

The 'old wine is better' – revisiting the 'Wineskins' parable:

This classic parable of Yeshua that speaks of the problems of pouring new wine into old wineskins has been so much a part of the Church and church doctrine that I had never seriously looked at it, though, without even any serious reflection, it had always somehow disturbed me.

Recently in a debate over aspects of the foundations of the NT, one of the scholars I had been arguing with said: *“Jesus warned against pouring new wine into old wine-skins. Attempts to domesticate the Christ of scripture by pouring the new wine of the Spirit into the old wine-skins of Second Temple Judaism are doomed to fail. If they do not burst the old skins the sweet wine of the Spirit will be turned into the vinegar of the death-dealing letter of the Law (2 Corinthians 3:6).”* – David Maas (in an email to Anthony Buzzard on Sat, Oct 15, 2011 and cc'd to me).

When I read this statement above, it struck me very forcefully, how emphatically this 'wineskins' statement of Yeshua was been used to support a very strong doctrine of 'Replacement'. That is, that the church has replaced Israel in God's affections and plans.

Maas is very clear here in equating the Jewish religion of Yeshua's day (what he terms 'Second Temple Judaism') that adhered to the Hebrew Scriptures (The Tanakh or Old Testament), with the 'old wineskin', and Christianity as the 'sweet (new) wine of the Spirit'.

Here is also very clearly equates this so-called 'Old Covenant' (Second Temple Judaism) with the 'letter of the Law' and the so called 'New Covenant' of Christianity with the 'Spirit of the Law'.

This 'Replacement Theology' whether intention or not (surely most 'Christians' who support it are not intentionally anti-Israel and against the Jewishness of Yeshua), has resulted in a great deal of anti-semitism which has ultimately led to great persecutions and pogroms against the Jewish people.

In fact, it could be argued that the miss-understanding of this parable has been instrumental in much evil ('bad fruit') against the Jewish people and helps explain why when Jewish lovers of the Almighty look at the 'fruit of the tree' of Christianity, they do not see 'good fruit' but bad, and consequently reject the messenger because of the falsehood of the message. In this vein you may wish to revisit Matthew 7:16-20, Luke 13:6-9 and then John 15:2-16.

In seeking commentary where this parable was first used to argue that the church had replaced Israel and Judaism, I found that it appears to have been first proposed by the seriously anti-semitic Marcion (85 – 160 CE) in his ultimately successful efforts to separate Christianity from Judaism (I would recommend a reading of Frank Selch's book 'Replacement Theology' for more detail on the history of this rejection of the Hebraic roots of Christianity).

So, thanks to David Maas comment, which I found very disturbing, I was interested in returning to and reconsidering this parable.

Thanks to the incredible work of the late David Flusser (Hebrew University) and the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research, I now understood that the Gospel of Luke was most likely written before the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, and these well before John's gospel.

Therefore it seemed sensible to start in Luke (Luke 5:36-39):

*“He also told them a parable: “No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But the new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says **“The old is good”**.”* (Some manuscripts, such as the KJV have **“The old is better”**) – The Jewish Annotated New Testament

I had read and listened to this scripture a great many times and even heard preachers speak on it but I had amazingly missed the last sentence where Yeshua said the old wine is better! You may need to do a double take yourself here. Yeshua states that it is the old wine, not the new wine in new wineskins that is better!

It is also perhaps worth noting some different ways verse 39 is translated into English:

“... And no one who has ever tasted fine aged wine prefers unaged wine.” – The Message

“Of course, nobody who has been drinking old wine will want the new at once. He is sure to say, ‘The old is a good sound wine.’” – JB Phillips

“And no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is good enough.’” - NASB

I am not sure though that these translations bring anything new or more helpful to the simple comment that the 'old wine is better'.

When we turn to the two references to this same parable in Mark (2:22) and in Matthew (9:17) we find this last sentence missing. Without this concluding sentence it is much easier to interpret this parable as Marcion and Maas have. Perhaps this part of the parable was excluded from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark deliberately by copyists or translators, for this very reason.

It should not take much reflection then to see that this parable can in no way be suggesting that the 'sweet (new) wine' of Christianity is somehow superior to the old wine of Judaism. If these were the two concepts and approaches being compared, it would mean that Yeshua was saying that Judaism was better!

So now, we need I think to ask, is this what the parable is suggesting or is it something a little more subtle?

The late Dr Robert L Lindsey (a Baptist Pastor and student of Flusser) argues most convincingly in his book 'Jesus, Rabbi and Lord' (see Chapter 19) that all throughout the Gospel of Luke the structure of each narrative is three fold: (1) An incident in Yeshua's life is related; (2) this is followed by a teaching discourse by Yeshua; and (3) which then concludes with 2 parables.

Consider how this 'wineskins' parable fits with this approach.

We see in Luke 5:27, that the tax collector (Matthew Levi the possible author of the Gospel of Matthew or at least the original Hebrew 'History of Yeshua') has prepared a great feast for Yeshua. A number of the Pharisees and scribes question Yeshua about spending time with these 'sinners' (the tax collectors had chosen their unrighteous occupation which meant they had chosen to separate themselves from community welfare and fellowship with their 'healthy' or righteous brethren).

Yeshua then makes the classic statement or teaching that the healthy do not need a doctor. He was saying here, as he had elsewhere, they he had come to call the unrighteous, the 'lost sheep of Israel' back to the covenantal relationship that the family of Israel had with their Father, the Almighty.

It is thus, in this context that he gives the two parables; the parable about sewing a piece of new cloth onto an old garment and the wineskins parable. In this context, I would argue that the 'old wine is better' refers to those of Israel who have been, and remain in, communion with the God of Israel. That is the healthy sheep of Israel that are not lost (the mainstream Jewish 'man in the street' represented in the religious context by the Pharisees - Yeshua himself being essentially a Pharisee – see 'Jesus' by Flusser).

They are 'better' or 'good enough' because they have a developed intimacy with the Almighty, which the Jewish tax collectors and other sinners, through no longer walking right with God (halakha), have turned their backs on.

In calling these 'sinners' back to the Father, Yeshua sees them as like new wine needing a different treatment and approach (new wineskin) which he offers. The same can surely be said when many years later, Gentiles would be accepted into the Kingdom of God, the movement of Yeshua. They would also need a 'new' or different approach as they would not have grown up with the 'oracles of God', with anything like the knowledge of the Tanakh and mitzvot (commandments) that the Jewish people have from birth. This 'new wineskin' essentially encompasses the Ten Commandments plus the four Noahide Laws as detailed in Acts 15. I have dealt in a little detail with the edicts of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) in my article 'Circumcision – A Step of Obedience?'.

This parable has nothing to do with a comparison between living under the 'letter of Torah (Law)' or the 'Spirit of Torah'. I have dealt with this issue elsewhere. See for example, 'Siblings of the King: Living in the will of the Father'. The well known scholar James Dunn also discusses these very commonly misunderstood phrases in 'The Theology of Paul the Apostle'.

For a much more in-depth look at the 'wineskins' parable I highly recommend '*The Old is Better: Parables of Patched Garment and Wineskins as Elaboration of a Chreia in Luke 5:33-39 about Feasting with Jesus.*' By Anders Eriksson (<http://www.ars-rhetorica.net/Queen/VolumeSpecialIssue2/Articles/Eriksson.pdf>)

Paul Herring
December 2011

www.circumcisedheart.info