

THE JUICY TRUTH OF BIBLICAL WINE

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INTRODUCTION

“To drink, or not to drink: that is the question.” As much as the Bible refers to alcohol and the dangers of drunkenness, why do people struggle with this question? Before making it through the first five books of the Old Testament, the reader is confronted with the word “wine” in both positive and negative references. Continuing through the rest of Scripture only validates the confusion over the issue of whether alcoholic beverages may be consumed by God’s people.

“Wine” is found from Genesis 9:21 with Noah’s drunkenness to the end judgments on Babylon in Revelation 18:3. The focus of the issue on wine in the Bible revolves around whether every case refers to alcoholic wine or whether wine could also mean a nonalcoholic drink. Surprisingly, the English word “wine,” found in the King James Bible and other English translations, is used to translate at least ten different Hebrew words and at least two Greek words. A study of these different words for wine in the original languages will lay the groundwork for this study on whether wine in the Bible was solely alcoholic or not. This issue also requires background and cultural study to arrive at a valid conclusion.

As the morality of this world continues to wane, believers need to know what the Bible teaches about wine and fermented drinks. Studying the different Hebrew and Greek words for wine, the process and use of wine in Bible times, and the Biblical view of wine will guide the believer to a clearer understanding of this muddy issue.

THE BIBLICAL WORDS FOR WINE

The foundation of Scripture rests in Its very words. Since God inspired the entirety of Scripture (II Tim. 3:16), God, not man, chose the words that refer to wine. The translators of the King James Version used the single word “wine” to translate several different Hebrew and Greek words that God uses throughout the Bible. While this is not an inaccurate translation by any means, today’s dominant association with wine is an alcoholic beverage. This main association did not come until the 1800’s. Charles Wesley Ewing, in his book *The Bible and Its Wines*, shows that English dictionaries from the early 1700’s defined wine as liquid from grapes, without attaching words like “fermented” to its definition.¹ While fermented wine was implied by some of the definitions, they were not the predominant usage at that time. Today’s culture has changed the understanding of wine to be exclusively an alcoholic drink.

Some believe that the attempt to show the Hebrew and Greek words revealing both fermented and unfermented wine is futile. G.I. Williamson, in his book *Wine in the Bible & the Church*, says, “A careful study of the Hebrew and Greek terms reveal [sic] no such distinction [between fermented and unfermented wines] in Scripture.”² While the words in the original languages of the Bible are not exclusive in the distinction between fermented and unfermented wine, examining the different words and meanings can give some general guidelines and be found profitable.

¹ Charles Wesley Ewing, *The Bible and Its Wines* (Denver: Specialty Publishing, 1985), 2.

² G.I. Williamson, *Wine in the Bible & the Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1985), 10.

The Hebrew Words and Meanings for Wine

A quick glance in *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* shows around two hundred times that the English word “wine” is used in the Old Testament.³ About ten different Hebrew words make up this list. The most common word is “yayin.” This word is the generic use of the term “wine.” William Patton’s book, *Bible Wines or The Laws of Fermentation*, quotes several professors and books which demonstrate the fact that “yayin” can refer to either fermented wine or unfermented grape juice.⁴ In Genesis 9:21, Noah drinks “yayin” and becomes inebriated, clearly indicating it can refer to an alcoholic wine. Isaiah 16:10, on the other hand, says that “the treaders shall tread out no wine [yayin] in their presses.” Since wine cannot become fermented while still in the grape, it only makes sense that the wine tread out of the grapes is unfermented. “Yayin,” as unfermented wine in particular contexts, gains credence from rabbinic writings of the past. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* mentions “newly pressed wine, prior to fermentation” as being called “yayin mi-gat.”⁵ Already, evidence can be seen supporting the belief that not all wine referred to in the Bible is alcoholic.

“Tirosh,” another Hebrew word translated as wine, sheds even more light on the distinction between two wines in the Bible. Strong defines “tirosh” as “must or fresh grape-juice (as just squeezed out); by implication (rarely) fermented wine; new, sweet wine.”⁶ “Must,” according to *The American Heritage College Dictionary, Third Edition*, means “the juice expressed from fruit.” Isaiah 65:8 uses this word in the phrase, “As the new wine [tirosh] is

³ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 1220-1221.

⁴ William Patton, *Bible Wines or The Laws of Fermentation* (Little Rock: The Challenge Press, n.d.), 47.

⁵ Cecil Roth, ed. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, Israel: Keter Publishing House, 1971), 16:538.

⁶ Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, 124.

found in the cluster,” giving Scriptural proof that this word identifies, at least, unfermented wine. Micah 6:15 also shows that “tirosh” refers to what is immediately pressed from grapes. Only Hosea 4:11 allows for the possibility of “tirosh” being held in a negative sense. Taking this verse into consideration, Ewing still concludes, “From the foregoing testimony of Hebrew Scholars, and the use of tirosh in the Scriptures, it is this writer’s firm conviction that tirosh is never fermented. If it becomes fermented it is no longer tirosh.”⁷ With or without accepting the Hosea passage as nonalcoholic, few can dispute that the dominant use of “tirosh” in the Old Testament refers to grape juice.

While several other Hebrew words translated as “wine” could be examined, the point that both fermented and unfermented wine exist in Scripture has already been made. Other words like “shekar,” “enab,” “asis,” and “chemer” would help to support the distinction of wines in the Bible but are not necessary to examine for the current argument.

The Greek Words and Meanings for Wine

In addition to the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the Greek of the New Testament also gives validity of two wines in the Bible. Just as “yayin” is a general use of the word wine, including the meanings of fermented or unfermented, the Greek word “oinos” serves the same purpose.⁸ Revelation 17:2 says, “With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine [oinos] of her fornication.” In this case, the Bible clearly implies that “oinos” is fermented since the people become drunk from it, even though the passage speaks metaphorically. Stephen Reynolds, who wrote *The*

⁷ Ewing, *The Bible and Its Wines*, 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

Biblical Approach to Alcohol, demonstrates how “oinos” must also be able to refer to unfermented wine. According to Reynolds, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, uses “oinos” to translate “yayin” in Isaiah 16:10 and “tirosh” in Proverbs 3:10. Both of these passages refer to grape juice in the Old Testament.⁹ Even though examining the different Hebrew and Greek words used for “wine” in the English Bible cannot give an absolute, exclusive distinction between alcoholic and nonalcoholic wine in Scripture, the fact that both do exist can be seen.

THE MAKING AND USE OF WINE IN BIBLE TIMES

After looking at the Biblical words for “wine” in the original languages, the reader must next consider the making and use of wine in Bible times in order to determining whether Scripture condones or forbids the use of alcoholic beverages. Upon initially studying this area, the writer of this paper became disappointed upon reading reports declaring that all wine in Bible times had to be fermented since there was no refrigeration or method of preventing it. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* states, “There apparently were no attempts made to preserve wine in an unfermented state....Some scholars are of the opinion that unfermented wine was impossible in ancient times in Palestine.”¹⁰ *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible* makes no mention of preserving the grape juice in ancient times but rather implies all wine was fermented.¹¹ The discouragement of these findings faded as more detailed sources on this issue were consulted.

⁹ Stephen M. Reynolds, *The Biblical Approach to Alcohol* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 43.

¹⁰ Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 5:938.

¹¹ Pat Alexander, ed., *The Lion Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Tring, England: Lion Publishing, 1986), 221.

The Preservation of Wine

Despite what some books ignorantly say, the people living in Palestine during Bible times used several different methods to preserve wine in the unfermented state. Samuele Bacchiocchi, in his book *Wine in the Bible*, even goes as far to say that “the ancients were far more knowledgeable in the art of preserving fruits and wines than is generally presumed.”¹² Without modern refrigerators or ice, how could people of the past keep their wine in the unfermented state? William Patton explains that for wine to become alcoholic there must be the right levels of sugar, yeast, temperature, and consistency.¹³ Any alteration of these conditions can potentially keep the juice from turning into an alcoholic drink. Later, he lists four main means used by the ancients for preserving wine as unfermented: boiling, filtration, subsidence, and fumigation.¹⁴ He states that with boiling grape juice, “the water is evaporated, thus leaving so large a portion of sugar as to prevent fermentation.”¹⁵ People have boiled grape juice into syrup since before the birth of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ The resulting syrup could be stored for months until ready for use. At that time, water would be added to turn the concentrate syrup back into a drinkable juice, unfermented.

In addition to boiling, the other means were variably successful in preserving the wine. While the methods of filtration and keeping the juice cool show the ingenuity of people in Bible times, the fumigation process magnifies their expertise on preserving grape juice. By bringing the juice into contact with sulphur dioxide fumes or items containing sulphur preceding sealing and

¹² Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1989), 106.

¹³ Patton, *Bible Wines*, 14

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶ Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*, 115.

storage, the oxygen would be removed from the air in the container and prevent fermentation.¹⁷

While these examples of preservation of wine in ancient times only give a quick survey, the point is made that people preserved unfermented wine.

The Attitude towards Wine

Unlike the alcohol-crazed world of today, history reveals a different preference between alcoholic wine and grape juice among the majority of people centuries ago. The boiled wine, which required water to be added to the resulting syrup, seems to have been a choice drink in ancient times. Patton quotes Aristotle, born in 384 B.C., to Archbishop Potter, born in A.D. 1674, as having been familiar with cultures widely using boiled wine.¹⁸ How popular was unfermented wine in the Jewish culture? The *Mishna*, the oral Jewish teachings put into written form around A.D. 200, mentions boiled wine as a common part of Jewish life.¹⁹ Patton quotes from a letter by Professor M. Stuart, “facts show that the ancients not only preserved their wine unfermented, but regarded it as of a higher flavor and finer quality than fermented wine.”²⁰ The attitude towards wine was favorable of the unfermented type.

The Uses of Wine

While wine’s primary use would be a liquid drink, many other uses were found in this product. When wine is boiled, it turns into thick syrup as the water evaporates. This sweet syrup

¹⁷ Patton, *Bible Wines*, 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

was known to be used as a substitute for sugar and butter.²¹ Just as people today use molasses or honey to put on bread, this grape syrup could also be placed on foods. In an article for *Christianity Today*, Robert H. Stein, though holding to the belief that wine in the Bible does not refer to nonalcoholic grape juice, effectively gives a valid use for fermented wine. He initiates the article by explaining that the wine of Bible times did not have near the amount of alcohol as today's wines made in a distillery. Stein states that instead of boiling or filtering water in order to make it safe to drink, people commonly mixed wine with their water.²² The slight alcohol content could be enough to kill harmful bacteria. For stomach ailments, such as what Paul seemed to indicate that Timothy had, unfermented grape juice is actually the best remedy, second only to orange juice, since alcohol diminishes the positive affects.²³ By glancing through the many uses for unfermented and only slightly fermented wine, one can easily see its importance in the lives of people centuries ago.

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF WINE

After examining the different Hebrew and Greek words for wine and the cultural making and use of wine in Bible times, the reader must finally understand the Biblical view of wine. Upon an initial reading of Scripture and finding only the single English word "wine," an incorrect conclusion can be understandable. In light of what has been discussed, though, the Biblical view of wine should come into focus. Just as the letters G-O-D can mean the one true God and Creator of all things or a false supreme being, wine can have a positive and negative

²¹ Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible*, 120.

²² Robert Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today*, 20 June 1975, 10.

²³ Peter Masters, *Should Christians Drink?* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1992), 68.

definition. Context is the key to unlocking whether a passage refers to fermented or unfermented wine.

The Negative References to Wine

Context makes the negative references to wine very clear in Scripture. Since grape juice cannot result in inebriation, any reference to the wine causing drunkenness means the wine is fermented. Noah's drunkenness in Genesis 9:21 clearly resulted from alcoholic wine and had part in Ham's sin and Canaan's curse. In Genesis 19, Lot's two daughters use wine to intoxicate their father in order to commit incest with him. Alcoholic wine is also blatantly spoken out against. Proverbs 20:1 calls alcoholic wine "a mocker" and "raging" by context. Proverbs 23:29-35 gives a grave description of the wrong type of wine. The Bible clearly forbids people to even look upon this type of wine. In the New Testament, Ephesians 5:18 says, "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." These and other passages of Scripture clearly give negative references to wine which are determined by context to be fermented.

The Positive References to Wine

While many references to wine are negative, others are plainly positive. As with the negative, context quickly reveals God's attitude towards this type of wine, which is believed to be unfermented. In Genesis 14:18, the first positive reference to wine in the Bible has Melchizedek bringing bread and wine to meet Abraham. Leviticus 23:13 mentions wine as part of an offering to God. In Daniel, wine is mentioned among the lists of blessings from God. In

the Gospels and I Corinthians, believers are even commanded to observe the Lord's Supper with unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. While many attempt to show that Jesus used alcoholic wine, the Bible refutes such an idea. Jesus Christ came to fulfill the Law (Matt. 5:17). According to the Law, no leaven was even allowed to be in one's home (Exod. 12:15). Leaven is synonymous with yeast, the very substance which makes and exists in fermented wine. Since leaven pictures sin and corruption, the bread AND THE WINE in the Lord's Supper could not have had any leaven or fermentation. Christ's use of the words "fruit of the vine" also distinguishes the wine from the fermented type. Looking through the whole of Scripture the split between negative and positive references to wine concludes that two different types of wine are addressed. The key to distinguishing the difference rests in the context.

CONCLUSION

After examining the Biblical words for wine, the process and use of wine in Bible times, and the Biblical view of wine, one can designate two different types of wine in Scripture. The Hebrew and Greek words, though not exclusive in every case, reveals a distinction between fresh grape juice and fermented wine. The historical accounts in secular writings only support the division of two types of wines. In light of the linguistic and historical information, the Bible's use of "wine" becomes clear when context is taken into account.

The dangers of alcoholic wine and blessings of grape juice declare the need for believers to separate from fermented drinks. The countless homes and lives destroyed by alcohol have not even been addressed in this paper. The number of alcohol related automobile accidents also have not been given to support abstinence from alcohol. The testimony of Scripture alone should be enough to bring believers to a decision to refrain from alcoholic beverages. General Robert E. Lee agreed with the Bible when he said, "My experience through life has convinced me that abstinence from spirituous liquors is the best safeguard to morals and health."²⁴ The issue of wine is not about standards but sanctification and refraining from sin.

²⁴ Alban Douglas, *One Hundred Bible Lessons: God's Answers to Man's Questions* (Macedonia, Ohio: Bible Believers Bookstore, 1966), 254.

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