

# **Wine in the Ancient World**

## **Part 2**

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*Wine in the Ancient World*, Part I has been accessed over 10,000 times since 2009. There are many preachers/writers who believe this is a sign of growing acceptance of alcohol among evangelical Christians, and moral weakness. Although I might agree that evangelicals are slipping in their values, that is not the focus of this paper.

What motivates me is to present the historical data accurately. Anyone who has read my writings knows that I am disappointed with how many things I was taught as a young Christian in a Protestant/Free Church environment that were mostly opinions and dogma, but NOT a simple and accurate presentation of the New Testament data. [I typically refrain from using the term “facts,” preferring the use of “data.” The word “fact” comes with the implication that the presenter is obviously correct, yet even “facts” must oftentimes be interpreted.

As a young man I had been presented with a tract arguing that the wine in the Bible was non-alcoholic. For several years I believed and adhered to total abstinence of alcohol. The more I studied the biblical text the less I could be persuaded of this position, after all, if Paul tells believers *not to get drunk* they obviously had access to alcoholic beverages.

I am going to interact with a couple authors/articles in this paper, but mostly I am going to present my opinions and interpretations of the data. Some of these articles represent what I heard as a young man. One such argument is that wine in the New Testament was of a weaker alcoholic content and was diluted with water so that it was virtually not alcoholic. Another author claims that in the first century both fermented wine and non-fermented grape juice were available. This author claims that when the scriptures speak positively about “wine” it is referring to nonalcoholic grape juice; negative references are speaking about fermented wine. This second work actually cites my paper as a source for his evidence that some “wine” was indeed only grape juice. He says that some writers have claimed it was impossible to keep wine from fermenting, thus simple grape juice did not exist. I have not come across this view, but I do not doubt that some hold this position.

Let me make it clear from the start that I hold to the stance clearly given by the New Testament: Christians should abstain from being intoxicated, *Ephesians* 5:18. When I offer my arguments my intention is NOT to be pro-alcohol. Abstinence

from alcohol is certainly a good option, but I am against the stance that the New Testament teaches abstinence. In my opinion this is just not true.

At the end of Part I some questions remained for me:

1. How can any wine be diluted with water and continue to taste good?
2. Was there a way to have a concentrated wine with a higher alcoholic content that could withstand dilution, keep good flavor and yet contain enough alcohol to allow for fairly easy intoxication?

I want to offer my thoughts on these questions. I also want to offer some arguments against some of the positions given by others to support abstinence. Perhaps more importantly, I want to offer pastoral thoughts about matters of conscience and how I believe Christians should approach alcohol. These will be my personal opinions and interpretations of the data (from historical documents and from communications with professional winemakers). I will try to make a clear distinction between my opinions and when I am using data agreed upon by other scholars.

As I point out in Part 1, the evidence from ancient writers does indicate that nonalcoholic “wine” was commonly served mainly to women, children and slaves. This would be a “second” wine produced by boiling the skins and pulp. It might also be mixed with “must,” the by-product of regular wine used to sweeten and retard fermentation. Fermented wine was commonly diluted with water, to stretch the seasonal production and make it last longer. Dilution with water also served to lower the alcoholic volume and the risk of quick intoxication. This allowed men to drink/enjoy more beverage before becoming intoxicated.

## **SECTIONS PLANNED FOR PART 2**

I. Possibility of “spiking” wine with sweetener, like “must” to keep it from overfermentation [this is not addressed yet – 2023-Feb-04].

II. Emotional arguments used to promote abstinence for Christians

Over the years I have heard and read many arguments advocating for total abstinence that I want to address. I am sure that I will not deal with every argument, but these are the ones I have heard the most.

Some emotional arguments contain truthfulness, but in the end are not a solid method for logical debate. Some might argue that “logic” is a form of “pagan

philosophy,” but it is quite difficult (if not impossible) to gain truth from the biblical text without using logic.

Let me make it clear before I present my thoughts that I hold to the stance given by the New Testament. Christians are urged to abstain from intoxication. Paul is clear about this in *Ephesians* 5:18. When I offer my arguments I am NOT arguing FOR the consumption of alcohol. Abstinence from alcohol is certainly a good option, but the New Testament does not demand abstinence.

Emotional arguments go something like this:

***Consuming alcohol is wrong (or sinful) because being drunk leads to DUI and traffic deaths.***

Probably anyone more than 25 years old knows of someone who was killed in a car accident that included alcohol. Everyone would agree that mixing of alcohol and driving is not a good idea and that people should not die because of this mixture. But why only take away the alcohol?

Why not use the same logic to say “Driving a motor vehicle is wrong (or sinful)?” Being *drunk* leads to poor decision-making, accidents and death.

No doubt about this. It is impossible to argue against this statement, but if this is our logic we should abstain from driving automobiles and call it “sin.”

- many drivers get impatient in congested traffic and drive recklessly
- teenagers (especially boys) like to drive fast and get into accidents.

Over 33,000 people died in car accidents in 2012. While 30% of these accidents involved alcohol, over 20,000 deaths did not involve alcohol. Yet we continue to drive automobiles and allow our teenagers to drive.

***Alcoholism has torn so many families apart.***

Yes, but using the same logic we would need to call all Christians, even married ones, to abstain from sex and live in celibacy. Some men seem to have very little control of their sex drive and their need to have multiple women - adultery has torn many families apart.

There were Gnostic sects that taught sexual abstinence. The Shakers, an 18th century Protestant, charismatic sect also taught sexual abstinence even for married couples.

If we interviewed divorced women and asked what led to their divorce we would ultimately come to the conclusion that selfishness is what threatens any marriage.

It could be the man is a workaholic or the woman is a spendaholic, but we would not teach abstinence from work or from shopping.

***Drinking alcohol is bad for the body, thus the Temple.***

Using this logic, Christians should abstain from eating fast food. McDonald's would have to be labeled "sin."

This emotional argument has lost ground in the last 2-3 decades as the obesity rates have increased and medical science has shown moderate drinking of alcohol (especially red wine) to be good for the cardiovascular system.

***Jesus would not have turned water into alcoholic wine and put pregnant women/fetuses at risk or tempted those who might have propensity to be alcoholics.***

As was mentioned in *Wine Part 1*, women and children were typically not allowed to drink alcoholic wine and were given a grape juice drink.

Yes, the wine would have tempted some who struggled with alcoholism, but using this logic would demand that Jesus NOT multiply fish and bread – He would have tempted some with gluttony.

***Alcoholism has a genetic marker which makes certain people more likely to become addicted.***

For me this is the best emotional argument for total abstinence. But most people with a disposition to excess will "sin" in many other areas: work, food, sex, TV, watching sports, video games, golf, gambling etc. It remains dangerous for those who have a genetic predisposition to compulsive behavior, but we do not have biblical license to demand abstinence from ALL of these activities. This logic would demand abstinence of virtually everything until we can be certain that a person does not have any inclination to being compulsive. We would all have to become monks to live up to this logic.

***Christian leaders are urged to abstain thus the BEST example is abstinence.***

This is not so much an emotional argument, as it is very poor exegesis of the NT text. A reader sent an extensive article to me written by John McArthur. Like many Christian leaders, McArthur is committed to his particular strain of doctrine and therefore has great difficulty reading/interpreting the NT text when it appears to go against his position. This is difficult for all of us; I include myself.

I lost the link and have not been able to find the article again, but this page does have many comments that are the same as the article I used:

<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-380/christians-and-alcohol>.

There are some points that I agree with, but when he gets to specifics I tend to find it difficult to take him seriously. In the section where he is saying that rulers were to stay away from alcohol MacArthur cites the Levites from the Old Testament:

8 Then the Lord said to Aaron, 9 “You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the tent of meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, 10 so that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, 11 and so you can teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses.” *Leviticus* 10:8-11

It is quite important to note that the Lord did not command the sons of Aaron to totally abstain from wine; He told them “not to drink wine or other fermented drink *when you go into the tent of meeting*.” Basically, don’t come into the Tabernacle/Temple of God if you have been drinking.

MacArthur moves from this text to the requirements for bishops/deacons in the Pastoral epistles and cites from *1 Timothy* 3, but he does not use quotation marks. He is using his own words, but I am citing him with quotation marks:

“...temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not devoted to wine...” then he repeats “not devoted to wine.”

There are some translations that say this: New KJV, KJV and a few other lesser known versions. MOST versions use “not addicted” [Amp], “not a drunkard” [ESV, RSV], “not given to drunkenness” [NIV].

MacArthur is pushing a very conservative reading of the text. He goes on to cite the authors I argue against in Part 1, making it seem like the wine in the New Testament was 2-4% alcohol. But he doesn’t stop there:

The wine, then, of biblical times could well have been unintoxicating...because its fermentation had been diluted so much in the mixture with water. Taking a very conservative estimate, for example, if water is three-to-one mixed with wine, the level of alcohol would be between 2.25 and 2.75 percent...Four to one would take you down to 1.8 to 2.2, and the only way you could possibly get drunk would be just to consume volumes of it.

If he is correct, why would Paul be concerned at all with his leaders drinking wine? The average man has to drink 4-5 (with alcohol content 4.5-5%) beers to be intoxicated; that is 48-60oz of beer, almost a half a gallon. By MacArthur's numbers, diluting the wine with three parts water (which was common) the average man would have to drink close to a gallon of wine to get drunk. It would take almost two gallons if diluted with four parts water. Most people just cannot drink that much liquid of any kind fast enough to get drunk.

MacArthur continues, "And it's also crystal-clear on the issue of people in leadership, staying away from that because they have responsibility before God not only to render right judgments and to teach truth accurately, but to set a pure example."

He cites the texts fairly accurately, but none of the texts call for total abstinence. Yet he gives the summary above, "...it's crystal-clear...people in leadership [speaking of church leadership], staying away from that [alcohol] because they have responsibility...to teach accurately..."

This usage of the biblical text, in my opinion, is NOT responsible. The text IS crystal-clear:

*1 Timothy 3:*

*Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness... 8 In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine...*

The text does NOT say complete abstinence.

*Titus 1* does NOT say complete abstinence.

*Leviticus 10* does NOT say complete abstinence – only while ministering in the Tabernacle/Temple.

There would be a point for debate if these passages had some disagreement, but there is clarity – do not operate in ministry while/immediately after consuming alcohol and avoid drunkenness. The Pastoral texts do not even say "he must NEVER be drunk," thus one could argue that a one time failing would not disqualify such a leader. THIS is the position the Church has always held. I realize that Protestants are not keen on looking to the Catholic Church for guidance, but do you really think Catholic priests and monks would drink ANY alcohol if the text clearly forbade it? Not only the Catholic Church, but the Orthodox Church and the Anglicans (Episcopalians) - all consume alcohol. It is very difficult for me to

take writers like MacArthur seriously when they cannot represent clear biblical text properly. At least admit what the text says and then give your rationale, but this kind of biblical exegesis is sad and lacking in credibility.

Emotional arguments are fine, but if you are a pastor, teacher or leader you must be clear that the biblical text does not support your argument. I live by various spiritual disciplines that I think are valid, have virtue and help me in my spiritual life. But these disciplines, while possibly encouraged, are not commanded in the New Testament. I cannot demand them of others. Paul speaks very clearly about this (*1 Corinthians* 8 and 10; *Romans* 14) when he is discussing eating meat offered to idols. We have lost the emotional intensity of this issue 2,000 years later. This was ground zero in the conflict of the primitive church when Gentiles started coming to faith in Jesus the Messiah. I can only offer a brief summary here. I have sections on the website where I deal with this history: Conversion of Paul, the Jerusalem Council, and James, brother of Jesus.

In *Acts* 14 we read that the church in Antioch started reaching Gentiles. In *Acts* 15:1 we read that some Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem and were teaching that the Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul strongly disagreed with these Jews which led to the Jerusalem Council where it was decided that the Gentiles did not have to live under the Law, but were expected to abide by some Jewish food laws (15:20). It appears from Paul's letters that he never agreed with the ruling in Jerusalem.

In *Galatians* Paul clearly says that Gentiles should NOT be circumcised, are not obligated to follow the Law. In *1 Corinthians* 8 he says that whether you eat meat offered to idols or not does not affect your stance with God, v8. He is, however, concerned that we not put a stumblingblock in front of a weaker brother, but he then says in *1 Cor* 10:25 that we can eat "anything" sold in the meat market and if a brother feeds you just eat whatever is put in front of you without question, v27. Then in *Romans* 14 Paul says not to judge one another by what you eat OR drink, just do not be a stumblingblock. The kingdom is not about what we eat or drink (v.17), just do not cause someone else to "fall." (v21)

This issue of Paul's Gentile converts not following the Jewish food laws was a huge problem in the primitive church. Some of these Jewish legal zealots followed Paul around, persecuted him and infected his congregations. This was a serious



issue. Yet Paul never backed down. In *Romans* he links drinking wine with eating meal offered to idols. Gentiles were not known to dilute their wine as much as Jews; maybe that was part of why Paul included it.

I have been in fellowship with many different parts of the body of Christ: evangelical-conservatives, protestant liberals, fundamentalists, Catholics, Anglicans...and several flavors of charismatics. I have never heard anyone speak in judgment against other Christians for not consuming alcohol, but I have heard plenty of judgment from those who abstain speaking against those who drink. There is not a single clear command in the New Testament for total abstinence from alcohol, but in *Romans* 14 we are commanded three times not to judge another Christian for abstaining or for consuming alcohol or eating certain kinds of meat.

We are encouraged to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification,” *Rom* 14:19. We are commanded “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery [excessive indulgence in sensuality].” *Eph* 5:18 We are also commanded “whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God,” *Rom* 14:22.

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” *Romans* 14:17

Sources I am using as I continue to work on this topic:

Amir Sarig 2004-2007 – Recanati winery, assistant winemaker.

2007-present – Tabor winery, winemaker.

In addition, Owner of a 15 Ha vineyard and boutique winery (Sarig winery) Education: BSc – Biotechnology. Tel-Hai college, Israel; MS – Oenology. University of Adelaide, Australia. [http://www.twc.co.il/en/Content\\_meeting.aspx?id=51](http://www.twc.co.il/en/Content_meeting.aspx?id=51)

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