

ANCIENT AND MODERN WINE:
ELEMENTS OF DISSIMILARITY

by

James D. Steinbach

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Bob Jones University

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ANCIENT AND MODERN WINE: ELEMENTS OF DISSIMILARITY

Introduction

What should Christians do with wine? This question is far from the fundamental core of orthodox Christian doctrine, yet it has divided many churches, denominations, and even friendships. Many Christians read the Bible, see its praise for wine, and staunchly defend their liberty to drink no matter what the circumstance. Other Christians focus solely on the Scripturally identified dangers of drinking and decry any and all use of beverage alcohol categorically. There is a biblical balance to the two sides of this debate. On the one hand, Scripture praises wine as God's gift to gladden men's hearts (Ps. 104.15) and, on the other, it warns about the deleterious effects of wine's abuse (Prov. 23.29ff). Either extreme only accounts for half of the story.

Before assuming, however, that merely acknowledging this "balance" settles the issue entirely, Christians must understand an even more basic question: is drinking biblical "wine" the same as drinking modern "wine?" In other words, are there significant cultural dissimilarities between wine-drinking in the ancient world and contemporary wine-drinking, or are the two situations interchangeable? This paper will examine three potential areas of dissimilarity between ancient and modern wine-drinking and evaluate the level of dissimilarity and significance for each concern.

Necessity v. Luxury

Wine as a Modern Luxury

It has been claimed that drinking today is unnecessary because of the variety of “wholesome, nonaddictive beverages.”¹ On the other hand, wine-drinking was necessary in biblical times because of the scarcity of safe beverages.² The first assertion can quickly be conceded. Pure water, soft drinks, fruit and vegetable juices, milk - modern supermarkets provide more non-alcoholic choices than consumers have the ability to try! It is true that, today, wine is not the lone sterile alternative to otherwise impure beverages. Wine is one more uncontaminated option among hundreds of others.

Wine as a Biblical Luxury

The second assertion, however, cannot be so quickly accepted. Was wine a necessity because of a dearth of safe drinking options in the ancient world? No, it was not. One need look no further than the Bible to see this. Nazirites vowed to abstain entirely from wine (Num. 6.2-4), yet they managed to stay safely hydrated.³ Priests who were serving in the Tabernacle were not allowed to drink wine (Lev. 10.9), yet they had sufficient healthy beverages. The Rechabites honored their father's tradition and chose “to drink no wine all [their] days” (Jer. 35); they

¹ Norman L. Geisler, “A Christian perspective on wine-drinking,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139, no. 553 (January 1, 1982), 53.

² *Ibid*, 51.

³ Additionally, Nazirite vows were about more than simply avoiding alcohol: no one becomes intoxicated from raisins or grapeskins.

survived for years without wine. In the light of Scripture's clear statements, it is difficult to maintain that wine was necessary because other safe beverages were scarce. Further, there are numerous explicit examples of people drinking water from unsterilized sources. Gideon tested his soldiers with a drink from a stream (Jdg. 7.5); David longed for Bethlehem's spring water (II Sam. 23.15); God commanded Elijah to drink from the brook Cherith (I Ki. 17.3-4). "Poisonous water" could be a danger (Jer. 8.14; 9.15), but the passages that mention it present it as a deliberate poison in a hostile situation, not as an accidental hazard.

Wine as an Ancient Secular Luxury

The non-necessity of wine can be found in extra-biblical sources as well.

Dayagi-Mendels notes that

"in the ancient world, wine was a rare and costly commodity. Though the upper classes enjoyed it on a regular basis, the remainder of the population only drank wine on festivals and special occasions. Over time, however, wine became widespread among all social strata, in both the pagan and Jewish world. It was drunk at ceremonies and festivals, in public places and in private homes."⁴

When they were not at "festivals and special occasions," the Israelite bourgeoisie survived with wine-less hydration for generations before wine became more broadly accessible. Though arguments from silence do not stand on their own, they do serve to confirm arguments built on evidence. Thus, it is noteworthy that nowhere do the ancients speak of the contamination of water; rather, the necessity

⁴ Michal Dayagi-Mendels, *Drink and Be Merry: Wine and Beer in Ancient Times* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1999), 53.

of wine seems to be a modern solution to the “problem” of biblical evidence for wine-drinking.

Upon closer examination of this alleged dissimilarity, it becomes evident that wine is not necessary today and was not necessary in the ancient world either. This, however, is only one point of similarity and conceding it does not constitute a *carte blanche* approval of wine-drinking.

Restraint v. Excess

Excess in Modern Culture

Another proposed dissimilarity is that ancient wine-drinking was characterized by restraint and wisdom, while modern drinking is characterized by excess and drunkenness. Geisler alleges that “America is an alcoholic culture, but the New Testament culture was not.”⁵ Wishing to prevent inebriation and sin, many Christians will point to the college party scene, happy hour at bars, and statistics about underage drinking. It should be immediately affirmed that drunkenness is indeed sin and, consequently, any cultural setting that actively promotes drunkenness should be shunned. However, Geisler’s dichotomy is only half true. In the ancient world, those who desired to honor the Lord or live wise lives exercised moderation with their wine; the same kind of people can be found today.⁶

⁵ Geisler, 54.

⁶ For this view, see Kenneth L. Gentry, “The Bible and the Question of Alcoholic Beverages,” *Criswell Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (March 1, 2008): 39-51, and G. I. Williamson, *Wine in the Bible & the Church* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1985). The present author could also add multiple personal accounts of mature Christian friends who exercise wisdom and moderation in their consumption of wine.

Excess in the Bible

In the ancient world (as today), there were many who exercised little or no restraint with their wine consumption. Scripture contains multiple stories of men (godly and pagan) who on occasion failed to practice moderation, some accidentally, some willingly: Noah (Gen. 9), Lot (Gen. 19), Nabal (I Sam. 25), Ahasuerus (Esther 1), Belshazzar (Dan. 5). It also provides ample warning against drunkenness, a warning that would be unnecessary were the whole culture characterized exclusively by moderation (Prov. 20; 21; 23; Isa. 5; 28; 56; Hab. 2; Eph. 5; I Tim. 3; 5; Tit. 2). The biblical record itself leaves one wondering how a Bible scholar could make the assertion that ancient culture did not have issues with alcoholism.

Excess in Ancient Secular Culture

The reality of the dangerous drinking culture of the ancient world is even more pronounced when one steps outside the protected arena of scripturally-informed wisdom. Dayagi-Mendels concludes, based on multiple paintings and inscriptions, that “it was not uncommon for banquets to turn into drunken revels” in the ancient Near East.⁷ The Greek author Athenaeus records a story of a “party of young fellows” who became so drunk that they thought they were “in a bad storm on the ocean” and threw the furniture out of the house in an effort to “lighten the ship.” The magistrates let them go with merely a promise “never to drink too much.”⁸ This is not unlike the casual attitude many adults take toward today's

⁷ Dayagi-Mendels, 81.

⁸ Atheneaus, *Deipnosophistae*, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Atheneaus/2A*.html (accessed October 15, 2010), II:37.

college drinking parties. The Romans celebrated the wine-god Bacchus (Dionysius) with feasts that degenerated into drunken orgies.⁹

Some might care to argue over the perceived extent of ancient moderation or modern excess as though to demonstrate that the scales are currently tipped toward excess. That conclusion, however, would be based more on perception, opinion, and impression than on fact. As helpful as they would be, there are no polls or records of how widespread drunkenness was in ANE cultures. The claim that “America is an alcoholic culture, but the New Testament culture was not” cannot be quantified and, thus, does not stand up to scrutiny. To the contrary, both ancient and modern cultures were made up of people who abstained, people who practiced moderation, and people who drank in excess. Again, this alleged dissimilarity proves to be a similarity upon further examination. Conceding this cultural similarity, however, still does not settle the question of modern wine-drinking.

Dilution v. Strength

Jewish Dilution

Wine was diluted with water in biblical culture: this is indisputable. “Jews, like the ancient Greeks and Romans, avoided strong, concentrated wine, which the Talmud calls *yayin hai*; instead they drank only wine that had been mixed with water.”¹⁰ The Talmud records a debate between rabbis who variously identified the proper dilution rate at three-fourths or two-thirds water, the stated concern being

⁹ Dayagi-Mendels, 106-107.

¹⁰ Ibid., 60.

taste.¹¹ II Maccabees 15:39 (KJV) says that “as it is hurtful to drink wine or water alone; and as wine mingled with water is pleasant, and delighteth the taste: even so speech finely framed delighteth the ears of them that read the story.”

Greco-Roman Dilution

Potter records that “Amphictyon, king of Athens ... enacted a law, that only wine tempered with water should be drunk at entertainments.”¹² Amerine notes that “only barbarians drank undiluted wine.”¹³ Dayagi-Mendels observes that “the mixing of wine was a skill in its own right. ... [p]rofessionals were highly sought after by the royal courts.”¹⁴

Modern Strength

Today's wines, however, are not diluted. Some (like port and sherry) are fortified; that is, their alcoholic content is increased artificially.¹⁵ According to average ancient dilution ratios, modern wine is easily five to ten times stronger in

¹¹ Michael L. Rodkinson, trans., *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, Vol. I (Boston: New Talmud Publishing Company, 1903), 143-45.

¹² John Potter, *Archæologia Græca: or, The Antiquities of Greece* (Glasgow: George Brookman, 1839), 677.

¹³ Maynard A. Amerine, “Wine” in *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, ed. Lauren S. Bahr (New York: P. F. Collier, 1996), 23:518, quoted in John Randolph Jaeggli, *The Christian and Drinking: A Biblical Perspective on Moderation and Abstinence* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2008): 43. Amerine asserts that wine was diluted for the sake of flavor, not alcoholic content. However, that does not invalidate the fact that wine was diluted, even by pagans.

¹⁴ Dayagi-Mendels, 59.

¹⁵ Maynard A. Amerine, “Wines: Production” in *Encyclopedia Americana* (Danbury, CT: Scholastic Library Publishing, Inc., 2006), 29:41-43.

its alcoholic content.¹⁶ In fact, it is quite likely that even modern beer is stronger than ancient wine was.

The strongest dissimilarity between ancient and modern wine-drinking is at the very heart of the question: the composition of the wine itself. It can be argued that modern wine is almost as dissimilar from ancient wine as hard liquor is from beer today. No one would claim that drinking whiskey and drinking beer are essentially the same thing; similarly, drinking modern wine and drinking ancient wine cannot be treated as if they were interchangeable aspects of two remarkably similar cultures.

Conclusion

Modern wine is not ancient wine. While it is true that both modern and ancient cultures had their share of users and abusers of wine and that wine is a non-necessity in both cultures, it cannot be glibly asserted that the drinking question is the same in both cultures. It cannot be settled so lightly. The beverages in question are markedly different in their alcoholic content. The believer who seeks to drink in moderation has a much more difficult task ahead of him than the ancients had. In spite of some similarities in the cultural context and opinion, the two wines are not the same; drinking wine is a much more dangerous proposition today than in the biblical world.

¹⁶ Ancient wine was 2-3% alcohol according to Jaeggli, 44. Modern table wines are around 14% alcohol; fortified wines closer to 20% according to Amerine, 42-43.

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