

## WINE IN BIBLICAL TIMES

### 1. What do the words mean?

- A. “Yayin/Oinos” - can mean “fermented/unfermented” wine; can mean “intoxicating/nonintoxicating” wine
  - 1) Prov. 23:29ff – must be “fermented” – cannot be grape juice
  - 2) Isaiah 16:10 – cannot be “fermented” – must mean grape juice
  - 3) Pliny the Elder says, “good wine” was one destitute of spirits – (Lib. IV CB)
  - 4) Horace wrote of wine that was non-intoxicating in his Odes (I. 18)
  - 5) Plutarch, in Moralia, wrote of wine that neither affected the brain nor passions and remarked that he liked wine that was non-intoxicating.
  - 6) Barnes, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, states, “the common wine of Judea was the pure juice of the grape without any mixture of alcohol and was harmless.”
  - 7) Aristotle wrote of wine as both fermented and unfermented (Meteorological 384a 4-5 /388 b 9-13).
  - 8) Athenaeas wrote of unfermented wine taken from the fields (Banquet 1, 54 / 2, 24 / 6, 89).
  - 9) The Septuagint (an intertestamental Greek translation of the Old Testament) translates the Hebrew word “tirosh” (new wine) as “oinos” 33 times. Obviously, they believed oinos could be unfermented.
  - 10) The word “yayin” (O.T. wine) can refer to newly pressed (unfermented) wine (Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971, vol. 16, p. 538).
  - 11) Josephus wrote that the “fruit of the vine” was unfermented juice.
  - 12) The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1901 (vol. 5, p. 165) states that Jesus would have used the unfermented wine of the Seder Service to institute the Lord’s Supper.
- B. “Tirosh/Gleukos” – means “new wine” – Acts 2:13 (not fully aged)
- C. “Shakar” – means “strong drink” – same word as “drunk” – I Sam. 1:14-15
  - 1) 1901 Jewish Encyclopedia – shakar means “unmixed wines”
  - 2) T.W.O.T. – “Wine was the most intoxicating drink known in ancient times. All the wine was light wine, i.e. not fortified with extra alcohol. Concentrated alcohol was only known in the Middle Ages when the Arabs invented distillation (“alcohol” is an Arabic word) so what is now called liquor or strong drink (i.e. whiskey, gin, etc.) and the 20% fortified wines were unknown in Bible times.” (vol. 1, p. 865)
  - 3) Dr. Ed Dobson states unequivocally, “drinking beverages with strong alcoholic content was prohibited. In fact, even the Greeks thought people who did that were barbaric . . . the Bible and culture condemn unmixed drinks and strong drink.”
  - 4) McNeil – everything we have today is strong drink by these standards.

### 2. How was wine stored?

- A. Boiled until thickened – non-intoxicating – “The wine Jesus and most other Jews drank was ‘oinos’, a drink made by boiling or evaporating fresh grape juice down to a heavy syrup or paste in order to prevent spoilage and simplify storage. To make a beverage, water would be added as needed to a small quantity of the syrup. That mixture was nonalcoholic, and even when allowed to ferment, it was

not intoxicating because it was mostly water.” (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Matthew 8-15, p. 261-262)

- 1) The Talmud, a codification of Jewish law, states that the Jews regularly used boiled wine (Erubin 29a).
  - 2) Pliny the Elder, in his Natural Histories, wrote of wine that had the consistency of honey and could last ten years.
  - 3) Dr. Caspar Neumann (a chemistry professor) said, “It is observable that when sweet juices are boiled down to a thick consistency, they not only do not ferment in that state, but are not easily brought into fermentation when diluted with water...” (Nott, London ed., p. 81).
- B. Liquid stored in jars/skins – fermented (mixed with water) – Professor Robert Stein explains that wine was stored in large jars called “amphorae”. The wine was taken from these jars and poured into large bowls called “kraters”, where it was mixed with water. Wine was never served directly from the “amphorae” without first being mixed with water. The ratio could be as high as 20 parts water to one part wine. (Christianity Today, June, 1975, pp. 9-11)

“To begin with, the wine was mixed with water and indeed . . . the benediction (blessing) should not be pronounced ‘til the water had been added to the wine.” (The Life & Times of Jesus Christ the Messiah, II, p. 208, Alfred Edersheim)

Jews (Jesus) **always** diluted their wine with water, usually to the proportion of three parts water to one part wine.” (The Bible Expository Commentary, vol. 1, p. 292, Warren Wiersbe)

In the 1901 Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 12, p. 533 it states that “yayin” (wine) was always diluted with water.

B.C. Homer, in his Odyssey, advocates a 20-parts water to one-part wine ratio.

Pliny, in his Natural Histories, advocates an 8:1 ratio.

The Jewish Talmud states that if wine is not mixed in at least a 3:1 ratio it is no longer wine.

## **Conclusion**

“The wine that was consumed in biblical times was not what we know as wine today. It was more of a concentrated grape juice with its intoxicating properties basically removed. You cannot defend wine-drinking today on the basis of wine-drinking in Bible times because the two are totally different.” (Living in the Spirit, p. 31, John MacArthur)

A brochure from the American Educational Materials, Anaheim, California, gives a running history of alcohol up until 1985. It comments on the alcohol at the time of Jesus Christ as being “ancient fermenting of fruit juice, man’s oldest tranquilizer, very low alcohol content”.

“It (wine) was invariably fermented (no refrigeration), it was not always inebriating and in most instances was but slightly alcoholic.” (Unger Bible Dictionary, p. 1168)

“The strength of natural wines is limited by two factors. The percentage of alcohol will be half of the percentage of the sugar in the juice. And if the alcoholic content is much above 10-11%, the yeast cells are killed and fermentation ceases. Probably ancient wines were 7-10%.” (T.W.O.T., p. 376)

Therefore, much of the wine was boiled, removing its alcoholic content. Jewish people mixed their fermented wines at least 3:1 with water. If the wine had a 7-10% alcoholic content, mixing it would reduce the alcoholic content to between 1.75% and 2.50%. In our culture, a drink has to exceed 3.2% to even be considered “alcoholic”. In Jesus’ day, one would have to drink all day in order to become drunk. This explains the comment of Paul to churches that their pastors “not be given to much wine”. (I Timothy 3:3)

The process of distillation was not invented until after 1000 AD, so ancient wines could not have a high alcoholic content (Encyclopedia Britannica).

You simply cannot defend social drinking on the idea that Jesus drank fermented wine because much of the wine of the day was unfermented and the fermented wine of the day would have been mixed with water and thus sub-alcoholic.

<http://www.fbcgrovecity.org/pdf/Wine%20in%20Bible%20Times.pdf>