

The Meaning of “Wine” in the Bible

By Kyle Pope

Introduction. Communication is one of the greatest challenges to human relationships. When one person uses a word or phrase in one way, but another person has a different concept of that same term it leads to confusion.

- **“Cut the Onions!”** A member of the church where I preach once told me that his father once ordered some food in a restaurant where the waitress didn’t speak English very well. When he ordered he told her “cut the onions!”—meaning *don’t put any onions in the dish*. She misunderstood and brought him a plate of finely chopped onions. In that example the same words produced dramatically different results.

One of the first things that is done in a formal debate is to set definitions of terms. Otherwise one side may be arguing based on a certain definition while another is using a different definition of a word.

In Scripture, there are many examples where we must clarify (or correct) definitions that man has placed on words that were never attached to those words.

- **Baptism** is never used in Scripture of sprinkling or pouring, but always of full immersion.
- **Church** is never used in Scripture of a building, but always of the people in fellowship with God in Christ.
- **Fellowship** is never used in Scripture to refer to a common meal, but “fellowship in the Gospel” always refers to mutual participation in spiritual matters.

In a similar way, this afternoon I would like for us to talk about a word used in Scripture that is equally subject to misunderstanding if we try to apply modern conceptions of it to each instance where we encounter it in Scripture—the word **“wine.”** *What do you think of when you hear that word?*

- **A glass of wine** someone might drink with dinner?
- **Bottles of fine wine** imported from exotic locations?
- The liquor that is purchased at a **liquor store**?

I. Alcoholic Wines.

A. There were alcoholic wines in the Bible. There is no question that drinks which were called “wine” were consumed in Bible times that were very similar to this conception of “wine” which we have today.

1. **Noah.** He planted a vineyard and became drunk and uncovered himself (Gen. 9:20-21).
2. **Lot.** After leaving Sodom and Gomorrah, his daughters made him drunk so they could conceive by him (Gen. 19:32-33).
3. **Uriah.** David made Uriah drunk with wine in the hope of concealing his own adultery (2 Sam. 11:13).
4. **Descriptions of drunkenness.** In addition to this, there are many descriptions of the state of intoxication (or drunkenness). Psa. 107:27 and Job 12:25 speak of

staggering “like a drunken man.” Jeremiah 23:9 speaks of shaking like a “drunken man.” Even the effects of sickness from drunkenness are described with sickness and “vomit” (Isa. 19:14; Jer. 25:27).

B. Even these were different from modern wines. There was, however, a difference between even these types of alcoholic wines and modern wines. Many modern wines are “**fortified**”—i.e. they have added sugars, yeast, and in some cases distilled alcohols added to increase the alcohol content. Distillation was not known in ancient times, and most yeasts are killed when an alcohol level reaches **12%**. By contrast modern distilled alcohols can contain as much as **95%** alcohol. A website known as *The Alcohol Content Database* offers some of the following examples: (Taken from <http://www.alcoholcontents.com/wine/>)

Wine Coolers	4-7%
Table Wine general	8-14%
White, dry	11.0
White, sparkling	12.0
White, sweet	12.4
Cabernet, Pinot Noir	11-14%
Dessert Wine	14-20%
Zinfandels	17-22%
Vermouth	17-22%
Port Wine	20%

II. A Different Type of Wine Described in the Bible.

A. There was a different type of drink the Bible also calls “wine.” There is a very different way that Biblical writers use words that refer to “wine” that is much different from that to which we are accustomed.

- 1. Juice in the grape is called “wine.”** Isaiah 65:8 declares, “the new wine (*tirosh*) is in the cluster.” Deuteronomy 32:14 calls “wine (*chemer*)” the “blood of the grape.” Numbers 6:3 forbids the Nazirite from drinking “grape juice” Judges 13:7 summarizes this restriction to say that the Nazirite was to “drink no wine (*yayin*).”
- 2. Juice fresh from the grape is called “wine.”** Genesis 40:11 records the dream of the cup-bearer as he tells Joseph about hand-squeezing grapes into Pharaoh’s cup. When the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, described this he used the word *gleukos* (the same word translated “new wine” in Acts 2:13), claiming that the cup-bearer “strained the wine” into the cup (*Antiquities* 2.5.2).
- 3. Juice in the press is called “wine.”** It is called “wine (*tirosh*)” while it was being trod with the feet (Micah 6:15), and when it comes fresh from the “presses” (Prov. 3:10), but it is also called by the more generic term as it describes treading out

“wine (*yayin*) in the presses” (Isa. 16:10). Jeremiah 48:33 speaks of “wine (*yayin*)” failing “from the winepresses.”

B. Is this a figure of speech? Some might argue that this is using a figure of speech.

There is a figure of speech scholars call *metonymy of effect* by which “the *effect* is put for the *cause* producing it” (Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 560-67).

1. A great example of this is found in Genesis 25:23. When Rebecca is pregnant with Jacob and Esau she is told “two nations are in your womb.” She didn’t literally have *nations* in her womb, but she had the children from which these nations would descend.
2. Metonymy, however, depends on a clear distinction. The problem with this as it relates to “wine” is that biblical language doesn’t make as precise a distinction as we do between *the thing produced* and *the things from which it is produced*. In other words, words for “wine” in the Bible are applied to the juice from the grape at all stages.

C. Familiar examples. This may be troubling to us if we want to see things in “black and white” terms, but the reality is that we see examples of this all the time in modern times. Compare this to some examples with which we are familiar:

- “**I’m going to get Gas**” might refer to diesel or gasoline. Leaded or unleaded. Premium, high octane or no ethanol. In the past it could have meant that you were filling your tractor with propane.
- “**Get me a coke, please**”—or in some areas of the country “**Get me a pop, please.**” That once would have meant a Coca Cola soft drink. Now it could mean Coke, Pepsi, Sprite, 7-Up, Dr. Pepper, caffeine free, sugar free, vanilla, cherry, etc.

The point is, when a word is used to describe things that are dramatically different, we can misunderstand something if we apply a meaning to it that is not necessarily that narrow.

III. Contrasting Descriptions.

A. Contrasting descriptions of “wine” in the Bible. Although the Bible uses words for drinks it calls “wine” there are some dramatically different ways these drinks are described. Consider a few contrasting passages:

1. **New Wine** (*tirosh*) “cheers both God and men” (Judges 9:13), but **wine** (*yayin*) “is a mocker” (Prov. 20:1). God speaks of those who drink “the wine of the condemned in the house of their god” (Amos 2:8).
2. **New Wine** (*tirosh*) was considered a blessing from God (Deut. 7:13; 11:14; 33:28) and taken away as punishment (Deut. 28:51; Isa. 24:7; 62:8), but man is warned not to “look upon” the more generic type of **wine** (*yayin*)—going on to picture what likely describes the process of alcoholic fermentation—“when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright” (Prov 23:31, KJV).
3. **Wine is used as a figure of punishment.** Some “eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence” (Prov. 4:17). The wicked shall “drink the wine of

the wrath of God” (Rev. 14:10), and “the wine of the fierceness of His wrath” (Rev. 16:19).

4. **Paul tells Timothy** to drink “a little wine (*oinos*) for your stomach’s sake” (1 Tim. 5:23), but the **wise man warns** “it is not for kings to drink wine” (Prov. 31:4).
5. **Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego** petitioned to be able to drink a different wine than the type of wine the king drank (Dan. 1:5, 8). This could have been an issue of Mosaic cleanliness, but it could also have concerned the nature of the drink itself.
6. Jesus gave the people 120-180 gallons of “water that was turned to wine” (John 2:1-10), and yet he taught that “drunkenness” can weigh down one’s heart causing the word to be choked within (Luke 21:34). His disciples taught that men must turn away from “drunkenness, revelries” and “drinking parties” (1 Pet. 4:3; cf. Rom. 13:13), and that “drunkenness” and “revelries” can prevent one from inheriting the kingdom of heaven (Gal. 5:21).

B. Can this be talking about the exact same substance? Is this only a matter of degree, or amount? Is it not rather talking about a substance of a different nature, a different preparation, and a different manner of consumption?

Conclusion. From this brief survey of biblical references to “**wine**” we have seen that the Holy Spirit used various terms to describe drinks that may be either praised as a blessing from God or condemned as something to be avoided. This makes it clear that biblical writers used such terms much more broadly than we use the term “**wine**” today.

- **The term “cider” in more recent times.** While this may seem odd to us in an age of detailed product labeling, FDA regulation, and mass production of food and drink products, this is actually quite common in agricultural cultures. When my wife’s grandfather was still alive he told me that as a child the term “cider” was used this way. It could refer to simple “apple juice” or unfiltered juice (we now call “apple cider”), the filtered juice (we now call “apple juice”), even “apple cider” vinegar produced from apples, but it was also used of fermented alcoholic juice (we would now call “hard cider”).
- **This was true of Bible wine.** The biblical record (along with other ancient literature) will use words often translated “wine” in reference to products of the grape at various stages.

In our next lecture we will consider biblical and extra-biblical evidence that demonstrates that ancient people did in fact have the ability and practice various methods to preserve and prepare various types of drinks made from grapes which were both alcoholic and non-alcoholic.