

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript
Episode 345
The Vine and the Branches
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Episode Summary

Jesus' allegory about the vine and the branches, ultimately about himself (the vine) and those who would claim to be his disciples (the branches) is quite familiar to Bible readers. Far less familiar is the fact that the content of Jesus' teaching draws on the Old Testament. Scholars, aware of this fact, nevertheless disagree as to which Old Testament passage is the primary point of reference. This episode of the podcast addresses that issue and demonstrates how its answer informs our understanding of the theological points Jesus (and the gospel writer, John) want to make in John 15.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 345: Ezekiel and John 15, the Vine and the Branches. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you doing?

MH: Pretty good. How are you doing?

TS: I can't complain. [laughs]

MH: Can't complain. [laughs] You always ask me how I'm doing, so I decided to throw that back at you. What's new in Abilene?

TS: Not much. Nothing, Mike. Nothing.

MH: Hey, it's cool here. It's not... I'm actually kind of missing fall. Fall is my favorite time of year, and I've actually wondered, "What's it going to be like essentially not having seasons?" But it *feels* like fall weather even though it doesn't look like it. So it's not so bad. I'm getting over it.

TS: Yeah, those winds coming off the ocean can get pretty chilly.

MH: Bring it on. [laughs]

TS: My favorite weather is when you can wear a long-sleeved shirt and shorts. That's my absolute favorite. About 55 or 60 degrees. Perfect.

MH: Yeah. We had a couple of days like that here, and no humidity, so it's awesome.

TS: Ooh. Making me jealous now.

MH: It's not raining. It's not raining all the time like it does in the Northwest. So this is about perfect. Other than the fact that there's no change in the colors. I like that, too.

TS: Yeah.

MH: Palm trees are palm trees. Whatever. I guess I can live with that.

TS: Yeah, I think our cruise should've been coming up here this weekend. So tear drop, because it would've been fun to see the fall in the New England area. Because I haven't made it up there too many times. But especially that time of the year is special.

MH: Yeah. My brother has actually done that. He's been to New England in the fall. He says it's just spectacular. But I'll just have to imagine it. [laughs] I'll go look at the pictures or something.

TS: Yeah. Well, maybe next year, Mike. Maybe next year we can make it happen. Maybe COVID will cooperate. Here in a few weeks, after the election, maybe it'll magically disappear. I don't know. Hopefully.

MH: Yep. [laughs] Right, go away. Oh boy.

TS: Well, Mike, I want to remind everybody real quick to go vote. Don't forget. The next book study is coming up. So go to NakedBiblePodcast.com and put your vote in. Let us know between Jude, Jonah, or (believe it or not) Revelation, Mike!

MH: The Old Testament in Revelation. And you must go to the website to vote. You can't do a mail-in ballot.

TS: [feigns surprise] Oh, no?

MH: You've got to go to the website.

TS: That's right, absolutely. I'm interested to see where we land with that, Mike. I'm keeping an eye on it.

MH: It's "No Contact" voting for the topic. [laughter]

TS: No protesting, no nothing. It's final. Whatever the result is is what the result is. Mike, we're still connecting dots. What "dot" are we connecting this week?

MH: Well, we are going to, as the title suggests, take a look at Ezekiel and John 15. So we're back to Ezekiel. We weren't gone for long. And I will say, this is probably our last visit for a while. We will see Ezekiel again, of course, especially *if* the Revelation topic wins. But we're back in Ezekiel. And once again I'm going to springboard off the source that we utilized in two prior episodes on the use of Ezekiel in the Gospel of John. So here we are again, like I said. And that is Gary T. Manning's book, *Echoes of a Prophet: The Use of Ezekiel in the Gospel of John and in Literature of the Second Temple Period*. And as I mentioned before, do not go out to Amazon and look for this book, because it's \$230. Don't be foolish. Don't spend \$230 on a book. If you like this stuff... I'm just pulling out a few extracts of the book, but the book's a lot wider than what we've been using it for. But if you like this stuff, go up to Logos.com and get the book for \$28 in digital form. That's a whole lot smarter. And if you don't like reading books on a screen (which I don't), print it. [laughs] Just print it out. Do not spend \$230 on a book.

5:00

Anyway, we're going to start with John 15, and utilizing Manning as a springboard. I think probably the easiest, most logical way to jump into the subject here is to read John 15. I know this is a familiar passage, but it may not be so familiar that you're just going to have all the elements in your head automatically. So I'm going to read John 15:1-17, and we will get started. I'm reading from the ESV.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in

his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

So that is the “Vine and the Branches” parable or allegory. It’s pretty familiar to a lot of listeners, a lot of Christians. But less familiar is the reality that what Jesus is talking about here is drawn (again!) from the Old Testament. So we need to know what that context is so that we don’t over-interpret or badly interpret what he’s saying here. This is building on something, okay? There are points of reference here that we need to know about. And I don’t think it’s too much of an exaggeration to say that I’m willing to bet that if you’ve heard a sermon on this passage, you would be the exceedingly rare individual if anyone has ever taken you back to the Old Testament for it. Usually this is just a springboard to sermon ideas about discipleship and so on and so forth. And it’s not that those ideas don’t have merit or deserve attention, it’s just that there are just some things going on here that would help in understanding and not over-interpreting or misinterpreting what’s going on.

Scholars are well aware of the relationship of John 15 to the Old Testament. There are actually several Old Testament candidates for the source of Jesus’ parable (we’ll just call it a parable) about the vine and the branches. The three candidates (if you get into the literature) are Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21-22, and Ezekiel 15:1-8 along with Ezekiel 17:1-10. So pick a prophet! Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel. I’m going to read through each one and sort of explain why it’s a candidate. We are (as you could guess already) going to land on Ezekiel. And we’ll get into the reasons as to why it’s a pretty high degree of certainty that this is what’s going on in John 15—the connection back to these Ezekiel passages.

But let’s just start with Isaiah 5:1-7. I’m going to read that in the ESV, and then we want to make a few comments about vocabulary from the Septuagint that connects to John in some ways. The relationship’s not very tight, as we’re going to see, but there are points of connection. So Isaiah 5. This is the “Vineyard of the Lord destroyed.” So this is where, typically, if anybody kind of ever thinks

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about the Old Testament relationship to John 15, this is sort of the default place where people end up going. And I'm going to read the first seven verses.

**Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.**

**² He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.**

**³ And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem
and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.**

**⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard,
that I have not done in it?
When I looked for it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?**

**⁵ And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.**

**⁶ I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briars and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.**

**⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;**

**and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, an outcry!**

So this is God referring to his vineyard (his beloved), which turns out to be Israel, and the planting metaphor is there, of course in relationship to a vineyard. It doesn't yield what it's supposed to yield. And then this is God's response to what's going on. If you look at Isaiah 5 in the Septuagint, there are a few words (like two) [laughs] that actually have resonance with John 15. So there's really not a whole lot of connection, even though on the surface it might sound like there is. For instance, in Isaiah 5:2, we have the reference to the vine. The Greek is *ampelos* (ἡ ἄμπελος). We have a reference to pruning, which is the verb *kathairei* (in John, anyway—that's the tense form). So those are the two terms (one's a noun; one's a verb) that show up and that link (or at least are present) between Isaiah 5 in the Septuagint and John 15. So it's not a whole lot, actually. Again, this passage is commonly thought to be what's behind John 15. But again, Manning takes us through the details. If you had his book, you could read how. He discusses this. And he says:

The verbal parallels between Isa. 5:1–7 and Jn 15:1–10 are not very impressive, since they consist only of synonyms.

You basically have synonym overlap (vine and pruning). You might have one or two instances where you have actually a shared term. But most of the similarity is not explicit. And so when you're looking to answer the question, "Hey what is the writer of John doing here?"... If he's using the Septuagint to draw his readers' attention to a particular passage, he's probably going to borrow more vocabulary from a particular passage that will telegraph "this is where I'm looking and this is where I want you to look." He wouldn't just sort of use synonymous language. And we have very little explicit connectivity here. So Manning brings that to our attention. He says, "Sure, there are thematic parallels here." So he writes:

... [T]he passage [MH: Isaiah 5] resonates in a number of ways with Jesus' parable of the vine... God is the gardener, although he is not given the title. In Isaiah 5, the emphasis is placed on God's care for the vineyard and vine: he builds a fence, tower, and wine-vat; then plants and tends the vine. He waits for grapes, but the vine produces only thorns [MH: or these wild grapes]. As in John 15, the lack of fruit results in judgment. In both John 15 and Isaiah 5, pruning is only for fruitful vines. God's protection and nurture are only directed towards those who bear fruit.

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So he says there are conceptual thematic parallels here, but we're expecting John (if he's looking at Isaiah 5 as he's thinking about Jesus' teaching here, or if

Jesus himself in real time is thinking of this passage from Isaiah in the Septuagint)... You would expect the connections to be either more numerous and/or more direct. But they're not. And so for that reason, a number of scholars move on to another possibility, and that is Jeremiah. So Jeremiah 2:21-22. It's only two verses, so let's just go there and read that (in the ESV).

**²¹ Yet I planted you a choice vine,
wholly of pure seed.**

**How then have you turned degenerate
and become a wild vine?**

**²² Though you wash yourself with lye
and use much soap,
the stain of your guilt is still before me,
declares the Lord God.**

If we go back up and get the context... This is Jeremiah. So this is going to be directed toward Jerusalem or Judah. The Northern Kingdom is already gone by Jeremiah's time. So it has sort of the same flavoring here as far as what it's aimed at. The point of the connection is the first line of John 15, where he says,

I am the true vine.

In Greek it's *hē ampelos hē alēthinōs* (ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινός).

And my father is the gardener... he prunes every branch that bears fruit.

And that's *karpon pheron* (καρπὸν φέρον) in Greek. Well if you go to Jeremiah 2:21, we read,

I planted you a fruit-bearing vine.

It's going to sound familiar with the Greek, because it *is* familiar. It's pretty direct. *ampelōn karpophoron* (ἄμπελον καρποφόρον). So we've got some pretty direct words drawn from Jeremiah 2 in the Septuagint in John 15.

I planted you a fruit-bearing vine, entirely true...

Pasan alēthinēn (πάσαν ἀληθινήν). So we've got connections with *ampelos*, with *alethenos*, *alethinēn*. We've got *karpon pheron* in John 15. We've got *karpophoron* in participle form in Jeremiah 2:21. (I think that's a participle. I'm reading it in English letters here, so I'm not quite sure the form.) But anyway, the point is the shared vocabulary here. So we get a little bit more explicit. And Manning comments:

The first two words constitute a strong parallel, since they occur in the same phrase, separated by two other adjectives in Jer. 2:21. The parallel extends to more than just the parallel words, however. In John, God is specifically called the gardener [MH: it's a different term here (γεωργός; geōrgos)]; in Jer. 2:21, God clearly functions as the gardener without the title. God plants the vine, and part of the point of the oracle (Jer. 2:1–3:4) is that Israel has rejected God despite God's care for Israel (Jer. 2:3).

The phrase καρπὸν φέρον (Jn 15:2) parallels καρποφόρον (Jer. 2:21), but there is a subtle modification. In Jer. 2:21, fruit-bearing is a metaphor for Israel's earlier faithfulness and usefulness to God (cf. Jer. 2:2–3, 5), in contrast to Israel's later apostasy. In John 15, the vine is Jesus, so there is no thought of his apostasy [MH: obviously]. The metaphorical element of fruit-bearing is thus transferred from the vine to the branches [MH: you don't get that in Jeremiah 2, but you do get that in John 15, is Manning's point]. There, the meaning of fruit-bearing is essentially the same as in Jeremiah [MH: except you've got different targets]: branches that do not bear fruit are apostate and worthless; branches that bear fruit are faithful and useful.

So he goes on and talks about the themes of faithfulness and usefulness in both passages (John 15 and Jeremiah 2). So he says there's an explicit vocabulary connection here. There's some thematic connection here (even though there's a bit of a modification). And he winds up his discussion this way:

The most important modification that John makes to the images from Isaiah and Jeremiah is to the identity of the vine [MH: which we mentioned earlier]. In both OT passages, the vine is Israel; while in John 15, the vine is Jesus.

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Then he goes off and he starts talking about certain features of the text that might explain how this modification is exegetically viable, in case... How do scholars argue, that despite this modification, that John and Jesus are still thinking of Jeremiah 2? So there are ways to answer that question. One thing being married to another in both passages... There's a different point of connection for the vine language. So Manning talks a little bit about how that could be justified exegetically. But then he sort of winds up summarizing it this way. He's going to move on to Ezekiel. And when we get to Ezekiel it's going to be pretty obvious that this really is the point of reference. But anyway, Manning says:

However the transfer of meaning in the vine metaphor was justified, John's allusions to the vine imagery in Isaiah and Jeremiah suggest that Jesus is faithful Israel.

So if you're going to look at those two passages (Isaiah and Jeremiah)... If that's the trajectory you're thinking of following... Jesus is the faithful Israel.

Israel had been the 'true vine' (Jer. 2:21), but was now useless and faithless. Jesus remained faithful...

You can see already he's saying, "If you want to take this trajectory, there's a contrast between the son of God (Jesus) and the son of God (Israel)." That's pretty apparent.

Jesus remained faithful, and thus God would now prune and tend Jesus and his branches instead of Israel [MH: *instead* of Israel—Manning is suggesting this is how you're going to have to take it]. For the disciples, this meant that their hope of usefulness to the farmer lay in remaining connected to the faithful vine. By implication, all other vines were false and were destined for destruction. Although the passage never states it clearly, there is a suggestion that the nation of Israel was such a false vine.

So Manning is doing his best to build a trajectory for how, if you're going to opt for Isaiah and Jeremiah, this is what you can say—if you're going to presume these are the connection points. Contrast between both vines (Jesus and Israel) and Israel as a false vine. "So you need to turn from that and you need to turn toward Jesus as your messiah." This would be the way you would handle it. Back to Manning:

To put it another way, the individual's relationship with God had always been mediated through Israel. Individual fate was tied to the collective fate of Israel. Now Jesus calls his followers to mediate their relationship to God through himself. Their fate would no longer be dependent on Israel's faithfulness and usefulness; it would now be firmly fixed on Jesus.

Now that's all good stuff, and Manning offers it for those who are either scholars who argue that these two passages are what John's thinking, or that's preferred (something like that) in terms of interpretation. So it's all good stuff. But he is going to say, "There's basically something better here," [laughs] at least in terms of the level of detail. The level of transparent connectivity invariably is going to point to Ezekiel 15 and Ezekiel 17. So I'm going to read Ezekiel 15:1-8 and then I'm going to read Ezekiel 17:1-10. And you'll get the feel of it here real quickly. The ESV header here for Ezekiel 15... It's the whole chapter. It's only eight verses. The header is "Jerusalem, a Useless Vine." So it's marked thematically. Because it's going to be pretty apparent here.

And the word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the

forest? ³ Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it? ⁴ Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel. When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? ⁵ Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything! ⁶ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. ⁷ And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them, and you will know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them. ⁸ And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord GOD.”

25:00 Now I want you to hold onto that thought. The wood that is thrown into the fire in Ezekiel 15, that's its fate because ultimately the wood itself is useless. And then when he takes that point and analogizes it to the people of Jerusalem, they get thrown into the fire because they have acted faithlessly. They don't believe. If that had believed, they would follow the Lord instead of following other gods. How many times do we have to go over this? We went through the whole book of Ezekiel. But just recall that one point. They have acted faithlessly. They do not have faith in Yahweh.

Now if you go down to Ezekiel 17, here's where you get the other vine imagery that you find in Ezekiel. So I'm going to read Ezekiel 17:1-10.

The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel; ³ say, Thus says the Lord God: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. ⁴ He broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants. ⁵ Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig, ⁶ and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.

⁷ “And there was another great eagle with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine bent its roots toward him and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted, that he might water it. ⁸ It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine.

Of course, the point is that the branches want a different eagle. Okay? [laughs] And they're reaching toward a different eagle. So verse 9:

⁹ “Say, Thus says the Lord God: Will it thrive? Will he not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. ¹⁰ Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted?”

Now the second one is a little more obtuse than the first one. But both of those passages have this vine and branch imagery. So what Manning does in his book is he produces a really detailed chart (that I'm not going to go through here for the sake of the podcast). He produces a detailed chart of the vocabulary shared between these two Ezekiel passages in the Septuagint (in the Greek) and John 15. And to be honest, it's pretty impressive, and it's very telling because there's a lot. And he writes this. Here's how he essentially summarizes it.

The amount of verbal parallel makes it clear that Ezekiel's vine parables are the dominant background to John's vine parable.

So he's not saying that it isn't possible that Isaiah and Jeremiah play a role here. And he did his best to help: "If this is where you're going, this is what you can learn from it, glean from it. Good." But at most, you've got two explicit (or in the case of Jeremiah, three, explicit) words between the two. And that's dwarfed by the vocabulary from the Septuagint in these two Ezekiel passages that you find in John. So back to Manning. And this is his point. There's just so much of it here.

Overall, Ezekiel's vine parables have 8 words... and two phrases... [explicitly] in common with John 15. This is significantly more than the wording shared between John 15 and any other OT passage. Even when only one of Ezekiel's vine parables is compared to John 15 [MH: let's just use *one* of the two passages, even when you do that], the parallels are greater than with any other OT passage. Isa. 5:1–7, for example, has only one word and two synonyms in common with John 15; whereas Ezekiel 17 has three words, one synonym, and one phrase in common with John 15. Ezekiel and John also share some rare words in common. Ezekiel 15 and John 15 are the only two passages in either testament to use cognates of *kathairo* καθαίρω [MH: that's a verb] to refer to pruning.

Let me just repeat that:

Ezekiel 15 and John 15 are the only two passages in either testament to use cognates of *kathairo* to refer to pruning.

30:00 Now in the first example with Isaiah, the verb was *kathairo* in John 15 and you have a reference to pruning in Isaiah 5, but it's actually only a synonym. It's not the same word. So this is really telling, that Ezekiel and John 15 are the only two places you're going to find that have this particular term used in the same context. Back to Manning:

Ezekiel is the only book in the LXX that regularly uses *klēma* κλήμα for 'branch'; John 15 is the only passage in the NT to use the word at all.

So think about that. The word for branch (*klēma*). The Septuagint of Ezekiel is the only place you're going to find it. And in the New Testament, the only place you're going to find it is John 15. So Manning says:

John's use of the word suggests his intention to recall Ezekiel's vine parables.

He goes on. But honestly, just that little bit is pretty solid evidence that John 15 links back to Ezekiel 15 and 17 and *not* Isaiah 5 or Jeremiah 2. Manning's not trying to cut them off totally, but he's, like, "If you're going to build the case, here are the data."

Now there are some observations that are in line with the closer relationship between John 15 and those two passages, and they provide some interpretive focus points for John 15. This is why we're doing the exercise. And by the way (just as a sidebar here), I hope you're learning some method as we do this. If you're doing a book study (you're doing your own personal Bible study) in a New Testament book, you *do* want to reference the Septuagint. This is easy if you have software or if you're using an online tool or something like that, where you can see, "What's the lemma here? In the Greek Septuagint of this passage, does that show up in John?" You can actually do this. And this is what you're looking for. You're looking for frequency of connection. And you're looking for... Explicit is more favorable than synonyms or thematic connection. Because if you're the writer of John (or if you're listening to Jesus and you know the Septuagint scriptures that well)... Maybe it's conceivable they could have. But either way (either trajectory there), if you can discern that Jesus (and of course the record of this in John 15) is repeatedly going to a particular place in the Septuagint, that's a good indicator that they want you to think about that. They want your mind to go back. Because if you do, it's going to help you parse what they're saying now. It's going to help you interpret. It's going to help you not over-read or misread the passage. And this is why scholars do this sort of thing. And you can do it too. You don't need to go out and earn a degree to do this. If you have software or online tools, you can do this sort of thing—just to orient yourself when you start to think about this passage that you're studying.

So anyway, he says here, in terms of his observations and implications... I'm just going to give you a few. In the first respect, it's pretty obvious that Ezekiel's vine

parables, like John's (unlike any other place in the Old Testament), distinguish between the vine and the branches. This is another thing that may not be apparent from what I've already read from Manning. But in Jeremiah we have similar language. But the vine in one place is Israel and in the other place it's Jesus. And in the one place the vine is apostate, and of course Jesus is not. So even if you have the vocabulary, there's a modification of what's going on here. That is not the case here. In John 15 and Ezekiel (these two passages), these are the passages that distinguish the vine and the branches. They don't mix them up. These are the only two.

35:00 So in Ezekiel 17 (and if we kept reading you'd also run into this in Ezekiel 19, which we have not shared at all), the branches are individuals and the vine is the royal Davidic dynasty of Israel. Later in Ezekiel 19, specifically the vine is Zedekiah. He's of the house of David. He is going to be unfaithful, but it's still this individual Davidic guy. So you have more of a connection there. So that's one observation that Manning makes that says, "Okay, this is a little bit better than what we've run into before." So 1) frequency of vocabulary, 2) explicitness of vocabulary. And we're talking ultimately contrasting one member of David's line versus the ultimate member of David's line (Jesus the messiah). The next thing he notes... I'm just going to read to you his second point. He says:

One of the most important parallels between John 15 and Ezekiel is the use of καθαίρω and its cognates (κάθαρος, κάθαρσις) to refer to pruning. Everywhere else in the NT and LXX, these words [MH: are not used of pruning but] refer to purity and purification; only in Ezekiel 15 (LXX) and John 15 are they used to refer to pruning [MH: that's their context]. Ezek. 15:4 describes the uselessness of vine wood; the LXX clarifies this by describing the uselessness of vine branches that have been pruned...

It's interesting... His point here is that even though they got attention, they still turned out to be useless. They've been pruned but they still... Normally you prune something that's producing fruit. You don't prune something that's not going to produce fruit. So for what it's worth, he says the Septuagint describes the uselessness of the vine branches that have been pruned at some point.

In Jn 15:2–3, God prunes (καθαίρει) the fruitful branches, thus making them pure (κάθαρος)...

So there's a purification element there. But the context is still the pruning.

John 15 describes judgment on the vine in terms similar to all three of Ezekiel's vine metaphors. In Jn 15:6, the fruitless branches wither (ξηραίνειν) and are burned (καίειν) in the fire (πῦρ) [MH: and that vocabulary is going to be shared vocabulary with Ezekiel]. In Ezek. 15:4, the pruned branches serve only as fuel for

the fire (πῦρ); in Ezek. 17:9–10, the vine’s shoots (with rotten fruit) wither (ξηραίνειν)...

Again, you get this withering of the branches and so on and so forth in both passages.

In Ezekiel, the three vine metaphors announce judgment against Jerusalem and its leaders. This is perhaps one reason for John’s appropriation of Ezekiel’s vine metaphors.

So Manning says his suspicions... This is really why Jesus goes to this passage. Because in the Ezekiel passages, who’s getting judged? It’s Jerusalem and its leadership, both political and religious. And again, in Jesus’ day, this provides him with the perfect contrast between himself and his followers and those guys.

Conflict with Jerusalem and its rulers is one of the driving themes of John, as was already seen in examining the shepherd discourse.

We did that episode a few episodes ago, where that’s the big deal. You have the evil shepherds versus the good shepherd. This happens a lot in John—John contrasting Jesus and his disciples with the Pharisees, the religious leadership, the Temple, Israel. He creates these contrasts a lot.

So to this point, if one is reading or hearing or thinking about John 15 and one knew Ezekiel 15 and 17 really well, you would be led to think of the failure of the Davidic kings at the end of Judah’s monarchy and their demise, because that’s the context for Ezekiel 15 and 17. With impending doom just looming right over the horizon, instead of repenting, instead of confessing, “Yes, we deserve this,” they don’t do that. In fact, the whole thing with Ezekiel 17 about the eagle and the two eagles and all this stuff is about how Israel tries to get help from a different source other than God. And God says it’s going to fail. “It’s going to fail. Instead of turning to me at the last moment, you’re still turning somewhere else. You’re still looking somewhere else.” And so if you know that content really well, you can see, if you were at the event when Jesus is saying this or you’re reading this in John in Greek and you know the Septuagint well enough to know where he’s going with this (back to Ezekiel), that’s the contrast. You are led to think of the failure of the Davidic kings at the end of Judah’s monarchy and their demise. The vine of David has fallen in Ezekiel. It’s toast.

40:00

But one is also led to think of the branches (Israel’s leaders in concert with and at service of that king). They’re shown to be worthless. Again, the vine that goes wrong in Ezekiel and the worthless branches are those that associate with an apostate king—with an apostate system. They do not turn to the one who planted the vineyard—to Yahweh. They don’t do it. They won’t do it. They’re turning to Egypt or some other power, “Help us,” instead of doing what God wanted them to

do. This is what God wants the result to be. He wants repentance, at least a confession that, “We’re in this situation because of our faithlessness.” They don’t do it. So again, you’re thinking of the vine of David failing, the leadership that is in the employ or connected with the failed Davidic king. They’re worthless. It’s not just the king’s fault; it’s the leadership (political leadership, religious leadership). They’re worthless. They’re useless. And Manning says, “Consider the resulting parallels.” Now I’ll pick two of them here:

1) The failure of the vine. Let’s just call it the Fail Vine—David’s line to the time of Jerusalem’s fall... Let’s think of it this way: David’s line all the way from David to the end of Jerusalem. You get Solomon, and then after Solomon the kingdom splits and you’ve got a few godly kings of the South, but a lot of them are apostate. And in the end, David’s line fails. The ruling “son” (or the sons—the kings) of God over Judah (the only one existing at the time of Ezekiel)... It fails. In contrast, Jesus, the true Davidic king and the true Son is the true vine. He does not fail in his allegiance to God. He accomplishes God’s work. And so, therefore, if you’re in his service, you’re not going to fail either. You’re not going to be worthless. Let’s put it that way.

2) So the failure branches (the second parallel) would be in Ezekiel those in service to the king. They were worthless shepherds. They were disloyal to God. They show themselves to be worthless wood to be burned. They get burned because of their faithlessness. Not because they really love Yahweh and they don’t succeed enough. They are burned because they *don’t* love Yahweh and they are worthless. They don’t believe. They don’t believe. They have attached their allegiance and their loyalty somewhere else. And this creates the context from which or out of which John 15 needs to be thought about. What about the branches of the true vine? Will they shift their allegiance? Will they become worthless? Will they forsake Yahweh? Will they forsake the true vine or will they remain believing? Will they remain with him? Again, John 15 does not call for the perfection of the believer. And that’s usu— I shouldn’t say it’s usually the way it gets preached. It comes darn close. I’ve heard a number of passages on John 15 that leave you thinking, “Am I doing enough for God to still like me? If I’m doing enough, that means I’m abiding. And if I’m abiding, then God approves. And so am I doing enough? Am I doing enough?” Okay? The point is, if you go back to Ezekiel, the point of reference is that they did squat. They didn’t do *anything*. They were faith/less. Their allegiance was somewhere else. And personally, I think it’s really helpful to think of John 15 against this backdrop. Who are we actually talking about here? So Manning writes this:

John 15 also shares broad themes with Ezekiel’s vine images. John’s judgment on the fruitless branches has strong verbal parallels with the judgment on Jerusalem in Ezekiel 15, and the themes of the two images resonate as well. The main point of Ezekiel 15 is that the faithlessness of Jerusalem (Ezek. 15:8) has resulted in

worthlessness and therefore judgment (Ezek. 15:4–6). In John 15, the judged branches fail to abide...

45:00 In other words they are faithless. They have no allegiance. They have no believing loyalty in Jesus. It's gone. Okay?

So if we want to interpret John 15, we need to be carefully thinking about what the circumstances in Ezekiel 15 and Ezekiel 17 really are. Okay? The reason that... For the analogy, John 15 does not call for the perfection—the perfect behavior and perfect, never-failing obedience—of the believer... Here's what we don't want to conclude. And again, I've heard sermons that, maybe they don't say this explicitly, but this is kind of what they make you think: "Unless my life is an endless succession of spiritual victories, then I'm on the outs in light of John 15." That does *not* describe what's going on in Ezekiel 15 and 17. Their disobedience there wasn't a blip on the radar. They had no allegiance. Period. And they're going to get cast away. They're *going* to get cast away. It's a colossal failure.

So the message to us (and the disciples in John 15) broadly... And we'll end with this. It's really about your allegiance to Jesus, the one who will not fail. Okay? Your believing loyalty needs to not fail. [laughs] Otherwise, you would be faithless. You would be disloyal to the true God. You would be turning to some other. John 15 needs to be defined in Old Testament terms of Israel's idolatry and its apostasy. It is about failure of believing in the true God and remaining loyal in that belief. It's about refusing to align yourself with other gods. The contrast is Israel's shepherds, the Davidic kings... They showed which deity (or how many deities) they believed in and aligned with, how many deities (or some other deity) they put their faith in, they threw their loyalty to. It wasn't Yahweh, is the point. Don't end up like them. *Don't end up like them*, worthless wood to be burned. Keep aligning your believing loyalty to the true vine. Doing so will mean you aren't worthless wood. You don't have to be *perfect* wood to be useful wood. You *will* bear fruit, since you are attached to the unfailing true vine.

So we're just going to wrap up with that. I really think that this is a good case (John 15) where if we read it in concert with the Old Testament passages to which it connects... And it connects in really not only frequent ways, but very particular ways. "This is the only time this word occurs. Septuagint of Ezekiel, John 15..." These things tell you where to go for your thinking in terms of how to parse John 15. It tells you. It's like a cheat sheet. You look for these little things, and the writer directs you. The speaker directs you as to how to parse this stuff. So in this case, I think it's really important, because of this... I can only speak as if I was a pastor, "Yes, I want people to be disciples. Yes, I want them to live holy lives." But God forbid that I equate discipleship and define it in such a way where people leave my church and think that unless their life is an endless string of spiritual victories, they're going to burn. That's just wrong. It's just wrong.

Ultimately (here we go again) it's about believing loyalty. And I think this is a good illustration of it.

TS: Alright, Mike. Yeah, I'd be interested if there are any pastors out there that actually *did* do a sermon on this. Send us an email. I'd like to hear their take on it.

MH: It's sobering. It's a sobering passage, but it shouldn't be a bludgeoning. [laughs] You know? Or just, "Cast me to the wind now" kind of thing. I've seen this, and so when I came across this I thought, "We need to loop this passage into this little mini-series that we're doing here." But I think this is a good one to include.

50:00

TS: Yeah. And also, Mike, you know who I think agrees with us? I was looking at our rankings. And this is just for iTunes only. But we were the #1 Christian podcast a few weeks ago, Mike, in Israel. And we were the #2 Christian podcast in Finland.

MH: Wow.

TS: Yeah! So our Finnish friends, thank you. And our Israeli friends, thank you. Thank you all for listening. That's awesome.

MH: Good. Yeah. That's good to hear. I'm glad, because I'm hoping people pick up a little bit on method for their own Bible study and are prompted to think about the connectivity. I just think it's important.

TS: Absolutely. Alright, well, I want to remind people, "Go vote. Go vote." And I'm talking about the Naked Bible Podcast vote. NakedBiblePodcast.com. Go vote for the next book study.

MH: Absolutely.

TS: And with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.