

LIFE OUTSIDE THE HOME

Vineyard Workers

Besides taking care of sheep and fishing, a common profession outside the home in Bible times was that of vineyard keeping. The grape was a principle fruit in Palestine and wine a typical drink. Grapes and raisins supplied iron and other minerals essential to the people's diet while the wine offered an alternative to the sometimes poor water supply.

The Vineyard

Sometimes a village would actually invest in a vineyard of its own, so its people could be supplied with this staple food. A town could make a decent profit selling grapes and wine. Certain characteristics were common to most Bible vineyards:

Location The best vineyards were to be found in South Palestine— in the area around Hebron. The area has many hillsides which the vine-dressers preferred for growing their crop. A hillside usually meant loose, sandy soil. Here the roots could penetrate deeply and get the water needed to grow the vine.

Terraces Many vineyards were *terraced*. That means they were planted into a hillside on various levels. Small rock walls would help keep the soil in place. Loose and sandy, after all, meant that it could be blown away by the wind too.



Wight

Wall Every vineyard needed some protection against animals that would eat the fruit and people who might try to steal it. The wall would typically be made of sticks, rocks, and dirt, covered at the top with thorn branches.

Clear Land

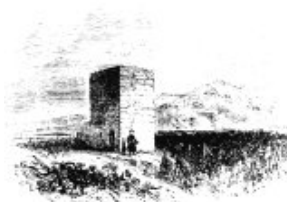
For the vines to grow, the land had to be free of large stones. A big job for those tending the vineyard was to clear the land of rocks so everything could grow properly.

Good Soil

To ready the ground for planting, it had to be hoed or spaded by hand. This again was a difficult process. A vineyard owner would commonly employ additional laborers to help with this work (Mt 20:1-3).

Tower

Finally, a vineyard would have a tower near its center. A watchman would stand in the tower and keep alert for wild animals or thieves that might try to break into the vineyard and steal the fruit. A vineyard tower could be anywhere from 10 to 40 feet high.



The Work of Planting the Vines

Once the vineyard was cleared and protected with walls and tower, the grapes could be planted. Vines were laid 10-12 feet apart so as to allow plenty of room for growth. It took about three years for a vine to begin producing good fruit. The grape blossoms in April and May and is harvested in the fall.

Taking Care of the Vineyard

Once planted, the vineyard needed to be tended by the *vine-dresser*. This was hard work. It was important to keep the wall in good repair as well as the tower. Then the vines had to be watched so that weeds and thistles did not grow up among them. Later on, *pruning* was very important. Every branch that is sickly or unproductive is cut off and thrown away. That way the good branches can get more water and nutrients from the soil. Good branches are cut back some so they produce even more.

Bible Reference

In a famous Bible lesson (Jn 15:1-3), Jesus pictures Himself as a vine-dresser who takes care of us, his vines. What kind of fruit does the Christian bear (See Gal 5)? What happens to the bad vines? How does Jesus "prune" us and so that we bear more fruit?

Harvest

During September and October the grapes would be ripe and ready to eat. Some were picked and dried on rooftops into raisins. The raisins could then be eaten through the winter. Raisins were frequently given to others as gifts too.

It was common courtesy during the harvest for vineyard owners to let travelers eat freely from the vineyards, but by at the same time the traveler was not supposed to “fill his cart” with grapes, but eat only until he was full.

In addition to fresh grapes and raisins, syrup would also be made. Grape juice was boiled until it thickened to the consistency of honey, then it would be eaten with bread or mixed with water for a non-alcoholic drink. Three pounds of grapes would boil to a pound of syrup.

Wine

Much of the grape harvest was, of course, made into wine. The juice for the wine was extracted by means of the ancient *winepress*. The winepress consisted of two depressions cut into a rock. One depression was higher than the other. Grapes would be placed in the higher side and then trampled by foot to squeeze out the juice. The juice would run down and be collected in the lower rock. Men, women, and children would be involved in the task of treading out the grapes. It was a happy occasion, and often this work was done with singing and shouting. Why not? They were giving thanks that the harvest was good! After pressing out the juice, it would then be fermented into wine.



Spiritual Reflections on the Vineyard

The Bible has many references to vineyards, sometimes using them to describe a spiritual truth. Think about the following:

How is the preparation of a vineyard similar to the way God prepared His people? He clears away the stones of our hard hearts through repentance. He builds a strong wall of salvation around us to protect us from the devil's attacks. He climbs the watchtower to care for our souls and see that harm does not come to His vineyard.

There are two “vineyard” parables in Matthew 21.

Mt 21:28-32 This parable was told in answer to those who did not want to listen to John the Baptist's message of repentance. How did it reveal the sins of the Pharisees' hearts?

Mt 21:33-43 This parable using the language of the vineyard and vineyard workers, show how dangerous it is to reject Jesus. He is the one that so many do reject, but He is marvelous in our eyes!

The winepress as a picture of the Final Judgment

Revelation 19:13-15 ¹³ He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴ The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. ¹⁵ Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

At the end of time, God will separate the wicked from the righteous just as the juice is separated from the grapes in a winepress. The wicked will be punished and the righteous will be safe in Jesus. Remember, of course, that the righteous are not called such because of *their* good work, but because Christ covered them with His robe of righteousness and through faith the blessings of this righteousness is given to us.

In Isaiah 5 the people of God are referred to as a vineyard

Through the picture of a vineyard that is laid waste, God explains the type of destruction that will come on Jerusalem and Judah as a result of their continual disobedience to Him.

John 15

In perhaps the most beautiful vineyard parable, Jesus describes Himself as the true vine and us as His branches. We remain connected to Him and bear much fruit. May God grant that we always be part of our Savior's family!

Resources

Bible Times and Customs by Tim Gibson

Manners and Customs of Bible Lands by Fred H. Wight