

APPENDIX I

Biblical Teaching on the Use of Alcohol

Introduction

This appendix examines the biblical teaching on the use of alcohol with a primary focus on the most commonly mentioned alcoholic beverage, wine. Passages in the Old and New Testaments will be examined with particular focus on the vocabulary in question and the issue of its alcoholic content. The primary question under examination is whether or not the Bible clearly teaches that believers should abstain from drinking alcohol. The abuse of alcohol is not an option for the Christ-followers because the Scriptures clearly condemn drunkenness.¹

At the risk of oversimplifying, prohibitionists generally believe that wine in the Bible may be either unfermented or fermented. Their assumption is that the Biblical context will indicate which *kind of wine* is being used: wherever the Bible refers to wine in a positive context, the reference is understood to be unfermented wine; wherever there are negative comments about drinking wine, they think the reference is to fermented wine. Based on this assumption they argue that the Bible prohibits drinking any wine or drink with alcoholic content. Second, abstainers believe that spiritual leaders should not drink alcoholic beverages but disagree among themselves as to their reasons for abstinence: some believe that there are sufficient warnings in Scripture to stay away from alcohol while others suggest that while the Bible does not prohibit the use of alcohol directly, it does elucidate principles which make it prudent and even Christ-like to avoid alcoholic beverages. Third, defenders of drinking wine in moderation generally believe that most wine in the Bible is fermented. Their assumption is that the Biblical context will indicate the *amount of alcohol* being used: wherever the Bible refers to wine in a positive context, the moderate use of alcohol is approved; wherever there are negative associations with drinking alcohol, they believe the reference is to an excessive use of alcohol. Self-control is the expectation placed on leaders by those who call for moderation. All are agreed that drunkenness is unbecoming a spiritual leader and for that matter anyone who is a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible

Evangelicals with their high view of Scripture are compelled to pledge allegiance to the Bible as the ultimate and infallible rule of faith and practice before pursuing particular positions on moral and theological issues. While the starting point is correct and laudable, the journey through personal experiences, religious and cultural traditions, and would-be teachers often bring sincere inquirers to conflicting conclusions. A fundamental hermeneutical principle is to ask the simple questions, "What did the Biblical author intend to say to his readers?" "What did the first readers understand the author to be saying?" "What does the Bible have to say

hundreds of years later to modern issues and questions which may never have been considered by the Biblical authors?"

There are at least three possible scenarios which help define the connection between Biblical cultures and our own with reference to rules which govern behaviour.

First, when a question clearly relates to fundamental and timeless issues, the Biblical response can be very explicit. For example, the Bible prohibits a sexual relationship with anyone except one's spouse: "You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14) The task of understanding this Biblical rule for sex outside of marriage in non-Biblical times and cultures does not seem difficult. In other words, when a modern question is also an ancient question with which the Bible deals directly, the applicability of the answer is easiest.

Second, when an issue relates to a relatively new question, it may be a greater challenge to find a Biblical source as an authoritative base for establishing modern regulations. For example, smoking cigarettes has been regarded traditionally among Pentecostals as a sinful practice. Converted sinners were expected to abandon the practice and believers were warned about the evils of smoking. In the absence of direct Biblical prohibitions, the argument against tobacco was usually based on related themes such as the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, or addictions are fleshly desires to be overcome, or freedom in Christ means deliverance from bad habits.² Any or all of the arguments against tobacco may be valid but there is no clear Biblical rule that says, "Do not smoke." Again in a sentence, when a question is raised about a practice which is not specifically addressed in the Scriptures, an answer may be found in general and timeless themes or principles.

Third, an even more complex situation emerges when the answer to a modern question about a practice is sought in the Bible and the Bible does not give a clear response (as in the *second* scenario mentioned above), but it does give *a considerable amount of information on the topic*. Conflicting positions develop when the parties who ask the modern question select topical Biblical information which appears to support their predispositions and mistakenly conclude their point of view is the Biblical answer and therefore is a guide for practice. In the presence of conflicting conclusions based on the Biblical information, it may be necessary to refer to general and timeless themes and principles as mentioned above in the "second" scenario.

Wine in the Old Testament

In current English usage the word "wine" refers to an alcoholic drink. But the word has not always been reserved exclusively for drinks with alcoholic content. For example, the King James Version (KJV), published in 1611, employs the word "wine" on 231 occasions as the English translation of ten Hebrew and three Greek

expressions. A basic issue in the debate over wine in the Bible is whether some of the references deal with unfermented drinks or all speak of beverages with significant alcoholic content. The Hebrew words which appear most often will be discussed separately and compared with others in the sections which follow.

Tiyrosh. Often in the Old Testament (OT) the staples of life are referred to as grain, wine, and oil. On at least 21 occasions the three commodities appear together and in another 17 wine is linked with grain or oil or may appear alone as the expression of God's blessing on His people in making available the natural provisions of food and drink. The New International Version (NIV) translates "wine" (Hebrew *tiyrosh*) in the passages referred to above as "new wine" (except Judges 9:13, "wine"). In all the passages, the Hebrew word *tiyrosh* in its context seems to refer to the freshly produced, and unfermented, juice³ of the grapes as a gift of God to His people.⁴ When it comes time to respond in worship, God's people present the firstfruits of harvest, or the tithes, to God, in the form of grain, wine (*tiyrosh*), and oil. Random references, without comment, are,

Genesis 27:28: May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness – an abundance of **grain** and **new wine** (*tiyrosh*).

Deuteronomy 7:13: He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land--your **grain, new wine** (*tiyrosh*) **and oil**--the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land that he swore to your forefathers to give you.

Deuteronomy 14:23: Eat the tithe of your **grain, new wine** (*tiyrosh*) and **oil**, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always.

Numbers 18:12: I give you all the finest olive **oil** and all the finest **new wine** (*tiyrosh*) and **grain** they give the LORD as the firstfruits of their harvest.
13 All the land's firstfruits that they bring to the LORD will be yours.
(See also Nehemiah 10:39; 13:5, 12)

Proverbs 3:9: Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with **new wine** (*tiyrosh*). (See also Nehemiah 10:37-39)

Judges 9:13: But the vine answered, "Should I give up my **wine** (*tiyrosh*), which cheers both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?"

Zechariah 9:17: How attractive and beautiful they will be! **Grain** will make the young men thrive, and **new wine** (*tiyrosh*) the young women.

In the context of these references to wine, it would be unthinkable to raise a question about its use. Of course it was appropriate to drink wine – it was a gift from God. The discussion of wine freshly pressed from the grapes as one of the staples of life, however, does not *settle* all the issues related to the use of wine in the Bible or modern society. To be sure, the major challenge facing the ancients was to take actions that would allow fresh juice to last until the next vintage. The inherent nature of juice pressed from grapes is to ferment as the yeast in the liquid interacts with the sugar. This occurs in a matter of days if there is no intervention the process of fermentation will render the wine virtually undrinkable. The genius of the ancients was, first, to preserve the grapes or the juice in such a way that the process of fermentation would be halted, not allowing the juice to “go bad,” and second, to enhance the fermentation process by adding ingredients with a view to making an alcoholic drink which would be available for future use.⁵ While it does not serve our purposes to become too technical, it may be useful to briefly summarize the methods of stemming the process of fermentation as well as controlling or enhancing fermentation for the preservation of the drink.⁶

Boiling. By boiling the grape juice the water content is evaporated out and leaves a high concentration of sugar which prevents fermentation. The product is a kind of syrup which may be stored for a long time and then mixed with water turning the concentrated syrup back into an unfermented drink. The *Mishnah* (a collection of ancient Jewish writings held in high esteem by the Jews) indicates that the Jews were in the habit of using boiled wines.⁷ Canadians would recognize the process as essentially the same we use to turn the liquid that we tap from maple trees into maple syrup.

Filtration. The presence of albumen and certain bacterial ingredients in the pressed grapes are necessary to decompose the sugar in the fermentation process which produces alcohol. By filtering out these catalytic agents from the solution, the resulting purified unfermented juice can be sealed and stored in the cool earth or under cool water.

Subsidence. The procedure is rather simple in that the fresh juice is kept still and cool while the ingredients which cause fermentation settle to the bottom of the container and are left there when the clear juice is poured off and again sealed and stored.

Fumigation. The ancients knew that sulphur is an antiseptic. By subjecting pressed grapes to the fumes of sulphur or by adding substances containing sulphur, such as egg yolks and mustard seeds, the juice was saved from fermentation. With reference to controlling the process of fermentation to produce and preserve alcoholic drinks, a number of techniques were used which involved temperature control and the addition of a wide range of substances.⁸ R. J. Forbes refers to some of the methods used by the ancients to affect the quality of the alcoholic beverage such as mixing in “inspissated must to obtain a higher alcoholic content, . . . resin, . . . gypsum [which]

improved the lustre of the wine, . . . herbs and flowers [which] imparted an artificial 'bouquet', . . . [and] sweetening ingredients."⁹

Yayin. The OT Hebrew word translated most often as "wine" is *yayin* (140 uses) and is used to indicate fermented or unfermented wine. According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971), "The newly pressed wine prior to fermentation was known as *yayin mi-gat* ('wine from the vat;' Sanh 70a), *yayin yashan* ('old wine') was wine from the previous year, and that from earlier vintages, *yashan noshan* ('old, very old')." ¹⁰ The word appears in a variety of contexts which may be summarized and listed as follows:

(1) In Isaiah 16:10 *yayin* appears to carry the same meaning as *tiyrosh* with reference to its freshness from the presses: "Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards; no one sings or shouts in the vineyards; no one treads out wine (*yayin*) at the presses, for I have put an end to the shouting" (See also Nehemiah 13:15; Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 48:33; Micah 6:15).

(2) *Yayin*, like *tiyrosh*, is listed with other principal staples of life: 2 Chronicles 2:15 "Now let my lord send his servants the **wheat and barley** and the **olive oil** and **wine** (*yayin*) he promised . . ." In many references wine (*yayin*) and bread appear together representing basic food and drink (for example, Genesis 14:18 and Judges 19:19).¹¹ The many ways in which God blesses His people are rehearsed by the Psalmist:

Psalm 104:14: He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate – bringing forth **food** from the earth: 15 **wine** (*yayin*) that gladdens the heart of man, **oil** to make his face shine, and **bread** that sustains his heart.

(3) *Yayin*, again like *tiyrosh*, has sacred connotations in that it is used as a drink offering to the Lord: Exodus 29:40, "With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of **fine flour** mixed with a quarter of a hin of **oil** from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of **wine** (*yayin*) as a drink offering" (see also Leviticus 23:13; Numbers 15:5, 10; 28:14; Hosea 9:4). In Ezra 9:6 the word *chamar* is used in the place of *yayin* to refer to the wine that must be made available to the priests for use in the sacrifice offered to the Lord.

(4) The first occurrence of *yayin* in the OT provides evidence that the word also refers to fermented wine and has the potential of reducing cognitive abilities: Genesis 9:20, "Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. 21 When he drank some of its **wine** (*yayin*), he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent." Another passage shows *yayin* at the heart of the incestuous relationship that Lot had with his scheming daughters: Genesis 19:32, "'Let's get our father to drink **wine** (*yayin*) and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father.' 33 That night they got their father to drink **wine** (*yayin*), and the older daughter went in and lay with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up"

(See also 1 Samuel 25:36, 37; 2 Samuel 13:28; Esther 1:10; Proverbs 20:1; Isaiah 5:11, 22-23; 28.1, 7; Hosea 4:11; Joel 3:3).

***Shekar* and *yayin*.** The OT Hebrew word, *shekar*, is translated by the KJV as “strong drink” on the 21 occasions it is coupled with *yayin* (“wine”).¹² The New King James Version (NKJV) exercises some editorial license by amending the translation of the *yayin/shekar* link in all but three of the passages with the substitution of “similar drink” or “intoxicating drink” for the KJV “strong drink.”¹³ The NIV translates *shekar* as “fermented drink” or “beer.” The NASB translates *shekar* in Micah 2:11 as “liquor.”

The fact that *shekar* and *yayin* are used together in the same verse is adequate proof that they are different liquids. It is generally agreed that the basic difference is that *yayin* is produced from grapes and *shekar* from grains and things like dates, honey, or apples. While it is reasonable to assume that the juice from the non-grape sources could be suitable for drinking and perhaps could be preserved in its unfermented state, nevertheless there is little or no Biblical support for the notion that *shekar* could refer to either an unfermented or fermented beverage – it seems clear in the OT that *shekar* is an intoxicating drink.¹⁴ The interesting question is whether the use of these drinks had positive or negative implications, or both.

(1) At least one Biblical reference appears to approve both *yayin* and *shekar* for consumption. The passage (which deals with the “second tithes” and the permissibility of exchanging the tithe produce for money) includes *yayin* and *shekar* as items which could be purchased for the family religious feast: Deuteronomy 14:26-27, “Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, **wine** (*yayin*) or other **fermented drink** (*shekar*), or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice.”¹⁵

(2) Both *yayin* and *shekar* were off limits for individuals who took vows of consecration (Nazirite) to the Lord (Numbers 6:2-21). A person who made such a vow “must abstain from **wine** (*yayin*) and other¹⁶ **fermented drink** (*shekar*¹⁷) and . . . must not drink grape juice¹⁸ or eat grapes or raisins. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins” (6:3-4). Similarly, the mother of Samson (who was destined to be a Nazirite from the womb) was instructed to “not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, nor drink any **wine** (*yayin*) or other **fermented drink** (*shekar*) nor eat anything unclean” (Judges 13:14).¹⁹ Because of the common source, grape juice, grapes, and raisins were on the prohibited list along with *yayin* and the non-grape fermented drinks.

The Rechabites, a non-Jewish tribe, had similar rules as those observed by individuals who took a Nazirite vow with reference to the prohibition of wine and grape products (no reference to the fermented drinks made from non-grape fruits and grains).²⁰ When Jeremiah was *instructed* by the Lord to invite a Rechabite family to “one of the side rooms of the house of the Lord” and to offer them wine to drink, they replied,

Jeremiah 35:6-9: We do not drink **wine** (*yayin*), because our forefather Jonadab son of Recab gave us this command: ‘Neither you nor your descendants must ever drink **wine**. 7 Also you must never build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards; you must never have any of these things, but must always live in tents. Then you will live a long time in the land where you are nomads.’ 8 We have obeyed everything our forefather Jonadab son of Recab commanded us. Neither we nor our wives nor our sons and daughters have ever drunk **wine** 9 or built houses to live in or had vineyards, fields or crops.

It is interesting to note that the Lord instructed Jeremiah to use the story of the Rechabites as a lesson in obedience:

Jeremiah 35:13-14: Go and tell the men of Judah and the people of Jerusalem, “Will you not learn a lesson and obey my words?” declares the LORD. “Jonadab son of Recab ordered his sons not to drink **wine** (*yayin*) and this command has been kept. To this day they do not drink **wine**, because they obey their forefather’s command. But I have spoken to you again and again, yet you have not obeyed me.”

(3) Other limitations with reference to the use of *yayin* and *shekar* relate to both religious and secular leaders. Aaron and his sons, who were the first priests in Israel, were instructed “not to drink **wine** (*yayin*) or other **fermented drink** (*shekar*) whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You must *distinguish* between the holy and the common . . .” (Leviticus 10:8-10; see also Ezekiel 44:21). It should be noted that the prohibitions were not general but related only to their conduct while they were ministering in the Tent of Meeting. Scriptures also report, however, on the negative outcomes in other situations involving spiritual leaders when they are under the influence of alcohol: “Priests and prophets stagger from **beer** (*shekar*) and are befuddled with **wine** (*yayin*); they reel from **beer** (*shekar*), they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions” (Isaiah 28:7). In a scathing indictment of priests, the Lord says through Hosea:

Hosea 4:7-11: The more the priests increased, the more they sinned against me; they exchanged their Glory for something disgraceful. 8 They feed on the sins of my people and relish their wickedness. 9 And it will be: Like people, like priests. . . . 10 “They will eat but not have enough; they will engage in prostitution but not increase, because they have deserted the Lord to give themselves 11 to prostitution, to old **wine** (*yayin*) and **new** (*tyrosh*), which take away the understanding of my people.”

The “watchmen” represent another category of people who are responsible for the welfare of others. Wine is a distraction from their duties:

Isaiah 56:10-12: Israel’s watchmen are blind . . .

They are shepherds who lack understanding;
 they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain.
 12 “Come,” each one cries, “let me get **wine** (*yayin*)!
 Let us drink our fill of **beer** (*shekar*)!
 And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better.”

The potential negative impact of alcoholic drinks on a leader is rehearsed in the lesson given by a mother to her son²¹ who would one day be a king:

Proverbs 31¹⁻⁵: The sayings of King Lemuel – an oracle his mother taught him:
 2 “O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows,
 3 do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings.
 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel – not for kings to drink **wine** (*yayin*),
 not for rulers to crave **beer** (*shekar*),
 5 lest they drink and forget what the law decrees,
 and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.” (See also Hosea 7:3-7)

(4) Along with the potential negative impact that the alcoholic drinks had on rulers, as described in Proverbs 31, it is clear in verses 6 and 7 that alcohol with its power to alter one’s perception of reality gave it some positive qualities:

Proverbs 31:6-7: Give **beer** (*shekar*) to those who are perishing,
wine (*yayin*) to those who are in anguish;
 7 let them drink and forget their poverty
 and remember their misery no more.

Beer (*shekar*) was prescribed as an anesthetic for “those who are perishing” and **wine** (*yayin*) as a stimulant for “those who are in anguish.”

(5) The Scriptures also refer to the power of alcohol to do damage. Perhaps the most familiar reference to alcohol in the Bible is found in the “miscellaneous maxims” of Proverbs. The literary device of personification is used to speak about the attributes of wine itself: Proverbs 20:1 “**Wine** (*yayin*) is a mocker and **beer** (*shekar*) a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” The inference is that the people who drink wine take on the characteristics of the wine and become mockers and brawlers. The pernicious consequences of “those who linger over wine” are dealt with in more detail in Proverbs 23:29-35

29 Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
 Who has strife? Who has complaints?
 Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?
 30 Those who linger over **wine** (*yayin*),
 who go to sample bowls of **mixed wine** (*mamcak*²²)
 31 Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
 when it sparkles in the cup,

when it goes down smoothly!
 32 In the end it bites like a snake
 and poisons like a viper.
 33 Your eyes will see strange sights
 and your mind imagine confusing things.
 34 You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,
 lying on top of the rigging.
 35 "They hit me," you will say, "but I'm not hurt!
 They beat me, but I don't feel it!
 When will I wake up
 so I can find another drink?" (See also Isaiah 5:11, 22; 22:13)

One other example of the destructive power of wine is found in Psalm 75:8, "In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming (*chamar*) wine (*yayin*) mixed with spices (*macak*); he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs." In this instance the "foaming wine mixed with spices" is a metaphor for the wrath of God being poured out on the wicked of the earth.

Old Testament Summary. The current question concerning the use of alcohol by a spiritual leader in some respects fits best in the *third* scenario mentioned in the introduction of this paper: the question is not directly raised or answered in the OT but it does give considerable information about the topic. Indeed, it may be unrealistic to look for the question or answer when it is obvious that "wine" is one of the Biblical staples of meals and celebratory events, including religious ceremonies. It appears that any modern permission or prohibition for the use of alcohol should be made with reference to overriding Biblical principles which provide guidelines for Christians in all areas of life.

Having examined several Hebrew words for wine in a variety of contexts, what are the minimal observations which may be considered?

- (1) The fact that so many different words are used in reference to drinks in the OT is evidence in itself that the topic is complex and that simple conclusions are not easily attained.
- (2) Wine, along with grain and oil, was one of the staples of life. It was a blessing of God. In its original state it was fresh juice but its inherent disposition to ferment necessitated human intervention to prevent or assist fermentation.
- (3) Wine had religious significance since it was part of the harvest that was tithed to the Lord's house and the priests. It was also the drink offering that was ceremonially poured out to the Lord as an act of worship.
- (4) Wine was a major contributor to the sin of Biblical characters such as Noah and Lot, as well as some priests, prophets, watchmen, and rulers.

(5) The Bible approves the decisions of individuals and groups (Samson’s mother, Nazirites, Rechabites) who voluntarily abstain from all grape products – presumably because of the dangers associated with alcohol.

(6) The Bible restricts the use of wine by priests while ministering and in one passage advises kings of the dangers associated with wine.

(7) Alcoholic wine has the ability to alter perception and adversely affect human cognitive powers. On the other hand, the ability to affect the emotions and dull the senses makes it an appropriate sedative for the dying and the depressed.

(8) While the OT clearly speaks of the evils of drunkenness, there is no general prohibition concerning the use of wine in daily life.

(9) The attempts by modern abstainers to determine the *alcoholic content* of OT wine and present-day moderationists to determine the *allowable amount* of alcoholic wine by interpreting each Biblical context are based on assumptions that result in contrary conclusions. It appears that a position on the current use of alcohol by spiritual leaders should not be determined solely by OT passages.

Wine in the New Testament

The NIV New Testament (NT) uses the word “wine” on 40 occasions to translate Greek words for drinks. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT dated around 250 B.C., provides the basis for the common use of *oinos* for wine in the NT.²³ In the Septuagint the word *oinos* is used to translate both *yayin* and *tiyrosh*. It may be argued that *oinos* refers to fermented wine in its many translations of *yayin* where it is clear that the drink is alcoholic and also to unfermented wine where it is also clear that *yayin* sometimes refers to juice coming directly from the winepress. For example,

Isaiah 16:10: Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards;
no one sings or shouts in the vineyards;
no one treads out **wine** (*yayin*) at the presses

Also, *oinos* is used more than 30 times in the Septuagint to translate *tiyrosh*, fresh juice or “new wine.” For example,

Proverbs 3:9-10: Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats²⁴ will brim over with **new wine** (*tiyrosh*).

It is appropriate to conclude that the Greek *oinos*, translated as “wine” in the NT, may refer to both unfermented and fermented drinks. Significant references to wine in the NT will be discussed individually.

Luke 1:11-17. The first passage quotes an angel of the Lord who brings a response to Zechariah's prayer requesting a son. The promised son will be "great in the sight of the Lord" and "is never to take **wine** (*oinos*) or other **fermented drink** (*sikera*²⁵). The prohibition of such drinks immediately places John the Baptist in the category of a Nazirite from the womb, similar to the OT Samson.²⁶

Luke 7:31-35 (Matthew 11:7-19). In the course of making a positive evaluation of John the Baptist and his ministry, Jesus makes some unflattering comments to a crowd of listeners. He compared them to children who play pretend games like wedding or funeral and who complain when others will not be adequately merry or mournful to suit the occasion. Jesus makes his point by noting that they were critical of John the Baptist because of his austere Nazirite lifestyle and they were also critical of Him because of His social habits of eating and drinking with a wide variety of people. They accused Jesus of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34).

The people were correct in observing Jesus' strategy of socializing with sinners. There are reports about Him eating and drinking with Levi and a number of his tax collector colleagues (Luke 5:29-30), with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36), and with a "prominent Pharisee" on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1).²⁷ Where Jesus' critics were wrong, of course, was with their malicious exaggeration of His normal eating and drinking they charged Him with being "a glutton and a drunkard." The point Jesus is trying to make in the passage is that unbelievers make absurd criticisms in order to justify their unwillingness to accept the new message concerning the Kingdom that both He and John the Baptist preached. Unfortunately, some modern readers come to the text and find justification for drinking alcohol – "Jesus drank alcoholic wine so I guess it's okay for me." Whether Jesus drank wine that had been preserved unfermented or whether He drank wine that had been preserved with alcoholic content should not be determined by the bizarre statement from an unreliable source that He was "a glutton and a drunkard."

John 2:1-12. Jesus was at a wedding reception with his mother, brothers, and disciples when He was confronted with a crisis by His mother. We may assume that the wedding involved relatives because the mother of Jesus appears to be quite concerned about the shortage of wine. It has been suggested by one Bible commentator that one of the major reasons for the shortage was that Jesus, an invited guest, showed up with five men that He had just recruited as disciples and for whom preparations would not have been made. Whatever the reason, Jesus took charge of the situation and said to the servant in reference to the six nearby jars, which were normally used for purification ceremonies, "Fill the jars with water." The next instruction from Jesus was, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." Bible scholars debate whether He turned 120 gallons of water in wine in one stroke or whether the miracle took place as the servants drew some of the water to be served. The master of the banquet who was the first to drink the miraculous wine was impressed, not unsurprisingly, with "the good wine" (KJV)

which was still available so late in the banquet.

Again, it is unfortunate that modern debaters use the incident to support the notion that for His very first miracle Jesus turned more than 500 litres of water into alcoholic wine for the consumption of the guests at a wedding banquet. A more careful analysis of the text offers several points for consideration: (a) the reason for the shortage is not explained (but it does not have to mean that the guests had drunk too much); (b) Jesus responds to a need that is identified by His mother; (c) the master of the banquet, surprised at the quality of Jesus' wine, suggests that the hosts have put a lie to the custom of lowering the quality of wine as people drink more and become less discriminating; (d) the wine at the beginning of the banquet was good and the wine Jesus made was just as good – the same Greek expression for “the good wine” is used for both. The lesson is that Jesus participated in normal social functions and when confronted with what might be called a need to avoid embarrassment, He cared enough to perform a miracle. The point to be emphasized is that the text does not ask the question, “Did Jesus create fermented wine?”²⁸

Ephesians 5:15-20. The temptation in the wine debate is to extract only a portion of the passage as if it were the most important: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” In an attempt to keep the context in focus, the whole passage should be in front of us:

15 Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, his primary purpose was not to deal with the amount of wine a person might be allowed to drink but rather his point in the above passage is to show that alcoholic spirits and the Holy Spirit are on different sides of the answer to “How then shall we live?” There are some obvious contrasts in plain English – you can be unwise or wise by making the most out of every opportunity in an evil world; you can fail to use your brains or you can understand what the Lord's will is for your life. “Do not get drunk on wine” or your life will be riotous and you will never get things figured out. “Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” Rejoice with your Christian friends worshipping God and knowing that this is the Lord's will for you and everything is yours in Christ. For those who pursue wine, life will be disordered, confused, and riotous.²⁹

It is interesting to note that on two other occasions this same contrast between wine and the Spirit is mentioned:

(1) Luke 1:15: “He (John the Baptist) is never to take **wine** or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the **Holy Spirit** even from birth.”

(2) Acts 2:4-15: “All of them were filled with the **Holy Spirit** Amazed and perplexed, they (the bystanders from many nations) asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much **wine.**”³⁰ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: . . . “These men are not drunk,³¹ as you suppose.”

1 Timothy 5:23. We do not know whether Paul received any medical advice from his companion, Dr. Luke, but he ventures to give his protégé Timothy some advice concerning his health: “Stop drinking only water, and use a little **wine** because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.” Without getting into the problems related to the impure water of the day or the possible magical qualities of wine that can do good things for health and healing, it should be remembered that the OT prescribed wine for specific problems (Proverbs 31:6, 7). It is a fact that in modern culture alcohol serves an important purpose in many over-the-counter and prescription medications where it serves as both a solvent and a preservative. Occasionally, reports are heard in the media about the beneficial effects that wine may have on the heart. The usual add-on is, “Consult your doctor before you do anything.”

1 Timothy 3:2-3, 8. The Apostle Paul writes Timothy with instructions about selecting individuals for leadership in the local church. With reference to a bishop/elder, one of the qualification was that he be *mē paroinon* (literally “not beside wine” and interpreted by the NIV as “not given to drunkenness”). The Greek phrase is used twice by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7. The lexicons generally suggest that the phrase refers to people who “sit down beside wine regularly.” The American Standard Bible (ASB) seems to take a different approach by leaving wine out of the text altogether and simply says “brawler” with a note in the margin which says “not quarrelsome over wine.”

1 Timothy 3:2: Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

3 not given to drunkenness (*mē paroinon*), not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money (See also Titus 1:7).

For whatever reason, Paul does not use the same expression in reference to the use of wine when writing about deacons, a second category of church leaders. In spite of the fact that the qualifications of elders and deacons are separated by only a few verses, when speaking about deacons Paul uses a more conventional expression with reference to the use of wine.

1 Timothy 3:8 Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, **not indulging in much wine** (*mē oinō pollō prosechontas*), and not pursuing

dishonest gain.

New Testament Summary. Again, as in the OT, the question concerning the use of alcohol by a spiritual leader is not addressed in a manner which allows a clear prohibition or permission. Proponents of both abstinence and moderation offer conflicting interpretations and applications of the verses referring to wine. There are significant observations which may be listed.

(1) The Greek word *oinos* is the common word for wine. It is argued that *oinos* may refer to fresh or fermented wine.

(2) The category of Nazirites introduced in the OT who were forbidden to drink wine (fresh or fermented) carries over to the NT in references to John the Baptist.

(3) The relationship of Jesus to wine both as an imbibitor and creator are very controversial.

(4) The use of wine may lead to loss of control.

(5) Wine has medicinal qualities which may be helpful in certain situations.

(6) The Bible restricts the use of wine by priests while ministering and in one passage advises kings of the dangers associated with wine.

(7) Alcoholic wine has the ability to alter perception and adversely affect human cognitive powers. On the other hand, the ability to affect the emotions and dull the senses makes it an appropriate sedative for the dying and the depressed.

(8) Spiritual leaders should not be identified with those who have an obvious appetite for alcohol. It remains a matter of conjecture whether the negative remarks about drunkenness are tantamount to the approval of some lesser degree of intoxication.

Concluding Observations

An examination of the references to wine in Biblical times demonstrate that in ancient cultures wine was one of the basic staples of daily life. It is clear from the use of different Hebrew and Greek words that wine could refer to fresh grape juice or fermented drinks with varying degrees of alcoholic content. It is also evident that wine could be processed to prevent fermentation or to enhance fermentation in the production of alcoholic drinks. Indeed, in the face of the ambiguity in reference to the words along with the stark contrast between the alcohol and its use in Biblical cultures in comparison with our own, a definitive defense for abstinence or moderation is not easily prepared.

Endnotes

¹ All sides of the debate view drunkenness negatively whether from a secular or religious perspective, whether from the impact on an individual, the family, or society in general.

² Whatever the merits of the Biblical arguments against tobacco, the issue in more recent times has become a public health issue. Smoking may still be sinful but the effective message that is now delivered to the general public is that it is harmful and illegal in public places. Basically, in the vernacular, “You may kill yourself smoking but you can’t hurt other people with second-hand smoke.”

³ It should be noted that an unusual use of *tyrosh* (“new wine”) appears in Hosea 4:11-12 where it is linked with negative agents *yayin* (“old wine”) and prostitution “which take away the understanding of my people.”

⁴ The Hebrew word *'acyc* is used in four places and is also translated by the NIV as “new wine” in Joel 1:5; 3:18; Amos 9:13 and “wine” in Isaiah 49:26. The Joel 3:18 and Amos references refer to promised blessings; for example Amos 9:13 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.” The Joel 1:5 passage refers to two “wines”: one (*yayin*) which is associated with drunkards, and the other (*'acyc*) which will be cut off and therefore have an effect on the availability of *yayin* which is produced from the new wine. While the Joel and Amos use of *'acyc* seems to refer to unfermented juice, the Isaiah 49:26 passage is more controversial because of the statement, “they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine” (*'acyc*).

⁵ It must be noted that the Bible does not attach any morality to either preventing fermentation or enhancing it. The question simply does not come up.

⁶ See Samuele Bacchiocchi, “Chapter 4: The Preservation of Grape Juice,” *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1989). The chapter is online

http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/wine_in_the_bible/3.html

⁷ Mishnah, *Terumoth* 2:6, 11:1.

⁸ R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technologies*, vol. 8, “Fermented Beverages 500 BC – 1500 AD.” (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1955), 106–129.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 118. <http://books.google.ca/books?id=Y84UAAAIAAAJ&pg=PA117&lpg=PA117&dq=ancient+technology+for+the+fermentation+of+wine#v=onepage&q&f=false>

¹⁰ http://www.gemsinisrael.com/e_article000033156.htm

¹¹ The word *chamar* (Aramaic root) also appears in lists of food staples and is translated “wine.” (See Ezra 6:9; 7:22). The word *chamar* (“wine”) also appears in Daniel 1:5, 8, 16; 5:1, 2, 4, 23 but in Daniel 10:3 wine reverts to *yayin*.

¹² The single reference where *shekar* appears alone is Numbers 28:7, the KJV translates *shekar* as strong drink when it is coupled with *yayin* and “strong wine” when it used alone. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* suggests that in Numbers 28:7 *shekar* is an early general term for intoxicating drinks before a distinction was made between drinks according to their source (i.e. grapes or barley), and only in this passage does *shekar* have the same meaning as the *yayin* used for the drink offering of Numbers 28:14 and Exodus 29:40. D. Miall Edwards, “Drink, Strong,” James Orr, General Editor, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915. <http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/>.

¹³ The three exceptions are Proverbs 20:1; 31:6; and Isaiah 24:9.

¹⁴ Indeed, the root of *shekar* is *shakar* which means “to be or become drunk”; the KJV translates *shikkor* (also a derivative of *shakar*) in Proverbs 26:9; Isaiah 24:20; 28:1, 3; and Joel 1:5 as “drunkard(s).”

¹⁵ Defenders of abstinence find this passage one of the most difficult to explain since *shekar*, an alcoholic drink, is approved for a religious feast. See an example of an abstainer interpreting, <http://www.learnthebible.org/deuteronomy-1426-endorsement-for-drinking-or-not.html>.

¹⁶ The NIV shows its bias by inserting without justification the word “other” in front of “fermented drink.” The New King James Version (NKJV) also demonstrates an editorial point of view but is careful to use italics for its inserted word “*similar* drink.” Other versions of the Bible allow “wine and strong drink” to be different beverages without reference to fermentation.

¹⁷ When *shekar* appears in the Bible text, almost always it is linked with *yayin*. The KJV translates the word as “strong drink;” the NIV translates it as “fermented drink” or “beer.” The word *shekar* is discussed in a separate section below.

¹⁸ The word *mishrah* translated as “juice” (Numbers 6:3) appears only in this OT passage. Ironically, the KJV translates the word “liquor,” which illustrates that words may change through time.

¹⁹ Other passages dealing with the Nazirite vow and the limitations associated with it are the specific reference to Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11) and a general reference to Nazirites in Amos 2: 11, 12. Most Bible scholars connect the Nazirite status to John the Baptist (Luke 1:15). In the case of John the Baptist the Greek words for the prohibition are *oinos* (wine) and *sikera* (fermented drink).

²⁰ Adam Clarke suggests that the Rechabites are most likely descendants of Jethro, father-in-law of Moses (see Numbers 10:29-32; Judges 1:16; 4:11). In 1835 a society formed in England known as the Independent Order of Rechabites as part of the temperance movement to promote total abstinence from alcoholic beverages.

²¹ There are many speculations about the identity of King Lemuel and his mother – one of the more interesting being Solomon and his mother Bathsheba.

²² Strong’s number 4469 “wine mixed (with water or spices).” The root word “*macak*” (Strong’s 4537) appears in Psalm 75:8 and is translated “wine mixed with spices.” *Biblesoft’s New Exhaustive Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.

²³ In practically all references the Greek word for wine is *oinos* – the exceptions are compound words *oinopotes* (Luke 7:34; Matthew 11:19 – an imbibor of wine), *paroinos* (1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7 which means “staying near wine” according to *Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*), *oinophlugia* (1 Peter 4:3 suggesting “drunkenness”), and the word *gleukos* (Acts 2:13 referring to “sweet wine”).

²⁴ “a wine-vat (whether the lower one, into which the juice drains; or the upper, in which the grapes are crushed)” *Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*.

²⁵ The Greek *sikera* is related to the Hebrew word *shekar*.

²⁶ Because of Jewish familiarity with the Nazirite vow, it is probable that it would be understood that the prohibition of all grape products and hair cutting would also apply to John the Baptist.

²⁷ Jesus also took time to attend a dinner held in His honour in the home of the grateful Lazarus who had been previously raised from the dead (John 12:1-3). Martha gladly served and Mary lovingly poured out the expensive ointment on the feet of Jesus.

²⁸ Samuele Bacchiocchi discusses and responds to the modern notion that Jesus was not a teetotaler and even miraculously manufactured high quality alcoholic wine at the Cana wedding banquet. He lists the five major assumptions which he believes are misguided: First, it is

assumed that the word *oinos* “wine” indicates only “fermented-quality grape drink, i.e. wine. Second, it is assumed that since the word *oinos* “wine” is used in reference both to the wine which ran out and the wine that Christ made, both wines must have been alcoholic. Third, it is assumed that the Jews did not know how to prevent the fermentation of grape juice; and since . . . the season of the wedding was just before the Spring Passover (cf. John 2:13), that is, six months after the grape harvest, the wine used at Cana had ample time to ferment. Fourth, it is assumed that the description given by the master of the banquet to the wine provided by Christ as “the good wine” means a high-quality alcoholic wine. Fifth, it is assumed that the expression “well drunk” (John 2:10) used by the master of the banquet indicates that the guests were intoxicated because they had been drinking fermented wine. Baachiocchi then proceeds to demonstrate the falseness of all of these assumptions by referring to Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources to show that the banquet wine was unfermented and that Jesus turned water into good unfermented wine. See Chapter 5 of Bacchiocchi’s book online http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/wine_in_the_bible/4.html.

²⁹ The Greek word *asotia* translated as “debauchery” by the NIV in Ephesians 5:18 occurs in only two other verses in the NT: Titus 1:6, “wild” and 1 Peter 4.4, “dissipation.”

³⁰ *gleukos* – “sweet wine, i.e. (prop.) must (fresh juice), but used of the more saccharine (and therefore highly inebriating) fermented wine” *Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*.

³¹ *methuo* – to drink to intoxication; *methusko* in Ephesians 5:18.