

VITICULTURE AND JOHN 15:1-6*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Few Bible students today can point to having an agricultural background or having lived on a farm. This has led to a distinct lack of familiarity with all or most aspects of agriculture, including viticulture.¹ Since the culture of the Bible was principally agrarian, this modern unfamiliarity may contribute to misunderstanding some portions of Scripture. When interpreting difficult passages, such issues as context and lexical meanings are certainly important. But the proper use of historical and cultural data may also inform one's understanding of key terms and concepts, thereby clarifying what might otherwise be obscure or confusing in a biblical passage.

The problem of John 15:1-6 is made apparent by the variant and disparate interpretations given this passage. Debate continues concerning the meaning of *airei* and *kathairei* in v 2 and whether v 6 describes a believer's or an unbeliever's destiny. Some of the confusion can be clarified with an adequate understanding of the viticultural practices of the first century. This article seeks to describe key viticultural practices in first-century Palestine and then use them as a basis, though not the sole basis, for answering questions concerning the fate of the unfruitful branches. This will be accomplished by first introducing the debate between the "lordship" and "free grace" views on John 15:1-6.² Then a

* This article was previously printed in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 153 (January 1996) and has been reprinted with permission.

¹ This author holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in horticulture from Texas A&M University and taught grape-pruning as a teaching assistant there.

² J. Carl Laney, "Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (January-March 1989): 55-66; and Joseph C. Dillow, "Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (January-March 1990): 44-53. Their arguments are generally built from lexical and textual clues, though Laney does refer to present

discussion of cultural practices will be detailed, followed by analysis of the passage with the relevant data in view.

II. INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS

At least three interpretations of the passage exist: 1) the unfruitful branches of v 2 and burned branches of v 6 represent Christians who lose their salvation; 2) they represent professing “Christians” who never had salvation; or 3) they represent unfruitful Christians who are cared for by God and then eventually are disciplined by means of death.³ The second and third views, both arising within Calvinism, are the focus of this article. They are represented by men such as Laney and MacArthur who reflect the lordship (justification) view, and Dillow who reflects the fellowship (sanctification) view.

A. PROFESSING “CHRISTIANS” WHO ARE UNBELIEVERS

The dominant view among Calvinists is that the nonfruit-bearing and removed branches of vv 2 and 6 are nonbelievers within the visible church who appear to be believers but who are spiritually fruitless.⁴ Reflecting this position, MacArthur says, “The healthy, fruit-bearing branches...represent genuine Christians.” He argues, “We are not saved by works, but works are the only proof that faith is genuine, vibrant, and alive (Jas 2:17). Fruit is the only possible validation that a branch is abiding in the True Vine.”⁵ Thus the absence of fruit demonstrates the absence of life.⁶ And, since abiding is necessary for fruitfulness, one who does not abide is one who is not saved.

cultural practices. Still, neither refers to any first-century data that might enlighten meanings within the text to support their understanding of key terms.

³ Charles R. Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” *Grace Journal* 9 (Spring 1968): 3, 7.

⁴ Laney, “Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” 55; Robert A. Peterson, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages,” *Presbyterion* 17 (1991): 108; and James E. Rosscup, *Abiding in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 42.

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 168.

⁶ Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1909; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 220; Rosscup, *Abiding in Christ*, 42; J. C. Ryle, *Ryle’s Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, John

Laney identifies “two divine actions” being taken on the branches of v 2. Those that are fruitful are “pruned” (*kathairō*) while the fruitless (i.e., unregenerate) ones are “removed” (*airō*).⁷ The unfruitful branches of v 2 are identified in v 6 as the cast out branches. Judas is an example of the kind of people who initially identify with Jesus and then fall away and are the ones who, though they appear to belong to the faith, are in fact pruned out and destined to destruction.⁸

B. CHRISTIANS WHO ARE LIFTED UP AND ENCOURAGED AND THEN LATER DISCIPLINED WITH DEATH

The second view says that unfruitful branches represent believers who are cared for by God and later are disciplined. According to Chafer, abiding in John 15:1-6 refers to communion and not union because the passage’s focus is on the believer’s walk. Further, he sees the action on the branches in v 6 as an issue of communion, not union. A believer’s failure to abide and thus to bear fruit leads to discipline from God, which may include physical death.⁹ Dillow concurs with Chafer, adding that believers experience not only divine discipline in this life but also loss of reward at the judgment of Christ.¹⁰

C. THE ISSUE AT HAND

These two views conflict in their understanding of John 15:1-6. The unfruitful branch cannot be both a believer and an unbeliever. The branch that fails to abide cannot be a believer who is disciplined and also

10:10 to End (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 328; and Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 13-14.

⁷ Laney, “Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” 57.

⁸ William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to John*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 2:294-95; Homer A. Kent Jr., *Light in the Darkness: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 181-82; MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 166; J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, 2 vols. International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1928), 479; Peterson, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages,” 108.

⁹ Lewis S. Chafer, “The Eternal Security of the Believer,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 106 (October–December 1949): 402-403.

¹⁰ Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” 51-52.

be an individual who was never regenerate. The question the exegete faces is which view has the greater probability of being correct. This must be answered on the basis of cultural as well as textual data. The assumption that the message of the Gospel of John focuses on justification, as well as a lack of understanding of viticulture, seems to force most interpreters to look to v 6 as a guide to interpreting v 2. This forces some interpreters to view “professing Christians” as distinguished from actual believers. A few Calvinist interpreters have attempted to answer the question from a sanctification perspective and so have differed in their conclusions.

If Jesus was pointing to a certain practice or was using terminology with distinct and understood meanings, then discovering the viticultural practice or the term’s meaning within the culture of His day will aid in understanding those key terms.

III. ARGUMENTS

A. PROFESSING “CHRISTIANS”

The interpretation of John 15:1-6 hinges in part on one’s understanding of v 6.¹¹ The problem of the burning of detached branches and one’s conclusion concerning their destiny directly influences the meaning of other key terms in the passage. Thus that issue must be addressed before discussing the other related arguments.

1. *Nonbelievers Are in View in Verse 6*

The justification interpretation identifies the burned branches in v 6 as unbelievers who are destroyed in hell.¹² As MacArthur wrote, “the imagery of burning suggests that these fruitless branches are doomed to hell.”¹³ Laney points to John 6:37 and Jesus’ promise not to cast out (*ek-balō exsō*) any who come to Him as proof that the branches being cast out (*eblēthē exsō*) cannot be believers.¹⁴

¹¹ Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 16.

¹² Peterson, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages,” 108.

¹³ MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 171.

¹⁴ Laney, “Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” 62.

Belief is the connection that unites the vine and branches. Without belief there is no abiding. The absence of abiding indicates deficient (transitory or superficial) belief... There is no fruit without faith, and there is no faith without fruit... While Reformation theology affirms that faith alone saves, it affirms with equal conviction that the faith that saves is not alone.¹⁵

Laney rejects the idea that burning refers to discipline on believers because the removal of the branches is “a prelude to judgment, not of blessed fellowship with Christ in heaven.”¹⁶

But if these branches be taken as Christians, what can the removal signify? The taking to heaven of sinning believers, as suggested by Chafer, does not remove them from Christ or from profession in Christ. If Jesus wanted to teach the truth that sinning believers may be removed to heaven it does not seem likely that He would have chosen this figure. What happens to dead and removed branches is not good.¹⁷

Peterson and Smith note that when Jesus referred to unfruitful, removed, and burned branches He used the third person, but that He referred to the disciples in the second person.¹⁸ Peterson concludes from this that Jesus “carefully distinguishes his disciples from the unfruitful branches which are headed for God’s judgment.”¹⁹ This then leads to the problem of the unfruitful branches in v 2.

2. *Fruitless Branches Refer to Nonbelievers*

In this view the unfruitful branches that are “removed” in v 2 are synonymous with the nonabiding branches in v 6. Laney suggests that the “natural flow” of the context means Jesus was referring to the same people.²⁰ MacArthur looks to the context and key players, including Judas, to argue for false believers being represented by “barren branches” that are judged.²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷ Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 17.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Peterson, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages,” 109.

²⁰ Laney, “Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” 60, 65.

²¹ MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 166.

Every gardener understands this principle. Fruitless branches are detrimental to the vine. They take sap away from the fruit-bearing branches. Wasted sap means less fruit. Even after careful pruning these branches will remain barren. There is no way to make them bear fruit.²²

MacArthur also points to Rom 9:6 and 11:17-24 to argue that “a person can be in the family tree but not be a true Israelite. Likewise, one can be a branch on the True Vine without really abiding in Christ.” The “cutting off” is related to 1 John 2:19 and the departure of the antichrists from the apostolic fellowship.²³ Ryle argues,

One principle is that no one can be a branch in Christ, and a living member of His body, who does not bear fruit. Vital union with Christ not evidenced by life is an impossibility, and a blasphemous idea. The other principle is that no living branch of the true vine, no believer in Christ, will ever finally perish. They that perish may have looked like believers, but they were not believers in reality.²⁴

3. *Airei* Means “Remove,” not “Lift”

Laney defends his interpretation of *airei* as “remove” rather than “lift up” by noting that 13 of its 23 uses in John’s Gospel have the sense of “take away” or “remove” while only eight times it means “to take up” or “to lift up.”²⁵ Thus the majority of uses points to a judgmental sense. Noting that the basic sense of the word is “removal,” Smith says, “Since the context must determine what kind of removal is in view, it is certainly not the best method of exegesis to interpret the word in a manner that is contradictory to the context. . . In the context, verse 6 describes the taking away in no uncertain terms as a taking away to judgment.”²⁶ MacArthur presents a “viticultural” argument.

Vinedressers had two chief means of maximizing the fruit that grew on the vine. One was to cut off the barren limbs. The other was to prune new shoots from the fruit-bearing branches.

²² Ibid., 170.

²³ Ibid., 171.

²⁴ Ryle, *Ryle’s Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, 335.

²⁵ Laney, “Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” 58.

²⁶ Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 9.

This all insured that the vine would produce more fruit, not just leafy growth. Verse 2 describes both chores:...Barren branches grow more rapidly, and new ones sprout quickly. They must be carefully and regularly pruned. It is the only way to insure maximum quantities of fruit.²⁷

This is a nice-sounding description for the nonviculturalist. But is it what was actually practiced? That will be seen later.

4. *Not Abiding "in Me" Refers to Nonbelievers*

Smith rejects the fellowship interpretation of "in Me" in v 2.

Those who hold that the unfruitful branches represent Christians base their interpretation largely upon this phrase and allow it to determine their view of the rest of the passage. Most commentators, however, have felt that the rest of the passage is so clear that this one phrase should be carefully weighed in the light of the whole context...The familiar technical usage of the phrase "in Christ," as it is found in Paul's prison epistles, was not until many years later. At the time when Jesus spoke these words no one was "in Christ" in this technical sense because the baptism of the Holy Spirit did not begin until Pentecost. When these words were spoken, to be "in Christ" was not different from being "in the kingdom." Jesus' parables about the kingdom being composed of wheat and tares, good and bad, fruitful and unfruitful, are very familiar.²⁸

Laney invalidates Smith's argument by noting that the phrase clearly refers to salvation elsewhere in the Gospel of John.²⁹ Even so, he attempts to refute the argument that "in Me" in v 2 indicates that the unfruitful branches are believers by making it an adverbial phrase modifying the verb "bearing" rather than an adjectival phrase modifying "branch." Thus bearing fruit occurs "in the sphere" of Christ and emphasizes the "process of fruit-bearing" rather than the "place."³⁰

5. *Modern Practice*

Laney attempts to strengthen his arguments by reference to modern viticultural practices. Quoting from a circular from the California Agricultural

²⁷ MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus*, 168.

²⁸ Smith, "The Unfruitful Branches in John 15," 10.

²⁹ Laney, "Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6," 63.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

Extension Service entitled “Grape Growing in California,” he notes that “regular pruning is necessary during the vine’s growing season.” From it he identifies pinching, topping, thinning, and pruning as four actions taken to control growth and improve fruit production.³¹ He then says that Jesus’ point was that “as the vinedresser cuts away what would hinder the productivity of the vine, so God the Father, through loving discipline (cleaning, purging, purifying), removes things from the lives of believers that do not contribute to their spiritual fruitfulness.”³²

The problem with this data is that it does not point out the difference between growing-season pruning and dormant-season pruning, as will be noted later. To his credit, Laney admits that “the destruction of the Jews at the time of the Arab conquest (A.D. 640) suggests that changes may have occurred in agriculture as the Arab people took over Palestine.” This leads him to conclude that the “grammatical and lexical context” is all that is left to the interpreter “to gain a proper understanding of the passage.”³³ This is true if no way exists by which to ascertain the viticultural practices of first-century Judea. But there is.

B. CHRISTIANS WHO ARE ENCOURAGED AND THEN DISCIPLINED

In the fellowship or sanctification interpretation of this passage the imagery Jesus used in the vine-branch analogy describes fellowship with God rather than union with Him. “With John, the kind of relationship pictured in the vine-branch imagery describes an experience that can be ruptured (John 15:6) with a resultant loss of fellowship and fruitfulness,” and so the passage describes “the believer’s fellowship with God.”³⁴ Vanderlip notes that in the Gospel of John “life” occurs 32 times in chaps. 1–12 and then only three times in chaps. 13–20 because Jesus was then with His disciples who had “come to possess life and therefore the

³¹ Laney identifies H. E. Jacob, “Grape Growing in California,” Circular #116 (California Agricultural Extension Service, College of Agriculture, University of California at Berkeley, April 1940) as his source (*ibid.*, 57).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁴ Zane C. Hodges, “1 John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983), 888-89.

subject matter of the book advances to other themes.”³⁵ As a result what Jesus said in John 13–20 should be understood differently.

1. Believers Are in View in Verse 6

Dillow does not see a soteriological focus in v 6. Instead, “the point of the figure of the vine and the branches is not to portray organic connection but enablement and fellowship. This casting out then is not from salvation but from fellowship.”³⁶ The fire of 1 Cor 3:15 is the same as this verse.

Paul wrote that the believer is the building and that the building is built up with various kinds of building materials and that the fire is applied to the building. The apostle obviously saw an intimate connection between the believer and his work. To apply the fire of judgment to the believer is the same as applying it to his work. Indeed the believer’s works are simply a metonymy for the believer himself...The believer who does not remain in fellowship because of disobedience is cast out in judgment and withers spiritually, and faces severe divine discipline in time and loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ.³⁷

This branch is neither a nonbeliever nor one who loses his salvation.

2. Fruitless Branches Refer to Believers not in Fellowship

Dillow rejects the idea that unfruitful branches cannot be either regenerate or abiding. He asks, “If the fruitless branches are only professing Christians, then what bearing did the passage have on the disciples?” In his response to Laney, Dillow argues that

the passage gives every indication that it was addressed in its entirety to the disciples to tell them how they could bear fruit in *their* lives. Jesus said to them, “If you [the disciples, not those to whom they would one day minister] abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.”³⁸

³⁵ George Vanderlip, *Christianity according to John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 31.

³⁶ Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” 53.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-52, italics his.

Cook concurs.

Abiding in Christ is to be distinguished from *being* in Christ, although ideally there should be no practical difference between the two. We may observe the distinction by noting John 15:1-11, where the “in Me” branch of verse 2 is seen to be different from the “abide in Me” branch of verse 4. To *be* in Christ is to be born again, to be regenerated, to have had forgiveness of sins through Christ. Thus the disciples are in Christ (v. 2) because they have been cleansed of their sins (v. 3). To *abide* in Christ, however, is to be an obedient follower in fellowship with Christ the Savior and Lord (vv. 4-5, 9-11). An examination of 1 John 3:24 will reveal that obedience is the condition for abiding. Moreover, in John 15:10 our obeying Christ and thus abiding in Him is compared to the Son’s obeying the Father and thus abiding in Him; the Son was already *in* the Father by virtue of His sonship, but the Son *abided* in the Father by obeying Him. We see, then, that just as Christ’s abiding in the Father was the maintenance of personal fellowship with the Father, so our abiding in Christ is the maintenance of personal fellowship with Christ.³⁹

3. *Airei* Means “Lift up,” not “Remove”

Dillow identifies R. K. Harrison’s interpretation of *airei* as “lifts up” in v 2 and notes that in at least 8 out of its 24 occurrences in John it is used in that sense.⁴⁰ He then responds to Laney by noting that Harrison reported how fallen vines in Palestine “were lifted ‘with meticulous care’ and allowed to heal.”⁴¹ Further, in a footnote Dillow remarks that Harrison states that *airei* has *airō* (“to lift”) as its root rather than *aireō* (“to catch, take away”).⁴² Dillow then points to his own personal observation of viticultural care,⁴³ concluding that if “lift up” is the meaning, “then a fruitless branch is lifted up to put it into a position of fruit-bearing.” He adds that this interpretation does not contradict v 6, but that it rather

³⁹ W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 133-34, italics in original.

⁴⁰ Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” 50. He lists John 5:8-12; 8:59; 10:18, 24 as examples.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 51, fn. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 51.

suggests “that the heavenly Vinedresser first encourages the branches and lifts them in the sense of providing loving care to enable them to bear fruit. If after this encouragement, they do not remain in fellowship with Him and bear fruit, they are then cast out.”⁴⁴ This casting out is from fellowship, not salvation.

4. *Not Abiding “in Me” Refers to Believers out of Fellowship*

Dillow notes Smith’s argument that “in Me” is only a general reference to people being in the kingdom rather than to the Pauline concept of being in Christ, since both the present kingdom and the future millennial kingdom include a mixture of true and false believers.⁴⁵ Dillow responds by pointing out that professing Christians are not in Christ. He says that “it is unlikely that ‘in Me’ can refer to an ‘Israel within Israel’ (i.e., the truly saved within the professing company) in view of the consistent usage of ‘in Me’ in John’s writings to refer to a true saving relationship.”⁴⁶ He asserts that the phrase “in Me” always refers to fellowship with Christ in its 16 uses in the Gospel. “It is inconsistent then to say the phrase in 15:2 refers to a person who merely professes to be saved but is not.”⁴⁷ Further, “the preposition *en* is used ‘to designate a close personal relation.’ It refers to a sphere within which some action occurs. So to abide ‘in’ Christ means to remain in close relationship to Him.”⁴⁸ Jesus’ use of the phrase refers to “a life of fellowship, a unity of purpose, rather than organic connection,” which is distinct from the Pauline concept of “in Christ.”⁴⁹ Based on the use of the phrase to describe the relationship of Christ and the Father and His nonrelationship with Satan (John 14:30), Dillow argues that it does not speak of “organic connection or commonality of essence, but of commonality of purpose and commitment.”⁵⁰ Its use in John 17:21 indicates a unity of purpose rather than organic connection. “If this ‘in Me’ relationship referred to organic connection, Jesus

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Smith, “The Unfruitful Branches in John 15,” 10.

⁴⁶ Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

would not have prayed for an organic connection between Him and believers because it already existed.”⁵¹ He concludes from this,

To be “in Me” is to be in fellowship with Christ, living obediently. Therefore it is possible for a Christian not to be “in Me” in the Johannine sense. This seems evident from the command to “abide in Christ.” Believers are to remain in fellowship with the Lord. If all Christians already remain “in Me,” then why command them to remain in that relationship? It must be possible for them not to remain.⁵²

C. SUMMARY

The two views approach the passage differently and attempt to answer the other’s positions. Both point to textual as well as contextual data. Both refer to viticultural practices, or at least their understanding of them. Before interpreting the passage, an examination of some of the available information that might illumine the meanings of key terms is appropriate.

IV. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL DATA

Viticulture was an integral aspect of first-century Judah’s culture. When Jesus presented the analogy of the vine and the branches to His disciples, He was speaking from a familiar context. Because its practice was so widespread it is likely that all the disciples, including the fishermen, may have seen grapes cultivated in their villages or on hillsides around their homes.

A. TRAINING OF PLANTS

In early Israel the branches of cultivated grapes were either allowed to trail along the ground or were trained to grow over a pole.⁵³ Pliny’s mention of this indicates that it was still being practiced in first-century

⁵¹ Ibid., 47.

⁵² Ibid., 47-48.

⁵³ Jehuda Feliks, “Vine,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16:156; James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972; reprint, New York: Nelson and Phillips, n.d.), 360-61; W. E. Shewell-Cooper, *Plants, Flowers, and Herbs of the Bible* (New Canaan, CT: Keats, 1977), 75; and David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan* (Decatur, GA: Almond, 1985), 228.

Palestine as well.⁵⁴ When the stems were trained along the ground the grape clusters were propped up to keep them from contacting the soil and being ruined.⁵⁵ Trellising of vines seems to have been introduced by the Romans as one of their advancements in viticulture and was used extensively in Palestine. It allowed air to flow through the branches to dry the dew more quickly.⁵⁶ Pliny described five approaches to training grapevines “with the branches spreading about on the ground, or with the vine standing up of its own accord, or else with a stay but without a cross-bar, or propped with a single cross-bar, or trellised with four bars in a rectangle.”⁵⁷ Thus when Jesus related His analogy, the disciples would probably have been familiar with both trailing and trellising practices.

B. PRUNING

Pruning of the vineyards occurred at two principal times during the year. Immediately following the harvest the grapes were pruned severely in the fall and all leaves were stripped from the plants to induce dormancy.⁵⁸ Spring trimming of vines was practiced before blooming as well as after.⁵⁹

The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, dated around A.D. 280, contain a contract for labor in a vineyard. They, along with Pliny’s writings, represent the nearest viticultural documents to the first century. In this contract the procedure for vineyard management began with “pruning, transport of leaves and throwing them outside the mud-walls.”⁶⁰ This corresponds to the postharvest pruning. Following this the workers were committed to “planting as many vine-stems as are necessary, digging, hoeing round the

⁵⁴ Pliny says, “This is better for wine, as the vine so grown does not overshadow itself and is ripened by constant sunshine, and is more exposed to currents of air and so gets rid of dew more quickly, and also is easier for trimming and for harrowing the soil and all operations; and above all it sheds its blossoms in a more beneficial manner” (*Natural History* 17.35).

⁵⁵ Walter Duckat, *Beggar to King: All the Occupations of Biblical Times* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 264; and Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, rev. Boyce M. Bennett Jr. and David H. Scott (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 183.

⁵⁶ Pliny, *Natural History* 17.35.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan*, 228.

⁵⁹ Pliny, *Natural History* 17.35.

⁶⁰ *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Part 14, “1631. Contract for Labor in a Vineyard,” 18.

vines and surrounding them with trenches.”⁶¹ The planting of stems refers to asexual reproduction of grapes through cuttings and would be done during dormancy, using material taken from the plants in the pruning. This stage of contracted labor was postharvest and followed the severe pruning in the early dormant season. The contract continues, “We being responsible for the remaining operations after those mentioned above, consisting of breaking up the ground, picking off shoots, keeping the vines well tended, disposition of them, removal of shoots, needful thinnings of foliage.”⁶² This describes their responsibilities during the growing season. Direct actions on the vines included “picking off shoots, removal of shoots,” and “needful thinnings of foliage,” no one of which fits the description of the removal of a branch. This work, being of minor impact on the plant, was designed to encourage fruit development while discouraging extensive vegetative growth.

For best results the growth rate of a grapevine must be carefully maintained. If it has too few growing points, it grows too fast and becomes vegetative, producing fewer flowers and smaller grape clusters. If it is allowed to have too many growing points, it grows too extensively and its energy is wasted on growth and the clusters do not produce large or juicy grapes. The severe pruning in the early dormant season involves the reduction of the plants to their appropriate number of growing points, the buds. Later the spring removal of shoots reflects the process of insuring that the plant is not allowed to grow too slowly by spreading its energy among the large number of suckers and water sprouts that appear on the main trunk as well as the fruiting branches.

Based on Isa 18:5 Duckat asserts, “After the plants budded and the blossoms turned into ripening grapes, the vine dressers cut off the barren branches.”⁶³ However, this is refuted by Pliny, who notes:

Thus there are two kinds of main branches; the shoot which comes out of the hard timber and promises wood for the next year is called a leafy shoot or else when it is above the scar [caused by tying the branch to the trellis] a fruit-bearing shoot, whereas the other kind of shoot that springs from a year-old branch is always a fruit-bearer. There is also left underneath the cross-bar a shoot called the keeper—this is a young

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Duckat, *Beggar to King: All the Occupations of Biblical Times*, 264.

branch, not longer than three buds, which will provide wood next year if the vine's luxurious growth has used itself up—and another shoot next to it, the size of a wart, called the pilferer is also left, in case the keeper-shoot should fail.⁶⁴

Of significance is the number of nonfruit-bearing branches left on the vines. Pliny also noted that after the harvest, when the most severe pruning occurs, the fruiting branches are pruned away for they are considered useless.⁶⁵ This procedure has not changed since the first century. Branches are selected for various purposes and pruned accordingly during dormancy. The fruiting branches for the following season are allowed to keep between 8 and 20 buds, depending on the cultivar.⁶⁶ This serves to regulate the branch's growth rate in the spring at a level that encourages maximum flowering and fruit-set. The nonfruiting branches are pruned more severely to encourage vegetative growth with a view to a thick branch which can be used for fruiting the following year. Other adventitious growths, like water sprouts that arise from the roots at the base of the vine, are removed.

V. INTERPRETATION

Did Jesus intend to teach that unfruitful followers were not true believers, or that they faced divine discipline, or something else? How much should the immediate audience and the viticultural terminology influence one's understanding of the passage?

A. THE SETTING AND CONTEXT

As part of His final discourse, Jesus' words in John 15:1-6 are addressed to His believing disciples. Judas had recently departed from their company with the intention of betraying Him, something the others would learn very soon. Jesus was discussing His relationship to them as their source of life and as the one whose ministry would be continued through the Holy Spirit after His departure. Because the disciples

⁶⁴ Pliny, *Natural History* 17.35.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* When discussing propagation practices, he says, "Vines give more numerous kinds of shoots for planting. The first point is that none of these are used for planting except useless growths lopped off for brush-wood, whereas any branch that bore fruit last time is pruned away (*ibid.*)."

⁶⁶ Jules Janick, *Horticultural Science*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Freeman, 1972), 240-48.

responded with worry and sorrow, Jesus was reassuring and comforting them. In light of His departure and the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit, Jesus introduced the vine-and-branches analogy to reveal to them the importance of their continued dependence on Him. They must “abide.” Whether He delivered the analogy within the walls of the residence or enroute to the Garden of Gethsemane is uncertain and immaterial. However, the season, the time of early spring growth, is important to note.

B. THE CENTRAL ISSUE

The central issue of Jesus’ analogy involves abiding and fruitfulness in light of His departure and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In John 15:1-10 Jesus mentioned “abide” or “abiding” 10 times, and He spoke of fruit six times. Jesus was clearly teaching that only by abiding in Him can His followers hope to be fruitful. As a result of abiding they will bear “much fruit.” He urged them to “abide” in Him and His teachings through obedience. But what about the two kinds of branches and the action of the Vinedresser?

C. THE BRANCHES

Of course the fruitful branches are true believers. But what about the unfruitful branches? And what are the nonabiding branches? Can practices in Jesus’ day provide any clues to His use of *airei* in v 2 or the significance of burning in v 6?

D. THE FARMER’S ACTIONS IN VERSE 2

Most commentators state that farmers removed unfruitful branches and then cleaned up the fruiting branches to make them more fruitful. But that is not accurate.

As already stated, two kinds of pruning occurred in the vineyard. First, pruning occurred after the harvest while the vines were dormant. This pruning removed unwanted material from the desired branches, including all remaining leaves, as well as unwanted branches and water sprouts. Second, spring pruning removed succulent sprigs from the fruiting branches, dead and diseased wood, adventitious buds on the trunk of the vine, but not all nonfruiting branches. Some nonfruiting branches were kept on the vine. So to what did Jesus refer in John 15:2?

E. *AIREI* AND *KATHAIREI*

A play on words is evident between *airei*, which many writers say means “he removes,” and *kathairei*, “he prunes.” *Kathairei* may also

mean “he cleanses” and so is linked to John 13:10, “you are clean [*kathairoi*], but not all.”⁶⁷ Since Jesus was apparently referring to Judas in that verse, some commentators say Judas was the unfruitful branch that had to be removed.

However, much of the difficulty of the passage is removed when exegetes stop attempting to make v 6 an exposition of v 2. Understanding Jesus’ intended meaning in this passage is made easier by recognizing the viticultural practices to which He referred. The weakness of the “taken away in judgment” view of *airei* becomes evident when the term is understood within its viticultural context.

Airei is not an attested viticultural term. *Kathairō*, on the other hand, does have at least one viticultural use, and when used in a literal sense it does carry the idea of cleaning.⁶⁸ It has a figurative sense of spiritual cleanness and, building from its viticultural meaning, Jesus used the term again in v 3. As an attested viticultural term, Jesus’ use of it in this analogy must therefore be consistent with its normal use and meaning. His use of parables to teach spiritual truths is based on analogies built from accurate portrayals of the natural world. What He described is what happened. Through analogies with the familiar world listeners were able to recognize the spiritual truths being taught.

Since *kathairei* was the legitimate viticultural term describing the process of removing suckers from a fruiting branch, it should be understood that way. Thus the possibly nonviticultural term’s meaning should be understood in conjunction with its clearly attested viticultural counterpart. If it was not a term common to viticulture, Jesus may have chosen *airei* because of its similarity in sound to *kathairei* in order to make a play on words (paregmenon, or derivation).⁶⁹ More likely, however, He was using a term farmers used then to describe their own practice. Its lack of attestation does not mean that it was not a term common to

⁶⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 308.

⁶⁸ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 386.

⁶⁹ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 304. He describes this figure as a repetition of words “derived from the same root,” that “are similar in origin and sound, but not similar in sense.”

viticulture, though an argument from silence is not convincing proof either. But whether *airei* is accepted as a viticultural term or not, its use within the analogy must correspond to a common practice the disciples knew and understood. Since both terms are used in the passage they are better understood as being done simultaneously. In other words Jesus was not putting together two tasks from separate seasons. He was most likely referring to seasonal care of vineyards at the time He spoke, namely, spring training and trimming.

The approach of most exegetes is to see in Jesus' words a process by which farmers pick off the adventitious sprigs from the fruiting branches (cleanses them) and cut off nonfruiting branches (takes them away). This interpretation of *airei*, however, contradicts the evidence from Pliny that nonfruiting branches were preserved and nurtured for use the following season.⁷⁰ It would be better to see Jesus indicating what actually occurred during the spring, namely, certain nonfruiting branches were tied to the trellises along with the fruiting branches while the side shoots of the fruiting branches were being "cleaned up." The nonfruiting branches were allowed to grow with full vigor and without the removal of any side growth or leaves, since the more extensive their growth the greater the diameter of their stem where it connected to the vine, giving greater ability to produce more fruit the following season. Removing the nonfruiting branches from the ground and placing them on the trellis would allow the rows of plants to benefit from unhindered aeration, considered an essential element to proper fruit development.⁷¹ To see *airei* as removal (judgment or discipline) is to contradict the actual practice of the time.

Recognizing the practice described by the two terms, the meaning of "in Me" becomes apparent also. Both kinds of branches may be in Christ and may be abiding, since they both existed and were desired on every vine in Jesus' day. Denying that the unfruitful branch of v 2 is attached to the vine violates the reality of the world from which the description arose.

What about Jesus' instructions to abide (*menō*, v 4)? He told His disciples that they were fruiting branches that had been "cleansed" and so they could anticipate immediate fruitfulness, though that depended on their maintaining a proper relationship ("abiding") with Him. He implied by this that others were believing in Him who were not yet ready to bear

⁷⁰ Pliny, *Natural History* 17.35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

fruit, but who needed to maintain a proper relationship with Him, to abide in Him (i.e., to stay in fellowship with Him) in order to bear fruit eventually. This understanding of vv 3-5 conforms to the cultural practices from which the analogy arose.

F. THE NONABIDING BRANCHES

The nonabiding branches of v 6 are not the same as the unfruitful branches of v 2. Verse 6 does not raise the issue of fruitfulness reflected in v 2 and is not looking at the same time of year. Sprigs cleaned from the vines in the spring would be too small and succulent to do more than wither away. They would not have enough wood in them to form a pile and make a fire. There also would not be any adventitious “branches” with sufficient time to develop woody stems, but only succulent sprouts. Even a two-foot long sprout would wither to practically nothing in the spring. To build a fire as described in v 6, mature wood would have to be removed. This happens in the severe pruning at the beginning of the dormant season after all fruit has been harvested, and all branches look alike. It happens to fruitful as well as unfruitful branches.

Rather than warning of discipline or judgment, v 6 illustrates uselessness in light of dormant-season pruning. Within the vine-and-branch analogy, the best illustration of the uselessness resulting from a failure to abide could come only from the postharvest pruning. Everything pruned in early spring was either growing from a branch (sprigs and suckers), the branch not being removed, or from an undesired location on the trunk. Only at the end of the season would “branches” be removed, piled up, and burned. In fact Jesus may have chosen to allude to postharvest cultural practices specifically because He did not want His disciples mistakenly to link fruitfulness or fruitlessness to divine discipline. Rather, He wanted them to see the importance of abiding. In a vineyard anything not attached to the vine is useless and discarded. A part of the discarding process at the end of the productive season is the burning of dry materials. The burning need not describe judgment; it is simply one step in the process being described. It is what happens to pruned materials. Their uselessness, not their destruction, is being emphasized.

The two verses following this illustration help clarify Jesus’ point. He was clearly addressing His believing disciples. He linked answered prayer to abiding (v 7) and His Father’s glory to their fruit bearing (v 8). Both abiding and fruit bearing, developed and defined in vv 4 and 5, are related directly and conditionally to the men standing in Jesus’ presence. Both vv 6 and 7 begin with third-class conditional clauses, indicating that

it was possible for the disciples, undeniably identified by “you” in v 7, to fail to abide. If they could fail to abide in v 7, they could also be described by and subject to the warning in v 6. When the fruitfulness that results from abiding demonstrates their relationship to Christ as His disciples (v 8) and is seen in light of the promises of vv 5 and 7, their usefulness as His disciples must be in view in the warning in v 6. This is especially true since the focus of the whole passage is on what they were to experience in this life following Jesus’ departure, not the one to come.

If one takes the fire to represent the judgment of nonbelievers in hell, it must be based on failure to abide, not on failure to bear fruit, since fruitfulness is not mentioned in v 6, though it is the issue of the passage. But Jesus’ excluding it from this verse is significant. How can one be a branch attached to Christ and then become detached without ever having been regenerate or without losing salvation? The “Israel within an Israel” answer is woefully inadequate. The best solution for a person who considers this a commentary on justification would be that Jesus was not implying a separation from Him but that the branches never abided in Him. The problem with this is that it would mean, strangely, that Jesus issued a warning to unbelievers in the middle of encouraging His disciples, individuals who believed in Him but who needed to be strengthened to keep trusting Him in view of what they would experience over the next three days. If uselessness was not Jesus’ point, then the only interpretation for anyone holding eternal security would be spiritual decline and discipline by death for persistently disobedient believers.

VI. CONCLUSION

When Jesus gave the analogy of the vine and the branches, He based it on the cultural practice of His day, which was to clean up only the fruit-bearing branches and tidy up the rows during the early spring growth following blooming. Severe pruning and removal of branches did not occur until the grapes were harvested and dormancy was being induced. Since Jesus was speaking in the spring, it is more natural to see His words in John 15:2 as referring to the spring practice. The viticultural use of *kathairei*, which described the removal of sprouts from fruiting branches, should inform the meaning of *airei*. Both actions occurring simultaneously, the verse looks at the farmer’s care for all the branches belonging to the vine, whether fruiting or not. That v 6 looks at the fall, postharvest pruning is seen in the practice of burning all the wood not

attached to the vine. Thus even if v 6 is seen as teaching a judgment on those who do not abide in Christ, it cannot be used to inform the meaning of v 2. They are separate practices from opposite ends of the season and would have been understood as such by the apostles.

Jesus' message to His disciples was that, though He was departing, the Father was still caring for them. To bear the fruit God intended, they needed to continue to rely on Jesus and to respond to His instruction. If they chose not to "abide," they would not bear fruit and would therefore not be used by God.