

# Jesus as the True Vine: A Transition of Economies Announced at John 15

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A survey of mainline Johannine sources written on Jesus' self-predicated "I Am" declarations in the fourth gospel reveals a notable problem: His final one, the "true vine" statement of John 15, is the one ἐγώ εἶμι out of the group that is afforded the least amount of attention by NT scholars. Moreover, the gospel of John itself often suffers neglect from scholarship regarding its notion of economical transitions or dispensational shifts, a feature more customarily treated in the synoptics (specifically Matthew and Luke). Further, there is a notable gap in biblical scholarship related to the use of positive vine texts depicting national Israel's hopeful future. Rather, OT texts depicting judgment on faithless Israel are customary when comparing vine imagery to Israel.

In an effort to address these lacunae, this article seeks to fill the void left by the customary glossing over of John 15:1, 5. It suggests the reason for the neglect of scholarly treatments of these two critical verses may be due to vine/vineyard imagery being the most pointed OT depiction of national Israel and the Jewish people. As such, through analysis of the text and related passages, this article will demonstrate that at John 15, an announcement is made concerning identities and roles which have direct bearing on the relationship between Israel and the (future) church. To put it succinctly, the argument advanced is that at John 15 Jesus announces a dispensational shift to be led

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by the Spirit-indwelt church without collapsing the permanence and glorious future of national Israel. As such, a transition of economies seems to be at play in John's gospel which has gone largely unnoticed in Johannine studies.

### **An Economical Transition Anticipated**

Matthew is often considered the most "Jewish" of the gospels due to its emphasis of Jesus' messiah-kingship over the Jewish nation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the fourth gospel is not without its own unique presentation of Jesus' kingly rule over Israel. In fact, John wastes no time highlighting this, as seen in Nathaniel's early declaration that Jesus is "the Son of God and King of Israel" (John 1:49). Further, while the synoptics are perhaps more comprehensive in their treatment of Jesus' role as teacher viz., highlighting his discourses, John demonstrates a broader role for Christ—he is the divine λόγος who enveloped himself in flesh (1:14). Christ's dual traits—divine personhood and relationship with Israel—are what set the tone for his final self-predication at John 15, a text steeped in imagery from OT passages depicting national Israel as a vine.

One prominent feature exclusive to John's account is Jesus' seven Ἐγώ Εἰμι ("I Am") declarations, which help form its structure. Jesus' specific purpose in John 15 sets this last declaration apart from the other six, providing wider significance for biblical and theological studies. Specifically, phrases such as "true vine," "the vine dresser," and "the branches" in verses 1 and 5 relate to Jesus', His Father's, and the church's identities and roles as one world-economy transitions to another. By way of Christ's final "I Am" declaration and accompanying viticulture illustration, Jesus contrasted himself with national Israel while simultaneously identifying his disciples as distinct, yet related entities who should expect a shift in economies with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> Calling attention to the undeniable Jewishness of Matthew, D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo state, "Since the book betrays so many Jewish features, it is not easy to imagine that the author had a *predominantly* Gentile audience in mind" (*Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 156).

This economical transition, largely unnoticed in Johannine studies, would later find its tangible expression in the church—the germinal form of which was comprised of Jesus’ sole audience that fateful night, fittingly identified as “the branches.” As such, Jesus does not fulfill or replace national Israel. Rather, his final “I Am” declaration was an illustration used to highlight the contrast between himself as the ever-faithful Israelite and that of unfaithful national Israel, which endlessly wandered under the law. Further, by drawing on the hopeful vineyard language used in Isaiah 27, the economical shift announced in John 15:1, 5 serves to underscore national Israel’s security and future as a covenanted people.

### **An Economical Transition Announced**

Jesus’ final ἐγώ εἰμι declaration in John 15 appears, on the surface, to be anticlimactic. Perhaps this is because the predicate noun Jesus used to complete this statement, “the vine,” is not as universal or awe-inspiring as the others—such as Jesus being “the light of the world” (John 8:12), “the resurrection and the life” (11:25), or his penultimate, “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). By contrast, the imagery used in John 15:1, 5—significantly, given the night of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest—is tailored specifically to the Jewish people as Jesus declared himself to be ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true vine). While some debate exists as to what Jesus was referring with his use of “vine,”<sup>3</sup> the general consensus among evangelical scholars is that vine imagery is a Jewish expression used to describe the nation of Israel (Ps 80:8) as well as her expected Messiah (Gen 49:22–24). As such, Jesus’ final “I Am” is steeped in OT backgrounds.

In addition to Jesus identifying himself as the *true* vine (or genuine Israel), He also provides another identifier to depict the

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Rudolf Bultmann viewed Jesus’ vine imagery as alluding to the tree of life in Eden (Gen 2:9). Bultmann does this by appealing to Gnostic, Mandaean sources. See Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), s.v. “Vine, Wine, ἀμπελος.”

disciples remaining with him. These were the very disciples who comprised the incipient church, which would later be birthed by the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. In John 15:5, Jesus labels those who follow him, κλήματα (branches), and commands them to μένω (abide) in him, thereby disclosing a sharp distinction between himself as Israel, and them as something distinct who are to maintain an intimate relationship with Israel.

That Jesus uttered this declaration specifically on the last night of his teaching ministry and directly between his prophecies of the coming Holy Spirit yields a fascinating inference: a new era was dawning in which the Spirit would accomplish what Israel never could. It is here where a unique understanding of inaugurated eschatology is discovered. Rather than assuming the Davidic kingdom had been inaugurated in John's gospel, a position made popular by progressive dispensationalists, this study sees Jesus' statement(s) as inaugurating or introducing a new economy, which furthers world history toward end-time events. A transition from law to grace is illustrated here—not one of law to kingdom.

Additionally, it is worth noting a simple but often overlooked fact: This statement is the only one of the seven Jesus uttered that included his "Father" (ὁ πατήρ μου). Thus, the unit of thought includes *three* role-identities rather than two: Jesus = the vine; the Father = the vinedresser; and the disciples = the branches. Jesus' including his Father highlights a transitional economy being declared, and the Father's role in it supplies the key to other texts which support a dispensational understanding regarding the future kingdom (e.g., Acts 1:3, 6).

Jesus elsewhere described the Father as "greater than I" (John 14:28), as it is he who sovereignly planned and controls all of history. As Haenchen has remarked, Jesus "placed himself entirely in the service of the Father.... He gave himself over entirely to what the Father has affected in him."<sup>4</sup> It is the Father to whom Jesus submits all things and it is from the Father that

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 7-21*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 131.

Jesus receives his literal messianic reign (cf. Dan 7:9–14; Rev 5:9–13).

### Unbalanced Portrayal of Vine Imagery

Scholars have traditionally limited OT textual support connoting specific vine imagery to selective uses of pessimistic portrayals of Israel being a vine or vineyard. The customary texts used for support of this negative portrayal are Psalm 80:8–16; Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10; Ezekiel 15:1–8; 17:1–10; 19:10–14; and Hosea 10:1–2.<sup>5</sup> This trend has never been seriously altered. To this, Grant Taylor points out, “Johannine scholarship remains focused upon the OT texts surveyed, which connote God’s people under judgment.”<sup>6</sup> Because the vine imagery which Jesus uses is customarily thought to refer only to *negative* portrayals of national Israel, generally only these OT passages are used for textual support. Thus, scholars’ presuppositions are often fueling the use of evidence favoring their predetermined results.<sup>7</sup> This hermeneutical blunder is common, especially when it concerns Israel.

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<sup>5</sup> It is these specific OT passages connoting *judgment* upon Israel that have historically (virtually exclusively) been used by scholars in their treatment of John 15—from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. See, for example, Augustine, *Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel of St. John* 80.2 (NPNF, 7:344); B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 216–17; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 272; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 513; John C. Hutchinson, “The Vine in John 15 and Old Testament Imagery in the ‘I AM’ Statements,” *BSac* 168 (January–March 2011): 68–69. To his credit, Hutchinson does provide a few brief comments on Isaiah 27:2–6, a positive vine-text depicting a future prosperity for Israel.

<sup>6</sup> Grant D. Taylor, “The Fruitful Vineyard of God, Jesus and His Disciples at John 15:1–7” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 3.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent dissertation exposing just how pervasive presuppositions are within biblical theology, see Edward J. Herrelko III, “The Role of Presuppositions and Their Impact on The Process of Biblical Theology: A Case Study of The Pauline Theologies of James Dunn and Thomas Schreiner” (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016).

The historic tendency of applying only these judgment vine-imagery texts as the OT background to Jesus' final ἐγώ εἶμι seems to be the mainstay in Johannine scholarship. Due to the negative portrayal of Israel in these texts, a false notion that Israel has been rejected by God for a permanent replacement or fulfillment with either Jesus or the church, has been commonly assumed by scholars.<sup>8</sup> This assumption must be challenged.

It is, of course, important to consider the relevance of these OT judgment-vine texts. Taylor reminds his readers that "each of the texts contains legitimate verbal and conceptual connections to John 15:1–17."<sup>9</sup> Yet, their exclusive placement as the backdrop to John 15 leaves an unbalanced portrayal. While these negative OT vine passages provide a striking contrast to Jesus' claim of being ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή (the True Vine), their exclusive usage does not complete Jesus' entire illustration. There are other remarkably positive and hopeful OT vine/vineyard texts which depict Israel as having a glorious future.<sup>10</sup> For example, Isaiah 27:1–6 predicts a restoration of national Israel in dramatic vineyard imagery:

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea. In that day,

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah 1–32*, Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols., trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 7:170; Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:197; cf. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 396 ; For excellent counterviews demonstrating the future restoration and salvation of national Israel, see Walter P Olson, "The Future of The Nation Israel According To The Book of Romans," *Central Bible Quarterly* 10, no.1 (Spring 1967): 3–34; and, Jim R. Sibley, "Has the Church Put Israel on the Shelf? The Evidence from Romans 11:15," *JETS* 58, no. 3 (September 2015): 571–81.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, "Fruitful Vineyard of God," 3.

<sup>10</sup> For a distinctly Jewish and novel interpretation of John 15 that sees Genesis 49:22 as the premier positive vine-text providing the background for Jesus' illustration, see Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, the King of Israel* (Tel Mond, Israel: Israel Study Center, 2015), 216–20.

“A pleasant vineyard, sing of it! I, the LORD, am its keeper; every moment I water it. Lest anyone punish it, I keep it night and day; I have no wrath. Would that I had thorns and briers to battle! I would march against them, I would burn them up together. Or let them lay hold of my protection, let them make peace with me, let them make peace with me.” In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit.

According to this passage, national Israel has a future as a “pleasant vineyard” (בְּרֵם חֲמַר) beyond the days of Jesus’ earthly ministry.<sup>11</sup> The hopeful promise of this text precludes any notion of God’s replacement of national Israel. As such, focusing solely on negative Israel-vine texts leaves an unbalanced portrayal. Indeed, passages such as Isaiah 27 must be considered when evaluating Jesus’ declaration.

As it stands, Taylor is among the few who make this connection. Instead of proposing the “good Israel” (Christ) replacing the “bad Israel” (nation)—Taylor sees a distinct correspondence between the vine text of Isaiah 27, which speaks about Israel’s future restoration, and John 15.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Taylor suggests, “The poet of Isa 27:6 looks forward to the eschatological day about which Yahweh has just sung (Isa 27:2–5)... When this occurs the 12 tribes of Jacob–Israel will one day be restored in the land and will be joined by sojourners who together become the one ‘house of Jacob.’”<sup>13</sup> This writer agrees with Taylor’s assessment of the biblical connection to a future restoration of Israel. Indeed, the eschatological renewal of Israel in Isaiah 27 is vital to understanding Jesus’ vine analogy. Taylor correctly assesses that both judgment *and* restoration texts regarding Israel play prominent roles in John 15: 1, 5.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> NET Notes point out: “Many medieval MSS read בְּרֵם חֲמַר (“vineyard of wine”) i.e., “a productive vineyard” (NET Bible, study note at Isa 27:2).

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, “Fruitful Vineyard of God,” 84–108.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 99, 101.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

However, whereas Taylor believes the main thrust of John 15 is to show that “Yahweh’s vineyard will be renewed in his Messiah, Jesus, and the disciples who abide in him”<sup>15</sup> as a fulfillment of prophecy, this writer believes that a distinct, yet close relationship exists between Jesus, the church, and national Israel—with a transitioning of dispensations being announced at John 15. Rather than serving as a fulfillment or even an inauguration of prophecy, Jesus’ final ἐγώ εἰμι is intended to highlight a transition in God’s economy. This emphasis is the result of an interpretive methodology that remains consistently normative, or literal, when applied to either descriptive or prophetic portions of OT and NT vine texts.<sup>16</sup>

### Uniqueness of John 15:1, 5

The purpose of John 15:1–5 is to highlight Jesus’ final self-predicated ἐγώ εἰμι viz., that he is ἡ ἀμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true Vine)—a symbol used of national Israel (e.g., Isa 5:1–2). Although Jesus may be the ultimate correspondent to Israel who ensures national Israel will remain, a new age was dawning that would change Israel’s relationship with God. As Jesus made this declaration, the disciples were to continue to trust in Christ as the absolute Israel who is loved by the Father, the eternal cultivator or “vinedresser” (ὁ γεωργός). Thus, John 15:1–5 highlights Jesus’ final “I Am” statement demonstrating the he alone is the true vine, his Father is the sovereign cultivator, and true disciples are those who μένω (abide) or utterly depend on him for life.

Jesus’ “I Am” statements not only use metaphors to bring his identity to the fore, but also specifically underscore his role. For example, David Ball observes,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> While this article focuses on biblical vine/vineyard imagery used as metaphorical depictions of national Israel, it should be noted that not all appearances of the word group are used in such a way. Though an exhaustive treatment reaches beyond the scope of this article, it is understood that various uses of “vine” and “vineyard” do occur in the OT with single-intended meanings depicting general agricultural or viticulture images without any theological or metaphorical undertones (e.g., Judg 9:27; 1 Kgs 21:1; Jer 31:5; Jas 3:12, et al.).

[T]he “I am” sayings with an image should be seen as emphasizing Jesus’ identity in relation to his role (for others), while the other “I am” sayings should be seen as emphasizing Jesus’ identity in itself. In other words, while the “I am” sayings without a predicate are primarily concerned with who Jesus is [e.g., John 8:58], those with a predicate are primarily concerned with what Jesus does. . . . It is only because of who Jesus is that he is able to fulfill the role which he has.<sup>17</sup>

There is a sense in which all seven of Jesus’ ἐγώ εἰμι statements reveal aspects of his deity and also highlight his comparative and contrastive relation through OT metaphors depicting messianic identities.<sup>18</sup> Yet, it is Jesus’ role as the “true vine” that sets off his final “I Am” statement from the others, due to its overtly nationalistic metaphor. Thus, John 15:1, 5 is unique in this regard, as it is the only one in which Jesus uses an explicit depiction of national Israel, יִשְׂרָאֵל / ἄμπελος (vine). Hutchinson suggests, “Jesus’ claim was not just identity with any vine. Rather, He is the *true* or *genuine* one, the messianic fulfillment of Old Testament imagery.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, four other points may be considered that enforce the uniqueness of this particular pericope, especially as it relates to economical or dispensational implications.

### *Enveloped by the Coming Spirit*

The true vine analogy at John 15 is unique for several reasons, including its placement in John’s Gospel. The public ministry of Jesus ends in John 12 before his final Passover celebration. Up to that point, many of the people believed in Jesus, but their fear of the Pharisees kept them from publicly

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<sup>17</sup> David Mark Ball, “‘I Am’ in John’s Gospel: Literary Function, Background and Theological Implications,” *JSNT Supplement Series* 124 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic P, 1996), 174–75.

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48); “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5); “I am the gate for the sheep” (10:8); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14)—all of which contain rich OT correspondence.

<sup>19</sup> Hutchinson, “Vine in John 15,” 64.

announcing their faith (John 12:43). With this scene, all of Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing, performed in places where he was able to freely move about, comes to an end. The story then shifts from Jesus' public ministry to one of privacy with only His twelve disciples (13–17), after which He is betrayed and arrested. Concerning this transition, Rudolf Bultmann observed, "[Jesus] is no longer now the one who stands in the struggle, but the one who speaks to his own, i.e. to his own community."<sup>20</sup> During these final discussions with the disciples, Jesus announces two major events germane to the current paper: the coming of the Holy Spirit and that he himself is the "true vine."

Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit in only two places in John: chapters 14 and 16. As such, an *inclusio* of sorts is present within this section of Jesus' upper room discourse, framed by the Spirit's future role to initiate a new economy. In John 14, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as ἄλλον παράκλητον (another helper) who will be with the disciples forever (John 14:17).<sup>21</sup> Two chapters later, John records Jesus promising to send the Holy Spirit specifically to the disciples after His ascension (16:7). He then describes the Spirit's coming ministry in the world (vv. 8–11). What is significant to grasp about these two prophetic chapters regarding the coming Spirit is the fact that Jesus' final "I Am" in John 15:1, 5 is set directly in between them. The context of these chapters reveals that a new relationship between the Jewish disciples of Israel and their God was on the horizon. Later revelation reveals this new relationship occurred when the Spirit birthed the church in Acts 2. Charles Smith observes,

This relationship was soon to assume a new form in that He was leaving, but the Holy Spirit would come as His Representative.

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<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster P, 1976), 458.

<sup>21</sup> This is not the place to explore the variant differences between the future ἔσται (he will be) and the present ἐστίν (he is) except to say this author believes the future tense has stronger support. For an excellent treatment on the matter, see James M. Hamilton, Jr., "He Is with You and He Will Be in You" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003), 213–20.

With the arrival of the Holy Spirit there was to begin a new and vital relationship (John 14). The parable of John 15:1–8 was given at this point in His instruction, in order to illustrate this new relationship.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, by emphasizing the context of chapter 15 in John’s gospel, a dispensational shift becomes readily apparent. This was not lost on J. N. Darby who stated, “In chapters 15, 16 [of John] you get the distinct dispensations—Christ the true Vine on earth, and then the Comforter come on earth sent down by the exalted Christ.”<sup>23</sup> That Jesus’ final ἔγώ εἶμι, a statement dripping with imagery depicting national Israel, is enveloped by His prophecies concerning the Spirit who will birth the church exposes a stunning shift in God’s economy.

### ***Illustration, not Fulfillment***

While Jesus’ words in John 15:1, 5 may carry type/antitype undertones, a feature addressed later, it is important to note that the entire chapter lacks any explicit “fulfillment” terminology—such as the verb πληρώω or its cognates.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore best not to describe this pericope as a specific fulfillment of OT messianic vine imagery, but rather, view it as Jesus highlighting his personal correspondence to ancient “vine” depictions.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the language Jesus uses at John 15:1, 5 (vine, vine-dresser, branch) is for *illustrative purposes* unique to national Israel and the Jewish people, not as exact fulfillment of OT prophecy. Indeed,

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<sup>22</sup>Charles R. Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring 1968): 4.

<sup>23</sup>John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Matthew–John*, vol. 3 (London, UK: Cooper and Budd, 1949), 379.

<sup>24</sup>For the various NT uses of πληρώω in respect to OT prophecy, see Charles H. Dyer, “Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, and Charles Ryrie (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 51–71.

<sup>25</sup>Contra. John C. Hutchinson, who at first explicitly calls the passage a “messianic fulfillment of Old Testament imagery” (64), but later concludes it “is *much like* the fulfillment of a *type* [emphasis added],” (“Vine in John 15,” 79. This comment provides good evidence that fulfillment and typological language is used rather loosely in biblical scholarship.

Jesus' final self-predication in John 15 is set apart from the others due to its uniquely corporate Israelite connotation.

By Jesus employing a metaphor from the Jewish Scriptures and applying it to himself, he highlights his messianic credentials to his immediate Jewish audience: "The messianic campaign of Jesus in the territories of Israel," argues Don Trest, "required that He present before the people of Israel certain messianic qualifications authenticating His messianic claim."<sup>26</sup> Jesus' analogy exposes himself as the true and qualified "Israel" who restores national Israel and shines as a beacon of light for the nations (Isa 49:3–6). As the "true vine," Jesus' messianic credentials reach their peak—but by way of illustration—not fulfillment.<sup>27</sup>

Charles Dyer cautions against viewing such a NT analogy as specifically depicting a fulfillment of OT prophecy: "Analogous language by itself is too imprecise to serve as a guide to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies."<sup>28</sup> As such, a NT author can employ familiar OT language for literary purposes depicting something other than fulfillment. "New Testament writers," continues Dyer, often "quote or allude to Old Testament people, events, and actions and use them to illustrate their own messages to the church.... One cannot determine the fulfillment of Bible prophecy merely on the basis of New Testament allusions to the Old Testament."<sup>29</sup> This is germane to the discussion at hand

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<sup>26</sup> Don Trest, "The Distinctive Sonship Soteriology of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, Part 1," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 20, no. 60 (Summer 2016): 150.

<sup>27</sup> This idea contrasts with Progressive Covenantalist Brent E. Parker, who states, "The prophecy of the restoration of the vine through a son, the king, is fulfilled in Jesus" ("The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parke [Nashville: B&H, 2016], 62). As the current section demonstrates, in John 15 Jesus is not himself a fulfillment of prophecy; rather, Jesus is employing a viticulture analogy or illustration. Thus, his words at John 15:1, 5 are analogical, not typological or fulfillment.

<sup>28</sup> Dyer, "Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment," 61.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

because nothing in Jesus' vine illustration demands a "fulfillment."

The position offered here is that Jesus' final ἐγώ εἰμι is better seen as a vivid illustration enveloped in rich OT metaphor rather than any specific fulfillment. As such, all entities involved in the analogy remain distinct and permanent: Jesus, the Father, Israel, and the church (in germinal form).<sup>30</sup> Further, Jesus' illustration had the purpose of evoking vine imagery in the disciples' minds, causing them to grasp the analogy's national significance along with the changing of relationship.

Understanding Jesus' words as an extended metaphor or illustration rather than a "fulfillment" bars any notion that literal Israel has no future in God's plans. Like Dyer, David Mappes cautions his readers regarding the use of "fulfillment formula" so often preferred by non-literal Bible interpreters: "The use of the fulfillment formula in the NT is simply too broad to suggest that its mere appearance indicates a historical completion of a prophetic promise. The context and use of each passage must be compared to the antecedent historical promise to validate a fulfilled promise."<sup>31</sup> Because of texts such as Isaiah 27—that prophesy a future restoration of God's "vineyard," Israel (cf. vv. 2, 6, 12)—the mere appearance of vine imagery here does not necessitate any fulfillment of the nation; indeed, it cannot.

This is in keeping with Israel's election as spoken by the prophets (Deut 7:6; Isa 45:4; Jer 31:35–37) and confirmed by the apostle Paul (Rom 9–11). If a fulfillment had taken place in John

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<sup>30</sup> The term "germinal" is borrowed from James I. Fazio, *Two Commissions: Two Missionary Mandates in Matthew's Gospel* (El Cajon, CA: SCS P, 2015). Fazio employs this term in regard to the first commission Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 10 and describes it as "the germ or seed form of the gospel which Christ first preached before He was laid into the earth, and which afterward bore much fruit (John 12:24)" (30–31). While the current work deals with a different biblical context than Fazio's research, this writer uses his helpful term "germinal" to refer to the *incipient* or *seed* form of the church, an entity that would not be actualized until the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. At the point of Jesus' declaration in John 15, the church existed in "germinal form," i.e., solely in the remaining disciples.

<sup>31</sup> David Mappes, "Literal Interpretation and Theological Method: What Is It and How to Do It?," *Ariel Ministries Magazine* (Winter 2017): 21.

15, a valid argument would indeed be that national Israel has been “completed” as part of God’s plan for the nation.<sup>32</sup> However, since no fulfillment was announced nothing in the text warrants concluding that national Israel is swallowed up into completion with Jesus’ illustration.

That said, if a “fulfillment” in some sense had truly taken place with Jesus’ true vine analogy, a case could be made that he fulfilled *Judaism* as a religion rather than national Israel. This is an option presented by N. T. Wright who states, “That which Judaism had thought to find in Torah is truly found in Jesus.”<sup>33</sup> Others have likewise promoted such a concept.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Michael Vlach points out: “The NT reaffirms Israel’s election as the reason God can never remove or replace Israel.”<sup>35</sup> National Israel’s future is secured in the God who does not revoke his promises (cf. Rom 11:29).

### *Vine(-yard) Language*

D. A. Carson has pointed out that vines were among the most common motifs in ancient religions: “Vine imagery is so common in the ancient world,” he wrote, “that scholars have been able to discover parallels they find in a compelling wide range of literature—in Gnosticism, the Mandaeen corpus, Philo, the

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<sup>32</sup> Michael J. Vlach labels this as a type of replacement theology called “economic supersessionism,” which “focuses on God’s plan in history for the people of God to transfer from an ethnic group (Israel) to a universal group not based on ethnicity (church). In other words, God planned from the beginning for Israel’s role as the people of God to expire with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the church” (*Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation* [Nashville: B&H, 2010], 14).

<sup>33</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 414.

<sup>34</sup> For example, this is the route also chosen by Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. Howard Clark Kee (New York: Abingdon, 1975), 229: “Though J[oh]n seeks in this way to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism, as well as the true pagan religion, the missionary quality is wholly lacking in J[oh]n.” Although it is not the point of the current article, Kümmel’s anti-missionary claim here is contrary to Köstenberger’s published works on the topic.

<sup>35</sup> Vlach, “Has the Church Replaced Israel?,” 200.

literature of Palestinian Judaism, and more.”<sup>36</sup> Carson’s point notwithstanding, that Jesus had specific vine/vineyard imagery derived from the *Old Testament* depicting national Israel as his point-of-reference is easily inferred by the frequency in which John appeals to specific OT passages throughout his account.

For Jesus to call himself ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true Vine), he was undoubtedly intending both to highlight and contrast himself with the symbol most prevalent for national Israel. Contrary to Vincent who states, “The vine was a symbol of the ancient church,”<sup>37</sup> Charles Smith captures well the importance of *Israel’s national identity as a vine*, linking it to John 15:

A careful study of the passage clearly indicates that Jesus did have in mind the familiar Old Testament usage of the vine as a symbol of Israel. This symbol was well-known to all Jews. Everyone knew of the temple-vine already mentioned and they no doubt had been taught from childhood the significance of this symbol. The vine was the recognized emblem of the nation Israel just as the eagle is the recognized emblem of the United States. During the Maccabean period the figure of a vine was stamped on the coins of the Jewish nation.<sup>38</sup>

The grapevine in particular had a prominent place among decorations for the temple. Josephus described the temple as having “a golden vine, with its branches hanging down [from above the front doors and embroidered veils] from a great height, the largest and fine workmanship.”<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, Josephus said these golden vines had “clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man’s

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<sup>36</sup> Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 513.

<sup>37</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 2:249. Vine’s statement is assumed, never demonstrated.

<sup>38</sup> Charles R. Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 5; Further, Allen C. Meyers, ed., in *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Vine, Vineyard,” states plainly, “In the Old Testament the vine is a rich symbol for Israel.”

<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.11.3.

height.”<sup>40</sup> With the temple scene of grape vineyards across the Kidron Valley as probable backdrops, Jesus’ declaration that he is truly ἡ ἄμπελος must have been striking for the Jewish disciples since they had a tangible reference point for comparison.<sup>41</sup> Grammatically, this articular noun being placed immediately after the ἐγώ εἰμι phrase, and yet before the following predicate adjective ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true), serves to underscore Jesus’ intended emphasis—it is he and he alone who is the vine, no other candidate will do.

Several features are included in John 15 to help support one main purpose: Jesus Christ is the premier model of everything Israel was meant to be. By way of analysis applied to Jesus’ statement at John 15:1, 5, the argument advanced throughout is that Jesus being ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινὴ (the true Vine) is not only a declaration of deity, but also conveys his connection to national Israel and their changing relationship with him. This new relationship was about to be formalized into the body of Christ, the church, which Jesus anticipated with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>40</sup> Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 5.5.4.

<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that Rudolf Bultmann does not see any tangible comparison between Jesus’ illustration and grape vines in the immediate area: “The absence of any particle of comparison, the definite article, and the term ἀληθ[*sic*] all show that there is no comparison or parable, such as might have been suggested by the sight of a vine climbing up the side of the house or of the golden vine over the Temple gate” (*The Gospel of John*, 529n.4.). Although Bultmann admittedly draws solid grammatical points, the argument addressed in this thesis is in no way dependent on physical grape vines being present as a point of immediate reference in Jesus’ analogy. Rather, in his viticulture illustration, Jesus used the word ἄμπελος (vine) as metaphor depicting *national Israel* which supplied the main point of comparison, not any nearby physical objects (even if nearby grapevines provided Jesus a tangible expression of the metaphor). Indeed, Bultmann himself concedes to this point: “But naturally the title ἄμπελος, like ποιμήν in chp. 10, presents the opportunity of appending metaphorical and comparative discourse” (*ibid.*).

While temporary Israel may fail, the eternal Israel does not. And the disciples are given a powerful glimpse concerning a new era that was dawning (the church), and their intimate relationship with its head. By drawing on language befitting of Israel's viticulture, Jesus emphasized that he is, and always had been, the only genuine vine; the Jewish disciples are connected to him as τὰ κλήματα (the branches).

The disciples, representing the incipient church, were not the vine—that right belonged exclusively to Jesus. This is contrary to Robert Gundry who sees no distinction between Jesus as the vine and the disciples as the branches: “Now that Israel has been set aside because of their rejection of Jesus, he *and those who abide in him become the new and true vine* of God's planting. Jesus is the whole vine, not just the stem, so that as branches those who abide in him are not merely connected to him; *they are absorbed by him* [emphasis added].”<sup>42</sup> Yet the distinction Jesus makes between Himself as a vine and the disciples as the branches is as sharp as Paul's description of the branches and the root in Romans 9; these distinctions need to be accounted for and not merely thought of as synonymous or “absorption.” It seems Robert Gromacki comes closer to the point: “Christ first of all depicted the new relationship that would exist between Him and the disciples in the metaphor of the vine and the branches.”<sup>43</sup> The new relationship would be intimate, yet distinct. Thus, any theology that proposes the church has replaced national Israel is aberrant to John 15.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 284.

<sup>43</sup> Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 145.

<sup>44</sup> For more on the grammatical and biblical significance of κλήματα (“branches”) see, Cory M. Marsh, “The True Vine: An Analysis of Jesus' Final Self-Predicated ‘I Am’ and Consideration of its Dispensational Implication” (Th.M. thesis, Southern California Seminary, 2018). Theological Research Exchange Network.

### *Type–Antitype Correspondence*

One argument of this article is that a fulfillment of prophecy had not taken place with Jesus' final predicated ἐγώ εἰμι statement. Rather, Jesus being the "true vine" was a comparative illustration with national Israel as the original referent. Yet, this scene marks what some believe to be a *typological fulfillment*. For instance, Hutchison suggests that, "Jesus was contrasting Himself to another earlier vine, Israel, and claiming to be the genuine vine—the perfect in place of the imperfect, the fulfillment of the type."<sup>45</sup> While it seems obvious that Jesus was contrasting himself with the earlier vine Israel, the concept of *type fulfillment* is not so clear. In his monumental *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, J. Barton Payne defines *type* as

Stand[ing] in correspondence of the verbalized *figure*, in that it is a predictive symbol or prefiguration that is presented through an independently existing historical reality, just as a figure of speech conveys a second thought that grows out of its accepted common usage. That is to say, the type possess another, separate existence among its immediate contemporaries, even while communicating its developed, God-given truth about the future.<sup>46</sup>

A point to note in Payne's definition is that a type is always an independent existing reality. Nowhere is the notion of cancelation of the original historical reality. A type establishes the physical reality of a *later spiritual* truth; the type's historicity remains untouched. Therefore, as Everette Harrison observed, Jesus being the true (ἀληθινῆ) vine in John 15:1 means he is "real, all that a vine should be in a spiritual sense."<sup>47</sup>

Jesus' intention was to highlight a spiritual truth connected to historical Israel. Yet, historical Israel has always remained

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<sup>45</sup> Hutchison, "Vine in John 15," 70.

<sup>46</sup> J. Barton Payne, "The Nature of Prediction," in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and their Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 21.

<sup>47</sup> Everett F. Harrison, "John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1962), 1106.

untouched as to its historicity and future fulfillment of promises like those described in Isaiah 27. “If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc.,” points out John Feinberg, “it is canceled. But if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat it in the NT for it still to be true and operative?”<sup>48</sup> There is nothing in Jesus’ vine analogy, if even it qualifies as a legitimate type, which hints that national Israel has been canceled, fulfilled, or any other concept suggesting its termination.

Furthermore, neither Jesus nor the church acts as a replacement or fulfillment of national Israel at John 15:1, 5. If a type-antitype correspondence does exist at John 15, it exists only to highlight a distinct, yet personal relationship between Jesus, Israel, and the (future) church. Acknowledging that biblical types do exist, Vlach concludes, “National Israel is not a type that is superseded by the church.... Instead, the typological connection is that of a historical and theological correspondence that reveals a close relationship between Israel and the church.”<sup>49</sup> The nation of Israel was never designed as a type to be transcended by Christ. Rather, Israel was always in need of the ultimate Israelite—Jesus the true Vine—to restore it (Isa 49:3–6). Indeed, their identity and function will continue into the future kingdom (Luke 2:8–20; Rev 20:6; 21:24).

### **Dispensational Implications of John 15:1, 5 in Relation to other NT Texts**

The argument advanced throughout this article is that Jesus’ final ἐγὼ εἶμι declaration at John 15 underscores a new era dawning in which the Holy Spirit would accomplish what national Israel never could. A transitioning of economies is announced with Jesus’ words, anticipating a dispensational shift in world history. By Jesus identifying the disciples as

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<sup>48</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Theological Systems and the Testaments: Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 76.

<sup>49</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies, 2008), 22, 23.

“branches,” he disclosed a sharp distinction between himself as Israel, and them as related yet still distinct. According to Isaiah 27:2–6, national Israel has a hopeful future as God’s restored “pleasant vineyard,” and the vine analogy at John 15 serves to ratify that the promises concerning Israel are still binding, and that a new dispensation was about to come to fruition with the birth of the church. Such a proposition has admittedly never gained attention in traditional Johannine studies. However, in what follows, several NT texts will be shown to bear a striking semblance to Jesus’ true vine illustration, along with insights that help gain a better understanding of his intent at John 15:1, 5.

### *Acts 1:6–7*

It is safely inferred that distinct identities and roles are being highlighted in John 15:1, 5, more so than the discipleship-abiding focus throughout the rest of the chapter—a feature of which virtually all commentators focus.<sup>50</sup> In particular, Jesus’ inclusion of his Father in verse 1 bears significant weight concerning dispensational thought—especially as it relates to Acts 1:6–7. This is because the Father’s role as ὁ γεωργός (the vinedresser), or better “the sovereign Cultivator,” is essential in understanding Jesus’ announcement of a dispensational shift. That the Father’s contribution in the mission of Jesus is prominent in the fourth gospel is readily seen by the fact that he is described as the “sender” of Jesus more than 50 times—an activity intended to elicit faith in Christ. John F. O’Grady observes, “Throughout the Gospel of John it is the peculiar function of the Father to bring people to faith.”<sup>51</sup> As the sovereign Cultivator, it is the Father

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<sup>50</sup> Francis Moloney represents the majority of Johannine commentators when he stated, “The outstanding feature of the opening section of 15:1–16:3 is the use of the verb *menein* “abide.” It is fundamental to the metaphor of the vine and the branches (vv.1 – 18) and is present in various forms across vv.1–11” (*Gospel of John*, 417). While the command to abide is certainly important to the chapter, one must still deal with the unique identities Jesus assigns in verses 1 and 5 in the beginning of the pericope.

<sup>51</sup> John F. O’Grady, “The Good Shepherd and the Vine and the Branches,” 38, no. 2 (May 1978): 88.

who determines the epochs of world history and draws all things to his Son, the true Vine.

John's gospel is inimitable in its presentation of the Father as the absolute Sovereign who controls all events. Commenting on John 15:1, Moloney underscores the Father's sovereign role: "It is the Father who is ultimately responsible for all that Jesus does and makes known."<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Haenchen adds: "Neither does Jesus claim anything as his own achievement, as he is represented in the Fourth Gospel ... but placed himself entirely in the service of the Father and renounces his own word. He gave himself over entirely to what the Father has affected in him."<sup>53</sup> The Father as sovereign over the Son's earthly missions (both advents) is key for understanding Jesus' death and resurrection (Acts 2:23–24) and his establishment of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6–7).

After the risen Christ spent "forty days speaking about the Kingdom of God" to his disciples (Acts 1:4), they asked only one question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The disciples' question is telling. The verb used, ἀποκαθίστημι (restore), is best defined, "to change to an earlier good state or condition, *restore, reestablish*."<sup>54</sup> This verb is used in the synoptics to refer to a physical restoration of good health after being healed by Christ (Matt 12:18; Mark 8:25; Luke 22:51), as well as the future coming of Elijah and the restoration of everything (Matt 17:11). Because this verb denotes a change to an earlier good-state, there is no question that the disciples were expecting a complete re-establishment of national Israel. The biblical expectation of the kingdom was always future and literal. Stanley Toussaint writes, "When John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, and the disciples announced the nearness of the kingdom of heaven/God (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7), the audiences

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<sup>52</sup> Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 419.

<sup>53</sup> Haenchen, *John 2*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> BDAG, 927. Moreover, Liddell Henry George and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* abridged version (Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, 2011), 5418 adds, "reinstate," to the list of glosses for ἀποκαθίστημι, which helps enforce the idea of a re-established, reinstated kingdom to Israel.

were thinking of an earthly kingdom of David. Never does the Lord teach anything different from their expectations.”<sup>55</sup>

Equally fascinating is Jesus’ response: “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). It is especially here that a connection to John 15:1 becomes apparent. At John 15, Jesus identifies the Father as ὁ γεωργός, the sovereign cultivator, demonstrating his absolute power and knowledge over all things pertaining to Jesus’ ministry. The Father’s sovereign role in Jesus’ vine analogy is germane to Jesus’ explanation at Acts 1:7 because the Father, being the cultivator of the vine, serves as a vivid word-picture of Him later establishing the kingdom in restored national Israel in fulfillment of OT prophecy (Isa 27:1–6; Dan 7:13–14; Amos 9:11–15).

In Acts 1:7, Jesus does not rebuke nor correct the disciples’ question. He does not offer anything in response that would lend a spiritual interpretation of the still future kingdom.<sup>56</sup> According to Toussaint, “In Acts 1:6 the disciples asked about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Again, Christ did not say they had a wrong view of the kingdom. Christ Himself looked ahead to a time when the disciples would be reigning with Him over Israel (Matt 19:28).”<sup>57</sup> The only thing Jesus offers in response is to say it is the Father who determines when Israel will be restored to her former glory.<sup>58</sup> As pointed out by Vlach, “The

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<sup>55</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “God’s Plan for History: From the Ascension to the Second Coming of Christ,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 179.

<sup>56</sup> Contrary to those who deny the concept of a restored national Israel and re-interpret texts such as Acts 1:7 in a spiritual sense. E.g., N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 374; and O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 134.

<sup>57</sup> Toussaint, “God’s Plan for History,” 179.

<sup>58</sup> John B. Polhill connects this to the prophet Joel: “Such passages as Joel 2:28–32 were interpreted in nationalistic terms that saw a general outpouring of the Spirit on Israel as a mark of the final great messianic Day of the Lord when Israel would be ‘restored’ to the former glory of the days

question of the apostles concerned the *timing* of the kingdom .... This is a ‘when’ question, not a ‘what’ question. The apostles are not asking Jesus to define the kingdom or explain its nature. They want to know *when* it was coming.”<sup>59</sup>

Before Jesus’ death, the disciples were commissioned to preach about the kingdom exclusively to Israel (Matt 10:5–6). Now they spent 40 more days learning about it (Acts 1:3). The only thing they lacked was knowledge concerning the timing of its establishment. “There is no indication in Jesus’ reply,” concludes Bock, “that anything they asked was wrong except that they are excessively concerned about when all would take place.”<sup>60</sup> When Jesus answered that only the Father knows the time when literal Israel will be restored, it was a guarantee that “[he] will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that [he had] given them” (Amos 9:15).

Therefore, no replacement, fulfillment, or dismissal of the old vine exists. Rather, a contrast between the two *vines* is what Jesus is underscoring, while highlighting the Father as the great cultivator, a point observed by Darby: “The true Vine, therefore, is not Israel; quite the contrary, it is Christ in contrast with Israel, but Christ planted on earth, taking Israel’s place, as the *true* Vine. The Father cultivates this plant, evidently on the earth.”<sup>61</sup> The heavenly gardener plants, plans, and brings about promises given to his people, and does so through the true vine. National Israel is not fulfilled or absorbed into the vine at John 15:1; rather, the Father has a future restoration for the nation that is guaranteed to come to fruition (Isa 27:1–6; 49:3–6).

### ***Matthew 21:33–44***

John 15:1, 5 uses vine imagery similar to that of other NT Gospel texts such as Matthew 21. A common consensus among

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of David and Solomon”(Acts, NAC 26, ed. David S. Dockery [Nashville: B & H, 1982], 84).

<sup>59</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 402.

<sup>60</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 62.

<sup>61</sup> John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible: Matthew–John*, vol. 3 (London, UK: Cooper and Budd, 1949), 374.

NT scholars is that these vine/vineyard texts depict the church as having replaced Israel.<sup>62</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, this conclusion is without convincing exegetical warrant. Each of these vine texts support the argument that national Israel is not replaced or transcended, and that a glorious restoration awaits her.

Matthew's Gospel presents a parable concerning a master of a vineyard (ἀμπελών) and a group of wicked tenants to which it was leased (Matt 21:33–44).<sup>63</sup> Much similarity exists between this parable and the "true vine" analogy in John 15.<sup>64</sup> In addition to *vineyard* language throughout the parable, a master/owner and his son are showcased within the story, both of whom have obvious connotations to Jesus and the Father. According to the parable, the owner of the vineyard sends two groups of servants to collect the vineyard's fruit, which ended violently both times. The landowner then finally sends his beloved son and heir thinking, "They will respect my son" (Matt 21:37). However, "they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him" (v. 39).

The allusions of this ἀμπελών story to that of the vineyard depicted in Isaiah 5 are difficult to miss as both *watchtower* or *fence* (לִּמְצָדָה; πύργος) and *wine* or *winepress* (כַּבֵּץ; ληνός) connect the two linguistically, while national Israel connects them contextually. Recognizing this connection, John Nolland observes, "The link with Is. 5:2 immediately confirms that God

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<sup>62</sup> E.g., William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 786; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1992), 325; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 212.

<sup>63</sup> For the biblical equivalence of ἄμπελος (vine) and ἀμπελών (vineyard), see David M. Ball, "'I Am'" in John's Gospel," 244–46; and Allen C. Meyers, ed., "Vine, Vineyard," in *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 1038.

<sup>64</sup> The fact that Jesus clearly informs his audience that the story in Matthew is a "parable" (Matt 21:33) enforces the argument made throughout that his vine analogy at John 15 is not to be understood parabolically or allegorically since no indication is given to take it as such.

is to be identified as the landowner. It also makes virtually certain that the vineyard is to be identified with the Jewish people, established as a people by the efforts of God himself.”<sup>65</sup> Matthew’s parable demonstrates that it is God who plants and cultivates his people Israel, who constantly fail. John 15:1, 5 furthers the story by contrasting Christ with Israel as the faithful and true vine.

The parable in Matthew 21 ends with Jesus’ declaring that Israel’s leadership had rejected their cornerstone (v. 42), so the kingdom would be given to a new generation (v. 43). From this declaration, it is illegitimate to infer that Israel has been replaced by any candidate, particularly the church. “It must not be concluded from this,” warns Toussaint, “that the kingdom is removed forever from Israel. This is impossible due to the promises given to Abraham and David. The promises are addressed to Israel as a nation.”<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, NT texts such as Romans 11:26–27 and Acts 1:6 speak of Israel’s future salvation and restoration. Thus, Gundry is mistaken to think that “Matthew writes his Gospel for the church as the new chosen nation, which at least for the time being has replaced the old chosen nation of Israel.”<sup>67</sup> Israel’s future as God’s pleasant vineyard (Isa 27) will bring further blessings to the world (Rom 11:12, 15).

Matthew’s vineyard parable is also similar to John 15 in meaning. Jesus, contrasting himself to the faithless vine, does not disclose a replacement of Israel by the church any more than his parable in Matthew 21 suggests the church as the new kingdom. David Turner observes, “According to [Matt] 21:45, the Jewish leaders realize that Jesus is talking about them, not Israel as a whole. It is thus a mistake to view 21:43 as indicating the

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<sup>65</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 869–70.

<sup>66</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980), 252.

<sup>67</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 162.

replacement of Israel by the gentile church.”<sup>68</sup> Instead, the New Testament declares that Israel will play a crucial role during the tribulation (Rev 7:4–8) and will enjoy a position of leadership and service after Christ’s return (Isa 2:2–4; Matt 19:28). These facts highlight dispensational distinctions necessary to prophetic fulfillment. This further enforces the contention of the current paper, that Jesus’ final “I Am” statement is intended to underscore a transitioning of economies—from one of law to one of grace.

### *Luke 13:6–9, 34–35*

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus tells another parable regarding a barren fig tree in a vineyard. Linguistically, the terms connecting this story to that of Jesus’ declaration at John 15:1, 5 are “vineyard” (ἀμπελών) and “vinedresser” (ἀμπελουργός) in vv.6–7. While both Greek terms Luke uses differ slightly from those of John (e.g., John uses γεωργός [land-worker] instead of ἀμπελουργός [vinedresser]), their meaning is contextually similar. However, a notable difference is seen in the terms’ referents. In Luke, an unnamed “man” marked by the indefinite pronoun τις is representative of God while the “vinedresser” appears to be representative of Christ. Further, the “fig tree” (συκῆ) most probably stands for national Israel which Luke uses in place of the Johannine term ἄμπελος (vine, John 15:1, 5).<sup>69</sup> Bock explains,

The fig tree is a picture of the nation and is a variation of another common figure that pictures the nation as a vine or as caring for a vine.... The fig tree pictures the nation and portrays Israel as not

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<sup>68</sup> David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 517.

<sup>69</sup> I. Howard Marshall differs in that Marshall does not see the fig tree representing Israel: “In the parable its fruit is symbolical of the Jewish people, but the OT references ... hardly suggests that [the fig tree as] a standing symbol for Israel is being used” (The Gospel of Luke, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 555). Marshall is of the minority opinion here among Johannine scholars.

having borne any spiritual produce for some time. The owner's disgust pictures God's evaluation of Israel's current status. It is possible that the vinedresser represents the merciful element in God's character pleading for patience.<sup>70</sup>

As with the Matthean parable, scholars also see a connection between the parable in Luke with the judgment passage in Isaiah 5. For example, Joel Green asks, "Does the narrator hope that his audience will hear Isa 5:1–7 in the background of this parable? If so, an identification of Israel with the vineyard is likely, with further identification of the fig tree as Israel's barren leadership also conceivable."<sup>71</sup> Yet, in no sense is a replacement given for Israel; rather, the opposite is conveyed as the parable ends with future hope for the fig tree (vv. 8–9).

The hope conveyed to national Israel in the Lukan vineyard parable runs congruent to the hope for the nation conveyed in the Matthean parable—both finding a connecting point with Jesus' final ἐγὼ εἶμι declaration in John 15:1, 5. Jesus, in contrast to the unfaithful vine, is the genuine or ultimate vine—the ever-faithful and true Israelite. It is the true vine—Jesus—to whom repentant Israel will one day cry, as recorded at the end of the chapter (Luke 13:35). Understanding this as a future reality, Bock asserts, "[Jesus and the church] believed that God would restore the nation in the end. In fact, the NT suggests that such a response will precede Christ's return, thus Luke's later reference to the current period as 'the time of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24; see also Rom 11:11–32 ... and probably Rev 7:1–8).'"<sup>72</sup> The Lukan parable and prophecy suggests no type of replacement for national Israel. Vlach states, "This declaration of blessedness will come from a repentant nation at the time of its restoration.... There is judgment for the present generation of Israel, but there is also the hope of restoration in the future."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the

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<sup>70</sup> Darrel L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1209.

<sup>71</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 515n126.

<sup>72</sup> Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1251.

<sup>73</sup> Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 186–187.

repentant nation as a whole will finally receive her Messiah at his next coming—a grammatical point Luke makes by his use of the second person plural pronoun ὑμῖν (you all), and second person plural verb ἴδητέ (you all see) (cf. Zech 12:10).

### Summation of Dispensational Implications

Far from baseless, the dispensational implications from these passages are rich. It should be recalled that in John 15:5, Jesus declares Himself as the vine and the disciples as τὰ κλήματα (the branches). At the time Jesus uttered this statement, the eleven disciples were His immediate audience. It is they who would be the leaders of the approaching economy, one which the Holy Spirit would usher in with the birth of the church. As Smith points out, “The Jewish branch is primarily meant; as by the contrasted fruit-bearing branch we are to understand primarily the Apostles, the Christian church having its germ in them.”<sup>74</sup>

Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that Jesus declared *Himself* to be the vine—the faithful Israel—while His disciples (the germinal church) are attached as the branches. In other words, the church is not the vine; it does not take the place of national Israel. This is in contrast to Bruce Waltke, who declares that the New Testament teaches the “hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church.... The Jewish *nation* no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills God’s purpose for Israel.”<sup>75</sup> It is also conflicts with Brent Parker: “Through Jesus Christ, the Savior of Israel and the nations, the eschatological, renewed Israel has emerged—the church.”<sup>76</sup> Contrary to these, however, Craig Blasing is on point: “[The church] [is] a new reality that did not replace, cancel, or ‘spiritually’ fulfill the plan and purpose of God for Israel.”<sup>77</sup> As

<sup>74</sup> Smith, “Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 12.

<sup>75</sup> Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” 274–75.

<sup>76</sup> Parker, “Israel-Christ-Church Relationship,” 63.

<sup>77</sup> Craig A. Blasing, “God’s Plan for History: The Consummation,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody), 198.

such, the church is not the new Israel, but is comprised of a remnant of believing Israelites during the current economy.<sup>78</sup>

This dispensation, or economy, will continue until the restoration of national Israel after Jesus' second coming (cf., Zech 14:4–9; Matt 24:30–31; Rom 11:25–27). Summing up this future hope, Blaising concludes, “Dispensational views of the eschatological consummation must be understood as attempts to give full theological justification to the hopes of Israel and the hopes of the church as distinctively, progressively, and historically revealed and affirmed in Scripture.”<sup>79</sup>

In sum, while the New Testament contains other passages depicting Gentile/Jewish relations through horticulture imagery, the passages in Matthew and Luke were chosen due to their specific vine/vineyard language shared with John 15:1, 5.<sup>80</sup> As

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<sup>78</sup> Contra C. Marvin Pate, who says: “The church, according to the New Testament, is the eschatological (end-time) Israel incorporated in Jesus Christ, and as such, is a progression beyond historical Israel” (“The Relationship between Israel and the Church,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*, ed. Daniel Hays and J. Scott Duvall [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 759). Awkwardly, Pate then goes on to provide a caveat that the church does not permanently replace Israel. This writer sees it difficult to bypass the logical conclusion that if the church has become the “eschatological Israel” that progresses past national Israel then, at least in some respect, national/historical Israel has been replaced—even permanently (as what would follow the eschaton?).

<sup>79</sup> Blaising, “God’s Plan for History,” 198.

<sup>80</sup> One notable exclusion from this section is Paul’s olive tree analogy in Romans 11:16–24. For solid treatments of this passage which view the “root” as referring to either Abraham or all three of the Jewish patriarchs, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle of to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 703–04; Thomas S. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 603–09; Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1973), 201–202; John Phillips, *Exploring Romans: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1969), 171–72; Further, David Olander, “God’s Sovereign Choice of Israel: The Holy Root of Romans 11:16-17,” *The Journal of Dispensational Theology* 19, no. 58 (winter 2015): 253–70, sees the root as extending from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob and into the eternal covenants made with them. For a different take that understands Paul’s “root” analogy as a rich description of the “oneness” between Israelite and Gentile remnants, see

demonstrated, none of these passages suggests any replacement or transcendence of national Israel. As Toussaint notes, “The New Testament sees three groups of people—Jews, Gentiles, and Christ’s believers, that is, the church (cf. 1 Cor 10:32).”<sup>81</sup> These distinctions are upheld through each of the passages, with no mixing with the others.

### Relation to Inaugurated Eschatology

Welsh scholar C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) popularized the idea of an eschatology in John’s gospel which is *realized* in Jesus and through his church.<sup>82</sup> According to Dodd, there is to be no still-future kingdom expected.<sup>83</sup> Dodd rejected a literal view of historical events such as creation and the fall, which led to his rejection of historical end-time events. To Dodd, all events were “realized” in Christ.<sup>84</sup> This idea was later modified by French Lutheran scholar Oscar Cullman (1902–1999) and promoted in American biblical scholarship through George Eldon Ladd (1911–1982).<sup>85</sup> Following Cullman’s lead in Europe, Ladd created a hybrid between Dodd’s extreme view that saw all eschatology fulfilled in Christ’s first advent, and one that saw

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Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 889–90.

<sup>81</sup> Toussaint, “God’s Plan for History,” 176.

<sup>82</sup> See C. H. Dodd, *History and the Gospels* (London, UK: James Nisbet, 1938); and C. H. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments: Three Lectures with an Appendix on Eschatology and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).

<sup>83</sup> Bultmann held to a similar theory seeing all eschatological elements wrapped up in Jesus, the word who became flesh (John 1:14), and something to demythologize into a presently-experienced existential crisis. See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 625; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner’s, 1970), 1:4–11, 19–22; 2:39–40, 113–14.

<sup>84</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Realized Eschatology,” *BSac* 127, no. 508 (October 1970): 316.

<sup>85</sup> Two pivotal works detailing “inaugurated eschatology” penned by Cullman and Ladd are Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); and George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).

nothing eschatologically related fulfilled.<sup>86</sup> He termed this middle path “inaugurated eschatology,” positing an “already/not yet” form of the kingdom of God. According to Ladd, “The Kingdom is not only an eschatological gift belonging to the Age to Come; it is also a gift to be received in the old aeon.”<sup>87</sup> For Ladd, “God *is* now the king, but he must also *become* the king.”<sup>88</sup>

Ladd’s paradigm would eventually influence a form of dispensationalists who call themselves *progressive*, adopting his *already/not yet* theory as a hermeneutical device, especially for the gospel of John.<sup>89</sup> In contrast to Dodd and Ladd, this thesis rejects any idea that the kingdom of God is currently experienced. Rather than positing an *already/not yet* fulfillment of the *Davidic Kingdom*, John’s gospel emphasizes eternal life as something experienced in this age, as well as the age to come (John 3:16; 5:24; 17:3; et al.). Thus, it is in relation to *soteriology* that any “realized eschatology” can be found in John’s gospel.<sup>90</sup> Any further inaugurated eschatology found in John may be traced

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<sup>86</sup> The extreme futurist eschatological view was held by men such as Anglican clergyman and ultra-dispensationalist, E. W. Bullinger (1837–1913).

<sup>87</sup> George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 70.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>89</sup> For an outstanding critique of Progressive Dispensationalism to include their Laddian-hermeneutics see, Ron J. Bigalke Jr. ed., *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University P, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> This seems to be Schreiner’s view as well, yet he obfuscates it by equating personal salvation with the already/not yet inauguration of the Kingdom of God: “The kingdom can be explained in terms of already-not yet. The *kingdom was inaugurated* in Jesus’ ministry but not yet consumed . . . . We noted a number of texts that indicate that the *inauguration of eternal life* in the ministry of Jesus does not rule out a future consummation” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 95; emphasis added. Cf. Thomas Schreiner *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 20, where he likewise neglects an important distinction between individual salvation and national Israelite promises in his “already but not yet” discussion.

to Jesus' ἐγώ εἰμι at John 15:1, 5 which appears to *inaugurate* a new economy furthering world history toward end-time events. Anything more than these two aspects regarding inaugurated eschatology is pushing beyond the intention of John.

As Acts 7:56 and Revelation 3:21 make clear, Jesus is currently in heaven at the right hand of the Father, sitting on the Father's throne—not the throne of David (see Rev 12:5). If there is any current kingship rule of Christ, it is to be tied to Melchizedekian kingship, in which Christ reigns as a royal priest, not his future Davidic kingship.<sup>91</sup>

Yet, since Dodd's and Ladd's theory, Johannine scholarship is almost dominated by realized or inaugurated eschatology. But if Jesus' true vine analogy means he has replaced national Israel, then there is no future kingdom to be expected since he is now reigning on David's throne (2 Sam 7). If such a theory were legitimate, then the kingdom of God is a reality currently experienced. However, a future kingdom, one in which the church will share, still awaits fruition in a redeemed national Israel (Amos 9:11–15; cf. Acts 1:6–7; Rev 20:2–7). Fruchtenbaum states, "Jesus has never yet sat on the Throne of David ruling over a Kingdom of Israel. The reestablishment of the Davidic Throne and Messiah's rule over the Kingdom still awaits a future fulfillment. It requires a future kingdom."<sup>92</sup>

What was inaugurated by Jesus with His "I Am" statements (John 15:1, 5) was a transitioning of economies, a movement from God ruling the world through the Mosaic code to one in

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<sup>91</sup> For an excellent treatment on the current Melchizedekian ministry of Jesus connected to the theme of "inaugurated eschatology," see Kyle C. Dunham, "The Kingdom of Christ and of God: A Traditional Dispensationalist Argument for Inaugurated Eschatology," (Th.M. thesis, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), Theological Research Exchange Network. See also Andrew M. Woods, *The Coming Kingdom: What is the Kingdom and How is Kingdom Now Theology Changing the Focus of the Church?* (Duluth, MN: GGP, 2016), 98–100, for a brief but solid treatment of Christ's present priesthood.

<sup>92</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 377. Later, Fruchtenbaum details how exactly church saints share in the future Messianic kingdom (387–96).

which grace would be the new ruling factor (cf. Rom 6:14). As such, it is a dispensational shift that is previewed by Jesus' ἐγὼ εἶμι declaration, not any fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Other than this, any such *inaugurated eschatology* found in John's gospel is germane only to individual salvation, not the future Davidic Kingdom (Isa 2:1–5; 27:2–6, 12–13).<sup>93</sup>

Jesus will rule from literal Jerusalem—the capital of the world-wide kingdom of God. Vlach observes, “While the kingdom is mediated through the nation Israel, it is not only for Israel. The kingdom is open to all who believe.”<sup>94</sup> Gentile inclusion in the future kingdom was something always anticipated by the OT (Isa 25:6; cf., 19:24–25). Jesus also affirmed such a diverse inclusion of the future kingdom (Matt 8:11; cf. Rev 7:9–10). Andrew Woods sums it up by stating: “All that God intended for the earthly theocracy of the Old Testament era will come to fruition not only for Israel, but also for the entire world.”<sup>95</sup>

Jesus' final “I Am” statement in John is intended to highlight distinct identities and roles. Jesus is victorious where Israel had failed. God is in sovereign control over all of Jesus' ministry to include His future kingdom rule. Woods states, “God the Father will govern the last Adam, or God the Son, who in turn will govern the world on the Father's behalf.”<sup>96</sup> Further, the Jewish disciples as branches are to remain as much in Christ as they by nature do in national Israel. They formed the nucleus of the church and as such were to abide in Christ while upholding their Israelite heritage. There is no replacement of the Jewish nation or inauguration of kingdom eschatology. Rather, as Kostenberger states, in the current interim, “Jesus displaces Israel as the *focus*

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<sup>93</sup> This view of restricting “inaugurated eschatology” to personal soteriology was one advocated by Robert Mutlow, “The Predicated ‘I Am’ Sayings in the Gospel of John,” (M.A. thesis, The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, 1995).

<sup>94</sup> Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 315.

<sup>95</sup> Woods, *Coming Kingdom*, 174.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

of God's plan of salvation [emphasis added]."<sup>97</sup> A displacing of focus is not the same as replacement.

### The Germinal Church and the Coming Spirit

It is recalled that Jesus' final "I Am" statement is in the middle of his discourse to his disciples, which ends with his betrayal (John 13–17). Broken down further, Jesus' true-vine analogy is centered directly in between his prophetic *inclusio* of the coming Holy Spirit (John 14, 16). Again, Jesus' only audience during this section of Scripture is the 11 disciples.<sup>98</sup> These disciples formed the kernel of the Christian church, which the Holy Spirit would birth at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Jesus chose as the predicate for his "I Am" statement a metaphor borrowed from the OT depicting corporate Israel, ἄμπελος (vine).<sup>99</sup>

A new community called the church was on the horizon, which would derive its life from the vine. As Köstenberger observes, "Now Jesus is the vine whose branches constitute the new Messianic community."<sup>100</sup> The age of law was about to expire with the "true Vine," and a new age was about to begin

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<sup>97</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 448.

<sup>98</sup> Judas had by this time left the group and was plotting Jesus' betrayal with Jewish authorities (John 12:26–30).

<sup>99</sup> For a recent treatment emphasizing the complex "intertextuality" of both the Old and New Testaments demonstrating that the writers of Scripture were biblical exegetes (dealing with a text's meaning) as well as astute biblical theologians (dealing with a text's significance), see Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018). Chou convincingly demonstrates that when a prophet or apostle uses previous biblical language by either directly quoting from or alluding to other biblical passages, there are usually far more than two texts at play. Indeed, the entire Bible seems to be an intricate linguistic web of connecting points. As such, Jesus' use of "vine" in John 15 should call to mind the various OT, and possibly NT, uses of vine and vineyard, taking each usage or allusion into account.

<sup>100</sup> Andreas J Köstenberger, "The Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission: Missiological Insights from the Gospel of John," *Missiology* 23, no. 4 (October 1995): 451.

with the Holy Spirit's indwelling ministry (John 14:25–26; 16:7–15). In other words, Jesus was announcing a dispensational shift from law to grace.

Also advanced throughout the article was the promotion of a still-future and glorious restoration of national Israel. The kingdom of God prophesied throughout the OT will come to fruition upon Christ's return to literal Israel (Zech 14). Jesus' final ἔγώ εἰμι, then, was not a statement of replacement of Israel in any sense. In fact, the Bible's last book ensures the continuance of ethnic Israel, so much so that it lists each individual tribe for the monumental roles they play during the coming tribulation (Rev 7:3–8; cf. Jer 16:16–19; Ezek 9:4–6). Commenting on these 144,000 ethnic Jews marked out during this time, Robert Thomas is adamant:

The term *Israel* must be referred to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the natural understanding of the word's normal usage in the NT as well as the OT. This accounts for the detailed division of the people of God into twelve families answering individually to the twelve tribes of Israel in vv.5–8 and is the explanation favored by the earliest Christian tradition.<sup>101</sup>

Jesus' statement in John 15, that he is the true vine or the genuine Israel, cannot be taken as an expiration of literal Israel. Rather, Jesus was telling his disciples that a new era was about to begin that may change relationships (Jew and Gentile, believers and God), but not distinct identities. Smith agrees, "This relationship was soon to assume a new form in that He was leaving, but the Holy Spirit would come as His Representative. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit there was to begin a new and vital relationship."<sup>102</sup>

National Israel continues and will ultimately be redeemed at Christ's second coming (Zech 12:10; 14:4–11; cf. Ezek 34:25–31). In the interim, Jewish and Gentile believers are bonded

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<sup>101</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 476–77.

<sup>102</sup> Charles R. Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring 1968): 4.

together by the Holy Spirit who baptizes them into the tangible expression of the current dispensation—the church (1 Cor 12:13). “John affirms that the Jews have not ceased to be God’s covenant people,” confirms Köstenberger, “specifically, individual believing Jews are incorporated into Jesus’ new Messianic community.”<sup>103</sup> Those who believe Jesus and His church have fulfilled, absorbed, or replaced national Israel err in assuming there cannot be two peoples of God.<sup>104</sup> Yet, individual identities are not eliminated and transcended by the church or kingdom but are preserved and redeemed. The Holy Spirit’s ministry in the current economy has torn down any wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile believers but has not eliminated their distinctiveness. Capturing vital distinctions between the law and grace economies, mid-19th-century theologian R. W. Dale explained:

That the Jewish race might not lose, through their sins, the inheritance bestowed on them in Abraham, God gave them the law; that we may not lose, through our sins, the inheritance bestowed on us in Christ, God has given us the Spirit. They were not to obtain the right to their peculiar distinctions by obeying the law; the law was intended to prevent them losing what was theirs without their disobedience: we are not to obtain the right to the Christian dispensation by the work of the Spirit; the Spirit has been given that the redemption, which is God’s free gift to us through Christ, may not be lost.<sup>105</sup>

When Christ announced that he was the true Israel, and (what would be) the church were the branches, the disciples were to understand his words in light of his promises of his earthly departure and the coming of the Spirit (John 14:1–20). Jesus

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<sup>103</sup> Köstenberger, “Challenge of a Systematized Biblical Theology of Mission,” 456.

<sup>104</sup> See Bruce A. Baker, “The Two Peoples of God in 2 Thessalonians 1:10,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 13, no. 38 (April 2009): 5–40. Indeed, nothing biblically precludes the probability of *multiple* peoples of God, such as believers in pre-Mosaic and post-Church economies. Cf. Isaiah 19:25.

<sup>105</sup> R. W. Dale, *The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 168.

would return for his church one day before establishing the kingdom in Israel, as only the ultimate Israelite—the true vine—could restore the Israelite nation. Alva McClain contends, “On the basis of Christ’s finished work, the Spirit’s ministry becomes possible, not only in the age of Christ’s absence, but also during His bodily presence in the coming age of the Kingdom.”<sup>106</sup> Therefore, with Jesus’ words in John 15, a future for national Israel is upheld while a preview is given that Gentiles were to be included in the Spirit’s work alongside ethnic Jews.

### Conclusion

While many scholars choose to focus on the more climatic-sounding “I Am” statements that emphasize individual salvation, Jesus’ final self-predicated  $\epsilon\gamma\omega\ \epsilon\iota\mu\iota$  in John 15—with its national Israelite undertones—has suffered from a lack sufficient treatment by scholars. This article seeking to fill that gap has demonstrated several things in support of one main proposition: at John 15:1, 5, Jesus contrasts himself with national Israel, while His disciples are identified as distinct but related entities who should expect a shift in economies with the coming of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus’ vine imagery at John 15 may have had in mind OT judgment texts concerning Israel, its backdrop more probably concerned positive OT vine texts which stress national Israel’s glorious future, Isaiah 27:1–6 being the prime example.

Christ’s declaration as being the true vine is not a “fulfillment” of vine prophecies nor is it to be carelessly viewed as typology language. Rather, Jesus used a metaphor depicting national Israel for comparison sake in an illustrative fashion, omitting any need for allegorical or cryptic interpretation. Understood with a heightened view to the text’s grammar and history, implications customary to dispensational thought emerge as each character in Jesus’ illustration enjoys an intimate relationship, while remaining permanently distinct entries. Further, Jesus’ delivered is true vine analogy between his

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<sup>106</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2007), 376.

prophecies of the Holy Spirit's coming, contextually highlighting a preview of the coming economy to be initiated, yet without collapsing biblical promises of a glorious future for Israel. Therefore, what was inaugurated by Jesus with his "I Am" statement at John 15:1, 5 was a transitioning of economies, a movement from God's ruling the world through the Mosaic code to one in which grace would be the new ruling factor. As such, Jewish and Gentile believers are now bound together by the Holy Spirit who baptizes them into the tangible expression of the current economy—the church (1 Cor 12:13)—while the kingdom of God still awaits its future establishment in national Israel.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The author acknowledges Mr. Paul Scharf and Mr. Chris Miller for lending their keen eyes and editing skills early-on in the preparation of this article.