

Bible History and Archeology

9. Bible Wines

This is from a tract written many years ago, by Victor E Stanton, (Field Secretary of The New South Wales Temperance Alliance). The Author stated that he has made a lifelong study of the subject, and here summarises the results of his research, based upon, first, the Statements of the holy scriptures themselves, and, secondly, upon the findings of authorities who speak from their own extensive knowledge of Eastern customs, rather than from the traditional prejudices and illogical explanations given in some Commentaries that obviously copy from one another to the confusion of the whole issue.

Typical Apparent Confusion:

Classical examples of confusion that “seems” to exist in Holy Writ are:- “Wine that maketh glad the heart of man”. (Psalm 104:15). “Wine is a mocker, ... whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise”. (Proverbs 20:1). The first is in the Psalms of David; the second is in the wise sayings of his son. Yet both are right! Then what is the explanation?

Factors for First Consideration:

Texts on this question from one part of the Bible often cannot be coupled with those from another.

- (1) the Bible covers customs and usages over a history of approximately 4000 years.
- (2) It refers to the people of all the then known nations - Egyptians, Chaldeans, Syrians, Romans, Greeks, Palestinians, etc..
- (3) The latest of these references are nearly two thousand years old.
- (4) The English translation of the Scriptures is almost 400 years old and was made in a time when there was little knowledge of Eastern usages compared with the data available from present archaeological research, and when a very remote prejudiced knowledge of the nature and effects of intoxicants existed among the translators.
- (5) There are, in our Authorised Version (KJV), no less than 13 words from the ancient languages translated into the one English word, “wine”.
- (6) The two words mostly used, “Yayin” in Hebrew, and “Oinos” in Greek, are both generic terms – “family words”, like our words “tree”, and “fruit”, and “drink”.
- (7) No “generic” term can be fully understood without its context. For example, if we say, “we have “trees” in our backyard”, one can only guess their “type”, but if we are speaking of the value of fresh fruit in the home and then say we grow “trees” for that purpose, the reference is obviously to fruit “trees”.
- (8) Some of the original words translated “wine” do not mean “wine” as we understand it - either fermented or unfermented, eg., “Thirosh” used in references to “your corn and your

wine, and your oil", means literally - your "cereals", "fruits", "olive products", the staple diet of those days.

(9) No Biblical text referring to "wine", can be safely quoted without taking into consideration (a) its context; (b) the people with which it was associated; (c) the period to which it refers.

Usages in Bible Days - An Historic Survey:-

The study of the customs of these peoples and their histories will help any fair-minded person to clear away much of the confusion that has persisted in the past, and unfortunately persists still today; even among Bible students.

Earliest Bible references:

The earliest reference to wine is Genesis 9:20, 21. "Noah planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine, and was drunken;". This is followed in chapter 19:32, "Come let us make our father drink wine, ...". With further unsavoury references to depravity resulting from "wine" that was clearly intoxicating.

But in Genesis 40:11, we have records of the Egyptian Pharaoh. "And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand". Obviously this was non-intoxicating wine, and was a popular way to drink.

Grape Juice A Staple Food:-

Among the Hebrew people the grape was an important staple article of food. Primitive means of preserving its juice were widely used. The three popular methods used were:-

(1) To heat it to just below boiling point and bottle it in gourds, jars, or skins, sealing it off while hot with oil and pitch (similar to modern preserving methods).

(2) Simmering it beside the fire until it reached the constituency of our treacle. Rich in sugar and pleasant acids, it would keep as well as in modern jams, and was returned to drinking consistency by adding water, or (as a luxury) with milk. See Isaiah 55:1 "Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price". This thick syrup largely took the place of sugar in their cooking.

(3) By a further "drying out" process, it was placed near a fire until it had almost the consistency of cheese or a heavy conserve. This had to be brought back to a drinking condition by dissolving in hot water and cooling. Yet all of these were classified generally as "wine" - the juice of the grape - literally, something "pressed out".

Brief History of Jewish use of Wine:

Little fermented wine was made or used by the Israelites until after the days of David. With the phenomenal prosperity that came in Solomon's reign, there came also the abandonment to questionable luxury. Babylonian and other heathen idolatrous ways of living were copied: then came the more general use of the intoxicating beverages, including beers, wines and even cocktails! These practices led on to the change of attitude in the references to wine by the sacred writers. Solomon's Proverbs are full of warnings. The Prophets of that time - Isaiah,

Jeremiah, Amos, etc., repeatedly refer to the personal and national ravages resulting from the new ways of using “wine” and “strong drink”.

After the captivity, however, and until the days of Christ, there seemed to be little use of intoxicating wine by the Jews - just as there was the abandonment of idolatry. True, there are a number of New Testament references to what is obviously intoxicating wine, but in each instance they have associations with other than Jewish people – eg, Romans, Greeks, or at least to Jews regarded as reprobate, through the influence of outside races.

Universal use of Grape:

In Christ’s day there were over three hundred kinds of wine in use, including many that were unfermented. Down through the centuries the grape (and its products) had figured largely in the diet of the peoples of all Mediterranean and nearby countries. This was because of the suitability of the climate and soils to its culture. There are many references by Paul to “wine” and being “drunk with wine”, etc., but these must be kept in their settings.

More often than not they were associated with the peoples (and their customs) far removed from Palestine, and related to idolatrous forms of worship.

No Scriptural reference, in this connection, can be properly understood or assessed without taking into account its original setting, which involves a lot of work, checking things like:-

The Period - The People - The Prevailing Customs, and the Original Word from which the translation came.

Passages often quoted in Defence of the use of Wine:

Paul’s advice to Timothy:-

1 Tim 5:23. “Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities”. Note first that it was “a little”; secondly, “for thy stomach’s sake”. Timothy was evidently a dyspeptic (a common ailment among intensive students). It was suggested as a medicine - not as a beverage - but drinker’s “props” are gone when we learn that there was a special “wine for the stomach”, which was commonly known and used at the time for such ailments, and of which Pliny gives the recipe. It was carefully prepared by straining the gluten from the fresh grape juice. It was to be heated and sealed hot (with oil and pitch) and then kept in a well or other cold place “to prevent any trace of fermentation”.

It was almost certain that Paul was referring to this wine when he wrote; use a little “stomach wine” instead of keeping to water, as a nephalite - a strict abstainer from “fermented wine” products. Even those who will not accept this simple explanation cannot lean on Paul for support as imbibers of “beverage” wine. Paul’s advice was: a “little” and for an “infirmity” only.

Jesus made Wine at a Marriage Feast:

Yes. But what kind of wine did Jesus make? As is pointed out earlier, fermented wine was not commonly used among the Jews in Christ’s day. This was a “wedding feast” (John 2:1-11).

Therefore it was a sacred feast. Such feasts lasted usually for six days.

Nothing fermented was permitted at a sacred function among good Jews. Had Jesus made “fermented wine”, it would surely have been mentioned, because it would be so unusual. When the ruler of the feast (the master of ceremonies) had tasted the wine, he exclaimed “thou hast kept the “good wine” until now”. It was customary to put “the best” early in the feast, for special guests, leaving the less choice for the ordinary folk who would call later to congratulate the newly-weds and their parents.

Pliny (again) explains that the Greek words here used for “good wine” means literally the “first quality”, or, (A1), and that this “good” wine was “that which had the least trace of ferment or mould”. It is incompatible with the character of Jesus that He should produce an “intoxicant” - especially for a function at which He knew that many young people would be gathered for several days.

To sum up: there is not one iota of evidence that this wine was fermented, but there is a mass of circumstantial evidence that The Master made the natural, wholesome beverage that was in common use in those times, and that it was the very best.

The Last Supper:

Not by the remotest stretch of the imagination can it be claimed that Jesus and His Disciples used fermented wine at the “Last Supper”, upon which is based the symbolism of the most sacred and solemn, and most beautiful of all the Christian Sacraments.

It was a “Passover Feast”. At such, any trace of anything fermented was strictly forbidden, (see Exodus 12:17-20), where it refers to “unleavened” and “leavened”.

“Leavened” is from the Hebrew “chamets” (which applies to anything that rises of itself, or is fermented), and in the New Testament, carries the connotation of “sin”, (see Matthew 16:6, 11, “The leaven of the Pharisees, and Saducees”).

The Jewish Mishna (Book of rules) sets out, emphatically, how the feast is to be accordingly prepared, and where fresh wine (grape juice) was not available, raisins could be steeped in hot water to make a suitable beverage.

There are three scripture references to Christ's last Passover supper with His Disciples. In none is the word “wine” mentioned, but in each, the term used is “fruit of the vine”. (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). In Matthew 26:27, 28, Jesus equates “the fruit of the vine” with “His blood”, which is very apt, as I will demonstrate. In John 15:1, 5. “I am the true vine, ... I am the vine ye are the branches”. The “pure” juice of that fruit (the grape) has matured through the “vine”. If “Jesus is the true vine”, as He says, then the “Pure juice of that vine”, (or any other vine for that matter), would not be fermented.

Let me add two Bible texts, which establish that the Jews were familiar with the “juice of the grape” being referred to as “blood”. Deuteronomy 32:14, the last part we read, “and thou didst drink the pure blood of the grape”. (Emphasis mine); and Genesis 49:11, the last part, “he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes”.

Fermented wine is no more the “the fruit of the vine”, than is soap a natural oil or fat! In fact, in fermented wine, the natural “blood of the grape” has decomposed and rotted into an

unwholesome and dangerous poison - a demoralizing drug. (These are strong words, but it is the absolute truth, as many have found out, unfortunately, in most cases, not until it is too late.

Instead of "wine" being the beautiful symbol of HIS "life", poured out on our behalf, it becomes, in its fermented state, a concoction representative of "decay, degradation and death". The author adds this thought. "When will Christian Communion wake up to the travesty of perpetuating a heathenish interpolation of the middle ages, and come back to the simple "Passover Supper", as observed by the Master and established as a sacrament by His Apostles"?

No Biblical Defence for "Drinking in Moderation":-

Some defend their moderate drinking by quoting Proverbs 23:29,30. "Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine". At first these texts seem to be saying that it is when people go to extremes, that it is bad, so moderate drinking is ok! But these texts must be read with verses 31, 32. "Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright (is fermented). At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder".

If one takes the time to read on further, it describes the downward pathway on which so many have gone before, and will ever follow to the end of time.

(I have never met one person who sets out to become a drunkard at the time that he/she takes up drinking alcoholic drinks, but I have met thousands, who have started off as "moderate, or social drinkers", only to end up as helpless drunks who cause untold unhappiness and stress to their families).

That statement was not made to denigrate the person who has become a victim of demon drink, but to state the obvious fact that, Drinking alcoholic drinks degrades more than it ever uplifts; as any reader will have to agree. (My own thoughts added).

The descriptions of the previous texts are scientifically accurate (as are all references to wine). The passages set out the "final state" of those who become too fond of liquor. The references to "mixed wine", (in verse 30), means literally, cocktails as we know them today. (And some people think that cocktails are a modern invention).

Other Interesting References:

(Isaiah 55:1). " ..., Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price". The common beverage of those times was the condensed grape juice diluted to drinking strength with water. But, for a banquet, or, a special feast, (as a luxury), milk was often used to break down the juice. (As is done with coffee these days). It would not be fermented wine spoken of here. Such, (fermented wine), mingled with milk, would be unpalatable, whilst the unfermented juice, broken down with milk, was delicious. It would be like saying today, "Come and have strawberries and cream for nothing"! Thus the beauty of the poetic reference is seen. God's gifts are the best, and free. Not something man "thinks" he has improved over what God has given for our good health. I have been told that "Grape juice" is the food absorbed fastest into the bloodstream, and also delivers the quickest, and best energy to the body.

Romans 14:21 "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak". This passage is often wrongly applied. Paul is here referring to "wine" being sold from the market stalls, which had been offered, or presented as a sacrifice to idols in a heathen temple before being offered for sale. It could be fermented or unfermented.

The text simply lays down the principle (because of disputes as to the rightness of purchasing goods that would aid a heathen temple) that it is not good to do anything that causes another to "stumble". (How apt when effected by overindulgence in wine), or, to be "offended" or cause to stray from the faith. In the case of "fermented wine", as we know only too well, this has caused many to stray, not only from the faith, but from their moral obligations to their families and employers or employees, friends and others who have trusted them.

Ephesians 5:18 "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit"; Frequently this text is quoted to suggest that it is the "excessive" use of wine that Paul is here condemning. But in the Greek the word endings link together the words "wine" and "excess", not "drunkardness" and "excess". In other words Paul was warning his readers "not to be drunk with wine (the kind used by the heathen Ephesians), which is the creator or cause of the "excess".

The "excess" or as the Revised Version puts it, "But be not drunken with wine, wherein is "riot", but be filled with the Spirit", and don't we know the truth of that? How many times has too much alcoholic "wine" caused "riot"? No man will ever know or be able to number. So Paul's advice still stands reliable and true.

Matthew 9:17 "Neither do men put new wine [pure grape juice] into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved".

In this text Jesus gives a precaution to those who set out to preserve "new wine", the unfermented juice of the grape.

He says to use "new bottles" (skins or gourds) for that job, because if they use "old bottles" there could be traces of fermentation in the "old bottles" which would cause the "new wine" to ferment, thus becoming of no use to the follower of Christ, and resulting in the bursting of the "old, previously used bottles".

Christ's example on the Cross;-

There are two occasions, while on the cross, when the Saviour was offered something to drink: Mark 15:23. "And they gave Him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but He received it not". This was a drugged intoxicant, evidently supplied by a society of compassionate women, which had existed ever since crucifixions had been instituted. The example of Jesus was that he did not drink it. Jesus knew that He would soon be going into the presence of His Father. He would go "fully conscious" of His act, bearing the sins of forgiven humanity, and so, when He became aware of the senses-deadening nature of this first drink offered, HE chose the way of sacrifice - He would not drink.

John 19:29, 30, "Now there was set a vessel full of "vinegar": and they filled a sponge with "vinegar", and put it upon hyssop, and put it to His mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the "vinegar", He said, it is finished: and He bowed HIS head, and gave up the ghost".

This "vinegar" was a cheap Roman ration wine, which was sour, vinegar-like, and Non-Intoxicating. In this second instance, the drink was Non-Intoxicating nor was it a drug. Jesus knew this and accepted the drink to quench His thirst. It certainly makes a difference when being assisted in our research, by some knowledge which is available of the customs of the day.

To Summarise:

- (1) There are approximately 250 references to "wine" and "strong drink" in the Bible and 200 of them are condemnatory.
- (2) There is not one passage referring to "intoxicating liquors" that speaks well of them.
- (3) Many of the condemnations of the "fermented wine" are most emphatic; eg, (Proverbs 20:1). "Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging. (or, maddening)".

The principles laid down by Paul in (Romans chapter 14) must apply to the taking of liquor. "It is good neither to eat - or drink - do anything whereby the brother stumbleth, is offended - made weak". (verse 21). Christ's injunction in Luke 17:1, 2), "not to offend (cause to stray) a little one (by example or action) is another unanswerable challenge to the drinker.

Holy Writ does not in one single passage, condone the use of "fermented wine", but it does emphasise the wisdom and the advantages of abstinence as instanced in the case of Daniel and his friends in Babylon. (Daniel 1:8, 12 - 21). The Nazarites vow, (Numbers 6), and the vow of the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35:5,6-10). And Solomon's advice to king Lemuel. (Proverbs 31:4).

Surely to the Christian, or (non-Christian) the Bible, the Written Word of God, should be the unerring guide and rule in the matter of drinking, and other avenues of human conduct. I hope that this paper has been of assistance to you, and that you understand this subject much better than when you commenced to read it. May God bless, and keep you.