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NOT JUST SOUR GRAPES: JESUS'S INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH'S SONG OF THE VINEYARD

John Gee

Abstract: In Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, he heavily references Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard. An understanding of both the original Hebrew and the Greek translation in the Septuagint of this passage helps provide greater context and meaning into Jesus's sermon. In particular, it clarifies Jesus's commentary and criticisms of both society and those administrators in charge of society, especially of the scribes and those that can be considered false prophets.

Latter-day Saints commonly view the book of Isaiah as a sealed and largely impenetrable text. Such a view is understandable, since Isaiah was written over two and a half millennia ago in a very different world and language from our own. Nephi said it was more comprehensible to those who “know concerning the regions round about,”¹ but such an approach has, by and large, been rejected and neglected by Latter-day Saints who would prefer an easier route to understanding. Instead we have pinned our hopes that Isaiah would be “plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy.”² We have relied largely on those interpretations provided by Book of Mormon or modern prophets. Another potential source is the words of Jesus. Sometimes the direct commentary of Jesus has been recognized, but sometimes Jesus's commentary is more subtle and easily missed. Jesus's commentary on Isaiah's song of the vineyard is an example of one of these more easily missed commentaries.³ A comparison of the Isaiah passage and Jesus's commentary is informative.

1. 2 Nephi 25:6.

2. 2 Nephi 25:4.

3. It is, for example, missed by Craig L. Blomberg, “Matthew,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A.

The Hebrew Text

Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard takes up the first seven verses of the fifth chapter. It is a sad song, detailing the problems in Israel toward the end of the eighth century BC. The text runs as follows (with my translation):⁴

'āšīrāh nnā' li-ydīdī šīrat dōdī le-karmō

I will sing now for my beloved a song of my beloved for his vineyard.

kerem hāyāh li-ydīdī

My beloved had a vineyard

be-qeren ben-šāmen

on a fruitful hill

wa-ye'azzeqē-hû

and he dug it

wa-yesaqqelē-hû

and he cleared it of stones

wa-yyiṭṭā' ē-hû sōrēq

and he planted good vines

wa-yyiben migdāl be-tōkō

and he built a tower in its midst

we-gam yeqeb hāšēb bō

and he also dug a winepress in it.

wa-yeqav la-ʾāsôt ʾanābīm

And he hoped that it would produce grapes

wa-yyaʾas beʾušīm

but it produced sour grapes.

we-ʾattāh yōšēb yerûšālaīm

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem

we-ʾiš yehūdāh

and men of Judah

šiptû-nāʾ bēnî û-bēn karmî

Please judge between me and my vineyard.

mah-lla-ʾāsôt ʾōd le-karmî

What more could I have done for my vineyard

we-lōʾ ʾāšīti bō

but I have not done for it?

maddûaʾ qivvēti la-ʾāsôt ʾanābīm

Why did I hope that it would bring forth grapes

wa-yyaʾas beʾušīm

although it brought forth sour grapes?

Carson, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007, 29–30; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, Baylor: Baylor University Press, 2016, 40–41.

4. Unless otherwise noted all translations are the author's own.

we-`attāh `ôdî`āh-nnā` `et-kem `ēt `āšer-`ānî `ōseh le-karmî
 And now I will make known to you what I will do for my
 vineyard:
hāsēr mešûkkâtô
 Take away its hedge
we-hāyāh le-bā`ēr
 so that it will be devoured.
pārōš gedērô
 Break down its wall
we-hāyāh le-mirmās
 so that it will be trodden down.
va-`āšitē-hû bātāh
 and I will make it desolate.
lō` yizzāmēr
 it will not be pruned
we-lō` yē`ādēr
 and it will not be dug
we-`ālāh šāmîr wā-šāyit
 and thorns and wild figs will be on it.
we-`al he-`ābîm `āšawweh mē-hamṭîr `ālāyw māṭār
 And the clouds will I forbid from raining rain on it.
kî kerem yhw̄h šebā`ôt bêt-yiśrā`ēl
 for the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel
we-`iš yehûdāh neṭa` ša`āšû`āyw
 and the men of Judah is his favorite plant.
wa-yeqav le-mišpāt
 and he hoped for justice
we-hinnēh mišpāh
 but behold oppression,
li-šedāqāh
 for righteousness
we-hinnēh še`āqāh
 but behold wailing.⁵

The situation described by Isaiah is that the Lord planted the men of Judah in the house of Israel. He cleared away the land and protected it. He expected them to bring forth specific fruit: justice and righteousness. Isaiah uses a play on words to distinguish between grapes and sour grapes. Instead, of justice (*mišpāt*) the men of Judah brought forth oppression (*mišpāh*); instead of righteousness (*šedāqāh*) they brought forth wailing (*še`āqāh*). There are only two sounds changed in the first pair and one in the second, but the meaning is almost the complete opposite, contrasting the difference between the Lord's expectations and the actual results.

5. Isaiah 5:1-7

To understand the passage, one must comprehend exactly what the men of Judah are doing instead of what is expected. The term *mišpāh* is a *hapax legomenon* meaning it occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ The noun derives from the verb (*šippāh*), another *hapax legomenon*,⁷ which is usually translated into something like *disfigure*, or *smite with a scab*,⁸ though the Septuagint has ταπεινώσει, *to humble, humiliate*. The Akkadian cognate of the verb from whence this comes, *sapāhu*, means to scatter, disperse, disrupt, squander, waste, or ruin financially.⁹

The term *še'āqāh* appears more frequently in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ It can mean a cry of anguish, termed the “cry of destruction” (*ša'aqāt-šeber*).¹¹ It is the cry of the crushed Esau when he realizes the consequences of selling his birthright.¹² It is the cry of the Israelites when they lose the Ark of the Covenant.¹³ The Egyptians themselves utter the same cry of anguish when their firstborn are killed.¹⁴ But there is another type of *še'āqāh*: the cry of oppression. It is the cry that goes forth to the Lord and demands the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁵ It is the cry of the oppressed children of Israel toiling in slavery to an unjust Pharaoh,¹⁶ which comes about because of the oppression (*laḥaš*) of the Egyptians, forcing the Israelites to do what they themselves refused to do. That same cry from Israel comes up because of the Philistines.¹⁷ The cry comes from violence (*hāmās*) and deceit or treachery (*mirmā*).¹⁸ It was even enshrined in the law of Moses: “Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely

6. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001, 641; hereafter cited as *HALOT*, Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996, 705; hereafter cited as *BDB*.

7. *HALOT* 1348; *BDB* 705.

8. Isaiah 3:17.

9. Martha T. Roth, ed. *The Assyrian Dictionary of Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, The Oriental Institute, Chicago, IL: Chicago Press Corporation, 2000, S:151–57, s.v. *sapāhu*.

10. *HALOT* 1042–43; *BDB* 858.

11. Jeremiah 48:5.

12. Genesis 27:34.

13. 1 Samuel 4:14.

14. Exodus 11:6; 12:30.

15. Genesis 18:21; 19:13.

16. Exodus 3:7, 9.

17. 1 Samuel 9:16.

18. Zephaniah 1:9–10.

hear their cry (*ša' aqātō*).¹⁹ Job claims the impious (*hānēp*) have no hope of the Lord hearing their cry because they were more interested in gain;²⁰ instead God listens to the cry of the poor and afflicted.²¹

Isaiah follows his song of the vineyard with a series of specific woes that provide a list of problems he sees as prevalent in Israel. These include (1) accumulating vast tracts of land from acquiring the homesteads of individual families,²² (2) interest in intoxication,²³ (3) adopting evil practices,²⁴ (4) calling evil good and good evil,²⁵ (5) considering themselves wise,²⁶ and (6) justifying bad behavior and punishing those who do good.²⁷ These things draw the wrath of the Lord.²⁸

Since the men of Judah are not producing the results the Lord wants, there is no reason to protect them. The Lord proposes to remove their protection and make the house of Israel devoured, trodden down, and desolate. It will be left to produce thorns and wild figs, plants that are useless and obnoxious. It is not that the inhabitants (the plants) will disappear, but the inhabitants will be devoid of justice and righteousness, just like all the other uncultivated places.

The Septuagint Text

The Septuagint, a pre-Christian translation of the Bible into Greek, provides a number of interesting changes to this passage in Isaiah:

ἄσω δὴ τῷ ἡγαπημένῳ ἄσμα τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ τῷ ἀμπελῶνί μου
 I will sing to my beloved a song of my beloved to my vineyard:
 ἀμπελὼν ἐγενήθη τῷ ἡγαπημένῳ
 My beloved had a vineyard
 ἐν κέρατι ἐν τόπῳ πλίονι
 on a peak in a rich place,
 καὶ φραγμὸν περιέθηκα
 and I surrounded it with a fence,

19. Exodus 22:22–23.

20. Job 27:8–9.

21. Job 34:8; Psalm 9:12.

22. Isaiah 5:8.

23. Isaiah 5:11.

24. Isaiah 5:18.

25. Isaiah 5:20.

26. Isaiah 5:21.

27. Isaiah 5:22–23.

28. Isaiah 5:25.

καὶ ἐχαράκωσα
 and I fortified it,
 καὶ ἐφύτευσα ἄμπελον σωρηχ
 and I planted a vineyard of Sorech,
 καὶ ὠκοδόμησα πύργον ἐν μέσῳ αὐτοῦ
 and I built a tower in the midst of it,
 καὶ προλήνιον ὠρυξα ἐν αὐτῷ
 and I dug a winepress in it,
 καὶ ἔμεινα τοῦ ποιῆσαι σταφυλὴν ἐποίησεν δὲ ἀκάνθας
 and I expected it to produce grapes but it produced thorns.
 καὶ νῦν ἄνθρωπος τοῦ ἰουδα
 And now, man of Judah,
 καὶ οἱ ἐνοικοῦντες ἐν ἱερουσαλημ
 and inhabitants in Jerusalem,
 κρίνατε ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ ἀμπελῶνός μου
 judge between me and my vineyard.
 τί ποιήσω ἔτι τῷ ἀμπελῶνί μου
 What shall I still do to my vineyard
 καὶ οὐκ ἐποίησα αὐτῷ
 and I have not done to it
 διότι ἔμεινα τοῦ ποιῆσαι σταφυλὴν ἐποίησεν δὲ ἀκάνθας
 because I expected it to produce grapes and it produced thorns?
 νῦν δὲ ἀναγγελῶ ὑμῖν τί ποιήσω τῷ ἀμπελῶνί μου
 Now I will announce to you what I will do to my vineyard:
 ἀφελῶ τὸν φραγμὸν αὐτοῦ
 I will take away its fence,
 καὶ ἔσται εἰς διαρπαγὴν
 and it will be for plunder,
 καὶ καθελῶ τὸν τοῖχον αὐτοῦ
 and I will pull down its wall,
 καὶ ἔσται εἰς καταπάτημα
 and it will be for treading down,
 καὶ ἀνήσω τὸν ἀμπελῶνά μου
 and I will destroy my vineyard,
 καὶ οὐ μὴ τηθηῇ
 and it will not be harvested,
 οὐδὲ μὴ σκαφῇ
 neither dug at all,
 καὶ ἀναβήσεται εἰς αὐτὸν ὡς εἰς χέρσον ἄκανθα
 and in it will come up barren thorns,

καὶ ταῖς νεφέλαις ἐντελοῦμαι τοῦ μὴ βρέξαι εἰς αὐτὸν ὑετόν
 and I will command the clouds to not drop rain in it.
 ὁ γὰρ ἀμπελὼν κυρίου σαβαωθ οἶκος τοῦ ἰσραὴλ ἐστίν
 For the vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth is the house of Israel
 καὶ ἄνθρωπος τοῦ ἰουδα νεόφυτον ἡγαπημένον
 and the man of Judah is his beloved shoot.
 ἔμεινα τοῦ ποιῆσαι κρίσιν
 I expected it to produce judgment
 ἐποίησεν δὲ ἀνομίαν
 but it produced iniquity,
 καὶ οὐ δικαιοσύνην ἀλλὰ κραυγὴν
 and not righteousness but a cry.²⁹

The Septuagint translators encountered a number of difficulties in their translation and solved them in a number of ways. Some of these are interesting, and one is important.

One problem was what to do with the Hebrew term *śōrēq*.³⁰ This appears to be a variety of grape,³¹ but the translators took it as a place name,³² which may have been the source of the grape variety.

More important is what the translators did with the term *be'ušim*.³³ In later Hebrew, this term means grapes that are either rotting³⁴ or in the early stage and not yet ripe³⁵ and thus highly acidic. The phenomenon was known to Aesop in his fable of the fox and the grapes; because the fox could not reach the grapes, he claimed that they were not yet ripe (ὄμφακες) and thus sour,³⁶ which is the source of the English expression *sour grapes* for denigrating something one was unable to attain. The Septuagint translators, however, connected this with a similar term, *bā'sā*,³⁷ that appears in Job, where it means something like thorns.³⁸ Where the grapes of Isaiah are either fermented because they are overripe or sour because they are unripe, the grapes of the Septuagint are not

29. Isaiah 5:1-7 LXXX

30. HALOT 1314; BDB 977.

31. Jeremiah 2:21.

32. Judges 16:4.

33. HALOT 107; BDB 93.

34. Mishnah Terumot 10.2.

35. Ibid., 1.2.

36. Aesop, *Fables*, 15a, in *Corpus Fabularum Aesopicarum*, ed. A. Hausrath, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1970, 1:21–22.

37. HALOT 107; BDB 93.

38. Job 31:40.

grapes at all, but rather thorns. It is this difference — highlighted in the Septuagint — that is crucial to understanding Jesus's interpretation.

Jesus's Interpretation

Jesus builds from Isaiah's parable in the Sermon on the Mount. The gospels and documentary texts from Jesus's day record a mixture of Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew in use.³⁹ Jesus could have given his sermon in Greek, or He may originally have used the same Hebrew terms as Isaiah did. In the latter case, Matthew, who put Jesus's words into Greek, used the Septuagint's wording to preserve the original allusion for a Greek speaking audience. This allusion, unfortunately, is lost in our current translations. Since "we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly,"⁴⁰ we should not be averse to insights from the original languages. The passage runs as follows:

Προσέχετε ἀπὸ τῶν ψευδοπροφητῶν,
 Beware of false prophets
 οἵτινες ἔρχονται πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐν ἐνδύμασιν προβάτων,
 which come to you in sheep's clothing
 ἔσωθεν δέ εἰσιν λύκοι ἄρπαγες.
 But inwardly are rapacious wolves.
 ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς
 From their fruits you will recognize them.
 μῆτι συλλέγουσιν ἀπὸ ἀκανθῶν σταφυλὰς
 They do not gather from thorns grapes
 ἢ ἀπὸ τριβόλων σῦκα;
 or from thistles figs.
 οὕτως πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖ,
 Likewise every good tree produces good fruit,
 τὸ δὲ σαπρὸν δένδρον καρποὺς πονηροὺς ποιεῖ·
 but the rotten tree produces rotten fruit.
 οὐ δύναται δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς πονηροὺς ποιεῖν,
 It is not possible for a good tree to produce wicked fruit,
 οὐδὲ δένδρον σαπρὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖν.
 Nor a rotten tree to produce good fruit

39. Mark 5:41; 7:26–27; 15:22, 34; Luke 23:38; John 1:38, 41; 5:2; 18:33–38; 19:13, 17, 19–20; Acts 21:37, 40; 22:2; Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material*, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2000.

40. Articles of Faith 1:8.

πάνδένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται.

Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire.

ἄρα γε ἀπὸ τῶν καρπῶν αὐτῶν ἐπιγνώσεσθε αὐτούς.

So from their fruits you will recognize them.⁴¹

The reference to gathering grapes from thorns would have been recognizable not just to Jesus's audience but to any early Christian versed in the Septuagint. They would have recognized the reference to Isaiah's song of the vineyard, although it is obscured by some modern translations. Those who recognized the allusion would have brought the associations of misconduct from Isaiah into Jesus's parable.

Jesus labels the false prophets as rapacious wolves (λύκοι ἄρπαγες).⁴² This is similar to his comparison of the scribes and Pharisees as whited sepulchers which look nice on the outside but inwardly are full of plunder and lack of restraint (ἄρπαγῆς καὶ ἀκρασίας).⁴³ Plundering or seizing the goods of others is repeatedly condemned in the New Testament⁴⁴ and other early Christian literature,⁴⁵ but examples are not given other than the mention of the "confiscation of your possessions" (τὴν ἄρπαγὴν τῶν ὑπαρχόντων ὑμῶν).⁴⁶ Examples can be found in the Septuagint, however. The spoils (ἄρπαγῆς) of lions are found in their dens,⁴⁷ and such behavior is most closely associated with lions⁴⁸ and wolves.⁴⁹ Isaiah condemns those who write wicked laws that allow them to deprive orphans of judgment and "seize the decisions from the poor of my people" (ἀρπάζοντες κρίμα πενήτων τοῦ λαοῦ μου),⁵⁰ and thus widows are simply targets to be robbed and deprived of their rights (χήραν εἰς ἄρπαγὴν).⁵¹ Isaiah sees this as a particular problem among the elders and the rulers of the people (μετὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων τοῦ λαοῦ

41. Matthew 7:15-20.

42. Matthew 7:15.

43. Matthew 23:25.

44. Luke 11:39; 18:11; 1 Corinthians 5:10; 6:10.

45. Didache 5:1; Barnabas 10:10; 20:1.

46. Hebrews 10:34.

47. Nahum 2:13 LXX = 2:12 KJV; ἄρπαγῆς = Hebrew *torēp*.

48. Psalms 21:14 LXX = 22:13 KJV ὁ ἀρπάζων = Hebrew *torēp*; Ezekiel 19:3 τοῦ ἀρπάζειν ἀρπάγματα = Hebrew *liṭrāp-terep*, 19:6 ἀρπάζειν ἀρπάγματα = Hebrew *liṭrāp-terep*; 22:25 LXX; ἀρπάζοντες ἀρπάγματα = Hebrew *torpē tārep*.

49. Ezekiel 22:27 LXX; ἀρπάζοντες ἀρπάγματα = Hebrew *torpē tārep*.

50. Isaiah 10:2 LXX; ἀρπάζοντες = Hebrew *ligzol*.

51. Isaiah 10:2 LXX; ἀρπαγὴν = Hebrew *šelālām*.

καὶ μετὰ τῶν ἀρχόντων αὐτοῦ).⁵² The writer of Ecclesiastes describes this “perversion of justice” (ἀρπαγὴν κρίματος).⁵³ Mostly it refers to the “stealing of money” (τὴν τῶν χρημάτων ἀρπαγὴν)⁵⁴ or forcefully taking away someone else’s goods.⁵⁵ Two Hebrew terms are translated by it: *gāzāl* means “to tear away, rob; to take illegitimately,”⁵⁶ and *tārap* means “to seize by force.”⁵⁷ The Law of Moses demanded that the offender “give back the thing that had been taken away” (ἀποδοῦ τὸ ἄρπαγμα ὃ ἥρπασεν) and adding a fifth of its value to it as well as a trespass offering (ᾠσάμ) as part of the conditions for repentance for this sin.⁵⁸

There is a difference, however, in Jesus’s interpretation of the Song of the Vineyard and the way it is presented in Isaiah. In Isaiah, the society is rotten and will be destroyed. Jesus recognizes the role of the individual in the society. The source of the injustice in the society is false prophets (ψευδοπροφητῶν). The term for false prophets is ambiguous and could include those that were never prophets or those who had legitimately been prophets who were acting in ways contrary to their calling. In the Septuagint, those who tried to kill Jeremiah included priests and false prophets (οἱ ἱερεῖς καὶ οἱ ψευδοπροφῆται) indicating that some legitimately held their offices,⁵⁹ but the term is also used as a general one for imposters.⁶⁰ Early Christians recognized that true and false prophets would be difficult to distinguish.⁶¹ Jesus identified these false prophets as being involved in usurpation (ἄρπαγες), illegitimately taking that which belongs to others. In a world of limited communication and opportunities to get to know general Church leaders, the early Christians made it a rule that someone claiming to be a Church leader who came into town and asked someone to give him money was a false prophet⁶² and should not be obeyed.⁶³ Jesus elsewhere notes that there would be many false

52. Isaiah 3:14 LXX; ἀρπαγὴ = Hebrew *gezēlat*.

53. Ecclesiastes 5:7 LXX, 5:8 in KJV; ἀρπαγὴν = Hebrew *gēzel*.

54. 4 Maccabees 4:10.

55. Leviticus 5:21 LXX = 6:2 KJV; ἀρπαγῆς = Hebrew *gāzāl*.

56. HALOT 186; BDB 159–60; Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London: Luzac & Co., 1903, 1:230.

57. Ibid., 380; BDB 382–83; Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim*, 1:555–57.

58. Leviticus 5:23–24 LXX = 6:4–5 KJV; τὸ ἄρπαγμα ὃ ἥρπασεν = Hebrew *haggezēl ʾašer gāzāl*.

59. Jeremiah 6:13; 33:7–8, 11, 16; 36:1 LXX.

60. Jeremiah 34:9 LXX.

61. Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates 11:7.

62. Didache 11:6.

63. Ibid., 11:12.

prophets who would arise and deceive many,⁶⁴ including, if possible, the elect.⁶⁵ Such false prophets will be well spoken of and generally well regarded (καλῶς ὑμᾶς εἰπωσιν πάντες οἱ ἄνθρωποι).⁶⁶ Early Christian leaders warned that such false prophets brought in “destructive factions” (αἰρέσεις ἀπωλείας).⁶⁷ The early Christians also designated as false prophet one who “does not do what he teaches.”⁶⁸ Early Christians also taught that “in the last days false prophets and corrupters will increase and they will turn the sheep into wolves and love will turn into hate.”⁶⁹ A false prophet, early Christians warned, would “destroy the understanding of the servants of God”⁷⁰ because he would speak to those who were of two minds (δίψυχοι) who wanted to be “like the world” (ὡς καὶ τὰ ἔθνη) “after their lusts and after the desires of their wickedness and fill their souls as they wish.”⁷¹ Thus the specific counsel to look at the fruits of such leaders was appropriate. Early Christians thus knew that true and false prophets could be distinguished by their way of life (ζωῆς)⁷² and the ways and means (τρόπων) they used to accomplish their objectives.⁷³

By locating the root of the problem in society with the leaders who led falsely, Jesus identifies them as accountable for the actions of the society they corrupt. Later in his ministry he was more explicit when he attributed the same problem to the scribes (γραμματεῖς) and Pharisees.⁷⁴

The Pharisees are perhaps the better known of these two classes. While it is often thought that Rabbinic Judaism is a descendent of the Pharisees, the Mishnah itself is somewhat ambivalent toward them. It notes that the Pharisees and the Sadducees opposed each other and took opposite positions, particularly on fine points concerning purity.⁷⁵ The Pharisees also opposed the Galilean heretic (presumably Jesus) on divorce.⁷⁶ They interpreted a number of situations pertaining to food as

64. Matthew 24:11.

65. Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22.

66. Luke 6:26.

67. 2 Peter 2:1.

68. Didache 11:10.

69. Ibid., 16:3.

70. Shepherd of Hermas, Mandates 11:1.

71. Ibid., 11:2.

72. Ibid., 11:7.

73. Didache 11:8.

74. Matthew 23.

75. Mishnah Yadaim 4:6–7.

76. Ibid., 4:8.

doubtful.⁷⁷ The Pharisees seem to have regarded themselves as purer than the common folk, but for those engaged in the service at the temple, the Pharisees were unclean.⁷⁸ According to the Mishnah, the humiliations caused by the Pharisees weary the world.⁷⁹

While the Pharisees as a group are generally known, the role of the scribes in Jesus's day is worth considering. They are, after all, listed first. The tendency to think of scribes as principally responsible for the copying of books — which they were⁸⁰ — obscures their larger role in society. Scribes served as the bureaucracy and administrators of the ancient world. The existence of a scribal class depends on the need to keep records, and the greatest generator of records in ancient societies was the state. "The right hand man, so to speak, of the strategus was the royal scribe. After the royal scribes there were a series of lesser officials (district scribes, village scribes, village elders, magistrates and town councillors, liturgists) whose administrative responsibilities are rather clear."⁸¹ As such, a scribe was seen as a very prestigious occupation.⁸² Scribes were used to collect taxes and draw up contracts. Even in a fairly large place, the number of scribes was probably very small.⁸³ Notaries were used in drawing up contracts.⁸⁴ Scribes working for the empire were "usually associated with documentation, such as the census and the land survey. They were however probably also responsible for receipts for taxes in kind."⁸⁵ Work on census and land surveys could require extensive travel.⁸⁶ Scribes were also associated with tax farming:

"Each year in each tax district, the tax-farmers bid for the revenues of the tax, which went to the highest bidder. If

77. Mishnah Tohorot 4:12.

78. Mishnah Hagigah 2:7.

79. Mishnah Sotah 3:3 (3:4).

80. Lincoln Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus*, Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 2012, 177.

81. *Ibid.*, 128.

82. Mishnah Nedarim 9:2.

83. Brian Muhs, *Receipts, Scribes, and Collectors in Early Ptolemaic Thebes*, Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2011, 213; Carolin Arlt, "Die thebanischen Notare," in *Actes du IXe Congrès International des Études Démotiques*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle, Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 2009, 30–32.

84. Mishnah Gittin 3:1; 7:2; 8:8; 9:8; Arlt, "Die thebanischen Notare," 29–30.

85. Muhs, *Receipts, Scribes, and Collectors in Early Ptolemaic Thebes*, 214; Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, 105.

86. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, 106.

at the end of the year the revenues of the tax exceeded the winning bid, the tax farmer made a profit. If however the revenues were less than the winning bid, they had to pay the difference to the state. Tax-farmers were thus required to present securities worth more than their bid. The tax-farmers could hire as many tax-collectors as they wished, but they were required to pay the tax-collectors a fixed wage, which was deducted from the tax revenues. They could hire more tax-collectors to ensure a thorough collection of taxes, but the extra tax-collectors would cut into their profits. Tax farmers had to submit accounts of revenues collected and wages paid each month, and all accounts had to be balanced within ten days of the end of the tax-farming period.”⁸⁷

The tax collectors hired scribes to keep their accounts.⁸⁸ Another scribe (ἀντιγραφεύς) served the government as an auditor.⁸⁹ While some scribes were employed only as long as the tax farmer who employed them won the bid that year,⁹⁰ other sorts of scribes “seem to have had long term appointments, possibly lifelong and hereditary.”⁹¹ Scribes associated with the temple seem to have been from priestly families and functioned as scribes as part of other temple duties.⁹² Scribes were also involved in the banking industry.⁹³ Scribes were generally necessary even for the literate if one wanted to write a letter.⁹⁴ Thus, Paul notes when he personally adds an appendix to a dictated letter⁹⁵ and expresses some pride in writing a long letter with his own hand without the aid of a scribe.⁹⁶ Some scribes, however, have been known to change the sentiments and contents of what they wrote to suit their own predilections.⁹⁷ So a corrupt scribe could cause a great deal of mischief, and since he controlled both the

87. Muhs, *Receipts, Scribes, and Collectors in Early Ptolemaic Thebes*, 219, 258 (I have tacitly corrected an obvious typo); Sherman L. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1938, 286.

88. *Ibid.*, 220.

89. Wallace, *Taxation in Egypt*, 286.

90. Muhs, *Receipts, Scribes, and Collectors in Early Ptolemaic Thebes*, 232–33.

91. *Ibid.*, 237.

92. *Ibid.*, 239.

93. *Ibid.*, 254–55.

94. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, 23.

95. 1 Corinthians 16:21–24.

96. Galatians 6:11.

97. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, 23–25.

documents and the bureaucratic apparatus, there was often no recourse to the corruption of the scribe.

Therefore, an appropriate way to translate the term for scribe is *administrator or bureaucrat*. Jesus's condemnations make more sense in terms of their role as bureaucrats rather than their role as copyists. The scribes, after all, were in charge of the tithes of mint and anise and cumin⁹⁸ and responsible for recording the gifts laid on the altars⁹⁹ and exchanging them for the gold to decorate the temple.¹⁰⁰ Significantly, the more detailed exposition of the crimes of the scribes and Pharisees coincides with and matches the earlier condemnation of the false prophets.

So for Jesus, the corruption of the rulers and the bureaucracy causes the corruption of the people and thus he provides specific warning about how to recognize corrupt leaders.

Jesus's interpretation of the Song of the Vineyard was given in the Sermon on the Mount. Large crowds from all over the area had been present — Galilee, the Decapolis (on the other side of the Sea of Galilee), Judea, Jerusalem, and trans-Jordan are all explicitly mentioned.¹⁰¹ When Jesus went up the mount, however, only his disciples — those who had been baptized¹⁰² — followed him.¹⁰³ These are the group to which the instructions were given. This group was asked to beware of false prophets and told how to judge if a leader or purported leader was or had become a false prophet. Similarly in the Book of Mormon, the injunction was part of the Sermon at the Temple and was given “to the multitude,”¹⁰⁴ which consisted of those “gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple which was in the land Bountiful,”¹⁰⁵ and who were “the more righteous part of the people.”¹⁰⁶

In the Sermon on the Mount, this injunction comes between two other sections. It follows the observation that not many people follow the straight and narrow path to life, but most prefer the broad and easy way to destruction.¹⁰⁷ It precedes the warning that simply claiming to be a follower of Jesus will not be enough to secure entrance into the

98. Matthew 23:23.

99. Matthew 23:18–19.

100. Matthew 23:16–17.

101. Matthew 4:25.

102. Matthew 28:19.

103. Matthew 5:1.

104. 3 Nephi 14:1.

105. 3 Nephi 11:1.

106. 3 Nephi 10:12.

107. Matthew 7:13–14.

kingdom of heaven but that one must actually do the will of God.¹⁰⁸ Notably it describes the fate of the false prophets in the final judgment and underscores that they will have thought they were doing the will of God.¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere Jesus had warned his disciples that “whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.”¹¹⁰ The implication of the juxtapositions is that false prophets will lead individuals on the broad path to destruction and think they are serving God by doing so.

Another difference between the two passages is apparent in the larger context. As opposed to Isaiah, who prophesies that the society will be destroyed in this life, Jesus pushes the punishment to the next life. Church members are to discern true from false prophets by their works — though both will claim, and probably think, they are doing the will of God — but it is at the final judgment that the false prophets will discover, to their horror, that they were not doing the will of God after all. Isaiah was making a specific prophecy about ancient Israel, one that came to pass when Israel was exiled. Jesus is providing a more general application of Isaiah's parable.

Conclusion

We have seen how the Hebrew text of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard was changed in the Septuagint. On the basis of a similar-sounding word, unpalatable grapes were changed to thorns. This image is taken over and elaborated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has the same message as Isaiah but shifts from a general condemnation of society to a condemnation of those administrators in charge of the society, who corrupt it. Jesus describes those who corrupt society as greedy individuals who seize money and property that does not belong to them. He points out that they may be detected by their works more than their words. He also shifts the comparison from a prophecy about a specific group at a specific time to a more general application whose fulfillment might not be in this life.

If we take this all as an academic exercise, then we are missing the point. We cannot simply look back at the corruption in Isaiah's day or Jesus's day and shake our heads. We must learn to be wiser than they

108. Matthew 7:21–23.

109. Matthew 7:22–23.

110. John 16:2 KJV.

have been.¹¹¹ We must bring forth fruits suitable for repentance¹¹² and not just sour grapes.

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111. Mormon 9:31.

112. Matthew 3:8; Alma 12:15; 13:13; Moroni 6:1; D&C 84:58.

