

A Critical Analysis of the Genre and the Message of Isaiah 5:1-7

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Introduction

Isaiah 5:1-7 has given rise to many varied and largely conflicting theories concerning both its genre and message.¹ In fact, many renowned scholars concur that there is something wrong in the current approaches which tend to provide so many different solutions. Instead of proposing another methodology to an already cluttered area of study, this article wonders whether researchers have complicated a rather simple matter. Could it be that we are dealing with a straight forward parable? Perhaps scholars came up with many diverse theories because they allowed themselves to be diverted by catch-phrases and words such as ‘lover’ which led them to seek cross-references about sexual imagery and so forth. Or could they have been misled by legal elements in the passage to talk about a ‘juridical parable’ and so on? In brief, with these suspicions in mind, this article seeks a more simple explanation of the pericope. It will be argued that Isaiah 5:1-7 is a parable in which Yahweh wants a targeted group of people to appreciate why his threatened action is justified in the face of their injustices.

The Problem

As noted by several biblical commentators, there is an enduring problem with the way scholars approach the Song of the Vineyard; namely, Isaiah 5:1-7. For example, in 1977 Willis noticed that scholars generally underestimate the difficulty in determining the genre of the passage.² Childs also notes that scholars are too preoccupied with

¹ *New Revised Standard Version: Cambridge Annotated Study Bible*, ed. by Howard Clarke Kee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 582. Further references to this work are provided in parentheses in the text.

² John T. Willis, ‘The genre of Isaiah 5: 1-7’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977), 337-362, (p. 359).

finding a formally consistent pattern with one genre.³ Williamson, as well, says there must be a fundamental problem with the method or its application given the diverse results.⁴ Indeed Willis, identifies several propositions that have resulted from the many different approaches. He writes,

Some scholars determine the genre of a text by their interpretation of its content (the prophet's song concerning his own vineyard, a bride's love song, a groom's love song); others, by this occasion (a drinking song, a song of the friend of the bridegroom, a lawsuit or accusation); others, by its purpose (a satirical polemic against Palestinian fertility cults, the prophet's song expressing sympathy for his friend Yahweh, a bride's love song, a groom's love song, a lawsuit or accusation); and still others, by its literary type (an uncle's song, a fable, an allegory, a parable).⁵

Childs says fixation with a formally consistent pattern led some scholars to be diverted by the presence of such words as 'lover' (*dôd*) to explore all the metaphors of love especially in the Song of Songs even though these elements are mentioned in passing and are not developed in the passage.⁶

Williamson tries to provide a solution by making a clear distinction between form and genre: 'Form should apply to the shape, structure or outline of a passage ... Genre, on the other hand, concerns the literary type of the passage.'⁷ However, the distinction Williamson seeks to make changes very little in terms of a simple solution. For example, after making such a distinction he still comes up with the possibility

³ Brevards S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 44-45.

⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary (ICC)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 327.

⁵ Willis, p. 359.

⁶ Childs, p. 45.

⁷ Williamson, p. 327.

of several genres for a very tiny passage such as Isaiah 5:1-7. He argues that there could be a genre of a whole book, of a passage and then several genres within a passage.⁸ In other words, Williamson perpetuates the unhelpful search for subgenres in Isaiah 5:1-7.

Even in terms of the ‘form’ of the passage, available propositions tend to require complex reconstructions and numerous conjectures to substantiate themselves. Just to take one example, Kwok Chi Keung wrote a doctoral thesis in which he argues that the existence of Isaiah 5:7 has set the boundary on what scholars can possibly read out of the song.⁹ With numerous reconstructions to come up with his favoured form, he suggests the dropping out of Isaiah 5:7 from the song. By the time Keung comes to the conclusion, his propositions appear artificial and speculative. Ironically, he notes that ‘a number of literary devices were available to the Isaianic School: songs, oracles, visions, lawsuit speech, judgment speech and historical narratives etc. Isaiah’s disciples were free to press home their points in whichever forms they found most appropriate.’¹⁰

A Parable

Perhaps scholars have complicated a very simple task for themselves. It might well be that Isaiah 5:1-7 is a simple parable that should be read as a unit without sophisticated attempts to find several genres that compose it. Put simply, the most appropriate interpretation of the song seems to be a parable. Willis’ initial suggestion, therefore, is the most plausible. He says the song should be understood as ‘a parabolic song of a disappointed husbandman.’¹¹ He argues that the passage possesses the elements which are deemed essential to a parable. A parable

⁸ Williamson, p. 327.

⁹ Kwok Chi Keung, ‘An analysis of the 2 Vineyard songs in Isaiah’, <http://www.stc.edu.hk/2005/subjects/rs/2000/cbi/thesis_200407.pdf>, [accessed 4 April 2016], p. 40.

¹⁰ Keung, p. 34.

¹¹ Willis, p. 327.

usually contains a single lesson. In a parable there is correspondence between parabolic figures and real characters. Many parables have legal elements. A parable also depicts a specific situation rather than a typical condition.

Isaiah 5:1-7 fulfils all these conditions as we shall see in our rereading of the passage. Therefore, as we will see, what appears to be subgenres are merely several twists and turns. These are not necessarily subgenres but devices that serve to heighten the tension as we move from one part of the parable to the next as Williamson himself noted.¹² Again, Childs makes an important observation that such references might simply function to puzzle the audience, grow their curiosity before driving a point.¹³

A Judicial Parable?

Some scholars insist that the song is a specific type of parable, a judicial parable. Writing in 1981, Gale Yee argued that the song is a combination of two genres. She said, 'I submit that two similar but also functionally different literary forms compose Isa 5:1-7, viz., a song and a juridical parable. It is through these two forms that Isaiah manipulates the southern kingdom, "the inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah (5:3)."'¹⁴

It would appear that proponents of this view are right. Indeed, a juridical parable has a setting of a courtroom in which the plaintiff or complainant brought a lawsuit against the offender before the judge and demands that justice be done between him and the accused. In Isaiah 5, the plaintiff could be identified as Yahweh (through the agency of the prophet), the accused might be seen as the house of Judah and the judges considered the people themselves.

¹² Williamson, p. 329.

¹³ Childs, p. 45.

¹⁴ Gale A. Yee, 'The Form-Critical Study of Isaiah 5: 1-7 as a Song and a Juridical Parable', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 43 (1981), 30-40 (p. 30-31).

In defence of this perspective, it is often pointed out that the device was used by the prophet Nathan while trying to confront David with the sins of both adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11 and 12). Again Yee suggests that a comparison be made between the pericope with the juridical parable in 2 Samuel 12:1-14.¹⁵ In that story David gave the punishment of what was to be done to the culprit without knowing that he was actually being invited to pass judgement on himself.

This argument fails. It misses the point by placing undue focus on parts of the parable rather than the whole of it. Yee, herself concedes that not all of the elements of the typical juridical parable are to be found in the Song of the Vineyard.¹⁶ One of those glaring differences is that the audience is not given the chance to respond in this monologue. Gerald Sheppard tries to account for the differences that Yee found difficult to solve but he unhelpfully made a series of speculative and complicated reconstructions to demonstrate his proposal.¹⁷ Willis had earlier speculated that the people might have pronounced some sort of agreement in their supposed silence between Isaiah 5:5 and Isaiah 5:7. However, there is no evidence in the text that the people (audience) gave such a response. At best this is an invitation for the real audience to ponder on why Yahweh's expectations are justified and the possible action he will take. Therefore, the suggestion that the passage is a juridical parable seems to rise from placing undue emphasis on legal elements in it.

Rereading the Parable

Let us now reread-the passage and possibly demonstrate that it is a simple and straightforward parable. In Isaiah 5:1, the author begins by

¹⁵ Yee, p. 33-34.

¹⁶ Yee, p. 33.

¹⁷ Gerald Sheppard, 'More on Isaiah 5:1-7 as a Juridical Parable', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 44 (1982), (45-47). For example, he placed Isaiah 3:13-14 (Interpretation and indictment) after Isaiah 5:1-2 (judgement) followed by Isaiah 5:7 (further interpretation), 5:3-4 (summons to judge) and 5:5-6 (sentence) respectively.

claiming to sing a song that is directed to his ‘beloved’ who has a vineyard. Scholars have gone at length to debate the Hebrew terms used to construct this verse. Attention focuses largely on the interpretations of the words *dôd* and *yadîd*. Some commentators such as Jerome translate *dôd* as ‘my (paternal) cousin.’ Others including Aquila and Ewald render it as ‘my (paternal) cousin.’ However, according to Willis, the term occurs in other Old Testament canticles exclusively on the lips of the young maiden speaking about or to the young man she loves.¹⁸ In this situation it means ‘beloved, darling, friend’, for Willis, this is the most natural meaning intended in Isaiah 5:1.¹⁹

Some scholars focus on the mention of the ‘beloved’ leading them to conclude that the song describes the relationship between the friend of the author (husband) and his vineyard (wife). For example, according to G. R. Williams the poet’s friend must be understood allegorically and not literally. He reckons that it is a female lover.²⁰ Thus, for him, the song is about the marital relationship between the friend of the poet and the wife of the former.

Such a view has found support in several scholarly quarters. There are scholars who try to provide evidence to show that in the Old Testament and in the literature, the vineyard, the garden and the field are used to describe erotic sexual relationship between the two lovers. It is also argued that Yahweh’s relationship with Israel has been portrayed by many prophets as that between husband and wife. It is recalled that the prophets frequently use the relationship of a groom and bride or husband and wife in speaking of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. For example, Malul gives a detailed argument to show that the

¹⁸ Willis, p. 344.

¹⁹ Willis, p. 338.

²⁰ Gary R. Williams, ‘Frustrated Expectations in Isaiah V 1-7: A Literary Interpretation,’ *Vetus Testamentum*, 35 (1985), 459-465 (p. 459).

land is often a metaphor for women and concludes that the pericope is about Yahweh the husband and Israel the wife.²¹

However, although it is true that the prophetic literature is replete with sexual imagery and that there is a possibility of Yahweh being the husband of Israel (the wine), this motif is not clearly developed in the current passage. In other words, while the speaker (whose identity will be revealed later as Yahweh) was communicating something to his vineyard (whole identity will be revealed later as the people of Judah) the sexual motif is less pronounced. Thus, Williamson rightly insists that there is lack of evidence that vineyard imagery had ever been applied to Israel before Isaiah's time and that vineyard imagery was used of women in Israel or the ancient Near East at this time.²² He also says there is no evidence that would allow us to say that this is specifically a love-song.²³ In fact, for him, the audience would have had no clue of such a bizarre notion.

The second verse (Isaiah 5:2) of the pericope describes the efforts of the vineyard owner. He dug it, cleared it of stones, planted it with choice wines, built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out wine vat in it. Due to his efforts the owner of the vineyard is full of expectations, the expectations which were not fulfilled. In fact, Williams notes that the passage as a whole is 'full of frustrated expectations.'²⁴ The owner of the vineyard 'expected it to yield grapes,' instead, the opposite happened as 'it yielded wild grapes.' Once again scholars miss the point by seeing the sexual overtones in every step of the pericope. Williams, again, interprets the care given to the vineyard as indications of the care a husband might render to his wife resulting in some justified expectations. He says good grapes

²¹ Meir Malul, 'The Relationship Between Tearing the Fence Down in the Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7) and Stripping the Woman Naked in the Old Testament', *Beit Mikra*, 168 (2001), 11-24.

²² Williamson, p. 329.

²³ Williamson, p. 335.

²⁴ Williams, p. 459.

refer to children and the wild grapes perhaps refer to illegitimate children. To put it in his own words:

The description of the location of the vineyard and the care that it received from the husbandman (vv.1b-2b) implies a matrimonial relationship in which the husband admirably provided for his wife. The expectations of grapes (v. 2c), perhaps a symbol of children, was fully justified, and the final word of the verse ... “stinking grapes”, perhaps representing illegitimate children comes as a great surprise.²⁵

However, there is no need to speculate concerning what the expectations are or what the grapes are. The passage itself provides the answer at the end, in Isaiah 5:7. The expectations are justice and righteousness but the frustration was that the outcome was bloodshed and a cry.²⁶

Isaiah 5:3 has an unexpected shift of speakers as the owner of the vineyard now speaks in the first person. As alluded above, this shift has led many to assume that the passage is made up of several different genres. However, the swing is part of the passage’s deliberate rhetorical strategy. The listener is moved from hearing about a third party with his vineyard to hearing about the speaker himself and some other character.²⁷ Again, it is no longer a mere call to reflection but an appeal from the author calling on the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah to judge between him and his vineyard. The invitation for the audience to judge is a tactic used by the author to let the audience see, in the light of Isaiah 5:2, that the vineyard owner’s actions are justified. As already argued, the juridical elements do not merit to interpret the passage as a juridical parable. An ordinary parable can simply contain such legal elements in the background.

²⁵ Williams, p. 460-461.

²⁶ This point will be developed in the discussion on Isaiah 5:7.

²⁷ Williamson, p. 339.

In Isaiah 5:4, the author, probably in view of Isaiah 5:2, asks his audience what they thought he could have done in addition to what he did for the vineyard. He let the audience see that his expectations were not met. As he put it, ‘When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?’ (Isaiah 5:4). Williamson rightly commented that ‘It is besides the point to ask why the owner did not undertake measures first to remedy the situation, as any normal farmer would ... The tale was told for the sake of the judgement to follow, and so the singer hurries on to that with the minimum delay.’²⁸ Put tersely, the questions are rhetorically posed to the audience to let them see that the vineyard owner’s expectations are justified. There is no indication that the audience is expected to respond.

Isaiah 5:5 and 5:6 contain the vineyard owner’s threat of punishment to his vineyard. His threats are made up of the following actions and consequences:

- Removal of the hedge: it shall be devoured
- Breaking of its wall: it shall be trampled down
- Render it a waste: it shall not be pruned or hoed; it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns
- Commandment of clouds not to rain any rain upon it

Some writers have focused on this threat of punishment to the vineyard to discuss the character of Yahweh. For example, Robert Carroll advances the argument that Yahweh is frequently portrayed through the image of food and drink in the prophetic writings and often brings harsh and violent destruction on his enemies. He writes,

Butchery is food and drink to YHWH. Such a proposition would appear to reflect one of the most dominant strands in the Hebrew Bible ... especially in the prophetic literature. Images of YHWH in the prophets frequently reflect a blood-thirsty figure, wading through blood, blasting everything in sight and threatening further violence to generations and generations of people and their children's children (e.g., Jer 2:9). The

²⁸ Williamson, p. 338.

representation of the deity is generally that of a berserker god.²⁹

In Carroll's opinion, divine justice in the prophetic writings is a questionable notion. He says Isaiah 5:1-7 reflects a bloody thirsty god who seeks to destroy,

I would especially want to focus on and highlight the notion of "YHWH's sour grapes" in Isa 5:1-7 which, in my opinion, seems to give promise of a wrecking notion which would deconstruct any sense of YHWH's justice in the prophetic discourses and which would raise fundamental problems about the prophetic construction of the idea of divine justice as a basis for the destruction of the community.³⁰

Although this dimension on the characterisation of Yahweh in the passage can be important, it misses the main point of the parable. The threat is not given as injustice per se but is an attempt to remedy injustice. In fact, complaint against injustice seems to be the overall motif of the passage as indicated by the conclusion of the passage. Chaney contends that the passage is more a specific critique of those who ruled the political economies of ancient Judah and Israel.³¹ For him, the notion of nation states and land grabbing by the elite reflected in Isaiah 5:1-7 is familiar to the modern reader. Story concurs that Isaiah 5:1-7 is about social justice. In his study, he explores the theme of paradoxical hope.³² He says the passage is about Yahweh who brings about hope even in the midst of tragedy. He argues that the lesson of the song is that the prophet announces 'divine judgement upon the recipients of privilege and blessing, for God expects

²⁹ Robert P. Carroll, 'YHWH's Sour Grape: Images of Food and Drink in the Prophetic Discourses of the Hebrew Bible', *Semeia*, 86 (1999), 113-131 (p. 114).

³⁰ Carroll, p. 129.

³¹ Marvin Chaney, 'Whose Sour Grapes? : The Addressees of Isaiah 5:1-7 in the Light of Political Economy', *Semeia*, 87 (1999), 105-123 (p. 118).

³² Lyle J. Story 'Hope in the Midst of Tragedy: (Isa 5: 1-7; 27: 2-6; Matt 21: 33-46 par.)', *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 31 (2009), 178-195.

responsible social conduct from whomever.’³³ However, for Story, ‘Isaiah’s two Songs (5: 1-7; 27:2-6) and Jesus’ parable are united in the truth that hope is still to be found in the midst of tragedy and destruction.’³⁴

Isaiah 5:7 provides a sudden twist of events. More importantly, the author reveals the true meaning of the parable. This is what evades many biblical commentators. This passage is the climax; it provides the key to interpreting the parable.

- The author’s friend is the Lord of Hosts
- The vineyard is the house of Israel and the people of Judah
- The people of Judah are the pleasant planting
- The expectations were justice and righteousness; the outcome was bloodshed and a cry.

It is clear from this interpretation that the vineyard is ‘the house of Israel and the people of Judah.’ There is no need to speculate about the identity of the lover with various references from the Old Testament and elsewhere. However, scholars have attempted to determine specifically what is meant by that. According to Williamson, Israel refers to the people of God as a whole, further defined more specifically as the people of Judah.³⁵ Judah, he writes, is the primary target of the polemic, but it is in their capacity as part of the people of God that they come in for judgement. He says by further specifying the people of Judah as the planting in which he took delight, the author implies that they were especially favoured or privileged section within the wider group.

However, although it is plausible that the passage was used by subsequent generations to refer to the whole people of Israel, the passage seems to focus on the people of Judah. According to Weren, the connection between Isaiah 5:7 and 5:3 makes it clear that the house

³³ Story, p. 184.

³⁴ Story, p. 195.

³⁵ Williamson, p. 342.

of Israel refers to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah, namely the southern kingdom.³⁶ Chaney, approaching the text from a social scientific perspective, argues that the parable targets an even more specific group, the elite. He describes the economic life of the eighth century Israel as follows:

Eighth-century Israel and Judah saw an increase in international trade, in which their leaders imported luxury goods, military materiel, and the wherewithal of monumental architecture. To pay for these imports, food-stuffs ... particularly the triad of wheat, olive oil, and wine ... were exported. Imports mostly benefited an elite minority, while the exports necessary to procure them cut deeply into the sustenance of the peasant majority.³⁷

Building on this context, Chaney argues that, Yahweh's harsh acts are not primarily directed to the entire populations of Jerusalem, Judah and Israel.³⁸ Instead they are aimed at the elite, the wealthy landowners of Judah and Israel.

It is, therefore, more plausible to conclude that Isaiah 5:1-7 is a parable in which the prophet wants his audience, the elite, to understand that God's concern is social justice but instead they perpetrate social injustice. The prophet wants the audience to make a negative evaluation of the way they are responding to the call for social justice. The parable thus targets a specific group of people, the urban elites who exploited the peasant majority, and not the victims of oppression. Understood this way, the periscope is about Yahweh, the just judge and defender of the oppressed.

³⁶ Wim J. C. Weren, 'The use of Isaiah 5, 1-7 in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12, 1-12; Matthew 21, 33-46)', *Biblic*, 79 (1998), 1-26.

³⁷ Chaney, p. 107.

³⁸ Chaney, p. 109.

The Meaning of the Parable

The rereading of the passage in the preceding paragraphs allows us to determine its motif. Several propositions have already been put forward. For example, Childs argues that in studying the passage we must go beyond simply describing a history of interpretation or formalising features of literary continuity.³⁹ He says we must rather relate the theological substance of both. In his view, this passage has theological significance beyond the sharp existential formulation of the prophet Isaiah. In the Old Testament it reverberates with the entire Mosaic witness to Israel as God's special possessions, while in the New Testament God the father is glorified by the righteous fruit that the following of Jesus Christ produce. It could also be speculated that the passage can be regarded as song about the unfruitfulness and wastefulness of God's resources by the people of Judah. Having been given everything they yielded wild grapes instead of good fruit.

However, this must be seen as a simple parable addressed to a specific group of people, the elite to try and convince them to stop perpetrating injustices. Thus, Williamson rightly argues that Isaiah is trying to persuade his audience to acknowledge some point of view that they evidently would not have done had he addressed them directly about the matter.⁴⁰ Thus, Isaiah wishes the audience to agree with the Lord's verdict that they are guilty of grave social injustice, and that their destruction is a fair punishment or consequence. Indeed as Williamson notes this view 'accounts for the passage's present literary position, for only then are the audience's ears open to hear some more specific charges in the woe sayings which follow, for they serve merely to amplify the nature of the charge.'⁴¹ This is an appealing conclusion given that Isaiah 5:1-7 is found in proto-Isaiah, the first part of Isaiah that narrates the strained relationship between the southern kingdom and Yahweh. These people constantly disobeyed God resulting in

³⁹ Childs, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Williamson, p. 329.

⁴¹ Williamson, p. 330.

various oracles of judgement. Their unjust behaviour necessitated the complaint.

Conclusion

The varied approaches and methodologies from biblical scholars pertaining to Isaiah 5:1-7 happened because these scholars allowed themselves to be diverted by false leads. The reality is that we are dealing with a simple parable that should not necessarily be broken into smaller units of purported subgenres. Such a reading enables us to easily identify the characters in the passage and to see that its message is an appeal against injustice. Yahweh (the vineyard owner) wants his targeted hearers (the elite of Judah) to see that his threatened action (withdrawal of protection and possible destruction) is justified because they have failed to do as expected (yield Justice and righteousness), but instead did the opposite (yield bloodshed and an outcry). Therefore, theories regarding the sexual imagery or the juridical nature of the passage are a result of a misreading of the rhetorical tactics of the author. None of those speculations have proved to be consistent.

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