



# THE VINE & the Branches

Part 1: Christ the Vine

# Introduction

One of the most common questions asked by those who may mean well but apparently have never given any serious thought to literary interpretation (biblical or otherwise) is: “Do you believe the Bible should be interpreted literally?” Within a brief few minutes, truly sincere people who are open to receive an educated answer could gain much insight. They could be provided with an illustration like this: “Early this morning, the White House said...” In a flash, it would be obvious to them that the home of the United States President, a material building, never “said” anything. The press corps is simply using an expression in a different sense which properly belongs to it. This is called a *trope*. And this particular trope is known as a *metonymy*,



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in which the name of the one, the White House, is substituted for the President “because the two are frequently associated together or because one may suggest the other.” We use substitutions of this kind in our everyday lives (“This dish is delicious!”; “Has your ride come yet?”; “Our team needs some new blood.”), so it should not be surprising that they also occur in Scripture and in other literary works. Consider this definition of biographies by Mark Twain: “Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man – the biography of the man himself cannot be written.” Or, another by Alice Munro: “Hair gathered around her face in droopy rolls and curtains.” When Jesus told the story of the *Rich Man and Lazarus*, He said, “They have Moses and the



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Prophets,” by which He meant that they have the *writings* of Moses and the Prophets – not the men themselves. Metonymy, of course, is just one of the many figures of speech used in the Bible. There are metaphors, allegories, similes, synecdoches, personifications, ellipses, euphemisms, irony, hyperbole – and many more. The short answer, then, to the question about taking *everything* in the Bible literally is simply, “No.” As with any work of literature, “the aim of good interpretation is simple,” as scholars Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out in their book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It is “to get at the plain meaning of the text...The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text.”



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At first glance, the allegory of *The Vine and the Branches* may seem easy to interpret. It should not surprise us, then, that many have skimmed over the surface of this marvelous text with only vague notions (sometimes mistaken) about what Jesus was intending to impart to His disciples on their walk to Gethsemane. It would be wise to listen to biblical commentator William Hendriksen who offered sound counsel for those who would approach this sacred text: “It is probably best to read these verses through, from beginning to end, several times before attempting any explanation. The earlier verses cannot be properly understood unless they are seen in the light of all that follows and, we may add, of that which preceded during the same night.”



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As we approach Jesus' solemn words related to the vineyard, we would also do well to listen to Paul's counsel to his son in the faith, Timothy: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). Or, as the *New Living Translation* says, "Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who *correctly explains the word of truth* (emphasis added)."

By paying close attention to language, context, syntax, and sound principles of biblical interpretation, we can understand what Jesus was communicating to His disciples that night. We know with certainty that Jesus was not claiming to be a literal grapevine. If not, then, what was He saying to His beloved disciples?



“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1).



# What Figure of Speech Did Jesus Use?

***The Vine and the Branches* is an allegory.** An investigation of the etymology of our English word *allegory* reveals its derivation from the Greek word *allegorein*, meaning “to speak allegorically” and “to explain or denote allegorically” (Kittel). It is formed from two Greek words, *allos*, meaning “other,” and *agoreuo*, “to speak in a place of assembly.” The *agora* is the marketplace or place of assembly. As a compound word, it came to mean a description of one thing (speaking about one thing) under the image of another, or “to speak, not according to the primary sense of the word, but so that the facts stated are supplied to illustrate principles” (W.E. Vine).





# Expanding Our Understanding

- An allegory is a *figure of speech*, “a mode of expression in which words are used out of their literal meaning or out of their ordinary use in order to add **beauty** or **emotional intensity** or to **transfer the poet’s sense impressions** by comparing or identifying one thing with another that has a meaning familiar to the reader.”
- “Thus, allegory sustains interest on two levels: first, in the **characters and actions** described by the surface story; second, in the **ideas** symbolized by them.” The idea may be illustrated by the following diagram:

**Surface Story**

**Second Meaning**



# Expanding Our Understanding

- “An allegory is a story in which **not one central point of comparison** is intended to be brought out (as in Jesus’ parables), but in which around this one point, there is intentionally and ingeniously woven a **web of detail-comparisons** in the two processes placed side by side.”
- **With an allegory, you have:** (1) a plurality of main verbs and mixture of tenses; (2) direct comparison; (3) words used figuratively; (4) plurality of points of comparison; (5) emphasis usually on timeless truths; (6) imagery identified with the specific thing signified; (7) the story blends factual experience with non-factual experience to enable the narrative to teach specific truths; and (8) the allegory is explained by showing why the imagery is identified with the reality and what specific truths are being taught (Mickelsen).



# The Context For Each Allegory

By carefully examining the context, the interpreter can determine:

- Who were the original hearers of the allegory?
- What was the reason Jesus made use of the allegory?
- What meaning did Jesus assign to each of the basic points of comparison?
- What was the role of the allegory in developing the total thought that Jesus presented?

*“If the interpreter does not consider carefully the context, it is almost impossible to avoid bringing his own ideas into the allegorical imagery.”*



# The Vine & the Branches

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## Three main points of comparison:

- The True Vine = Christ (John 15:1,5).
- The Vinedresser = the Father (John 15:1).
- The Branches = Disciples, Believers (John 15:5).





# Geerhardus Vos: Why Use An Allegory?

- Figurative modes of expression compare things in the visible, natural sphere (vineyards) with things in the invisible, spiritual (abide in Me).
- A metaphor compares a single thing or person to a thing or person in a different sphere.
- The purpose of employing an allegory is to render the truth more vivid through putting it in concrete form.
- An allegory can also veil the truth, “lest it should become clear and yield benefit to those unworthy of its reception.”
- An allegory could be called a “spiritual discovery” because it is based on a certain parallelism between the two strata of creation: the natural and the spiritual one (redemptive).



“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1).

# “I Am”

- The disciples were frightened when they saw Jesus walking on the water. “But He said to them, “It is I (literally, ‘**I am**’); do not be afraid” (Jn. 6:20).
- “**I am** the bread of life” (Jn. 6:35; cf. 6:41,48,51).
- “**I am** the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12; 9:5).
- “Unless you believe that **I am**, you shall die in your sins” (Jn. 8:24).
- “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that **I am**...” (Jn. 8:28).
- “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, **I am** (Jn. 8:58).

# “I Am”

- “Others were saying, ‘This is he,’ still others were saying, ‘No, but he is like him.’ He kept saying, ‘**I am**’ (Jn. 9:9).
- “**I am** the door of the sheep” (Jn. 10:7; cf. 10:9).
- “**I am** the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11-14).
- “**I am** the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25).
- “From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that **I am**” (Jn. 13:19).
- “**I am** the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6).



# “I Am”

- “**I am** the true vine” (Jn. 15:1,5).
- “Jesus, therefore, knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, went forth, and said to them, ‘Whom do you seek?’ They answered Him, ‘Jesus the Nazarene.’ He said to them, ‘**I am**’” (Jn. 18:5; cf. Jn. 18:6,8).
- “‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?’ And Jesus said, ‘**I am**’” (Mk. 14:61-62).
- “‘**I am** the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Rev. 1:8).

# The Seven “I Am” Statements in John

1. The bread of life
2. The light of the world
3. The door of the sheep
4. The good shepherd
5. The resurrection and the life
6. The way, and the truth, and the life
7. The true vine



*Moses Before the Burning Bush*

Raphael  
Room of Heliodorus  
Vatican Museum

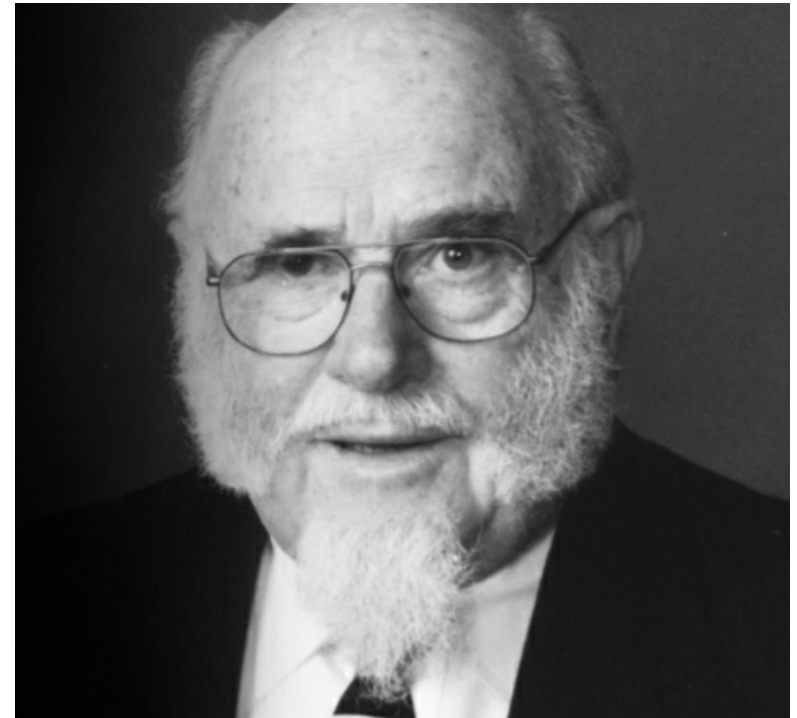


# Moses at the Burning Bush

- “God said to Moses, ‘**I am who I am.**’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel,’ “**I AM** has sent me to you.” God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel,’ “The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Ex. 3:14-15).
- “The ‘I am who I am,’ is the absolute *I*, the absolute personality, moving with unlimited freedom; and in distinction from ELOHIM (the Being to be feared), He is the personal God in His historical manifestation, in which the fulness of the Divine Being unfolds itself to the world.”

# Old Testament Roots of the New Testament

“These ‘I am’ statements all hark back to Old Testament specifics which were predicted of God, as coming from God or associated with the promised Messiah (cf. Exod. 3:14 and John 8:58).”



**Dr. Gerhard van Groningen**

Old Testament Scholar  
1921-2014





# The *True* Vine

- “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and **true** God” (I Thess. 1:9).
- “He who is holy, who is **true**, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this...” (Rev. 3:7).
- Kittel makes it clear that “in the images in which Jesus is described as the “true light” (Jn. 1:9) and the “true vine” (Jn. 15:1), *true* has in the first instance the sense of “true” or “genuine,” but genuine here means “divine” in contrast to human and earthly reality...”

# The Divine Vine

- “...it is my Father who gives you the **true** bread out of heaven” (Jn. 6:32).
- “Jesus therefore cried out in the temple, teaching and saying, ‘You both know Me, and know where I am from; and I have not come of Myself, but He who sent Me is **true**, whom you do not know’” (Jn. 7:28).
- “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only **true** God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (Jn. 17:3).
- “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is **true**” (I Jn. 5:20).



# Jesus, the True Vine

“Jesus is not merely like a vine; He is more, the actual original of which all natural vines, genuine in the domain of nature, are only images. As the real and genuine vine in this supreme sense, He exceeds all others who may in some way also be called vines, and He stands forever in contrast with all those who are not real but only spurious and pretending vines. Jesus alone embodies the complete will and purposes of God, which others only foreshadow or reveal in part, and which still others only pretend to reveal”

- R.C.H. Lenski





I am God and My Father is the vinedresser.

