

## Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by

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### CHAPTER TWENTY -

#### Care of Vineyards

THE DESCRIPTION OF A VINEYARD BY ISAIAH AND BY JESUS IN ISAIAH'S PARABLE of the Vineyard, and in CHRIST's Parable of the Wicked Husbandman, taken together, we get an accurate picture of an Oriental vineyard. Isaiah wrote: "**My well beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein**" (Isaiah 5:1, 2). JESUS spoke thus: "**There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen**" (Matthew 21:33). These two accounts list eight interesting facts that are true of many vineyards in Bible lands. They are often located on a hillside, they usually have a hedge or fence around them, the soil is cultivated by hoeing or spading, large stones are gathered out of the ground, choice vines are planted, a watch-tower is built, a winepress is constructed, and sometimes vineyards are rented. These points suggest the main features that need to be noticed in a study of the Oriental vineyard.

#### LOCATION OF VINEYARDS

*Hillsides often used.* Although vineyards are to be found in various locations in Palestine, it has been customary during past years for the hillsides to be utilized for the purpose, or the ground at the foot of a hill that slopes gently. Grapevines like a sandy or loose soil. They need plenty of sunshine and air by day, and dew by night, and their roots will penetrate deep crevices of rock to get nourishment.<sup>1</sup>

It was "**in a very fruitful hill**" that Isaiah's vineyard grew (Isaiah 5:1).

*Sections where most of the grapes grow.* The favorite places for vineyards in Bible lands are Southern Palestine, especially in the vicinity of Hebron where there are many hillsides; and in Syria and the foothills of the Lebanon Mountains in the north. It has been reported that one variety of grape grown in the vicinity of Hebron sometimes develops fruit so that one bunch may weigh as much as twenty-four pounds. Two natives will carry such a bunch on a pole, which reminds us of the spies sent by Moses into Canaan.<sup>2</sup>

**"And they came unto the brook Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon a staff"** (Numbers 13:23).

#### PREPARATION FOR A VINEYARD

*Terraces necessary for many vineyards.* This has to do with those located on the hillsides. A series of low stone walls above each other, are constructed along the side of the hill, to keep the soil in place, and at the right level for growing grapes. Remains of old terraces in various places indicate that this custom has been practiced for many centuries<sup>3</sup>

*A hedge or wall usually built around a vineyard.* An Eastern vineyard is usually surrounded with a ditch, and the earth from the digging of it is thrown along the inner side of the ditch, and upon this a fence of posts, branches, and twigs is built with thorn-branches on top. Oftentimes a wall of either stones or sun-dried mud takes the place of the fence. This serves as protection from foxes, jackals, or other animals, as well as from any thieves.<sup>4</sup>

In the parable of JESUS, the owner of the vineyard "**hedged it round about**" (Matthew 21:33). The Psalmist recounted what would happen to a vineyard whose hedges were broken down: "**Why hast thou then broken down the hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood doth waste it, and the wild beast of the field doth devour it**" (Psalm 80:12, 13). The lover in the Song of Solomon speaks of "**the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines**" (Song of Solomon 2:15).

*Large stones gathered out of the land.* After putting a hedge or wall around the vineyard, the next task is to gather out stones. Isaiah's parable says: "**And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof**" (Isaiah 5:2). It is not the small stones that are taken out, because their presence is important to aid in the retaining of moisture in the vineyard's soil. Rather the large boulders must be removed that would be a hindrance to the growing vines. Much of Palestine's land has had these rocks present, and they must be laboriously moved in preparation for a crop of grapes.<sup>5</sup>

*The soil prepared for planting.* The ground for hillside vineyards is not usually ploughed on account of its rocky character. Rather is the more arduous method of hoeing or spading by hand used. Isaiah pictures the process of cultivation the soil in the words, "**and he fenced [digged] it**" (Isaiah 5:2). If the farmer in charge of the vineyard does not have a small vineyard, he will probably need to have some workmen to help him, as was the case of the householder in CHRIST's Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-3), and in such a case it is to the marketplace that he will go to secure his workers.

*The construction of a booth or tower.* For centuries Palestinian vineyards have had watchmen, whose duty it has been to be on the lookout for marauders of any kind. Sometimes a simple booth is constructed for him, on a high spot where he can view the entire vineyard. This is made of branches and boughs of trees, and provides a shelter from the rays of the sun. This place becomes the home for the watchman for the summer months of the year. In the winter months this booth is deserted. Isaiah said: "**The daughter of Zion is left as a cottage [booth] in a vineyard**" (Isaiah 1:8). Often a more durable abode is made for the watchman, especially if his family is to live with him for the summer. Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard mentions the building of a tower "**in the midst**" of the vineyard (Isaiah 5:2). JESUS' Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen speaks of the building of a tower in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33).

Also when CHRIST told of the man who did not count the cost of building a tower, it was doubtless a vineyard-tower to which he was referring (Luke 14:28-30). These towers were of

varying height, all the way from ten feet to an occasional forty feet. These towers were not the same as the ones connected with the city walls. Nor are they the same as the more modern towers now in use by the Jews returning to the land of their fathers, who use them as a protection for their agricultural colonies.<sup>6</sup>

## PLANTING OF THE GRAPEVINES

The vineyard of Isaiah's song was planted, "**with the choicest vine**" (Isaiah 5:2). Although the slips are usually planted closer together, they are sometimes set about twelve feet apart in order to give plenty of space for the branches to run. As a rule the young vine is trimmed back and does not bear grapes until following the third year. The grape becomes out in April and May and gives out a delicate sweetness.<sup>7</sup>

Solomon's Song says: "**The vines with the tender grape give a good smell**" (Song of Solomon 2:13).

## CARE OF A VINEYARD

*Parable of the sluggard.* A good indication of the care required in growing a vineyard may be derived by looking at this parable as given in the book of Proverbs. "**I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down**" (Proverbs 24:30, 31). The sluggard failed to keep his vineyard-wall in repair, and he failed to keep his growing vines free of thorns and weeds. These two activities are absolutely necessary.

As in the case of raising a crop of grain, the native farmer does not usually fertilize the ground of his vineyard. Liming of the ground is dependent upon the many small and soft limestones so often present in Palestine. Some of the lime in the stones is dissolved with each rainstorm, and mixing with the soil helps it in the growth of the grapes.

*Pruning of the grapevines.* Before the arrival of springtime, the keeper of the vineyard prunes off every superficial branch, every branch that is sickly or feeble, so that the sap may flow into the healthy ones that will bear fruit. The branch that is located nearest the trunk or root usually bears the most grapes.<sup>8</sup>

JESUS indicates his familiarity with the pruning of the grapevines, in his famous allegory of the vine and the branches: "**I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman [cultivator] Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away; and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth [prunes] it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you**" (John 15:1-3). In this example, it is the Word that does the pruning.

## HARVESTING OF GRAPES

The vintage begins in the month of September in the Holy Land, and at this period, from ancient times, the inhabitants of many a village move out to the vineyards, where they live in tents or in

lodges. Concerning the men of Shechem, the Book of Judges says: "**They went out into the fields, and gathered their vineyards**" (Judges 9:27).

Jeremiah tells us about the gathering of the grapes by means of baskets: "**Turn back thine hand as a grape-gatherer into the baskets**" (Jeremiah 6:9). Isaiah predicts judgment as being a time when "**there shall be no singing**" in the vineyards (Isaiah 16:10). Thus the gathering of the grapes into the baskets was done with great joy and much singing. Whole families entered into the happiness of this harvest time. This is true among Oriental grape farmers today.

## USE OF GRAPES AND MAKING OF GRAPE PRODUCTS

*Fresh grapes and raisins.* During the months of September and October; the fresh ripe grapes are eaten along with bread as one of the principal foods, in Bible lands. Then the grapes are dried in a level corner of the vineyard. While being dried they are turned over and sprinkled with olive oil to keep the skin moist. Then they are stored for winter use.<sup>9</sup>

The Mosaic Law allowed the eating of grapes from a neighbor's vineyard, but none could be taken away in a vessel (Deuteronomy 23:24). Today, in the Arab villages of Palestine, there is an unwritten law of hospitality that everyone passing by a vineyard may help himself, but nobody would think of imposing on this kindness by carrying off any grapes.<sup>10</sup>

Raisins were widely used in the days when the ancient Hebrews lived in Palestine. Abigail gave David one hundred clusters of raisins (I Samuel 25:18). Raisins were brought to David at Hebron (I Chronicles 12:40), and again, when he was fleeing from Absalom, he received a quantity of them (II Samuel 16:1).

*Grapesyrup or "dibs."* The Arabs take the juice of grapes, and boil it until it is as thick as molasses. They call this "*dibs*," and they are very fond of eating it with bread, or they thin it with water and drink it. This grapehoney was in use in Bible times. It was probably this that Jacob sent to Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 43:11), and which was purchased by the Tyrians from the land of Palestine (Ezekiel 27:17). Three hundred pounds of grapes will make one hundred pounds of *dibs*.<sup>11</sup>

*The Oriental winepress.* The winepress of Isaiah's parable was constructed by hewing it out of rock (Isaiah 5:2). Those seen today are composed of two depressions hewn out of solid rock. The one is higher than the other one, and is also larger. The grapes are put into this one, and then trodden by the feet of men, women, and also children, usually whole families working together. The juice flows into the lower depression. Usually each vineyard of any size has its own winepress.<sup>12</sup>

This work of treading the grapes was customarily accompanied by shouts and songs of happiness. Jeremiah speaks of judgment in terms of the absence of this happiness. "**And joy and gladness is taken from the plentiful field, and from the land of Moab; and I have caused wine to fail from the winepresses: none shall tread with shouting; their shouting shall be no shouting**" (Jeremiah 48:33).

*The winepress as a figure of divine judgment.* Isaiah describes the nations as being put in GOD's

winepress where He treads upon them until His garments are sprinkled with their lifeblood (Isaiah 63:3-6). There is a graphic picture of the destruction of the army of Antichrist in the Book of Revelation. The coming Redeemer is described as being "**clothed with a vesture dipped in blood,**" and He is said to tread "**the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God**" (Revelation 19:13,15).

### THE RENTING OF A VINEYARD

Vineyards that are large are often rented out to one or more families. When this is done, the peasant who rents the vineyard agrees to give half or more of the products of the grapes. When harvest-time comes, the owner will send his servant to secure his share of the grapes, raisins, wine, or dibs.<sup>13</sup>

This illustrates CHRIST's Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, for JESUS in telling his parables was making use of familiar practices among the people. "**There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard . . . and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: and when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it**" (Matthew 21:33, 34).

1. George M. Mackie. *Bible Manners and Customs*, p. 43.
2. Edwin W. Rice, *Orientalisms in Bible Lands*, p. 152.
3. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 340.
4. Edwin C. Bissell, *Biblical Antiquities*, p. 126.
5. "Vineyard." *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, Charles R. Barnes. ed., p. 1166.
6. For discussion of vineyard-booths and towers see: Bissell. Op. cit., pp. 12-13; Rice, op. cit., pp. 152, 153.
7. Mackie. op. cit., p. 44.
8. Rice, op. cit., pp. 151, 152.
9. Mackie. op. cit., pp. 45-47.
10. G. Robinson Lees. *Village Life in Palestine*. p. 147.
11. See Rice, op. cit., p. 154; also "grape-honey." *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 500.
12. Mackie, op. cit., pp. 45, 46.
13. Rice. op. cit., p. 152.

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