

Wine in the Ancient World

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The use of alcohol is an issue which finds a good amount of disagreement in the Church. Some denominations use wine in the celebration (eucharist) of Holy Communion, while others will only use unfermented grape juice. Some hold strongly to total abstinence, while others see nothing wrong with a moderate use of alcohol. While I do have an opinion on this issue, my first intention is not to engage in this dispute here. However, I do have "an axe to grind." My concern as an historian is to approach and present the evidence of antiquity with accuracy; this article is a response to some presentations which have failed to do this. It is an unfortunate fact that incorrect information regarding wine in the ancient world continues to be repeated. The data which is incorrectly presented, and which I want to address here, comes from non-Christian ancient writers including Pliny the Elder and Columella.¹

The first major issue which always comes up is that all wine (*oinos*) was not fermented, or alcoholic. Typically, discussion is offered on the meaning of certain Hebrew and Greek words. On this point there can be little argument; it is certain that people in the ancient world drank grape juice, and *oinos* was sometimes used to refer to fresh, non-alcoholic wine. At the same time, Paul uses *oinos* when he says, "Do not be drunk with wine" (Eph.5:18). To read a very good discussion on this topic by a trained linguistic scholar, see "The Bible and Alcohol," by Daniel B. Wallace, Ph.D.²

Most articles I have found on this topic³ refer to Columella and Pliny the Elder, and unfortunately, most of these references misrepresent these ancient writers. In the first article on "Wine in the New Testament" in the *Full Life Study Bible* Columella and Pliny

¹ Columella (cir. 4 BC-65 AD) and Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) were contemporaries. I am using The Loeb Classical Library edition for both authors; Columella (Cambridge USA 1951) translation by Harrison Boyd and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, translated by H. Rackham, LCL Vol.IV (Cambridge USA 1960).

² See the article online: http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=988.

³ Though the page layout on the Waterford Church of Christ web site is elementary, the presentation of material is typical for this subject (http://www.wcofc.org/sermons/alcohol_and_the_christian.htm). This page cites Norman Geisler who is citing Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today*, June 20, 1975, pp. 9-11. This Stein article is cited by many of the web pages I have seen lately. Also, the *Full Life Study Bible*, edited by Charles Stamp (Zondervan 1996). The *Full Life Study Bible* contains three separate articles on wine in the Old and New Testaments which misrepresent ancient authors, both secular and Christian; pp.204-205; 1534-1535; 1586-1587. These articles relied heavily on the Ph.D. dissertation of Robert P. Teachout, "The Use of 'Wine' in the Old Testament" (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979). I had several e-mail exchanges with Dr. Stamp and a lengthy telephone conversation regarding these issues. Using some of my recommendations, he edited these articles in the 10th anniversary edition and improved them greatly by deleting most of the references to ancient writers. This is not an attack on Dr. Stamp – he recently passed away, was a fine man and quickly earned my respect as a scholar. I reference these articles now only because I continue to find them used as a resource for this very issue – people continue to misuse the inaccurate citations in the older version of the *Full Life Study Bible*.

are cited describing how to store wine by trying to keep it from the air, even sinking pitch-sealed casks under water.⁴ The section opens, “Finally, ancient Roman writers have explained in detail various processes used in dealing with freshly squeezed grape juice, especially ways to preserve it from fermenting.” Both of these ancient writers do spend a good deal of time describing how to keep and store wine, but not to keep it from fermenting. Columella devotes Book 12 of *On Agriculture* to the preservation of various food items against spoilage: vines, vineyards and wine production are covered in several chapters. It is important to understand why these writers spend so much time explaining the processes used for drying fruits, storing grain, and how to store wine – the goal was to make sure there was food and drink until the next harvest. Columella writes extensively about the storage of wine, but nothing is said to indicate that the purpose is to keep the wine from fermenting. A close reading reveals that Columella’s real concern, reflecting that of the ancient world, was to keep the wine from **too much** fermentation — becoming vinegar. This is borne out by his comments in 12.20.1, “Furthermore, boiled-down must, though carefully made, is, like wine, apt to go sour.” Again, 12.20.8, “This, though it does not make the flavour of the wine last forever, yet at any rate generally preserves it until another vintage.”

There are numerous places where both Columella and Pliny indicate that their discussion concerns fermented wine:

On Agriculture:

The following is the way to make sweet wine...when it has ceased to ferment...[add crushed spices and strain it]. This wine will be pleasant to the taste and will keep in good state and is wholesome for the body. 12.27.1

The best after-wine is made as follows...[add water to grapeskins which have been pressed and let it soak overnight] when it has fermented... 12.40

(See also, 12.28.3; 32; 37; 38.2,3)

Natural History:

Wine has the property of heating the parts of the body inside when it is drunk and of cooling them when poured on them outside. 14.7.58

In the neighbourhood of the Alps they put it in wooden casks and close these round with tiles and in a cold winter also light fires to protect it from the effect of the cold.

It is seldom recorded, but it has been seen occasionally, that the vessels have burst in a frost, leaving the wine standing in frozen blocks-almost a miracle, since it is not the nature of wine to freeze: usually it is only numbed by cold. 14.27.132

⁴ *Full Life Study Bible*, p.1534, citing Columella, *On Agriculture* 12.29 and Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 14.11.83. *FLSB* refers to keeping the wine “oxygen free.” I will use “air” rather than “oxygen” to avoid any anachronism.

All of these texts indicate the presence of alcohol and fermentation, but the two from Pliny are particularly interesting: the warming sensation of alcohol on the inside when consumed and the cooling, evaporative nature of using it as a rub — both point to alcohol. Then the lower freezing point of alcohol which causes Pliny to marvel at how wine could ever freeze. Add to this his descriptions of those who abuse wine and promote drunkenness (offending his sense of Stoic ethics)⁵ and it becomes obvious that Pliny is not covering the basics in grape juice production. He is **not** concerned about trying to keep grape juice from becoming wine. His concern was to keep wine from spoiling into vinegar and becoming useless as a beverage.

To summarize this first point: there was simple grape juice in the ancient world. Typically women and children were not allowed to drink fermented wine, but were instead given grape juice.⁶ There was also an “after-wine” that was served to day laborers.⁷ The norm, however, was regular, fermented wine.

Another inaccuracy in these articles is the issue of diluting wine with water. Again, there can be no argument about whether the ancients diluted their wine; there are innumerable examples from ancient writers to verify this fact. The problem is one of emphasis and implication. The second *FLSB* article begins,

WINE: MIXED OR FULL STRENGTH? Historical data concerning the making and use of wine by the Jews and other nations in the Biblical world indicate that it was (a) often unfermented and (b) normally mixed with water.⁸

We are only given two options, neither of which is to drink alcoholic wine in any appreciable way. Stein does the same, “In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water, but one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind....there is a striking difference between the drinking of alcoholic beverages today and the drinking of wine in New Testament times.”⁹ We have already seen that the ancients did drink to excess and this would include Jews and Christians. A plethora of examples (including Paul’s injunction in Ephesians 5:18) could be gathered from ancient writers to show that intoxication was a

⁵ *National History* 14.28.137-142.

⁶ *National History* 14.14.89ff. Plato tells us this, “...up to the age of eighteen, children should not touch wine at all....After this, up to the age of thirty, one should drink wine in moderation....[after 40 he should drink more freely] as a medicine to aid the harshness of age. It dissipates sorrow and depression...” *Laws* II.666A-C.

⁷ Columella, *On Agriculture* 12.40. After the initial juice had been drained for the “real” wine, water was added to the smashed grapes, boiled, and strained. Even this “after-wine” would ferment, but was considerably less tasty.

⁸ *FLSB*, p.1586.

⁹ Stein, p.11.

concern and was not unusual in the ancient world. Many ancient writers deplored the banality of excessive drinking — it went against the decorum which Graeco-Roman philosophers valued.¹⁰

Further down the *FLSB* article says, “The wine of old was...unfermented or fermented stored wine diluted with water at a ratio as high as 20 to 1.” Again Stein uses the same citation from Homer’s *Odyssey*.¹¹ There are a few problems with this citation: first, the characters in Homer’s narrative begin by drinking the wine **unmixed**, then (apparently to make it last longer) they begin diluting it with increasingly greater volumes of water until they reach 20:1. Homer’s point in this narrative was that Maronean wine was so robust that it never lost its flavor! It could also be that by the time they were drinking at 20:1 they were so drunk that they could not taste/notice the dilution (cf. John 2:10). But, there is a second problem: this citation from Homer is like using *The RugRats* as a research tool for understanding toddlers. Homer was the *Star Trek* of the ancient world! Both Pliny and Plato refer to the “legendary” aspects of Homer’s wine.¹² Listen to Plato on Homer,

We may assume, then, that all the poets from Homer downwards have no grasp of reality but merely give us superficial representation of any subject they treat.¹³

Pliny does say that this Maronean wine is famous for “its strength and unconquerable body,” and can be diluted 8:1 without losing its “bouquet, and [it] improves with age.”¹⁴ It must, however, be remembered that Pliny is discussing an exceptional wine. He is amazed that it can withstand this kind of dilution. To speak of its “strength,” “body,” “bouquet,” and to say that it “improves with age” makes it obvious that this is fortified (and rather sweet) wine, perhaps with an enhanced alcoholic content. Stamps, Teachout and Stein are correct when they offer data to show that wine was diluted with water, but to suggest Homer’s 20:1 is ridiculous and to put forth Pliny’s 8:1 as normal would also be wrong. A 2:1 or 3:1 ratio was not unusual. But it must be remembered that the juice of grapes, under natural circumstances, will have an alcoholic content of 10-17%, thus even a 3:1 ratio would yield a drink of 3-5%, which is similar to an average American beer. The wine in the ancient world was most likely stronger (in flavor, not necessarily alcoholic content) than modern wines to withstand such a dilution. No modern wine could withstand dilution with three parts water. It would taste, well, watered down.

¹⁰ Added to Pliny (note 5) and Paul, Philo writes a treatise in which he warns against excess and lauds the virtue of sobriety, see *On Drunkenness* 1.1-2.

¹¹ *FLSB*, p.1586 citing *Odyssey* IX.208; Stein, p.9.

¹² *Natural History* 14.53.

¹³ *Republic* X.600D.

Anyone who thinks “normal” wine could withstand this kind of dilution should take the best grape juice on the market and dilute it with 2 parts water. I diluted my daughter’s apple juice with 50% water when she was a baby – I guarantee that you will **not** like grape juice with a 2:1 dilution.

So what does it mean about the wine of the ancient world that it can be diluted to such an extent and still be “good?” I have an explanation, but that will have to wait for “Wine in the Ancient World, Part II.”

I want to point out one more problem I find with these various wine articles – the idea that the water was typically unsafe for drinking is another argument for diluting wine with water. Stein comments on this,

In ancient times there were not many beverages that were safe to drink. The danger of drinking water alone raises another point. There were several ways in which the ancients could make water safe to drink. One method was boiling...The safest and easiest method of making the water safe to drink, however, was to mix it with wine.¹⁵

I have read this kind of statement many times, but have never seen an historical reference. The only reference offered by Stein is his personal experience in Greece.

I spend a week in Ecuador on a mission trip each summer with a local church. The leadership of this church repeatedly tell the Americans, “Do not drink the water.” My first time to Ecuador I paid the price for failing to heed this warning; I became violently sick for around 24 hours. Yet the locals drink it and do not get violently sick. People around the world drink dirty water everyday – they do not die – they just live with parasites. In all my reading of ancient writers I cannot remember a single reference to this issue (while I obviously have not read **all** ancient documents, I have read a good many documents of first and second century writers). There are indications of water that was poor, but many more examples of good drinking water. Well water was common, the collection of rain water for drinking was common – the Bible has numerous examples of people drinking water. In the midst of this lengthy discourse on wine Pliny admits, “...more labour is spent [on wine] – as if nature had not given us the most healthy of beverages to drink, water, which all other animals make use of...”¹⁶ I do not recall Pliny or Columella ever saying anything about using wine to purify water. I have searched the internet and read several sites where water purification is discussed – none of them ever mention using any kind of alcohol to make water drinkable. Quite frankly, I do not believe this piece of information and I think a scholar should give some documentation to

¹⁴ *Natural History* 14.54.

¹⁵ Stein, p.10.

support such a statement. Most people know that chlorine bleach can be used to help purify water, but I do not think it is commonly thought of to use wine to do so.

Miles Stair is a survivalist living in Oregon [<http://www.endtimesreport.com/>]. You might not agree with his views, but he knows more than I will ever know about how to stay alive during a natural disaster – this includes how to get drinkable water, how to purify water, and how to safely store water for later consumption. In an exchange of e-mails he confirmed what I had thought all along:

“I can find no official source for sterilizing water with wine - no reference at all that would even hint at the efficacy of such a combination.” Miles

The closest thing I can find to this idea that wine can make bacteria-laden water safe to drink are studies clearly indicating that the alcohol and the acid in wine does kill bacteria:

<http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/9605/07/wine.digestion/> (1996)

<http://www.decanter.com/news/46268.html> (2002)

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/videos/2005-12-04/> (2005)

The most recent links above are about the work of Mark Daeschel. Dr. Daeschel is a professor of food microbiology at Oregon State University. I have e-mailed Dr. Daeschel asking for some expert explanation on this topic. I will report his response in “Wine in the Ancient World, Part II.”

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