

Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

Alcohol and the Believer Part 1: The Old Testament Words

The issue of the believer and alcohol is, by no means, an easy one. The old fundamentalist idea that “believers shouldn’t drink” is becoming increasingly unpopular, as alcohol as a means of entertainment, pleasure, and socialization becomes more and more the accepted norm in our society. More and more believers are tending to point out that the use of alcohol is never forbidden in the Bible, and that their drinking it is not a sin, especially if they do not get drunk. Some even suggest that those who condemn the use of alcohol are “weak” in faith, using passages such as Romans 14:1-2 as evidence. Yet on the other end of the spectrum, we have those who have become believers after experiencing the devastating effects of alcohol abuse in their lives or in the lives of their families. Such people have had families destroyed, lives torn apart, or even been committed to prison because of the use and abuse of alcohol. These, upon finding freedom in Christ, also enjoy freedom from the alcoholic abuse that had so enslaved them before. To them, the use of alcohol is an abomination, and they cling wholeheartedly to the fundamentalist doctrine of not drinking alcohol. What, then, are we to say in the light of such divergent opinions? What can we discover from the Bible about the use of alcohol? What is it that God really taught, and how can we apply it to our own use of or refusal to use alcohol today?

The first issue that must be covered in dealing with this issue of alcohol and the believer must be the Biblical words used for alcoholic drinks. What does the Bible really say? Is their evidence that God’s people used or did not use alcohol in Bible times?

1. Yayin

In the Old Testament, there are eight words that are translated as various alcoholic drinks. The first of these is “yayin.” It is from the root word “yayan,” which means “to ferment,” and is used of every sort of wine. The word occurs 142 times in the Old Testament, and is used for fermented wine of all kinds. We see it first in Genesis 9:21, where we read,

20. And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard.

21. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent.

Here we see that yayin is definitely capable of producing drunkenness, as it caused Noah to be drunk. We can see this fact in other occurrences of the word as well, like I Samuel 25:36.

36. Now Abigail went to Nabal, and there he was, holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal’s heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk; therefore she told him nothing, little or much, until morning light.

37. So it was, in the morning, when the wine had gone from Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became like a stone.

Here, Nabal sobered up when the yayin had gone from him the next morning. Another passage that demonstrates its intoxicating quality is Isaiah 28:1.

*1. Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim,
Whose glorious beauty is a fading flower
Which is at the head of the verdant valleys,
To those who are overcome with wine!*

The word “overcome” here literally means that these “drunkards of Ephraim” were knocked down from the wine! Jeremiah 23:9 has this same idea.

*9. My heart within me is broken
Because of the prophets;
All my bones shake.
I am like a drunken man,
And like a man whom wine has overcome,
Because of the LORD,
And because of His holy words.*

It is clear from these passages, then, that yayin was both fermented and intoxicating. Yet the word was also used in a positive sense. Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, gave yayin to Abraham in Genesis 14:18.

18. Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High.

Jacob in blessing his son Judah mentioned the effects of yayin in Genesis 49:12.

*12. His eyes are darker than wine,
And his teeth whiter than milk.*

God, in promising the restoration of His people Israel, mentions that His blessing will result in them being able to drink yayin in Amos 9:14.

*14. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel;
They shall build the waste cities and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them;
They shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them.*

Ecclesiastes 9:7 encourages the use of yayin.

*7. Go, eat your bread with joy,
And drink your wine with a merry heart;
For God has already accepted your works.*

Yayin was also used in some ceremonies of the law. For example, the Nazirite was to drink yayin at the conclusion of his vow. Numbers 6:20b.

After that the Nazirite may drink wine.

It could be used at the LORD’s feasts, according to Deuteronomy 14:26.

26. And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

It was poured out as a drink offering to the LORD, according to Exodus 29:40 (see also Leviticus 23:13 and Numbers 15:5).

40. With the one lamb shall be one-tenth of an ephah of flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of pressed oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering.

Thus, we see that yayin, although it was clearly associated with fermentation and drunkenness, could be used for positive purposes, even for worshipping the Lord.

2. Tirosh

The second word for alcoholic drinks in the Old Testament is tirosh. It comes from yarash, which means “to possess,” because it gets possession of the brain. It occurs thirty-four times in the Old Testament. An example of this idea is in Hosea 4:11.

11. Harlotry, wine, and new wine enslave the heart.

The first word for wine is “yayin,” and the second or “new wine” is “tirosh.” The idea here is that tirosh takes away the feelings of a person.

Yet tirosh is also used in a positive sense, as in Proverbs 3:10.

*10. So your barns will be filled with plenty,
And your vats will overflow with new wine.*

Tirosh is also associated with future blessing for Israel in Isaiah 62:8.

*8. The LORD has sworn by His right hand
And by the arm of His strength:
“Surely I will no longer give your grain
As food for your enemies;
And the sons of the foreigner shall not drink your new wine,
For which you have labored.”*

Another association of tirosh with blessing is in Joel 2:24.

*24. The threshing floors shall be full of wheat,
And the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil.*

Its absence can also be associated with the taking away of blessing, as in Micah 6:15 (here “sweet wine” is tirosh, whereas “wine” is yayin.)

*15. You shall sow, but not reap;
You shall tread the olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil;
And make sweet wine, but not drink wine.*

Yet I think an enlightening use of the word “tirosh” is in Genesis 27:28, where we read,

*28. Therefore may God give you
Of the dew of heaven,
Of the fatness of the earth,
And plenty of grain and wine.*

Notice here that the sentiments are that God would give Jacob (who was pretending to be Esau) blessings both of food and drink. “Grain” is used to symbolize food, and “wine” or tirosh was used to symbolize drink. This gives us an important clue in unraveling the Bible’s attitude towards alcohol, I believe.

3. Chemer

The third word that is used for alcoholic drinks in the Old Testament is the word “chemer.” It comes from the word “chamar,” which means “to ripen.” It is used of strong, red wine, according to the *Companion Bible*. It occurs eight times in the Old Testament. One example is Deuteronomy 32:14b.

*14. Curds from the cattle, and milk of the flock,
With fat of lambs;
And rams of the breed of Bashan, and goats,
With the choicest wheat;
And you drank wine, the blood of the grapes.*

Here the Hebrew word for “blood” is chemer. The word chemer here implies the possession of plenty. Another occurrence of the word is Isaiah 27:2-3.

*2. In that day sing to her,
"A vineyard of red wine!
3. I, the LORD, keep it,
I water it every moment;
Lest any hurt it,
I keep it night and day.*

Here the words “red wine” are the single Hebrew word chemer. The LORD speaks of Israel as a vineyard of chemer that He is keeping and tending.

Another use is in Ezra 6:9, where the kings of Persia gave chemer as a gift to the God of Heaven.

9. And whatever they need--young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem--let it be given them day by day without fail,

4. Shekar

The fourth word used in the Old Testament for alcohol is shekar. It is from the word shakar, which means “to get drunk.” It was a very intoxicating drink made from barley, honey, or dates. It was to be used in the service of the Lord according to Numbers 28:7.

7. And its drink offering shall be one-fourth of a hin for each lamb; in a holy place you shall pour out the drink to the LORD as an offering.

Here, what is to be poured out is shekar.

Shekar is also used in Deuteronomy 14:26, along with yayin, as we saw earlier.

26. And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

Here, “similar drink” is the Hebrew word “shekar.”

5. Asis

The fifth word for an alcoholic drink is asis. It comes from asas, which means “to tread.” This obviously refers to the treading of the grapes. That you could be drunken with it is demonstrated by Isaiah 49:26.

*26. I will feed those who oppress you with their own flesh,
And they shall be drunk with their own blood as with sweet wine.
All flesh shall know
That I, the LORD, am your Savior,
And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.*

Here, the words “sweet wine” are, in Hebrew, the word “asis.”

Yet the drinking of asis could be a blessing given by the Lord. An example of this is Joel 3:18.

*18. And it will come to pass in that day
That the mountains shall drip with new wine,
The hills shall flow with milk,
And all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water;
A fountain shall flow from the house of the LORD
And water the Valley of Acacias.*

Here, the presence of “new wine,” the Hebrew word “asis,” is clearly a sign of the blessing of the Lord. A similar passage is Amos 9:13.

*13. “Behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD,
“When the plowman shall overtake the reaper,
And the treader of grapes him who sows seed;
The mountains shall drip with sweet wine,
And all the hills shall flow with it.”*

6. Sob’e

The sixth Hebrew word for an alcoholic drink is the word sob’e. This is from sab’a, which means “to drink to excess” or “to become drunk.” It is used of any kind of strong, intoxicating drink. It only occurs twice in Scripture. The first occurrence is Isaiah 1:22.

*22. Your silver has become dross,
Your wine mixed with water.*

The second occurrence of sob’e is in Hosea 4:18.

*18. Their drink is rebellion,
They commit harlotry continually.
Her rulers dearly love dishonor.*

The word “drink” here is the Hebrew word “sob’e.” The idea seems to be more along the lines that their drinking bout or carousing is over than what we see indicated here in the NKJV.

7. Mimsak

The seventh Hebrew word for alcoholic drinks is mimsak. It means “mixed or spiced wine.” An example of its use is Proverbs 23:30.

*30. Those who linger long at the wine,
Those who go in search of mixed wine.*

The first word “wine” here is yayin, whereas “mixed wine” is mimsak. Here we can see from the context that it is clearly in a negative connotation. Mimsak is also used in false worship, as in Isaiah 65:11.

*11. But you are those who forsake the LORD,
Who forget My holy mountain,
Who prepare a table for Gad,
And who furnish a drink offering for Meni.*

Here, the Hebrew for “drink offering” is mimsak.

8. Shemarim

The eighth and final word for alcoholic drink is shemarim. It comes from shamar, which means “to keep, preserve, or lay up.” Hence, it is old wine that has been laid up for much time. It is old wine that is “purified from the lees and racked off” according to the *Companion Bible*. One occurrence of this word is in Psalm 75:8.

*8. For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup,
And the wine is red;
It is fully mixed, and He pours it out;
Surely its dregs shall all the wicked of the earth
Drain and drink down.*

Here, shemarim is translated as “dregs.” Another occurrence is in Isaiah 25:6.

*6. And in this mountain
The LORD of hosts will make for all people
A feast of choice pieces,
A feast of wines on the lees,
Of fat things full of marrow,
Of well-refined wines on the lees.*

In this passage, the word shemarim is translated as “lees.” It also occurs in Zephaniah 1:12.

*12. And it shall come to pass at that time
That I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
And punish the men
Who are settled in complacency,
Who say in their heart,
“The LORD will not do good,
Nor will He do evil.”*

Here, the word “complacency” is the word “shemarim,” and indicates that they are settled like the dregs of wine. A final and similar occurrence is in Jeremiah 48:11.

*11. Moab has been at ease from his youth;
He has settled on his dregs,
And has not been emptied from vessel to vessel,
Nor has he gone into captivity.
Therefore his taste remained in him,
And his scent has not changed.*

Here again, “dregs” is the Hebrew “shemarim.”

Some have argued that perhaps these words did not indicate a fermented beverage, but something similar to what we would call grape juice. This would seem unlikely, since these words are associated with drunkenness, and they even come from words that indicate the intoxicating qualities of alcohol. To say that they did not indicate an alcoholic beverage would be like talking about “unfermented fermented drinks” or “non-alcoholic alcohol.” The idea is ludicrous, and is contrary to the very meaning of the words.

In the next issue we will consider the New Testament words for alcoholic drinks and their usage. Then we will conclude by considering alcohol and the believer today and what conclusion we can come to about what our attitude towards alcohol should be.

Nathan C. Johnson