

# Beer and Wine: The Bible's Counsel

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Doesn't the Bible refer in a number of places to wine and strong drink? Don't we quite often find people drinking alcohol in the Bible? Can't we assume, then, that Scripture generally does not condemn drinking alcoholic beverages?

It's true that we often find people drinking alcohol in the Bible and that Scripture speaks of alcoholic beverages, but we need to be careful not to read too much into a superficial look at such texts. When our English Old Testaments refer to alcohol, they generally use the words *wine* or *strong drink*. So any examination of the Old Testament's attitude toward alcohol must take into account the different Hebrew words translated into these two English terms.

The term *strong drink* presents no major translation problems because only one Hebrew word, *shekar*, lies behind it. But even so, the translation *strong drink* is more general than it ought to be. Modern readers may well think of *strong drink* as distilled liquor. But that is not what the Bible means by the term *shekar*. Since the process of distilling alcohol did not develop until around A.D. 500, the strongest alcoholic beverage people could make in Bible times contained only 14 percent alcohol by volume, approximately the maximum produced by natural fermentation. This fact tells us that the scriptural term *strong drink* certainly gives us no license to drink what we know today as hard liquor.

If distilled alcohol is not what the Bible means by *shekar*, what does it mean?

Here is where ancient languages related to Hebrew can be helpful. Documents written in cuneiform script on clay tablets tell us that the Babylonians had an alcoholic beverage they called *shikaru*. (Notice how similar this Babylonian word is to the Hebrew *shekar*. It is actually the same word in two related Semitic languages.) Some of these clay tablets tell how *shikaru* was made so we can easily determine what beverage they are describing. From grain, the Babylonians made a mash which was allowed to ferment. In other words, these tablets that speak about making *shikaru* are talking about making beer! Since the Bible texts that use the word *shekar* are referring to the same drink, they are talking about beer as well.

This is something extremely relevant to our modern society. Here are Bible texts talking about beer—the beverage that is so widely advertised on American TV and that is so widely consumed by the American public.

And what view does the Bible take of this beverage? A very dim and negative view indeed. Of 21 Old Testament texts that mention *shekar* (beer), 19 strongly condemn it. The other two texts present special cases (we'll discuss one of these later). The New Testament mentions this same beverage only once and prohibits its use by John the Baptist as he grew up.

To give something of the picture these 19 Old Testament texts convey, let's look at what some of them say about *shekar*. Leviticus 10:9 prohibits its use by a priest in ministry; **Numbers 6:2, 3** forbids Nazarites from drinking it; in **Judges 13:3, 4** an angel warns Samson's mother-to-be not to drink it during her pregnancy; in **Deuteronomy 29:5, 6** God tells the Israelites that He did not provide this drink for them in their wilderness wanderings.

There is also the interesting story of Hannah. She went to the tabernacle at Shiloh and prayed so earnestly about the fact that she was childless that the priest accused her of being drunk with *shekar*. This she denied. See **1 Samuel 1:15**.

The prophets of Judah in the eighth century B.C. were especially vigorous in their condemnation of strong drink, or beer. Isaiah mentions it eight times, and each reference is strongly negative. He pronounces a woe upon those who drink it (**Isa 5:11**) and notes that it would not bring mirth when God cursed the land (**Isa 24:9**). He points out that beer causes staggering (**Isa 29:9**) and that false priests and prophets were two groups who especially staggered from its effects (**Isa 28:7**). The prophet Micah noted that the people wanted precisely this kind of leader—one who would approve of its use (**Mic 2:11**). **Proverbs 20:1** speaks of rage and brawling as two of its side effects.

Thus we see an almost universal condemnation of beer in the Old Testament. But what about **Deuteronomy 14:22-28**? This text doesn't seem to fit the pattern; it seems to indicate that Israelites could actually pay part of their tithe in beer! Some have seen in this a modern license for beer-drinking.

First, we should carefully note that **Deuteronomy 14** is dealing with a special use under special circumstances. The chapter takes up the subject of the tithe in **verses 22 and 23**. In a later section, it speaks about what might be called "delayed tithe." It is here that beer occurs as part of the "delayed tithe."

What is all this talking about?

**Deuteronomy 14** identifies the tithe as certain foods and drinks that the Israelite was to take to the sanctuary located centrally in the nation. When the tithe was paid regularly and on time, the products offered were to include newborn lambs and calves, freshly pressed oil, new unfermented wine or grape juice (*tirosh*), and grain. All these were fresh products that came from the harvest of the new agricultural year. But what was the Israelite to do if for some reason he couldn't get to the sanctuary with these fresh products? He was to make a substitution, and it is this substitution that **verses 24-26** describe.

**Verse 24** presents the problem: that of an Israelite who was not able to get to the sanctuary on time. **Verse 25** presents the intermediate solution: he was to convert his tithe into silver and retain the money until he was able to go to the sanctuary. **Verse 26** gives the final step in presenting the delayed tithe. When he arrived at the sanctuary, the Israelite was to purchase some of the same agricultural products he should have brought earlier and eat the tithe meal before the Lord.

But the products he purchased for the tithe meal must be mature to show symbolically that the tithe presentation was late. Thus he did not present a lamb; he purchased a mature sheep for presentation. He did not present a calf, but a mature ox. Instead of fresh grape juice (*tirosh*) he presented *yayin*, wine that had fermented with the passing of time. And he did not present grain; he presented beer that had been made from grain. In each case, the delayed tithe meal consisted of things chosen to correspond to and show the development of the agricultural product which should have been presented originally. Although not readily apparent, this actually involved an interest penalty since the ox would cost more than a calf and the sheep more than a lamb.

Under these special circumstances, the symbolic substitution of beer for the earlier grain when presenting "delayed tithe" can by no means be taken as a license for unrestricted recreational use of beer—either then or now. Especially when beer is elsewhere condemned in the OT.

When we turn to the subject of wine in the Scriptures, we find two main words—*tirosh* which usually refers to grape juice in its unfermented state, the way it comes from the press as a new agricultural product, and *yayin*, a word with less clear meanings.

In **30 of the 38** references to *tirosh* in the Old Testament it is paired with grain and oil, or oil alone, as products of the harvest used for tithe and taxes, etc. Three texts (**Mic 6:15; Isa 62:8; 65:8**) refer to *tirosh* as the product of the grape; four texts (**Prov 3:10; Joel 2:24; Mic 6:15; and Hos 9:2**) speak of *tirosh* as produced by pressing. Only one text (**Hos 4:11**) suggests that *tirosh* may produce intoxication—and this text may actually be referring to early fermentation or to the practice of mixing new and old (fermented) wine.

Thus *tirosh* appears to refer almost exclusively to unfermented wine or grape juice. But *yayin*, the other main word that the Bible uses for wine, clearly means fermented wine in most cases.

The Old Testament uses the word *yayin* some 140 times. Before dealing with specific texts, let's get a general overview of its use in the Bible. By my count, the Bible presents *yayin* in a negative light 60 times; in about 60 more cases it simply mentions it without making any value judgment, and in only 17 references does it possibly say something positive about it. Thus *yayin*, fermented wine, is spoken of negatively much more often than it is positively.

On the negative side, first of all, are the stories in which fermented wine produces bad results. Not many (if any) historical narratives in the Old Testament mention a beneficial outcome from the use of wine, but several end disastrously: the drunkenness of Noah (**Gen 9:21**); Lot (**Gen 19:32-35**); Nabal (**1 Sam 25:36, 37**); Amnon (**2 Sam 13:28**); Belshazzar (**Dan 5:1-3**); and Ahasuerus (**Esth 1:1-10**), for example.

**Isaiah (51:21); Jeremiah (23:9); Hosea (4:11; 7:5); Joel (1:5); and Habbakuk (2:15)** are among the Bible prophets who point out the ill effects, both physical and moral, which intoxicating wine produces.

**Proverbs 23:29-35** describes wine's immediate physical effects (red eyes and blurred vision), its immediate social effects (strife and wounds), as well as the long-term results (woe and sorrow). Elsewhere, the book of Proverbs refers to wine as producing poverty (**21:17**) and violence (**4:17**). Isaiah adds that it deceives the mind (**28:7**), inflames a person, and leads to forgetfulness of God (**5:11, 12**).

Those texts which point to certain useful functions of wine should not be overlooked, but they should be placed in perspective. Three texts (**Ps 104:15; Eccl 9:7; 10:19**) mention that wine can make the heart glad and bring cheer. This indicates an awareness of the immediate physiological effects of alcohol, but these

texts need to be placed along side the many other Bible statements mentioning its nonbeneficial long-term results.

**Ecclesiastes 9:7 and 10:19** might superficially appear to give approval for indulging in alcohol. In a bit of ancient philosophy, **Ecclesiastes 9:7** says, "Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do." RSV. It is a description of the author's search for those things that bring meaning in life. This text is pointing out that man should be content with certain common duties of life—including eating and drinking, even wine. However, the book ends with the author's finding a greater good to provide meaning in life—that man should fear God and keep His commandments. See **chapter 12:13**. All the other experiences in which the author tries to find meaning fade in significance beside this.

At least seven other Bible texts which appear to speak favorably of *yayin* do so merely by means of comparison; they are not speaking directly about wine itself. For example, the Song of Solomon uses a comparison with wine four times (**1:2, 4; 4:10; and 7:9**) to bring out the beloved's beauty. **Hosea 14:7** uses the fragrance of wine from Lebanon as a comparison. Proverbs 9:5, 6 uses wine figuratively in talking about the "banquet of life" that wisdom provides. **Amos 9:14** and **Zechariah 10:7** use the merriment that wine creates as a figure of how God's people will rejoice at the time of His final victory.

Wine was also used as a drink offering in the temple service, just as we have seen that beer was used in the presentation of delayed tithe. These drink offerings were poured out beside the altar; they were not drunk by the priests.

Thus most of the texts which mention wine favorably actually use it figuratively in comparisons. A few speak of its immediate physiological effects. But by far the majority describe its detrimental results—such as wicked acts committed in connection with drinking wine. Isaiah, for example, associates wine with the taking of bribes. See **Isaiah 5:22, 23**. Amos combines wine with profaning sacred things. See **Amos 2:8**.

In summary, the writers of the Old Testament raise four indictments against drinking wine. First, they recognize its immediate adverse physical effects—redness of the eyes, blurring of vision, staggering, and drunkenness in general. Second, they recognize its long-term moral effects—various kinds of immoral and unethical behavior along with the social results of such actions. Third, they identify particular instances of such behavior and connect them with specific persons. Fourth, because of its effects, they prohibit certain classes and specific individuals from drinking any wine.

In contrast to this large negative picture, about the only positive images the Bible gives of alcohol are three texts that note alcohol can produce a state of levity (certainly a valid physiological observation). The Bible writers also occasionally use wine to draw some favorable comparisons in figures of speech. (Yet they also use wine to symbolize some unfavorable comparisons as well. See the "wine of wrath" in **Psalms 75:8** and **Jeremiah 25:15**).

How then should we personally relate to alcohol in view of the overall picture given in the Old Testament? If one takes the whole picture into account and evaluates all the evidence, the most reasonable conclusion is that the only safe course is complete abstinence from alcohol in any form.