularly whether it classifies as a song or a juridical parable. This paper argues that it is both: through genre misdirection, it is a juridical parable concealed within a song until the timely reveal at the end. Likewise, there are multiple metaphorical layers at play in the Song of the Vineyard: the level of the vineyard owner/vineyard, the level of the beloved/bride, and the level of the referents of the metaphors, namely Yahweh and his people. This paper teases out these metaphors in order to identify the interplay between them.

The Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7) is a masterpiece of Hebrew poetry, especially with regard to its play on genres and its vivid, multi-layered use of metaphors. Yet with those elements also comes complexity, and that complexity has led to significant scholarly discussion and debate as to what exactly Isaiah is doing with his use of genre and metaphor in this text. The majority of the misconceptions about these elements has to do with misunderstanding their multifaceted dynamics. For example, the genre of the Song of the Vineyard is not merely one, but rather two: it intentionally presents one genre in the guise of another in order to conceal the true referents of the Song of the Vineyard until the proper time. Likewise, the metaphors of the Song of the Vineyard are operating on three levels: the level of vineyard owner/vineyard, the level of beloved/bride, and the level of Yahweh/his people. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to demonstrate how teasing apart the nature of the Song of the Vineyard's genre and metaphorical layers leads to a more robust understanding of the text. I propose that by presenting one genre in the guise of another—what I call genre misdirection—Isaiah invites his audience to imaginatively engage with the two intertwined metaphorical layers and to

¹ This paper won the 2020 Founders Prize from the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies for the best student paper in Hebrew Bible and cognate disciplines.

sympathize with the vineyard owner/beloved, obscuring their metaphorical nature until Isaiah unexpectedly reveals the third, non-metaphorical layer. By framing his indictment this way, the prophet leads his audience to indict themselves without them realizing until the very end that this is what they have done.

The Genre of the Song of the Vineyard

It is important to begin with a discussion of the genre of the Song of the Vineyard, as it has been subject to much debate. Some, for example, identify it strictly as a song.² John Goldingay suggests that it acts like “a minstrel singing a love song on behalf of his best friend, perhaps as his best man.”³ Similarly, J. Alec Motyer views it as a “marriage song,” with the relationship between the beloved and his vineyard serving as a metaphor for a groom and his bride.⁴ At the very least, one must recognize that there is some level of metaphorical meaning to the passage. After all, verse 7 reveals an identification of the characters within the Song of the Vineyard with other parties. To take the Song of the Vineyard completely non-metaphorically is nonsensical: who would actually place blame on and punish grapes for not growing properly?⁵

Additionally, the Old Testament uses vineyard imagery elsewhere to symbolize a woman in the context of a marital relationship, particularly in the so-called wisdom literature and Psalms (Ps 128:3; Song 2:15; 4:16). This depiction of the female body according to agricultural metaphors was extant in the broader corpus of ancient Near Eastern literature as well and included allusions to romantic scenarios between the woman and her lover.⁶ Although such a romantic connotation is not explicit in Isaiah 5, the wider usage of this imagery does highlight the common connection in ancient Near Eastern literature between agricultural terminology and the female body. It is therefore quite likely that Isaiah’s audience would understand his discussion about the beloved and the vineyard to be a metaphor for a bridegroom and bride, which Isaiah then develops into a metaphor for Yahweh and his people. Indeed, calling the vineyard owner the “beloved” (a relational

2 See J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 68; Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles’ Wings*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 54–55; Ivan D. Friesen, *Isaiah*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2009), 53–54.

3 John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 52.

4 Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 68.

5 Blenkinsopp identifies this as one of the numerous “problems for the modern reader” that are located in this passage (*Isaiah 1–39*, 206). However, as discussed above, this is taking the Song too far out of context. Even if one disagrees on the exact genre of the Song of the Vineyard, there needs to be some recognition of a level of metaphorical meaning in the text.

6 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 207; John T. Willis, “The Genre of Isaiah 5:1–7,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977) 337–62, here 345.

term) instead of the vintner (a viticultural term) is an immediate tip-off to the audience that Isaiah is using metaphorical language. It is also worth noting that Israel is elsewhere identified as both Yahweh's vine (Ps 80) and his bride (Hos 2).⁷ In this way, there are three layers interweaving with one another: (1) the vineyard owner and vineyard represent (2) a beloved and his bride, which in turn represent (3) Yahweh and his people.

Part of the challenge in labeling the genre of the Song of the Vineyard is that it shifts before it reaches the end: it begins as a song and concludes in a kind of parable. This has resulted in scholars struggling to name all that the Song of the Vineyard encapsulates.⁸ To some, such an overlap of genres displays "deliberate incongruity."⁹ Yet this assumes that multiple genres cannot coexist, or that to do so is to be incongruous. The Song of the Vineyard, on the contrary, deftly displays several different genres cooperating with one another. As J. J. M. Roberts observes, "Good poetry is not that univocal, and most scholars would consider the Song of the Vineyard good poetry. One must be open, therefore, to the possibility that the poem operates on several different levels and participates in several different genres."¹⁰ Thus the Song of the Vineyard contains multiple genres, the specifics of which we will discuss below. Each of these different genres is more prominent in certain portions of the Song of the Vineyard than others, but they are all simultaneously extant and vital to one's understanding of the passage.

For those viewing the Song of the Vineyard from a poetic and didactic perspective, it is a rhetorical masterpiece. The layered meaning both obscures and, later, facilitates identification. It invites the audience to sympathize with the singer and to be appalled at the vineyard without realizing that they are themselves the vineyard and Yahweh is the vineyard owner. Given that love songs are timeless in the way they sing of the lover's heartache, the audience believes that they are simply listening to "a harmless piece of entertainment"¹¹; they are not expecting a prophetic denunciation of their sin. If Isaiah had simply stood up before the people and began with the woes of verses 8–30, this might have caused the audience to

7 It is worth noting that in both of these contexts as they are found elsewhere in the Old Testament, "erotic connotation" is lacking entirely (Willis, "Genre of Isaiah 5:1–7," 348).

8 For instance, Childs sees in the Song of the Vineyard both the "wisdom components of a parable and the prophetic features of a judgment oracle." Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 44–45. Watts calls it a song, but argues that the "original genre" is that of a "complaint" or "accusation," which then shifts to a pronouncement of judgment. John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 2005), 54. In perhaps a prime example of the difficulty of encapsulating all that the Song of the Vineyard is, Brueggemann (*Isaiah 1–39*, 48) tries to cram in all the relevant descriptors by calling it "the love song-become-dispute-become-judgment." In his article "Genre of Isaiah 5:1–7," Willis counts as many as twelve different kinds of genre descriptors given to the Song of the Vineyard throughout the history of its interpretation.

9 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 206.

10 J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 71.

11 Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, 55.

dismiss his claims. Now, however, they become entangled in the imaginative world of the poem; they have already sympathized with the vineyard owner/bridegroom, and therefore they have already agreed with the logical conclusion that the vines/bride have not produced the correct fruit, even though they do not yet know that such a conclusion condemns them. This allows Isaiah to lay out the audience's true reality in verse 7 and, in the several woe oracles that follow (5:8–30), to draw out the consequences of that reality.

A helpful descriptor for the Song of the Vineyard is one coined by Gale A. Yee, namely “juridical parable.”¹² The Song of the Vineyard falls under the general banner of “parable” in that it is a story with particular referents primarily meant to convey a singular message.¹³ However, Yee argues that the Song of the Vineyard goes one step further, incorporating the elements of a lawsuit (including an indictment and sentence¹⁴) in order to set up an “intentional decoy which provokes the hearer to condemn himself.”¹⁵ The most recognizable comparison is found in 2 Sam 12:1–4, in which the prophet Nathan cleverly describes David's own actions back to him (albeit couched in the description of a different but parallel scenario) and causes David to unintentionally indict himself, only for Nathan to turn around and reveal, “You are the man!” (2 Sam 12:7).¹⁶ In the same way, Isaiah invites the people of Judah to condemn the bad fruit of the vineyard, only for them to realize—too late—that they have just condemned themselves (Isa 5:7).

Yee's label comes the closest in describing the nature of the Song of the Vineyard, yet it still does not quite match for a couple of reasons. First, while she acknowledges that the Song of the Vineyard is identified as a song as well as a juridical parable, her comparison of the two labels leads to unnecessary bifurcations in function between the two genres. She contends that the genre of song “articulates a *real* situation between God and his people” in a way that the juridical parable genre, which portrays “truly fictional situations similar to the king's own predicaments,” does not.¹⁷ However, such a distinction is unhelpful. In 2 Sam 12, for example, Nathan is relaying a real situation that happened with David, only in a metaphorical form rather than a non-metaphorical one. The use of metaphor to portray David's sin does not diminish its reality; rather, it initially obscures that the story does, in fact, portray David's sin until Nathan reveals this to be the case.

12 Gale A. Yee, “A Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1–7 as a Song and a Juridical Parable,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981) 30–40, here 31. The descriptor is indeed helpful, even though it does not capture all aspects of the Song of the Vineyard, as I will argue below.

13 A point made by Willis, “Genre of Isaiah 5:1–7,” 356–57.

14 Yee, “Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1–7,” 35.

15 Yee, “Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1–7,” 33.

16 All Scripture translations in this article are the author's. Beyond 2 Sam 12:1–4, see also 2 Sam 14:1–20; 1 Kgs 20:35–43. Some point to Jer 3:1–5 as well, but Yee does not see enough similarity to merit such a comparison (Yee, “Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1–7,” 33).

17 Yee, “Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5:1–7,” 39.

Thus the genres of both song and juridical parable can, to use Yee's words, articulate "a *real* situation."

Second, the label does not acknowledge that there is an intentional bait-and-switch with the audience in terms of the presentation of the Song of the Vineyard's genre and referents. The same misdirection occurs with Nathan and David in 2 Sam 12. Nathan crafts a parable that can be presented as a historical event, which is how David understands it. The parable has rhetorical impact with David precisely because Nathan presents it as a historical event upon which David can pronounce judgment and only reveals it to be a parable when the time is right. In this way, Nathan's parable embodies what I term genre misdirection. Disguising the genre conceals the referents until Nathan is ready to reveal them.

The same is true for the Song of the Vineyard. Isaiah intentionally hides his indictment inside another genre in order to conceal the true referents of the characters involved until the timely reveal. He begins by presenting it as a song, an innocuous genre that his audience would find attractive and therefore harmless. The parabolic and juridical nature of the Song of the Vineyard becomes apparent by verses 3–4. The judgment Isaiah invites his audience to engage in makes little sense if Isaiah is strictly singing a song about a vineyard, but if the audience takes it to be a parable about a beloved and his bride, then the judgment is understandable. At this point the true genre is revealed, but the referents remain hidden until verse 7. It is only at the very end that Isaiah reveals that the parable has been about Yahweh and his people all along.

Like Nathan, Isaiah employs genre misdirection in order to obscure the referents of the Song of the Vineyard until the opportune moment. This generates the rhetorical sting that Isaiah wants his audience to experience, for he can convince them to accept his premise before they recognize that it refers to them. In light of this multi-faceted nature of the Song of the Vineyard, I label Isaiah's performance as genre misdirection. Rather than attempting to encapsulate every genre involved in the Song of the Vineyard into a lengthy and possibly wordy label, genre misdirection connotes the intentional presentation of one genre in the guise of another for a rhetorical purpose. In this case, Isaiah conceals what is in effect a juridical parable about Yahweh and his people in a song about a vineyard owner/beloved and his grapes/bride.

In the final line of the Song of the Vineyard, Isaiah describes the people's activity as מִשָּׁפָךְ (bloodshed) instead of מִשְׁפָּט (justice) and as אֶרְגָּזָה (a cry of distress) instead of יִרְאָה (righteousness). From an auditory and visual perspective, the difference is subtle, perhaps even going unnoticed if one is not paying too close of attention, yet the meanings of these word pairs could not be further apart. This wordplay (a verbal misdirection, if you will) serves to further reinforce the purpose of Isaiah's genre misdirection. The genre misdirection and wordplay

effectively prove that the people's attempt to ignore or downplay their injustice has been unsuccessful. Their actions have not gone unnoticed by Yahweh's eyes, which have seen their acts of *bloodshed* rather than those of *justice*, and Yahweh's ears, which have heard the people's *cries* more loudly than any purported *righteousness*.

The Layers of the Song of the Vineyard

Beyond the question of genre, another element of the Song of the Vineyard that has led to a fair amount of discussion—and even confusion—is the different metaphorical layers contained within it. Three layers interweave with one another: the level of the vineyard owner and vineyard, the level of the beloved and bride, and the level of Yahweh and his people. Each layer has elements that correspond to the others. Some elements are explicitly identified throughout the Song of the Vineyard, while others are left open to the imagination, although some imaginative options are more likely to be prominent in relation to the overall image than others. In particular, of the three levels of meaning, the marital metaphor is the most indirect and therefore evokes multiple images in connection with it. As the audience continues to ponder the metaphor throughout Isaiah's performance, they have an opportunity to contemplate the related images and consider which of them is more prominent given the context, even as the other images remain. The three levels of the Song of the Vineyard work together, shifting from metaphorical references toward a non-metaphorical one.¹⁸ Therefore, in order to fully understand this passage, it is worth looking at these layers in detail in order to understand the significance and function of each, as well as their relationships to one another. To achieve this purpose, we will examine the metaphorical layers from two different but connected perspectives: first, we will tease apart the metaphorical layers to see how they are distinguished from one another, and second, we will observe how the layers interweave with one another to show how they are connected to each other.

18 It is a frequent habit of scholars to speak of language like this being either “metaphorical” or “literal.” In doing so, scholars often – unwittingly or not – create a false dichotomy that places greater value for meaning on the “literal” over and against the “metaphorical,” reflecting a belief that the “literal” is more “real” and therefore more relevant to the “true” meaning. Scholars who exercise this language often treat the metaphor like a husk that merely houses the kernel of truth underneath but holds no meaning or value itself: once the kernel is discovered, the husk can be cast aside. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, however, demonstrate that our language is far more metaphorical than we often realize and that utilizing metaphorical language does not diminish the “realness” of that language; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3. For this reason, I opt to use the language of “metaphorical” and “non-metaphorical.” Although perhaps still imperfect and a bit redundant, I hope by using it to avoid the false dichotomy that the “metaphorical/literal” language often creates and also demonstrate that while metaphors are a different way of discussing a given referent, they are no less significant or relevant to the referent's meaning than non-metaphorical language.

Teasing Apart the Layers of the Song of the Vineyard

The most significant elements of each layer are those used to identify the two main characters. The beloved is, surprisingly, not set in relationship with a bride, as one might expect, but rather with a vineyard. Beloved is a romantic, relational term, yet it is the title given to the one who, in the description of the song, owns and relates to a vineyard. By replacing a more relevant term, such as “vineyard owner” or “vintner,” with “beloved,” Isaiah gives his audience their first clue to recognizing that he is operating on more than one level. With the audience tipped off to the use of metaphorical language in this song, they can begin to imaginatively expand the use of metaphor to the other descriptors in the song. What is unknown to the audience at this beginning phase is that “beloved,” too, is a metaphor; more specifically, “beloved” is a metaphor for Yahweh. This knowledge will remain hidden until the major reveal in verse 7.

Opposite the vineyard owner, Isaiah introduces the vineyard. Since the audience has already been made aware of the interplay between the vineyard metaphor and the marriage metaphor, the natural inference is that the vineyard is also the personification of the beloved’s bride. This character is then revealed in verse 7 to be Yahweh’s people.

But here some clarification is needed. In the reveal of verse 7, Isaiah declares, “For the vineyard of Yahweh of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah the plantation of his delight.” The “house of Israel” and “people of Judah” (v. 7) refer to two different entities. That is, “Israel” refers to the corporate whole of Yahweh’s people while “Judah” refers to the people who live in Jerusalem and the surrounding political entity of the Southern Kingdom. Just as the vineyard functions as a container for the vines, so “Israel” is the container for “Judah.” The former acts as an umbrella term for the latter, with “Israel” describing the people of God as a whole and “Judah” being the more specific audience.¹⁹

19 There is some debate as to the particular referents of “Judah” and “Israel” in verse 7. Is Isaiah using these as technical terms to identify two distinct political identities, namely the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, or is he simply referring to the same group with two different titles? The other half of the parallelism—that is, “the vineyard of Yahweh of Hosts” and “the vines he delighted in”—sheds some light on the matter. At the level of the metaphor, the two elements, namely, “vineyard” and “vines,” share some overlap in that they both represent the thing over which the beloved has labored. Yet looking more carefully at the metaphor, there is some distinction to be noted; they are not strictly parallel lines. The vineyard functions as the collective whole of the object of the “beloved’s” labor, whereas the vines are the specific components contained therein. In the same way, Israel is the collective term representative of God’s people, and Judah is the particular element within it that is being addressed. Isaiah is a prophet to the people of Judah (and even more specifically in this case, to the rulers who, to some degree, are concentrated in Jerusalem; see v. 3), and therefore his accusations pertain to their sins specifically. At the same time, Isaiah has a tendency to employ the name Israel to refer to the collective people of God (e.g., Yahweh is frequently identified as the “Holy One of Israel”; Isa 1:4), whereas he often refers to the political entity of Israel as the Northern Kingdom more specifically by the name Ephraim (7:2). Judah, along with the rest of Israel, was identified as God’s people according to the patriarch

Following this pattern, the marriage metaphor also involves a container. In this case, the corporate Bride acts as a container for the individual brides of the groom/Yahweh. Much as Israel is the collective identity of Yahweh's people and the people of Judah are the individual members of that people, the B/bride can be understood either corporately or individually. Yahweh's people are together his Bride, but through Isaiah's song, they can each identify themselves as the bride, including the men of Judah.

Similarly, the singer of the Song of the Vineyard has a multi-layered identity. The speaker, Isaiah, is already known to the people in his role as Yahweh's prophet, which relates to the third layer of meaning in the Song of the Vineyard. However, for this performance, he introduces himself as the singer, who then becomes identified as a friend of the beloved. It is not until verse 7 that Isaiah connects the persona he has adopted (i.e., the singer/friend of the beloved) to his identity as Yahweh's prophet.

The grapes have diverse referents as well: the vineyard owner expects good grapes (i.e., justice and righteousness, v. 7) from his vineyard and instead receives bad or wild grapes (i.e., bloodshed and a cry of distress). Here our secondhand knowledge of Hebrew presents a challenge to understanding the referent for the good or bad harvest. The term רַעֲבָנִים leaves room for some debate regarding translation among scholars, particularly because it is such a rare word, and the translation of the term influences the understanding of the metaphor. Given its infrequent usage, the word is likely a technical term used among vintners, and while we may be less familiar with its meaning, it would have been perfectly well understood by Isaiah's audience.²⁰ Some scholars argue that the term means "wild grapes," meaning that the grapes would be small and sour, leaving a bad taste in the mouth of anyone who consumed them. Conversely, others contend that the term means "rotten/stinking grapes," meaning that the grapes would not be consumable at all. Given the context, I lean toward the translation "wild grapes." From a viticultural perspective, one reason that grapes become unusable for wine is that the vines, rather than sending the nutrients afforded by the sun and rain to the fruit, hoard those nutrients for themselves. This phenomenon is common, for example, when vines are not properly pruned. The result is fruit that is small and sour, and thus quite unusable for making wine.²¹

Jacob's new name, Israel, and so it is perfectly appropriate to employ it in reference to Judah. In doing so, Isaiah reminds his audience of their connection to Yahweh as their covenant God.

20 Per conversation with Knut M. Heim on October 12, 2017.

21 There are other ways that grapes can go bad. For example, diseases and/or parasites could eat away at the fruit, making it inedible. This image closely aligns with the translation "rotten/stinking grapes," since both disease and parasites would spoil the fruit. However, as I will explain in the rest of the paragraph, the close parallels that can be drawn between the bad grapes and injustice/unrighteousness, particularly in regard the means that bring them about, lead me to opt for the translation "wild grapes."

If this is what Isaiah's imagery is meant to imply, it makes the case of this vineyard even more shocking, since the vineyard owner took such great care to ensure a good harvest. It is evident that something has gone wrong in spite of proper care. What is more, the reason for a bad harvest in such an instance is not due to an external threat, but rather an internal malfunction. This image parallels the point of the non-metaphorical level, namely the injustice the people of Judah suffer, especially at the hands of the wealthy within Judah itself. Much like the vines that withhold nutrients that the grapes require for flourishing, the things needed for the people's well-being are instead amassed by the wealthy so that they can indulge themselves (vv. 8–10, 11–12). They are expected to use the blessings Yahweh afforded them to treat others with justice and righteousness, presumably through their trust/faith in Yahweh as well as their obedience to Yahweh's Torah; instead, they take in Yahweh's blessings and produce bloodshed and cries of distress (v. 7) through their disobedience.

At the level of the marriage metaphor, the equivalent to the good/bad grapes and (in)justice and (un)righteousness is a little more undefined. There are a few things that the B/bride might "produce," or fail to "produce." One option is *marital faithfulness*, that is, that the B/bride is expected to remain faithful to the husband who has cared for her so intentionally. The converse, then, is marital unfaithfulness. Texts such as Hosea lend credibility to the relevance of this image. Similarly, another option is *good sex* between the B/bride and beloved, with the alternative being either the deprivation of sex or bad sex. Linking this passage to those found in Song of Songs bolsters the connection between this set of images and that of the B/bride. A third option is that the B/bride is expected to *produce children*. More specifically, the B/bride is expected to both produce children and raise them with love and care. Conversely, the B/bride would either fail to produce children or, despite birthing them, mistreat and abuse the children.

Although each image has merit and could have been brought to mind by Isaiah's words, the context suggests that the third image is most prominent in relation to the other metaphors and referents in play. The audience is specifically indicted for mistreatment of the poor and vulnerable (v. 7; see also vv. 8–10, 23). This suggests an intentional, adverse effect by the hands of those with influence and wealth in the community, not unlike the passive neglect or active harm of an abusive mother toward her children. Rather than using the love and provision demonstrated by her beloved to raise children that are healthy and well cared for, the B/bride instead opts to treat her children with either hate or indifference, withholding the nourishment they need to thrive.

Thus, Isaiah deftly operates within three levels in the Song of the Vineyard: two metaphorical levels and one non-metaphorical. Each level has elements that correspond to those in the other levels, informing one another and adding

dimension to the images overall. At the level of *the vineyard metaphor*, the singer introduces the vineyard owner, who takes great care to cultivate his vineyard/vines, only to see the vines withhold nutrients from the fruit. This leads the vineyard/vines to produce wild grapes instead of the good grapes the vineyard owner expected. At the level of *the marriage metaphor*, the friend of the beloved describes how the beloved demonstrates great love and provision for his B/bride, hoping that the B/bride will produce and raise children with love. However, the B/bride instead shows hate/indifference toward her children, so that the children are neglected/abused instead of cared for well. Finally, at *the non-metaphorical level*, Isaiah reveals to the audience that although Yahweh has blessed Israel/Judah with the expectation that they will act in obedience to him, they disobey. The result is a population treated unjustly rather than justly. These levels are outlined in the chart below in order to summarize my analysis on the passage and the levels contained therein.

Three Layers of the Song of the Vineyard

| Singer | Vineyard owner | Vineyard | Vines | Good growth vs. withholding nutrients from the vines | Good, expected grapes | Wide grapes = small and sour |
|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------|--|---|---|--|
| Friend of the beloved | Beloved | Bride | bride = all adult Judeans are conceptualized as brides of Yahweh | Loving relationship, provision vs. unloving relationship/hatred/indifference, lack of provision | Children well cared for | Neglected/abused children |
| Isaiah | Yahweh | House of Israel | People of Judah | Trust/faith/obedience to Yahweh vs. lack of trust in and disobedience to Yahweh | Positive ethical behavior = justice and righteousness | Negative ethical behavior = bloodshed and cry of distress, resulting in a neglected population |

By teasing apart the elements of each of the three levels of the Song of the Vineyard, we are able to discern in greater detail the genius of Isaiah's words. As the audience listens to the Song of the Vineyard, they are invited to utilize their imaginations in drawing connections between the two metaphorical levels and, ultimately, with the non-metaphorical level. The more they have engaged their imaginations with the two metaphorical levels, the weightier Isaiah's reveal of the non-metaphorical level would feel, and this would increase the impact of his indictment of them.

The Interlocking Metaphors of the Song of the Vineyard

Having distinguished the metaphors found in the Song of the Vineyard from one another, it is important to see how they are connected. The metaphors of vineyard

owner/vineyard and beloved/bride are by far the most developed and detailed metaphors of the passage. Both sets of metaphors would have been readily familiar to Isaiah's audience, and would thereby "give the hearers a better opportunity to 'translate' details than if lesser-known images had been used."²² Isaiah employs the metaphors with great attention to detail, and parallels can be drawn between the individual components in a way that contribute to the overall image. As such, it is critical to examine the various elements of each metaphor, identifying the parallels between them and how they highlight what is being communicated at the non-metaphorical level.

Cultivation and Expectation

The vineyard owner develops his vineyard with care during the entire process: he chooses the land well, makes it sustainable for planting, builds what is necessary to both protect the vineyard and create the wine, and waits with eager expectation. Cultivation requires careful attention over long periods of time. One must prepare the soil, plant in ways that will lead to optimal growth, ensure that the vines receive the nutrients they need, prune them so that they grow in the most productive way possible, and protect them from pests that would weaken them. The vineyard owner not only expects fruit, but fruit of a certain caliber.

The husband also cares deeply for his bride and provides what she needs. Perhaps this includes a good home, an abundance of food, and loving-kindness. He might even build the house himself, as well as grow the food that they eat.²³ A healthy marital relationship would presumably include a healthy sex life as well, as a physical expression of that love that produces intense joy, mutual appreciation, and long-term happiness as well as children.

In the same way, Yahweh has provided for his people throughout their history. As Creator, he gives them sun, water, and plant and animal life for their daily

22 Kirsten Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 65 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 99.

23 By its nature, the use of any particular metaphor for the purpose of describing something else "highlights certain features while suppressing others" (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 141). The same is true for the metaphor of marriage in this passage, and it is important to identify what the use of this metaphor emphasizes in this instance and what it does not. In the modern Western concept of marriage, the relationship is a mutual one, in which both partners (hopefully) contribute equally. In this metaphor of marriage, however, the provision is asymmetrical, with the husband providing everything the bride needs, while the bride primarily contributes by bearing and raising children. This imbalance might have been more likely in an ancient patriarchal society, but this is not the point of the metaphor in this context. The purpose of the marriage metaphor, like the vineyard metaphor, is to demonstrate the total culpability of the people of Judah. The power dynamics between the bride and groom are unequal, because the power dynamics between Yahweh and his people are unequal. The metaphor works because it reflects the close, joyful, and binding nature of the relationship between Yahweh and his people, on the one hand, and the imbalance between the two, on the other. The use of this metaphor does not indicate a normative reflection on the level of agency a woman has or ought to have in a marital relationship.

needs. He brought them to the land in which they can live and thrive. He provided the temple and sacrificial system so that he might be in relationship with them. And as with the marriage metaphor, Yahweh provides these things for his people so that there might be a joyful relationship.

The Tragedy of Internal Harm

The presence of a watchtower in a vineyard is a curious addition. While the watchtower could be a place for the beloved to rest, its primary purpose suggests a need for protection and vigilance. What threat does the beloved perceive that would warrant the strenuous effort of building the watchtower in the first place? There is nothing inherently dangerous within the vineyard that the beloved has so painstakingly cultivated, so the threat must be external. Perhaps the vineyard owner has enemies that would seek to sabotage the vineyard or expects general vandals who would desire to take what is meant to help the vineyard flourish. Or it could be that the vineyard owner anticipates a threat from a foreign enemy: “Destroying the crops and food sources was one of the first strategies of siege warfare.”²⁴ This expectation sets up a level of tragic irony, for in the end, the vineyard is sabotaged not from an outside intruder, but from internal corruption. Even though the vineyard owner goes to great effort to protect his vineyard from harm, the vineyard nevertheless ruins itself.

At the level of the marriage metaphor, there is not much that functions as an exact equivalent to the vineyard’s watchtower. Perhaps it leaves the impression that the beloved was vigilant in protecting his wife and, eventually, his children from anyone who would attempt to do them harm. Tragically, harm does come upon the children, but from inside the household rather than any intruders.

Correspondingly, Yahweh has protected his people from many external threats over the years. Israel’s history is rich with stories of Yahweh rescuing them from their enemies. Multiple psalms praise Yahweh for this very thing (e.g., Pss 9; 18; 27); the psalmist even calls Yahweh his “strong tower” in Ps 61:3. In the Lev 26:4, “YHWH promises the people abundance, protection, peace, and security if they follow his decrees.”²⁵ Despite all of Yahweh’s protection from outsiders, however, his people do harm to each other through acts of injustice.

Dashed Expectations

While the vineyard owner expects large, sweet grapes designed for making choice wine, the grapes instead turn out to be wild grapes. Since wild grapes do not have the benefit of active cultivation, they end up small and sour, and, if they are not

24 Jennifer Metten Pantoja, *The Metaphor of the Divine as Planter of the People: Stinking Grapes or Pleasant Planting?* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 90.

25 Pantoja, *The Metaphor of the Divine as Planter of the People*, 102.

eventually harvested, rotten on the vine or devoured by pests. These vines hoarded the nutrients within their own branches, so that the grapes had no ability to become large and sweet, as the vineyard owner had hoped. The description of the grapes as wild gives the impression that for all of the vineyard owner's work, the grapes end up as if he had never put any effort into cultivating them at all, with the result that they are quite inedible.

With the culturally familiar metaphor connecting agriculture with the female body, it makes sense that one of the connecting features between the metaphor and referent here is fertility. Thus, the beloved hopes that his bride will produce the "fruit" of children, whom the bride will love and help raise with care, so that the children grow up to be healthy and strong. This, however, does not end up being the case. Kirsten Nielsen argues that the wife here is guilty of marital unfaithfulness and illegitimate children, citing comparative passages from Hosea to bolster her argument.²⁶ Yet it is important to note that the major problem in Hosea is idolatry, which is why the metaphor of marital unfaithfulness works so well there. By contrast, the major problem in Isa 5 is injustice, not idolatry. This gives credence to the idea that the bride's crime in the Song of the Vineyard is mistreatment of the children, not that she had illegitimate children.

Thus, the children are unhealthy, neglected, perhaps even abused, as is evidenced by the metaphor's referent of the abused within Judah and Jerusalem. Like the wild grapes, the children seem as if they never received any care at all. To mirror the image of the hoarding vines, perhaps the bride withholds the things they need for growth in order to indulge herself. The beloved sets up ways to protect from external forces, but the true damage comes from within, from the one who was supposed to supply healthy, vibrant life.

In the same way, the people of Judah, especially the wealthy elite, have harmed those they were supposed to nurture. They were supposed to produce justice and righteousness, but instead produced bloodshed and cries of distress. It is worth noting that:

The term "bloodshed" . . . means "outpouring," thus the outpouring of lifeblood through exploitative social practice; that is, the kinds of economic transactions that abuse, injure, and slowly bleed the poor to death. The "bloodshed" that concerns the poet is not thuggery and murder, but the more subtle, slower, but equally decisive killing through economic policy against the vulnerable and resourceless.²⁷

They have hoarded critical resources – most notably the land – for themselves in order that they might build larger houses for themselves and throw grander parties

²⁶ Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree*, 99.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, 48.

with the food and wine that their fields and vineyards produce. From the perspective of the vineyard metaphor, this “fruit” is “as unnatural as it is unexpected.”²⁸ Their wealth provides them with the opportunity to be generous and just (see Prov 3:27; 14:21; 22:9), yet they show little to no concern regarding the people for whom they are supposed to care. For the vulnerable of Judean society, the greatest damage to their well-being comes not from an external invasion, but rather from the ones who have a responsibility to care for them and fail to do so (see Isa 1:17).

Consequences of Failure

In response to the vineyard’s disappointing growth, the vineyard owner promises to undo all that was designed to make the vineyard as fruitful as possible. “The vineyard is not only left unattended, it is intentionally razed to the ground.”²⁹ The protection surrounding the vineyard will be removed so that animals can eat it and people can trample it, including any invading army. Without tilling and weeding the earth, thorns will spring up where vines ought to be. Even the rain will be withheld from it, resulting in total desolation. The vineyard will be reduced to what it was before the vineyard owner ever set foot there. Like the inclusion of the watchtower, the declaration of withholding rain is an unexpected addition; in this case, the announcement points the audience toward the impending destruction of the vineyard. Placed right before the timely reveal of the referents, it begins to hint to the audience that the identity of the vineyard owner is not what he appears.³⁰

Likewise, the beloved will no longer supply the necessities and blessings for his bride. One might imagine the bride being cast out of the house built for her, or perhaps even watching as the beloved tears it down. She will be left entirely destitute, devoid of the provisions needed to survive and thrive. She will be on her own, with no one and nothing to protect her from the elements and other threats.

So, too, Yahweh will remove the protections he has set in place for Judah. They will be exposed to external dangers (vv. 26–30), and they will lose the abundant blessings that Yahweh has provided for them (vv. 9–10). The metaphor also perhaps hints at the notion that Jerusalem in particular will now be vulnerable, no longer hemmed in by Yahweh’s protection.³¹ They will be trampled by invading armies (vv. 26–30) and expelled from the land bestowed to them (v. 13). Even the darkness of the clouds will hover over them (v. 30). The image is grim and leaves little in the way of hope.

Interwoven together, the metaphors and non-metaphorical referents of the

28 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 266.

29 Pantoja, *The Metaphor of the Divine as Planter of the People*, 131.

30 See Motyer, *Isaiah*, 69; Childs, *Isaiah*, 45.

31 Suggested by Mary E. Mills, *Alterity, Pain, and Suffering in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 45–46.

Song of the Vineyard create a tune that is none-too-pleasant to hear. The Judeans receive abundant provision from Yahweh, given with love, generosity, and the hope that it will cultivate additional benefits for others. However, instead of inspiring generosity, Yahweh's blessings are withheld by some at the expense of others. As a result, those blessings will be taken away from them all. The metaphors are designed to demonstrate total culpability on the part of the audience, as well as the inevitability of the consequences.³² They provide the "why" for the woes that are about to follow. Before Isaiah can describe the coming judgment, he must explain the reason it will occur in the first place. The metaphors stress that Yahweh is not acting unjustly, but in response to the injustice that they themselves have inflicted on others, despite the good things Yahweh has given to them. The images create a sense of dismay at the indictment given and the subsequent punishment described, but they can blame no-one but themselves for what is to come.

Conclusion

The genre and metaphorical layers of the Song of the Vineyard are complex, but it is that very complexity that contributes to the terrible beauty of the Song. By employing genre misdirection, Isaiah cleverly convinces his audience to acknowledge their own sin and condemn themselves before they even realize that the Song of the Vineyard is about them. By interweaving the vine/vineyard owner and bride/beloved metaphors, Isaiah engages his audience's imaginations and causes them to contemplate the ways they have rejected Yahweh's blessings and engaged in injustice toward their neighbors. The result is a potent piece of poetry, one that is just as compelling today as it must have been to Isaiah's audience then.

32 Nielsen, *There Is Hope for a Tree*, 101.