

# THE BIBLE AND THE QUESTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**I**n American evangelical culture the debate over alcoholic beverages has been fermenting for over 100 years. The dispute over the morality of alcohol consumption has even spilled over from the church, creating a wave of social and political responses. Those responses range from local educational temperance movements all the way to a (short-lived) national prohibition amendment to the U. S. Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

Few would deny the widespread abuse of alcohol in our culture today. From occasional binge drinking to full-scale alcohol dependence, from under age drinking to drunken driving, alcohol abuse is a serious problem.<sup>2</sup> And none can credibly deny that the Bible strongly condemns all forms of alcohol *abuse* through several means, including binding precept,<sup>3</sup> notorious example,<sup>4</sup> negative image,<sup>5</sup> and harmful effect.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the debate continues raging among evangelicals.

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<sup>1</sup>The Eighteenth Amendment effected Prohibition in 1919 but was repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment in 1933. It is the only Constitutional Amendment ever repealed.

<sup>2</sup>Statistics show that “about 18% of American adults have had an alcohol abuse problem at some time in their life, in addition to about 12% who have also had an alcohol dependence problem.” Cited from “Alcohol Abuse,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>3</sup>Prov 23:20, 21, 29–35; Hab 2:15; Luke 21:34; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:10; Eph 5:18; 1 Pet 4:3.

<sup>4</sup>Gen 9:21; 19:32; Deut 21:20; 1 Sam 25:36; 1 Kgs 16:9; Isa 28:1; Luke 21:34; Gal 5:21.

<sup>5</sup>Isa 29:9; 49:26; 51:21; Jer 13:12–13; 23:9; 25:27; 51:7; Ezek 23:28, 33; Joel 1:5; Matt 24:29; Luke 12:45.

For the evangelical the question of beverage alcohol consumption ultimately must be arbitrated in terms of the Scriptures, rather than traditional customs, contemporary social practices, cultural mores, or emotional revulsion. The classic text declaring the supremacy of Scripture for deciding ethical questions is 2 Tim 3:16–17, which reads, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for *teaching*, for reproof, for correction, *for training in righteousness*; that the man of God may be adequate, *equipped for every good work*.”<sup>7</sup>

Although many Christian temperance leagues exist throughout the land (e.g. the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, the International Organization of Good Templars, True Temperance Association, and National Families in Action, among others), we generally do not find countervailing associations promoting alcohol consumption among evangelicals. No “Promise Drinkers” organization or “Grape Expectations” league serves as an umbrella for moderationists. Yet moderationists have produced a growing body of literature engaging the debate from all sides of the issue.

In this article I will be presenting the biblical evidence for allowing a moderate, circumspect use of alcoholic beverages. Due to space limitations my approach to the issue involves three fundamental, unargued presuppositions regarding the Scriptures:

1. The Bible is the inerrant Word of God.
2. The Bible is the ultimate standard for ethical inquiry.
3. The Bible condemns all forms of alcohol abuse.

Building on these presuppositions I will show that just as the Bible allows an appropriate use of sex (despite its widespread perversion and abuse) and wealth (despite the love of money being the root of all kinds of evil), it also allows a balanced use of alcohol. In considering the issue before us, we must always recognize the distinction between *use* and *abuse*.

## II. ALCOHOLIC WINE IN THE BIBLE

Undoubtedly, the starting point for any careful discussion of the matter before us must focus on the *nature* of biblical wine. I believe the scriptural evidence is clear: the wine of the Bible was a fermented quality, alcoholic-content, potentially inebriating beverage.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following lines of evidence for the alcoholic nature of biblical wine:

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<sup>6</sup>Job 12:25; Hos 4:11; Ps 107:27; Prov 23:33–35; Isa 19:14; 24:20; Lam 4:21; Ezek 23:33; Nah 1:10.

<sup>7</sup>(Italics mine). Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the New American Standard Bible.

<sup>8</sup>Some abstentionists and prohibitionists point out that the distillation process, which allows for a more potent alcoholic beverage, was not created until

1. *Lexical consensus.* The leading Hebrew and Greek lexicons and the standard etymological dictionaries affirm that the major biblical terms signify “wine,” which is a fermented beverage. It speaks of an alcoholic wine, not mere grape juice. The most important terms in Scripture are the Hebrew words *yayin* and *shēkār* and the Greek *oinos*.

In the standard Hebrew-English lexicon today the definition for *yayin* reads simply “wine” (BDB 407), while that for *shēkār* is “intoxicating drink, strong drink” (BDB 1016). The NIDOTTE (2:439) defines *yayin* simply as “wine,” and notes of the nominative form of *shēkār* that it was “an intoxicating drink” (4:113). Even the entry in TWOT (1:375, § 864), written by abstentionist R. Laird Harris, defines *yayin* as “wine.” The TWOT (2:926, § 2388) listing for *shēkār* reads “strong drink.”

In the leading Greek-English lexicon of our day, the first entry under *oinos* defines the term as “a beverage made from fermented juice of the grape, *wine*; the word for ‘must,’ or unfermented grape juice, is *trux*” (BAGD, 701). In EDNT (2:505) the meaning of *oinos* is given simply as “wine.” TDNT (5:163) notes that “in the NT *oinos* is mainly used in the literal sense of wine,” and that signifies “intoxicating drinks.” Louw and Nida define *oinos* as “a fermented beverage from the juice of grapes—‘wine’” (L&N 1:77 §6.1979). The abridged Liddell and Scott *Greek-English Lexicon* (479) *oinos* entry reads “wine,” with the second entry noting its adjectival use to signify the fermented quality of non-grape-based drinks: “the fermented juice of apples, pears, etc.”

For the Hebrew and the Greek terms see also works by Davidson, Thayer, M’Clintock and Strong, Buck, Klein, Barnhardt, and Lust, to name but a few additional sources.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, prohibitionist advocate and Semitic languages scholar Stephen M. Reynolds admits that “the Talmud gives support to the idea that it was regarded as an intoxicant in post-Biblical (but nevertheless

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the eighth and ninth centuries by Muslim chemists. They argue that the Scriptures, therefore, do not reckon with this more inebriating phenomenon. This is not really relevant, however, for as we will see, the wine of the Bible *is* fermented (which by natural process creates an alcohol content up to 15 percent by volume) and *can* cause drunkenness, which is the fundamental concern in the debate.

<sup>9</sup>Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 303, 716. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: University Press, 1971) 2:3788. John M’Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker, rep. 1969 [1887]). Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, ed., *The Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus* (Boston: Brill) 2:1281. J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003) 431. Carl Darling Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages* (Chicago: University Press, 1949). Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Elsevier, 1966). Robert K. Barnhart, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (Bronx, NY: Wilson, 1988).

ancient) Hebrew. Thus in *Yoma* 76b . . . we read: ‘Why is it [wine] called “*yayin*” and “*tirosh*”? It is called “*yayin*” because it brings lamentation into the world, and “*tirosh*” because he who indulges in it becomes poor.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, ancient Hebrews speaking their *own language* affirm *yayin*’s fermented quality—as even one of the most vigorous opponents of this view admits.

Prohibitionists often note this unanimity and decry it. For instance, popular evangelist David Wilkerson laments, “I have searched out the old Bible commentaries and almost all of them suggest wine referred to in the Old and New Testaments was fermented.”<sup>11</sup> Scholar Robert P. Teachout does the same: “Unfortunately Bible scholars have been equally misled by public opinion.”<sup>12</sup> But when you search out all the internationally-reputed lexical scholars as they compile the standard dictionaries and lexicons and find them unanimously differing with your opinion, who is really mistaken?

2. *Translational consensus.* The major English versions of Scripture translate these words by English equivalents that signify alcoholic beverages. Rather than employing translations such as “juice,” “grape juice,” “must,” and so forth, they translate our key words as “wine” (*yayin* and *oinos*), and “strong drink,” “fermented drink,” “intoxicating drink,” “liquor,” or “beer” (*shēkār*). See key verses in the Authorized Version, American Standard Version, New English Bible, Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Version, New King James Version, New International Version, and the English Standard Version. See also Moffatt’s *Holy Bible: A New Translation*; Weymouth’s *New Testament in Modern Speech*; Williams’s *In the Language of the People*; and Beck’s *In the Language of Today*, for a few more samples.

3. *First mention.* J. D. Davis points out that *yayin* must be an intoxicant, due to the interpretive principle of “first mention”: “when the Hebrew word *yayin* first occurs in Scripture, it is the fermented juice of the grape (Gen 9:21), and there is no reason to believe that it has a different meaning elsewhere.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the very first time we come upon this word in Scripture, we see it intoxicating Noah. This certainly is not simple grape juice. The “argument from first mention” requires that any later changes in denotation should be clearly presented. But none are.

4. *Contextual usage.* Many of the verses that condemn drunkenness (such as those listed in footnotes 3–6 above) trace the intoxication to

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<sup>10</sup>Stephen M. Reynolds, *The Biblical Approach to Alcohol* (Minneapolis, MN: U. S. Council of the International Organization of Good Templars Alcohol and Drug Abuse Task Force, n.d.) 33.

<sup>11</sup>David Wilkerson, *Sipping Saints* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1978) 19.

<sup>12</sup>In the Foreword to Jack Van Impe, *Alcohol: The Beloved Enemy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980) 8.

<sup>13</sup>J. D. Davis, *Illustrated Davis Dictionary of the Bible* (Lynchburg, VA: Royal, rep. n.d., [1924]) 867.

*yayin* (Gen 9:21; 19:32–35; Isa 28:1, 7; Jer 23:9; 51:7; Joel 1:15), *shēkār* (1 Sam 1:14; Isa 29:9; 51:21; Jer 25:27; 48:26; 49:12; 51:7, 39; Lam 4:21; Nah 3:11; Hab 2:15), and *oinos* (Luke 7:33–34; Eph 5:18; Rev 17:2, 18:3). In addition, *yayin* is said to “make glad the heart” in several places (Judg 9:13; 2 Sam 13:28; Esth 1:10; Ps 104:14–15; Eccl 9:7; 10:19; Zech 10:7). Such an effect is implied in parallelisms in other places (Ps 4:7; Song 1:4; Isa 22:13; Jer 48:33). This “gladness” surely refers to the effects of alcohol in lightening one’s spirits, sometimes dangerously to the point of drunkenness (2 Sam 13:28–29).

5. *Lexical relationships.* One of the major Hebrew words in our debate is *shēkār* (“strong drink,” NASB). It is the noun form of the verb *shākar*, which means “become drunk” (BDB, 1016). In fact, “with very few exceptions *shākar* and its derivatives are used in a highly unfavorable and negative context” (TWOT 2:926, § 2388). We find *shēkār* associated with drunkenness (1 Sam 1:15; Prov 20:1; Isa 5:11, 22; 28:7; 29:9). Because of its intoxicating quality *shēkār* may be used as a stimulant to alleviate suffering for the dying (Prov 31:6; cp. Matt 27:34; Mark 15:23).

The Greek word *oinos* is used in various compounds demanding its alcoholic content. For instance, see *oinopotēs* (“drunkard,” Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34) and *oinophlugia* (“drunkenness,” 1 Pet 4:3). These compounds clearly signify the capacity to inebriate, which we should expect from the association of *oinos* with drunkenness (see Point 4 above).

6. *Qualified silence.* The Bible never distinguishes “safe” (non alcoholic) and “unsafe” (alcoholic) wines. If Scripture condemns drunkenness and alcohol dependence (which it does), why does it not distinguish between safe and unsafe wines for our benefit? We should wonder why no distinct word for safe, non-alcoholic wine exists in Scripture, over against unsafe, alcoholic wine. This is especially interesting in that the Babylonian Talmud speaks of non-alcoholic grape juice fresh from the press in *Sanhedrin* 70a. Commenting on this Talmudic reference, strict prohibitionist Stephen M. Reynolds notes, “Newly pressed wine, prior to fermentation, was known as *yayin mi-gat* (wine from the press).”<sup>14</sup>

After all, the spiritual leaders of the people were to make the people know the “difference between the holy and the profane” (Lev 10:10; Ezek 22:26; 44:23; Mal 2:6–7), as were kings (1 Kgs 3:9; 8:36; 2 Chr 6:27). Indeed, Adam’s original sin was his inability to distinguish good and evil (Gen 2:9, 17; 3:5).

Though many abstentionists and prohibitionists argue for distinguishing alcoholic and non-alcoholic wine, the evidence is wholly lacking. I agree with C. M. Kerr in ISBE (2:881) when he complains, “To insist on a distinction between intoxicating and unfermented wine is a case of unjustified special pleading.” Merrill F. Unger agrees: “Some,

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<sup>14</sup>Reynolds, *Biblical Approach to Alcohol*, 78.

indeed, have argued from [certain] passages that *yayin* could not always have been alcoholic. But this is begging the question, and that in defiance of the facts.”<sup>15</sup>

7. *Wine production.* Not only do we find nothing warning us to avoid certain kinds of wines (i.e. fermented), but we even have passages emphasizing the intentional aging of grape juice in order to promote its fermentation: “And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine” (Isa 25:6). “Moab has been at ease since his youth; He has also been undisturbed on his lees, Neither has he been emptied from vessel to vessel, Nor has he gone into exile. Therefore he retains his flavor, And his aroma has not changed” (Jer 48:11). The first reference even symbolizes the coming of the fulness of God’s redemptive kingdom. Jesus even casually observes (and with no note of denunciation) that “no one, after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, ‘The old is better’” (NIV Luke 5:39).

Aging is essential for transforming grape juice to alcoholic wine. E. J. Young notes of Isa 25:6: “By means of gradation, Isaiah now characterizes the banquet as one of wine that is matured by resting undisturbed on the lees. A play upon words as well as a gradation appears between *ishemanim* (fat things) and *shemarin* (lees). This latter word originally signified holders or preservers and then came to designate the wines that had rested a long time on sediment or dregs, and so had become more valuable. The wine lay on the lees to increase its strength and color.”<sup>16</sup>

The fermentation process appears on a smaller scale in the NT. In Luke 5:37 the Lord alludes to this in a parable: “no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined.” He clearly is referring to the fermentation process that would burst old, stretched wineskins.

8. *Circumspection requirement.* On some occasions “strong” Christians are instructed to forgo wine temporarily (Rom 14:21, note the aorist *piein*), when a likelihood exists that they will “destroy” (Rom 14:15, *apollumi*) a “weaker brother” (Rom 14:1; 15:1).<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is the “weaker” brother who cannot partake of alcohol, whereas the “stronger” brother (such as Paul: “we,” Rom 15:1) only forgoes it in those circumstances. Shall we establish “weakness” as the standard for Christian practice? Besides, Rom 14:21 speaks of forgoing other, quite acceptable food products in certain situations: “It is good not to eat *meat*

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<sup>15</sup>Merrill F. Unger, ed., *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody, 1988) 1188.

<sup>16</sup>E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 3:193.

<sup>17</sup>For a full discussion of this “Christian liberty” passage, see Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says about Alcohol* (Lincolnton, CA: Oakdown, 2001) chap. 6.

or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles” (cp. 1 Cor 8:13).

Nor may we use Paul’s directive to require all Christians to forgo alcoholic wine consumption out of a concern that we never know when a weaker brother might see us and be led to stumble. After all, Paul is writing a public letter stating that *stronger* Christians *may* partake of wine. Paul was not concerned that a weaker Christian might read this and use it as an excuse for abusing wine. Furthermore, Christ himself made wine for a large crowd without hesitating for fear some weaker person might be led to sin (John 2:1–10). And he mentions that he publicly drank wine, which gave opportunity for his critics to call him a drunkard: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt 11:19). And Matthew—and Luke in Luke 7:34—even records this in Scripture for the entire world to see. Are these actions of Paul, Christ, Matthew, and Luke dangerous? Surely not.

9. *Special abstention.* We discover in Scripture that abstinence from wine is not only rare but remarkable, distinguishing abstainers from the common culture in Israel. The recorded abstentions actually underscore the acceptability of the wine; else these special abstentions would be meaningless. Generally those who abstain did so in order to deny themselves something good as evidence of their supreme devotion and willingness to suffer loss for God’s sake.

God informs Aaron that he and his sons are forbidden to drink wine and strong drink. But this is only “when you come into the tent of meeting” (Lev 10:9). Why does this *special* consideration apply only to priests? And why are they not forbidden wine *at all times*? The context suggests the reason for this occasional prohibition: Nadab and Abihu’s deadly error in their priestly actions (Lev 10:1–3; cp. Ezek 44:21). Elsewhere we learn that kings should not “drink wine” or “desire strong drink” (Prov 31:4). But again, it is only under certain circumstances—while they are administering justice. The next verse explains, “Lest they drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted” (Prov 31:5).

A peculiar vow sets apart the Nazirite for a special dedication to the Lord (Num 6:2). This dedication prohibited the Nazirite from drinking wine and strong drink (Num 6:3a). But again, this represented a *distinctive* act for an *unusual* vow, showing that ordinarily Jews did *not* abstain from these beverages. Furthermore, their vow prohibited not only “wine and strong drink,” but also “grape juice” and even “fresh or dried grapes” (Num 6:3b). What is more, the vow even forbade cutting their hair, mourning the death of their parents, touching the dead body of one who suddenly died right beside them (Num 6:5–7). And this vow was only for a set period of time, allowing that these activities could be resumed after the terms of the vow had been met: “He shall be holy until

the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow” (Num 6:5; cp. vv. 8, 13). In fact, the text expressly states that “afterward the Nazirite may drink wine” (Num 6:20b).

Samson’s unique dedication to the Lord as a Nazirite “from the womb” involved his permanent abstinence from wine (Num 6:7b)—and also a prohibition against cutting his hair (Judg 13:4). The Rechabites permanently abstained from wine (Jer 35:6) out of obedience to their father (Jer 35:8)—but also denied themselves permanent houses and farmland (Jer 35:9). Obviously, they were denying themselves good things. By special angelic directive John the Baptist was never to drink wine or liquor all the days of his life (Luke 1:15; cp. Matt 11:18; Luke 7:33), and in this he is distinguished from Christ himself (Matt 11:18–19; Luke 7:33–34).

Thus, the cases of abstention from wine in Scripture are for peculiar purposes. Such cases distinguish the abstainers from the common experience of Israel as a means of showing special, necessary commitments. Thus, by the back door we may see the confirmation of wine drinking among the broader society.

*10. Ecclesiastical expectation.* In establishing the spiritual prerequisites for holding office in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul never prohibits consumption of alcohol. And this is so even though church officers must be “above reproach” (1 Tim 3:2, 10; 6:14). This is no matter of accidental oversight or of our need to “fill in the blanks,” for Paul expressly states that officers must not be “addicted to much wine” (*oinō pollō prosechontas*, 1 Tim 3:8), “not enslaved to much wine” (*mē oinō pollō dedoulōmenas*, Titus 2:3), not “given to wine” (*paroinov*, 1 Tim 3:3; Titus 1:7). Note the prohibitions against partaking of “much” (*pollō*) wine and being “addicted” (*prosechontas*) or “enslaved” (*dedoulōmenas*) by it. Elsewhere he calls upon all Christians not to become “drunk [*methuskesthe*] with wine” (Eph 5:18; cp Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:10; Gal 5:21; 1 Pet 4:3)—not to *avoid* wine *entirely*.

*Conclusion.* After surveying these ten lines of evidence it seems quite clear that the Bible’s wine was a fermented quality beverage.<sup>18</sup> No effort is made in Scripture to encourage our using a preferred type of wine (unfermented) in deference to another (fermented). Now we must consider the righteous use of wine in the Bible.

### III. RIGHTEOUS WINE USE IN THE BIBLE

When we reflect on the use of fermented wine in Scripture, we find in various positive contexts that it is acceptable to God. Of course, we should expect that, since no biblical directives separate morally unacceptable wine from acceptable wine and in that we do not hear any

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<sup>18</sup>Fuller documentation appears in my book *God Gave Wine*.

universal prohibitions against wine consumption. Let us survey a sample of evidentiary material demonstrating this.

1. *Righteous example.* The Scripture presents righteous men partaking wine in positive, unoffending circumstances. When faithful Abram met Melchizedek, a “high priest of God Most High,” we discover this holy servant blessing Abram while presenting him with “wine” (*yayin*): “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand’” (Gen 14:18–20). Not only do we sense no disapprobation in this setting, but this meeting is a blessed event lifted high elsewhere in Scripture (Heb 7:1–10). In fact, in the Hebrews passage Melchizedek is said to be “made like the Son of God” (Heb 7:3b; cp. 5:10; 6:20; 7:11, 17).

Elsewhere those who came “with a perfect heart” to make David king “brought food on donkeys, camels, mules, and on oxen, great quantities of flour cakes, fig cakes and bunches of raisins, *wine*, oil, oxen and sheep” causing “joy indeed in Israel” (1Chr 12:40).

We also discover Nehemiah applying himself to the holy work of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls after the Babylonian captivity. In the biblical record we read his humble plea to God to remember him for all of his work for God’s people. And in that context he mentions supplying abundant measures of wine to the officials:

And I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days *all sorts of wine [yayin] were furnished in abundance*. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor’s food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people. Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people. (Neh 5:16–19)

2. *Sacred employment.* In the OT God commands both *yayin* and *shēkār* to be brought as offerings to him. We should especially remember that *shēkār* is the noun form of the Hebrew verb *shākar*, which means to become drunk. Yet despite its capacity to inebriate, these items are required offerings to the Lord:

Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two one year old lambs each day, continuously. “The one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; and there

shall be one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine [*yayin*] for a libation with one lamb.” (Exod 29:38–40; cp. Lev 23:13; Num 15:5, 7, 10; 18:27, 30; 28:14; Ezra 6:9)

Then the libation with it shall be a fourth of a hin for each lamb, in the holy place you shall pour out a libation of strong drink [*shēkār*] to the Lord. (Num 28:7)

This is important for two reasons: (a) These fermented drinks are commanded as offerings to God, and consequently (b) the righteous Israelite had to produce them. If alcoholic beverages were unsuitable for human consumption, why were they acceptable in divine worship?

3. *Positive blessing.* In various places in Scripture wine appears as a positive, divine blessing. In Deut 14:22–27 we read legislation governing the Tithe of Rejoicing. There we discover that God invited Israel to purchase both wine (*yayin*) and strong drink (*shēkār*) with their Tithe of Rejoicing: “And you may spend the money for whatever your heart desires, for oxen, or sheep, or *wine*, or *strong drink*, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household” (Deut 14:26). Not only does God himself specifically allow the purchase of these fermented beverages, but they are to be consumed “in the presence of the Lord your God” as the people “rejoice” with their whole household.

The psalmist attributes to God the production of *yayin*, which *makes man’s heart glad*: “He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, And vegetation for the labor of man, So that he may bring forth food from the earth, And wine *which makes man’s heart glad*” (Ps 104:14–15a). Surely God’s provision envisions a righteous employment of this alcoholic beverage.

Furthermore, Scripture speaks of the satisfying life illustrated in eating bread and drinking *yayin* with gladness: “Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and *drink your wine with a cheerful heart*; for God has already approved your works” (Eccl 9:7).

4. *Spiritual symbolism.* Redemptive revelation’s rich symbolism boldly uses fermented beverages to extol salvation’s blessings. It likens the blessings of salvation itself to the free provision of *yayin*: “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy *wine* [*yayin*] and milk Without money and without cost” (Isa 55:1).

As mentioned previously, prophecy presents the height of redemptive blessings in the world by abundant wine imagery: “And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine” (Isa 25:6). The LXX translates “refined, aged wine” thus: “they shall drink gladness, they shall drink wine” (*piontai euphrosunēn, piontai oinon*).

Hosea uses wine production as a picture of future redemptive blessings: “Those who live in his shadow Will again raise grain, And they will blossom like the vine. His renown will be like the wine [*yayin*] of Lebanon” (Hos 14:7). Amos does as well: “I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine [*yayin*] And make gardens and eat their fruit” (Amos 9:14).

In Zech 10:6–7 we read:

I shall strengthen the house of Judah, And I shall save the house of Joseph, And I shall bring them back, Because I have had compassion on them; And they will be as though I had not rejected them, For I am the Lord their God, and I will answer them. And Ephraim will be like a mighty man, And their heart will be glad as if from *wine* [*yayin*]; Indeed, their children will see it and be glad, Their heart will rejoice in the Lord.

Hosea 14:7 speaks similarly: “Those who live in his shadow Will again raise grain, And they will blossom like the vine. His renown will be like the *wine* [*yayin*] of Lebanon.”

Clearly, Scripture views wine—even carefully aged wine—as symbolizing God’s blessings.

5. *Christ’s Witness.* I mention this above, but it bears repeating in this different context. The Lord himself miraculously “manufactured” wine in great abundance for a wedding party (John 2:1–9). The headmaster of the feast was impressed with the quality of the wine Christ produced, declaring that “every man serves the good wine first, and when men have drunk freely, then that which is poorer; you have kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10). According to Jesus’ own teaching men prefer old [i.e. aged, fermented] wine over the new [unfermented] expressed juice from the grape (Luke 5:39). And as I show above, Scripture even hints at methods employed to enhance the fermentation process (i.e. Isa 25:6; Jer 48:11) and the care necessary for containing fermenting wine (Matt 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37).

In that he manufactures wine in his first miracle, it is no surprise that he publicly drank it. This is remarkable because it distinguishes him from the aesthetic ministry of his forerunner: “John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking; and you say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man, and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!’” (Luke 7:33–34). He is not afraid of criticism from those who see him partaking wine.

These five distinct angles all point to a righteous use of wine, which we saw above is a fermented beverage capable of intoxicating. It is abundantly clear that Scripture does allow the moderate partaking of alcoholic beverages. For the righteous who use it in moderation, it is a

blessing (Deut 14:26; Ps 104:14–15); for the unrighteous who abuse it, it is a mocker and a curse (Prov 20:1; 23:29ff).

Before closing my survey of the biblical tolerance of wine drinking, it will serve the reader well to consider objections to wine use from the Bible.

#### IV. WINE USE OBJECTIONS FROM THE BIBLE

I will not in this place cover all of the leading biblical objections to the moderationist position, for several of these have already been treated above (i.e. Lev 10:8–11; Num 6:2–6; Judg 13:4; Rom 14:21). I will briefly touch on two key verses that I have not touched on and which are favorites in the debate.

1. *Proverbs 20:1*. This frequently cited verse reads, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.” At first glance this appears to prohibit the wise from partaking of wine. It strongly warns of the danger of wine drinking by calling wine a “mocker” and strong drink a “brawler.” But looks are deceiving. Consider the following brief response.

First, if this verse were condemning wine and therefore all consumption of it, then all the many verses mentioned above would be false. But given our evangelical view of the integrity of Scripture this cannot be. In other words, this verse must be interpreted in harmony within the broader context of Scripture as a whole.

Second, the warning pattern used by the writer does not require absolute rejection of wine. The pattern is akin to Paul’s statement that “knowledge makes arrogant” (1 Cor 8:1). Surely, Paul is not condemning all acquisition of knowledge! The point of Prov 20:1 is that wine has the *potential* to mock, just as the point of 1 Cor 8:1 is that gaining knowledge has the *potential* to make arrogant. Third, the parallelism between the first stanza and the second shows that wine is a mocker and strong drink a brawler *when one “is intoxicated by it”*—not when one simply drinks it. That is, the local context (the full verse!) interprets the proper understanding of the negative statement for us.

2. *Proverbs 23:31–32*. This proverb is a favorite for opponents of alcohol consumption: “Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it goes down smoothly; At the last it bites like a serpent, And stings like a viper.” It certainly presents a strong warning regarding the danger of wine. But once again, it does not prohibit wine drinking *per se*.

The contextual setting of the passage is quite clear. The warning and admonition apply directly to *immoderate abusers* of wine—they “linger long over wine” (v. 30). When we read Prov 23:29–35 we discover the persons in view exhibit all the emotional, social, and physical characteristics of drunkards: depression (v. 29a), a contentious spirit (v. 29b), telltale physical signs (v. 29c), delusions (v. 33), disorientation (v.

34) and detachment (v. 35a, b). These characteristics do not describe those who drink wine moderately.

Therefore, he who is to “not look on the wine” is anyone who lingers long over wine (Prov 23:30) to the degree that it controls, humiliates, and sickens him.

## V. CONCLUSION

The thrust of my study is intentionally narrow. My concern is to present the *biblical data* regarding the *general question* of the *morality* of alcohol consumption. Though other issues might tangentially bear upon the topic, the ultimate issue in the debate should be, “What saith the Lord?” Or to put it in contemporary parlance, we might ask, “What would Jesus do?” And we have seen that he would make wine and drink it (John 2:1–11; Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34).

In the final analysis it is quite clear that Scripture neither urges universal total abstinence nor demands absolute life-long prohibition. Although alcoholic beverages can be, have been, and are presently abused by individuals, such need not be the case. Indeed, the biblical record frequently and clearly speaks of alcoholic beverages as good gifts from God for man's enjoyment. Unfortunately, as is always the case among sinners, good things are often transformed into curses. This is true not only with alcohol but with food, medicine, sex, wealth, authority, and many other areas of life. In fact, gluttonous eating of food is paralleled with immoderate drinking of wine in Scripture (Deut 21:20; Prov 23:20–21; Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34), just as is the perverted use of sex (Rom 13:13; Gal 5:21; 1 Pet 4:3).

The reader should not conclude that I intend for this study to encourage drinking by those who do not presently do so. I do not. I have never and will never encourage others to drink. Whether or not an individual wants to drink is a matter of his own tastes and discretion (within biblical limits, of course).

Neither should the reader think that this study presents all that can be said on the biblical understanding of the question of alcohol use. Again, such is not the case. Space constraints prohibit an in-depth analysis of all the data of Scripture. Nevertheless, I believe that the issues presented herein capture the essence of the biblical position.

The only point I make herein is that the biblical evidence shows that God allows alcohol consumption in moderation. Too often the Bible takes the back seat to emotional, anecdotal, and social arguments against alcohol consumption. This is most unfortunate—especially when considering the matter in ecclesiastical circles for Christians must “let God be found true” (Rom 3:4).

