

ALCOHOL AND THE CONSCIENCE

Introduction

A love/hate relationship between man and alcohol goes back thousands of years.¹ Alcohol has enraged passions, fueled soldiers, and made many forget their reason for fighting. Alcoholic beverages have also calmed the fearful, cheered the sorrowful, and lightened the load of the weary. But how do the Scriptures present this potentially dangerous beverage? Heated discussion has raged over alcohol and its place in the life of the believer. This paper will ask the question, “Is drinking potentially intoxicating beverages a conscience issue?”

Although the Scriptures mention several different types of beverages² containing alcoholic properties,³ wine is by far the most common. Therefore, the majority of this paper will address how God views wine, and then draw principles concerning how the believer ought to view alcoholic beverages.

Interpreters face the dangerous possibility of reading their current culture, situations, and elements back into ancient texts. So is the case when the topic of “wine” is being discussed. The “wine” that is regularly mentioned and described in the Old Testament world, found in the ancient cultures of Israel, Egypt, Greece, Babylon, Assyria, and others, is not exactly the same as wine which commonly is sold under the same title today. Because there is often no one-to-one

¹ Ian Lendler, *Alcoholica Esoterica*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005). “The first historical evidence of alcohol is a jug of wine found in the mountains of present-day Iran that dates back to 5400 B.C.” (xvi).

² Strong drink is an example. See Prov 20:1; 31:4; Is 24:9. It as well was intoxicating (Is 29:9). It is nearly always linked with wine. See *D. F. Watson, “Wine,” DJG*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 870.

³ Michael M. Homan, “Beer and Its Drinkers: An Ancient Near Eastern Love Story.” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67, no. 2 (June 1, 2004), 93. Homan argues that Israel “like its neighbors produced and consumed massive quantities of beer.”

correspondence between a biblical entity and a modern term, the interpreter must consult the available literature to determine what beverages they labeled as “wine.”

One must also remember that concentrated alcohol was not common until the Arabs invented distillation in the Middle Ages. The average alcoholic content of wine and beer before distillation was comparatively light, although still able to intoxicate. Of the alcoholic beverages, wine carried some of the highest percentages of alcoholic content.⁴

Background

Alcohol in the Ancient Near East

The vine held an important place in the culture of the ancient near east.⁵ It was one of the first plants to be cultivated,⁶ and was used regularly in both common and religious life.⁷ Its fruit was thought to be a gift from the gods,⁸ and also protected by the gods.⁹ Wine and strong drink were used as sacrifices to pagan gods (Deut 32:37–38; Isa 57:6; 65:11; Jer 7:18; 19:13), and in the sacrificial system of the Israelites, as commanded by God (Exod 29:38–42; Num 15:2–19;

⁴ See R. Laird Harris, “יַיִן (*yā-yin*),” *TWOT*, 376. “The strength of natural wines is limited by two factors. The percentage of alcohol will be half of the percentage of the sugar in the juice. And if the alcoholic content is much above 10 or 11 percent, the yeast cells are killed and fermentation ceases. Probably ancient wines were 7–10 per cent.”

⁵ See Oded Borowski, *Agriculture In Iron Age Israel*. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 133. “The importance of fruit in the diet of the inhabitants of Palestine and of fruit trees in the economy of this land cannot be overemphasized.”

⁶ Noah had a vineyard after the flood (Gen 9). Borowski, *Agriculture*, 102 states “The earliest remains of cultivated grapes in Eretz-Israel date to the beginning of the third millenium B.C.E. and were found in Early Bronze Jericho and Arad.”

⁷ Seesemann, “οἶνος,” *TDNT* 5:162.

⁸ See Pritchard, *ANEP*, 48, 214. R. Dennis Cole, “Wine,” 1380, in *Eerdmans Dictionary Of The Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000).

⁹ “Wine,” *BEB*, 2145-46. “In both Egypt and Mesopotamia a goddess was thought to protect the vine. The ‘mistress of the heavenly tree of life,’ the goddess Siris, lived in the mountains of northwestern Assyria.”

28:14; Lev 23:13; cf. Gen 35:14; Num 28:7; 1 Sam 1:24; 1 Chr 9:29).¹⁰ Alcoholic beverages played an important role, not only in religion, but also in the social, economic, and political realms.¹¹

There are few products in the Middle East which had such an overwhelming influence upon the culture and conditions of the time. As an expensive commodity,¹² wine was included with grain and oil as one of the three most important goods in ancient Israel for their diet and economic stability.¹³ It differentiated the economic status of both the individual and community.¹⁴

What Is Wine?

Wine is the fermented beverage made from the crushing of fruit. It was a customary drink in the ancient times (Gen 14:18; Judg 19:19; 1 Sam 16:20; 2 Chron 11:11; Is 55:1; Dan 1:5; Lk 7:33–34). It provided an alternative to water when that which was available was contaminated, making wine more of a “necessity rather than a luxury.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Deut 14:22-27 delineates a stipulation for the distant worshiper to sell his tithe, travel, and then spend it on whatever is desired, such as wine and strong drink, to eat and drink before the LORD.

¹¹ See Michael Dietler, “Alcohol: Anthropological/Archaeological Perspectives.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (January 1, 2006): 229–249.

¹² R. J. Forbes, *Studies In Ancient Technology*, (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 71.

¹³ Joseph Kelly, “Wine,” *LBD*. See also Nathan MacDonald, *What Did The Ancient Israelites Eat: Diet in Biblical Times*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 22–23.

¹⁴ Victor H. Matthews, “Treading The Winepress: Actual and Metaphorical Viticulture in the Ancient Near East.” *Semeia*, no. 86 (1999), 19.

¹⁵ Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 953. “Wine,” *BEB*, 2148 argues against this idea, stating “There is no mention of wine being administered to water to make it safe for drinking, as is commonly accepted. Modern examples of pollution were not common in the ancient world, although this problem appeared occasionally. Examples are myriad concerning the fresh wells, springs, and moving bodies of water in biblical times, and methods were available to purify any impure water.” This author believes this is an erroneous view.

While it is true that wine could be made from a variety of fruits,¹⁶ wine was primarily produced by harvesting and processing grapes through the use of the winepress.¹⁷

At the winepress individuals stomped the grapes and drained the juice into pits (Num 18:27; Judg 6:11; 7:25; Job 24:11; Isa 16:10; 63:3; Joel 3[4]:13; Zech 14:10). Fermentation would begin to occur as the yeast on the grape skins combined with the crushed grapes, converting the sugars into alcohol. Fermentation would reach its peak within hours of the treading.¹⁸ The remaining crushed grapes and juice, or must, was later pressed in order to get the maximum product from the fruit, followed by the straining of the dregs (Isa 25:6).¹⁹ The wine was then separated and placed into stone jars (Jer 13:12) or sealed goat skins (1 Sam 1:24; 10:3; 16:20; 25:18; 2 Sam 16:1; Job 32:18–19; Mark 2:22).²⁰ Generally, the wine would be stored no longer than five years because of porous storage containers.²¹

Was “Wine” Always Alcoholic?

¹⁶ See Magen Broshi, “Date Beer And Date Wine In Antiquity.” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 139, no. 1 (Mr 2007), 55–59, for evidence concerning date wine in Palestine.

¹⁷ Avraham Negev and Shimon Gibson, eds. *The Archaeological Encyclopedia Of The Holy Land*. 4th ed. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 541. “Many hundreds of winepresses, some of which were most elaborate (Oboda, Sobata), have been discovered almost everywhere in the country. It seems that in the late Roman period the vintners in Palestine, mainly those in the high mountains south of Hebron and the central Negev, perfected the process of fermentation.” Borowski has found evidence of three different types of winepresses: 1. hewn from the rock; 2. built of stone; 3. portable stone press (Borowski, *Agriculture*, 111).

¹⁸ Joseph Kelly, “Wine,” *LBD*. “Within six to twelve hours after treading, the must would reach peak fermentation, and would continue to ferment for a few days.”

¹⁹ According to Watson this was behind Jesus’ condemnation of the Pharisaical practice of straining a gnat and swallowing a camel in Mt 23:24. Watson, “Wine,” *DJG*, 871.

²⁰ See James B. Pritchard, *Gibeon, Where The Sun Stood Still: The Discovery of the Biblical City*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), 79-99 for archeological evidence around Israel. They assert that the wine would be stored in underground cellars at a constant 65 degrees, and under a few centimeters of olive oil to keep it from souring (98).

²¹ Justin Jennings, Kathleen L. Antrobus, Sam J. Atencio, Erin Glavich, Rebecca Johnson, German Loffler, and Christine Luu. ““Drinking Beer In A Blissful Mood’: Alcohol Production, Operational Chains, and Feasting in the Ancient World.” *Current Anthropology* 46, no. 2 (April 1, 2005), 286.

In the times of the Old Testament, the term “wine” could refer to a broad range of meaning such as metaphorically speaking of the vine (from which the wine would originate),²² the fully fermented wine which had the ability to intoxicate, and to the intoxicating effect afterwards.²³ It also encompassed the beverages which had been diluted with water or mixed with intoxicants.

Sources indicate that it was common to mix wine with water, either to diminish the effect of the fermentation of the wine, or exterminate the bacteria in the water (2 Macc 15:39; *m. Ber.* 7:5; *m. Abod Zar.* 5:5; b. *Šabb.* 77a). In the Old Testament there seems to be a derogatory view of mixing wine and water (Isa 1:22), however the Greeks considered it barbaric to do otherwise.²⁴ By the times of the Romans, the Jewish customs had changed as well to include mixing their wine and water.²⁵ Various authors listed ratios of water to wine from two to one all the way to twenty to one.²⁶

Although it may have been standard practice to mix wine with water in the NT era,²⁷ when the Scriptures referenced “mixed wine,” they were not referring to mixing that wine with water. Rather, it was weak wine supplemented with strong wine. This would produce a stronger

²² There were instances where the grapes were squeezed and drunk immediately (Gen 40:11). Fitzsimmonds states that the term “wine”, in this case, “is never applied to the resultant juice.” See Fitzsimmonds, “Wine and Strong Drink,” *NBD*, 1242.

²³ DBL Hebrew, “יַיִן (*yā·yin*),” Ge 9:24; 1Sa 25:37.

²⁴ “Wine,” *BEB*, 2147. “If one desired to mention wine without water, it was necessary to add the word ‘unmixed.’”

²⁵ Dommershausen, “יַיִן (*yā·yin*),” *TDOT*, 6:61.

²⁶ See Watson, “Wine,” *DJG*, 871. Mishnah - 2-1, Talmudic - 3-1. Homer, *Odyssey* 9.193 says 20-1.

²⁷ Robert H. Stein, “Wine-Drinking In New Testament Times.” *Christianity Today*, June (1975): 9–11.

drink (Ps 75:8; Rev 18:6).²⁸ The evidence available to the interpreter suggests that wine consistently, and possibly universally, had a noticeable alcoholic content.

Alcohol in OT - Positive and Negative

The Old Testament has a variety of words which can be translated “wine” in the English language.²⁹ The majority of these are taken from the common word, יין (yyn), and the second most common, תירוש (tyrws).³⁰ These words for “wine” are found in every genre, and nearly every book, of the Old Testament. Wine is also referred to as “the blood of the grape” (Gen 49:11; Deut 32:14; Sir 39:26; 50:15).

The first reference to wine is found in Gen 9 where Noah cultivated the vine and became intoxicated. It is highly unlikely that this was humanity’s first interaction with wine. Adam, working the ground, and Cain with his firstfruits from the ground, most likely had interactions with the grape and its byproducts.

The Scriptures present three primary perspectives of wine. On the left is the blessing of wine (Ps 104:15 cf Judg 9:13) and on the right is the condemnation of wine (Prov 23:29-35). Various other passages have references to wine used as a metonym for judgment, prosperity, or bounty.

²⁸ “Wine,” *BEB*, 2147. See as well Douglas E. Neel and Joel A. Pugh. *The Food And Feasts Of Jesus: Inside the World of First-Century Fare with Menus and Recipes*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 129.

²⁹ The primary word is יין (yyn) which is used 141 times. Translated regularly as οἶνος in the LXX (122 times with yyn + ב and ה). The second most common is תירוש (tyrws). The remaining words are חמר (hmr), עסיס (‘sys), חמץ (hms), ממסך (mmsk), שמר (smr), מזג (mzg), סבא (sb’).

³⁰ “New wine,” or תירוש (tyrws), has sometimes been considered to be unfermented. Hosea 4:11, however, indicates that it cannot be considered that. See “Wine,” *BEB*, 2146, where they offer six reasons why this is highly unlikely. See also Eugene Carpenter, “יין (yā-yin),” *NIDOTTE*, 440-441. For another view, see Naeh and Weitzman who argue that “wine” does not always fit the context wherein תירוש (tyrws) is found. S. Naeh and M. P. Weitzman. “Tīrōš: Wine or Grape? A Case of Metonymy.” *Vetus Testamentum* 44, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 115–120.

Positively

Perhaps the most positive aspect of wine in the Old Testament was its ability to gladden the heart of man (Ps 104:15) and temporarily erase tribulations (Prov 31:6). Wisdom had prepared it (Prov 9:5), and wine was offered to those who would receive it (Isa 55:1). Wine was used to honor a guest (Gen 14:18) and give strength to the faint (2 Sam 16:2).

It was a general blessing from God (Gen 27:28, 37; 49:11–12; Deut 7:13; Ps 104:15; Prov 31:6; Eccl 9:7; Isa 55:1) and it was a curse to have none (Deut 28:30; Isa 16:10; 24:11; Jer 48:33; Amos 5:11; Mic 6:15; Zeph 1:13; Joel 1:10). It was used at great celebrations (1 Chr 12:39–40), and the lack of it was cause for mourning (Isa 24:9).

Wine was so important, that God promised it in abundance when making prophecies about the eschaton (Isa 25:6; Joel 2:24; 3:18; Amos 9:13–14; Zech 10:7).

Negatively - Prov 23:29-35

While clearly portraying the positive aspects of wine, the Old Testament was not blind to its dangerous effects if abused. When wine is first mentioned it is in the context of Noah's drunkenness and shame (Gen 9:21). Likewise it was part of Lot sin of incest with his daughters (Gen 19:30–38). Wine's excess was condemned (Isa 5:11), causing man's mind to err (Isa 28:7) and leaders to neglect their duties (Isa 56:9-12; Prov 31:4). It could lead one astray (Prov 20:1) and caused disastrous results (Ps 107:27; Prov 20:1; 21:17; 23:20–21, 29–35; Isa 5:22; 19:14; 28:7–8; Jer 25:27; Hos 4:11).³¹

³¹ This is not unique to Israel, but is common in many ancient cultures. Neel and Pugh state definitively that "All Mediterranean cultures frowned on drunkenness..." (Neel and Pugh, *Food and Feasts*, 126).

Several people groups were forbidden from drinking wine. Priests were not allowed to drink while on duty (Lev 10:9; Ezek 44:21). The Nazarites were forbidden from drinking wine (Num 6:1-5), and in the case of Samson, his mother could not drink wine or strong drink until he was born. The Rechabites (Jer 35:1-19) had kept the command of their forefather for several hundred years, to not drink wine, build houses, plant crops, or own a vineyard.³²

Daniel is another biblical model of abstinence. After his deportation, Daniel “resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank” (Dan 1:8). He and his three friends abstained, were evaluated, and were blessed by God (Dan 1:8-21). It should be recognized, however, that this abstinence was most likely due to the meat and wine’s connection to pagan offerings, and not the alcoholic content of the wine. Daniel eventually drank wine, as inferred from later in his book (Dan 10:3), suggesting that he had taken issue with the connections rather than the substance.

Metaphorically

Wine was also frequently used as a metaphor for God’s judgment (Jer 51:7; Lam 1:15; Joel 3:13). It was the wine of His wrath (Jer 25:15), that which was trodden in the winepress (Isa 63:2–3). Even the loss, or failure, of a vineyard was viewed as a disaster (Jer 8:13; Joel 1:11-12).³³

Alcohol in NT - Positive and Negative

³² The rejection of wine appears to be out of concern for their nomadic life, not its alcoholic content. See “Wine” *NBD*, 1243, and Phyllis A. Bird, “Vine”, *HBD*, 1113.

³³ Matthews, *Treading*, 23.

The New Testament addresses the consumption of wine as well. In fact, one could argue that because of the influence of the Greeks and Romans, wine was even more prevalent and pervasive in the everyday lives of the Jewish people. Several words have been translated “wine”: οἶνος, ὄξος, and γλεῦκος. Other figures of speech such as “fruit of the vine” (Mark 14:25, etc)³⁴ and “the cup” (Mark 14:22, etc), referred to the same beverage.

The NT presents several perspectives of wine, as did the OT. Drunkenness is condemned (Eph 5:18) and wine was used as an excuse to reject one’s message (Acts 2:13). Wine, however, was used in the very symbolic meal with Jesus and his disciples. It was also miraculously created by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, a striking connection with the eschatological age.

Positively³⁵

Wine was at the center of Jesus’ first miracle (John 2:1-11).³⁶ During the wedding at Cana, Jesus miraculously transformed water, meant to be used for ritual washing, into good wine, symbolizing the coming of the Messiah (Gen 49:11-12) and his kingdom (Jer 31:12).³⁷ This miracle was in some ways visualizing what he would later say to the Pharisees. In response to their questions concerning fasting, Jesus teaches that what they had was the old wine, but he was bringing the new (Mark 2:22; par. Matt 9:14–17; Luke 5:33–38).

³⁴ “Wine,” *BEB*, 2148. “The phrase “fruit of the vine” (Mt 26:27–29) is often interpreted to mean fresh grape juice. However, fresh grape juice would be all but impossible to find.”

³⁵ Richard D. Land and Barrett Duke. “The Christian And Alcohol.” *Criswell Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (Spr 2008): 19–38. Land and Duke argue that the majority of references in the NT are negative. Besides the few, “one encounters only negative statements in the NT about the non-medicinal use of wine” (28).

³⁶ Some argue that Jesus did not drink any of the wine he created (see Land and Duke, *Christian and Alcohol*, 32) or that the wine he created did not contain any alcohol (see Peter Lumpkins, *Alcohol Today: Abstinence in an Age of Indulgence*. [Garland, Texas: Hannibal Books, 2009], 150; Frederic Richard Lees and Dawson Burns. *The Temperance Bible-Commentary: Giving at One View Version, Criticism, and Exposition, in Regard to All Passages of Holy Writ Bearing on “Wine” and “Strong Drink”, or Illustrating the Principles of the Temperance Reformation*. [London: National Temperance Publication Depot, 1894], 304-5).

³⁷ See Watson, “Wine,” *DJG*, 873.

A further use of wine in the Jewish culture of the NT was for medicinal purposes. The Good Samaritan administered wine to the injured man (Luke 10:34), and Paul recommended wine for Timothy and his stomach (1 Tim 5:23). The Talmud believed that “wine is the greatest of all medicines (*b. B. Bat.* 58b).”

Possibly the most debated throughout the history of the Church, is the wine used at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:23-25; Matt 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20).³⁸ At this Passover celebration, the traditional elements were used. According to the book of Jubilees, wine was used during the Passover meal (*Jub.* 49:6). According to the Pesah, this wine would have been partially diluted, but still have the appearance and taste of wine (*b. Pesah* 108b), and this practice continued throughout the early church³⁹ and beyond.⁴⁰

Negatively

The duality of the OT view of wine is present in the NT as well. John the Baptist abstained (Luke 1:15; Matt 11:18). Drunkenness is forbidden (Eph 5:18) and considered a work of the flesh (Gal 5:21), something characteristic of the Gentiles (1 Pet 4:3). Leaders and aged

³⁸ The absence of the term οἶνος has been the basis for some to assert that this was not wine. Others have argued that if the bread was to be unleavened then the cup must be unfermented [see William Patton, *Bible Wines Or Laws Of Fermentation And Wines Of The Ancients*. Oklahoma City: Sane Press, 1978], 83). Gentry argues that taking the phrase literally would be absurd, “it would teach that the cup is filled with uncrushed whole grapes” (Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. *God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says About Alcohol*. [Lincoln, California: Oakdown, 2001], 80).

³⁹ See Justin Martyr *Apol.* 1.67; Hippolytus *Apos. Trad.* 23.1; Clement of Alexandria *Paed.* 2.2; Cyprian *Ep.* 62.2.11.13).

⁴⁰ “Wine,” *ODCC*, 1767. “From the earliest period it has been the custom to mix water with the wine in the Eucharist; it is taken for granted by Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, while by the time of Cyprian a mystical meaning was given to the practice.”

members of the church must not be enslaved to it (1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 2:3).⁴¹ It was used as a fitting metaphor for wrath and tribulation (Rev 14:19–20; 17:2; 19:15).

“New wine” was the attributed cause by the crowd for the apostles display on the Day of Pentecost. Some have argued that “new wine” refers to unfermented grape juice,⁴² however, this passage demonstrates that it had the ability to intoxicate as well.⁴³ Because the harvest was still several months away,⁴⁴ this “new wine” would have had to been kept unfermented for quite some time.

The refusal of Jesus to drink wine while on the cross (Mark 15:23) was not an example of his position of abstinence. Several other passages already noted from the Gospels demonstrate that total abstinence from wine was not his normal recourse. Rather, in this circumstance he was choosing to die with an unclouded mind.⁴⁵ Later, he did accept ὄξος, or sour wine, to relieve his thirst before he died (Mark 15:36).

Evaluation

Throughout the years interpreters have attempted to reconcile the variety of views which the Scriptures seem to have concerning this potentially intoxicating substance. It is evident that

⁴¹ Land and Duke admit that “...none of these passages require abstinence. Their concern is related to over-indulgence...This should not be interpreted to mean, however, that these passages permit church leaders to drink alcoholic beverages” (Land and Duke, *Christian and Alcohol*, 29).

⁴² “οἶνος,” L&N, 76. “Though some persons have argued that whenever mention is made of Jesus either making or drinking wine, one must assume that this was only unfermented grape juice, there is no real basis for such a conclusion. Only where οἶνος νέος ‘new wine’ (6.198) is mentioned can one assume that this is unfermented grape juice or grape juice in the initial stages of fermentation.” “οἶνος νέος: a set phrase referring to newly pressed grape juice, unfermented or in the initial stages of fermentation.”

⁴³ Interpreters have suggested other theories about “new wine.” 1. “New wine” refers to the first drippings from the winepress, and still fermented (see *NBD*, 1242.). 2. “New wine” refers to the product of the most recent harvest (see Watson, “Wine,” *DJG*, 870).

⁴⁴ “Wine,” *BEB*, 2146. “In early September the grapes were collected in the plains, and at the end of the month in the hills.”

⁴⁵ F. S. Fitzsimmonds, “Wine,” *NBD*, 1243. Cf. Prov 31:6.

wine had an important place in the lives of those who lived during the Bible times. It was both a blessing and a cursing, a gift and a weapon. How ought the modern interpreter view Scripture's teachings?

Two primary options are available to one who believes in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. The interpreter may first understand that the Scriptural term "wine" is used for both the fermented beverage and the unfermented grape juice.⁴⁶ Or, one may understand that it is not the product, but the abuse of fermented beverages, which is condemned.

Teachout espouses the view that when "wine" in the OT caused someone to be drunk, it was speaking about a sinful fermented beverage, but when "wine" is used in a good sense, it is speaking about grape juice.⁴⁷ Context determines the interpretation of the substance. In this way, the interpreter is able to reconcile the seemingly opposed messages of the the Bible concerning fermented drinks. It also allows for clear lines of application in the reader's current culture.

While offering a plausible explanation, this view must deal with other difficulties. First, was it possible that they had ways of preserving fresh grape juice for extended periods of time? Ancient sources state that there were possible ways of doing so.⁴⁸ However, it is highly

⁴⁶ This was the view espoused by the once popular, Temperance Bible Commentary. See also Patton, *Bible Wines*. Norman Shanks Kerr, *Wines: Scriptural and Ecclesiastical*, (London: National temperance publication depot, 1887). George Whitefield Samson, *The Divine Law As To Wines: Established by the Testimony of Sages, Physicians, and Legislators Against the Use of Fermented and Intoxicating Wines : Confirmed by Egyptian, Greek, and Roman Methods of Preparing Unfermented Wines for Festal, Medicinal, and Sacramental Uses*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1885). See as well Kenneth I. Brown, *The Use Of Wine In The Bible*, (Allen Park, Michigan: Detroit Baptist Divinity School, 1971), 23-24, where he says, "These biblical terms mean the fruit of the vine without reference to presence or absence of alcohol."

⁴⁷ See Robert Teachout, "The Use Of 'Wine' In The Old Testament" (doctoral diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979).

⁴⁸ See Patton, *Bible Wines*, 36ff; David R. Brumbelow, *Ancient Wine And The Bible: The Case for Abstinence*. (Carrollton, Georgia: Free Church Press, 2011), 41-70. These included keeping the temperature below 45 degrees, submerging it in cold water for forty days, using sulphur, and boiling. Whether these were actually viable or not has not been tested by the author. Aristotle recommended boiling to weaken the intoxicating effects (Iain Gately, *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol*. (New York: Gotham Books, 2008), 24).

improbable that, considering the widespread use of wine, every positive reference to “wine” was due to the difficult task of preserving juice in an unfermented state. Second, if there was such a difference between God’s view of wine and grape juice, wrath and blessing, why did they not consistently clarify as Moses did in Num 6:3, using מִשְׁרֵת עֲנָבִים to describe the juice of grapes?⁴⁹ Third, the drinking of fermented beverages did not always result in drunkenness.⁵⁰ Finally, condemning wine categorically only moves the problem out one step, it does not solve it. Rules can be made about every substance which may have the possibility, or probability, of danger attached to it. These tend to become burdensome, and only teach the individual to follow a list of rules rather than Scriptural principles.

Recognition that “wine” with no fermentation was nearly nonexistent has been widely accepted.⁵¹ The climate of ancient Israel, and the process of pressing the grapes in a wine press both contributed to the speed of the fermentation process.⁵² The question is not whether Israel drank fermented drinks,⁵³ it is whether Yahweh approved of it.

The Bible does not make a point to differentiate between intoxicating wine and fresh grape juice, but rather between sobriety and drunkenness. This is because the authors were not concerned with what was being consumed, but with the outcome. Efforts to distinguish the

⁴⁹ The example of water could be used. The same term for water was employed for salt water or fresh water, potable and not potable. While appearing to be a genuine comparison, the argument fails to recognize that salt water was not a common drink. To our knowledge, no one established specific places to drink salt water, nor do we hear of invading armies trying to drink up another nation’s supply of not potable water. There was no need to differentiate, for when it came to drinking, potable water was the only option.

⁵⁰ The logical argument is often presented as: 1. Drunkenness is sinful; 2. Wine always leads to drunkenness; 3. Wine is then sinful. While the first premise is biblical, the second is not verifiable, therefore the conclusion is false.

⁵¹ *Watson*, “Wine,” *DJG*, 870. “All wine mentioned in the Bible is fermented grape juice with an alcohol content. No non-fermented drink was called wine.” R. Dennis Cole, “Wine,” *EDB*, 1379. “All biblical forms were capable of producing intoxication (Hos. 4:11; Joel 1:5).”

⁵² Matthews, *Treading*, 20.

⁵³ Land and Duke, *Christian and Alcohol*, 29.

chemical makeup of the “wine” being mentioned in each instance, whether spiked, fermented, partially fermented, diluted, or fresh juice, result in an extended treatise focused on what the biblical authors made no concern.⁵⁴ The Scriptures do not present the substance as the problem, but rather the abuse of it.⁵⁵

Conscience and Alcohol

The evidence presented from Scripture indicates that there is no inherent sinfulness in the substance of wine. However, the NT teaches that there are times when the drinking of that substance would be sin. Besides the unanimous agreement of the biblical authors that drunkenness is sin, there are several other situations which must be considered.

Conscience

The New Testament speaks of the *συνείδησις*, translated “conscience” in most contexts, as a determining factor in the sinfulness or correctness of participating in something which is not forbidden in Scripture. The conscience is the God-given, yet moldable, internal monitor which evaluates past and future decisions.

Paul uses *συνείδησις*, both in word and pen. It is his *συνείδησις* which governed the manner of his life and ministry. It was a regulator between him and God (Acts 23:1; 2 Tim 1:3).

⁵⁴ Eg. Teachout’s dissertation. In response to the Two Wine Theory espoused in the 19th century, Edward H. Jewett had these words to say, “It is needless, however, to go on ‘slaying the slain.’ The theory is DEAD in the estimation of scholars worthy of the name. We have recently had in our hands nearly twenty letters from Hebrew and Greek scholars and professors in our Eastern universities and theological seminaries - men like Drs. Schaff, Briggs, etc., - in which they all repudiate it. We do not hesitate to express the conviction that not one first-class Hebrew or Greek professor can be found in the United States who would support it over his own signature.” (Edward H. Jewett, *The Two-Wine Theory Discussed by Two Hundred and Eighty-Six Clergymen On The Basis Of “Communion Wine”*. [New York: E. Steiger & Co., 1888], vii).

⁵⁵ J. E. Whitteker, “Bible Wine: Its Privileged and Appointed Use”. (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, n.d.), 15. “If men brutalize themselves by it, that is not the fault of the wine, or of the god who gave it and who blesses it: the fault lies in their own weak, lustful hearts. Wine is not the only avenue for the expression of a beastly life.”

It also directed his interaction with his fellow man (Acts 24:16), forcing him to rely upon the grace of God with simplicity and godly motives (2 Cor 1:12). Because his *συνείδησις* affirmed his ministry, he expected that the *συνείδησις* of his hearers would give the same judgment (2 Cor 5:11). His *συνείδησις* hampered his opportunities to lie (Rom 9:1) or use deceitful methods to teach, or abuse, God's Word (2 Cor 4:2).

It was a good *συνείδησις* which Paul wanted his fellow workers and followers to have (1 Tim 1:5). Alongside a pure heart and sincere faith, this *συνείδησις* would keep them from straying from the service of the Lord (1 Tim 1:19), as had happened to others. Those serving the King in ministry must have a clear *συνείδησις* in regard to how they understand and teach the faith (1 Tim 3:9).

Not only was the *συνείδησις* a tool used to monitor one's ministry before God, but also challenge one to respond appropriately to human authorities. It was for the sake of their *συνείδησις* that Paul admonished the believers of Rome to be in subjection to the government (Rom 13:5).

Paul argued that the *συνείδησις* was a faculty given by God in order to convict man about moral choices which had been made. It was available both for unbelieving Gentiles and believers in the Church. It was a proof that the Gentiles had no excuse for their rebellion against God (Rom 2:15). It also should have kept man from lies, but had the ability to be seared (1 Tim 4:2).

The *συνείδησις* was a determining factor in the sinfulness of a particular action. Though not a matter directly forbidden by God, a person could sin by acting against what they thought was right. Paul argues for this function of the *συνείδησις* in his correspondence with the church of Corinth. A weak *συνείδησις* is one which forbids a believer from eating something (1 Cor 8:7,

10, 12, 25, 27, 28). A pure συνείδησις allows one to respond to God and fellow man in a pure way, but a defiled συνείδησις defiles all other actions and attitudes (Titus 1:15). With this understanding of the conscience, the drinking of alcohol could be sin for an individual. The conscience bears not only on the individual and his personal decisions, but the conscience of other observing believers could determine the sinfulness of drinking alcohol.

Rom 14:1-15:13

In Rom 14:1-15:13 Paul addresses the idea of eating and drinking to the benefit, or harm, of another believer.⁵⁶ The overarching exhortation is that the strong receive and protect the weak. This is important even in the eating of foods (14:2), observing of days (14:5), and drinking of wine (14:21). Paul was convinced that in the Lord, “nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (14:14; cf Mark 7:14-23). His primary concern was not the consumption of food or drink, but the kingdom of God with its righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (14:17).

The strong have a great responsibility toward the weak. There is the potential that he may destroy the weaker brother. The combination of the terms πρόσκομμα (13), σκάνδαλον (13), λυπεῖται (15), ἀπόλλυε (15), κατάλυε (20), προσκόμματος (20), προσκόπτει (21), and κατακέκριται (23) demonstrate that the weak is not merely in danger of a pang of conscience, but an eschatological judgment.⁵⁷ Because so much is at stake, the stronger must build up the weak (15:2), not allow him to stumble, or continue in his weakness.

⁵⁶ A related passage in the Pauline writings is 1 Cor 8-10, specifically addressing meat offered to idols. Paul warns that the consciences of observing believers and unbelievers must be considered in the question of eating and drinking (1 Cor 10:28-29).

⁵⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*. Vol. 6. BECNT. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 733-734. Contra John MacArthur, *Romans 9-16*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 294.

Contrary to many who misuse these verses, the weak would not necessarily be the drunkard. The believers are weak in faith (14:1),⁵⁸ not weak because they are prone to drunkenness or addiction. A drunkard may be weak in faith as well,⁵⁹ but weakness is not synonymous with drunkenness.⁶⁰ To be weak in faith resulted from a composite of beliefs⁶¹ which forced the individual to reject meat and wine, and/or regard certain days over others.⁶² Their consciences forbid them from doing something that God had not forbidden them from doing.

The weak are also not those who are merely offended by the behavior of the other believer. It is the individual who is pressured, directly or indirectly, to do something against his conscience, and therefore sin against God. “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23b).

In this situation the difference between, and the response to, the weaker brother and a “masquerading weaker brother” is often confused. A weaker brother is one who would say “I am tempted to sin by following your example in something which is against my conscience.” According to Paul the appropriate response would be, “I will not encourage you to do this, or do this in your presence, until we have come to an understanding.” On the other hand there are those

⁵⁸ According to BDAG, “ἀσθενέω,” 142, the participle ἀσθενοῦντα refers to someone who is experiencing “some personal incapacity or limitation,” particularly “in determining correct courses of action.”

⁵⁹ Land and Duke argue with this mentality. “Even those who are able to control their drinking should recognize that they are engaged in a behavior that is destroying millions of lives, and choose to abstain rather than encourage by their behavior someone to drink who will not be able to control his drinking” (Land and Duke, *Christian and Alcohol*, 21).

⁶⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: a Theological Survey*. Encountering Biblical Studies. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 197. Murray calls this a “perversion of Paul’s teaching” (John Murray, “The Weak and the Strong.” *WTJ* 12, no. 2 (1950): 142).

⁶¹ Some have argued for primarily Jewish concern of the OT law. See Schreiner, *Romans*, 706ff and Douglas Moo, *The Epistle To The Romans*. NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 829ff.

⁶² Murray, “Weak and Strong,” 139.

who would say “I am not tempted to sin by doing what you are doing, but I don’t think you should be doing that.” In that case a proper response would be, ““Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?” (Rom 14:4a) Here is what I believe Scripture to teach.”⁶³

The drinking of an alcoholic beverage would therefore be sin for a believer to drink when it causes him to be drunk, when his conscience tells him it is sin, and when he is encouraging others to drink it against their conscience. Bringing spiritual harm⁶⁴ upon another believer is a grave offense (Rom 14:21), “for none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.” (Rom 14:7).

Culture

In light of the various conscience issues, both of the individual and those affected, a variety of considerations must be evaluated to determine when it is proper to abstain and when it is proper to partake.

One could say that the majority of one’s conscience is developed by his background and upbringing, or “personal culture.” By this process, many have come to believe that alcohol is inherently sinful. Therefore the consumption of alcohol is a sin for them. If one’s conscience will not allow them to partake, they must abstain.

Another culture to consider is the Christian culture in which the believer is living. This could be understood as the cumulative conscience, or the understood standard, of the Christian community(ies) in which one operates. Different churches, in different locations, in different denominations have different acceptable practices. In some churches, the consumption of an

⁶³ Ibid, 152. See also D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge. *Letters Along The Way: a Novel of the Christian Life*. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1993), 92.

⁶⁴ See Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*. NIVAC. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 468.

alcoholic beverage may be equated with the practice of voodoo, where in another church it is a regular practice in need of no discussion. Even though one's personal conscience allows the partaking or abstaining, in these circumstance it is often the conscience of the weaker brother which must be considered and which will limit the freedom of the stronger brother.

A third culture is that of the general populous of the city, state, or nation where one is located at the time. Both believers and unbelievers from that area have a general standard, or cumulative conscience, concerning alcohol. Although this can cover a large range of ideas, a collective average can often be agreed upon. This is often ingrained in a life long resident, but must be questioned in the area of cross cultural contexts. For example, in many areas of Peru, those in the lower class see drinking any alcohol as an attempt to get drunk. Alcohol has one main purpose, and that is to intoxicate. Within this general culture, the local churches normally viewed the drinking of any alcohol as an attempt to become inebriated.

While most of these situations have been understood as reasons to abstain, another angle should be addressed. In some situations, it could be damaging for the believer to abstain.⁶⁵ For instance, if one refuses to partake in the Lord's Supper because a fermented beverage is used, even though one's conscience does not forbid it, he is refusing to participate in this ordinance of the Lord with fellow believers. Similarly, if the secular culture viewed the drinking of an alcoholic beverage as good, and an unbeliever offered the drink as a demonstration of friendship or trust, abstaining could do unnecessary damage.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ This does not mean that the believer should sin against his conscience, but it should encourage the weak to pursue a more biblical approach in order to evade potential damages.

⁶⁶ Some would argue that the individual could just ask for a different drink. It is true that there is often a possibility of another beverage, but this is not always the case. One must not assume that there will always be a second option.

An additional qualifier must be added. If these cross cultural interactions are taking place with one of the participants under the constraints of a church covenant or supervision of a mission board which strictly forbids alcoholic beverages,⁶⁷ then that individual is placed in a difficult position. If his conscience were to allow him to drink, and his current culture encouraged it, yet he had placed himself under the authority of an abstaining contract, he would be breaking his promise if he did partake.

Wisdom Approach

There are numerous arguments and considerations that could be made for or against abstinence, some quite valid. What about serving wine to minors or former drunkards during the Lord's Supper? What about those who grew up under alcoholic parents, or health concerns, or the cost? Additional questions about possibility for addiction, or unrecognized drunkenness, also should be asked. When addressing possible harm done to immature believers, most abstaining Christians focus on the drinking of alcohol. This is a fair concern, and worthy of much thought. However, in their eagerness to "touch not, taste not" they may be putting these immature believers in equal, if not more drastic, harm.

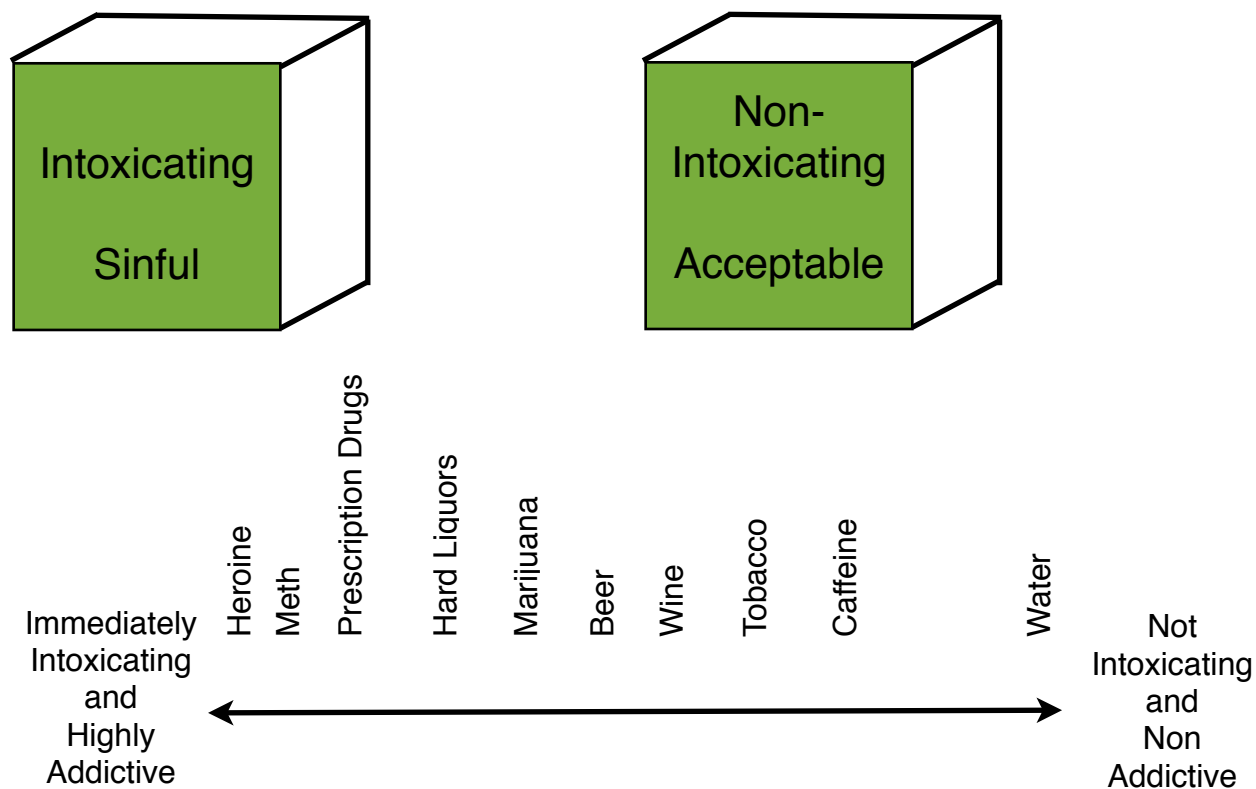
One must consider the danger of drawing lines where the Bible does not. Teaching personal preferences as defined characteristics of holiness can lead some into legalism, and others into apostasy. Addressing why one believes that the consumption of intoxicating beverages is wrong may be more important than merely trumpeting teetotalism. If one is able to prove that believers throughout the Scriptures never drank any fermented beverages to the glory

⁶⁷ Perhaps a mediating position would be to change the wording of contracts from "forbids" to "discourages", allowing the individual to make a positive decision in the cases where a national's faith could be damaged by abstaining.

of God, then they ought to teach and explain that. But if he cannot, he must consider the danger of teaching a conscience issue as a sin issue.

One way of teaching wisdom living is by understanding the scope of “intoxicating beverages.” According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, “to intoxicate” means “(of alcoholic drink or a drug) cause (someone) to lose control of their faculties or behavior.” Therefore, an “intoxicant” would be a substance which causes someone to lose their faculties or behavior. This can be the outcome of any number of legal and illegal substances. Caffeine, hallucinogens, medication, and other natural and chemical substances could produce intoxication if not used moderately. Moderation does not only take into account the amount but also the level of intoxication which something holds. It would be foolish to restrict the use of any substance which could at some level produce intoxication, just as it would be foolish to unrestrainedly indulge in another substance. If one consumes sufficient caffeine stimulants, their faculties will be impaired and their person endangered.

The belief of the author is that the proper way to view this issue is not by placing all beverages, foods, drugs, and chemical compounds into two boxes labeled Intoxicating/Sinful and Non-Intoxicating/Acceptable, but rather on a continuum between substances which are likely to intoxicate to those which do not. The higher the chances of intoxication the smaller amount is appropriate to consume. Since intoxicants are generally addictive, this would as well involve the wisdom of engaging in even a small amount.



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Conclusion

The Scriptures do not expressly forbid the consumption of potentially intoxicating beverages, but they do establish guidelines for their appropriate use. One's conscience plays an active role in the assessment. Many more questions could be, and should be, asked in each particular scenario. May the prayer of each believer, both he who abstains and he who partakes, be "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31).

⁶⁸ This is not to scale, nor a medical chart.

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