

“Wine” in the Bible

by Bill Crews

How clever is the father of lies (Jn. 8:44). How cunning are his ways. How deceptive is his work. Satan has been so successful in beguiling the human race that not a few people are lulled by the notion that his very existence is a myth. He doesn't really care whether you are aware or unaware of his existence as long as you will embrace his wares. And one of the devil's wares is such reasoning as the following:

1. **“Wine”** is universally an intoxicating beverage, the fermented juice of the grape. Some are more potent than others, but all have noticeable alcoholic content. The stronger the “wine,” the better the “wine.” (People automatically conclude that any “wine” called better in the Bible was that because it was more potent in alcoholic content.)
2. The Bible uses the word “*wine*” quite freely; therefore, what “wine” means today it must mean in the Bible.
3. From what the Bible says about “*wine*” it follows that people freely made and consumed an alcoholic beverage, an intoxicating beverage with divine approval. Such is to be regarded as a blessing from God. Even Jesus, the Son of God, made and drank such “*wine*” in John 2.
4. Since the Bible condemns drunkenness, it is excessive drinking only that is wrong and condemned and not moderate consumption of any alcohol beverage.

What a parcel of **lies** is embodied in these statements. It is true that the word “*wine*” is today universally regarded as the fermented juice of the grape and therefore an alcoholic beverage (why, who would think of Welch's Grape Juice as “*wine*”?). “Bottle of wine,” “table wine,” “cooking wine,” “wine list,” “wine cellar,” “wine taster,” “wine connoisseur,” “wine-bibber,” “wino” all bear this out. The great fallacy comes of assuming that the word “*wine*” in the Scriptures has the same meaning as the word “*wine*” today. Here are some points not generally known today:

1. Most Hebrew and Greek words rendered “*wine*” in the Bible were used to refer to the juice of the grape in whatever state it may have been in — from the grapes on the vine to the strongest result of natural fermentation.
2. The “*wine*” of the Bible appears sometimes with condemnation and warning, and its character is bad. But in other places it appears with approval and blessing, and its character is good. It is the context that must determine the character of the “*wine*.”
3. The **fortified** “wines” of today were unknown in the historical setting of the Bible. The strong “*wines*” of the Bible, so obviously condemned (e.g., Prov. 23:29-35), would be considered mild by today's standards.
4. The people who lived when the books of the Bible were being written (from about 1450 B.C. to the close of the first century A.D.) did indeed (this is sometimes in ignorance disputed) know how to preserve the juice of grapes in an unfermented state — by boiling (removes water and also any alcohol that may be present and thickens and sweetens), by sealing and cooling (keeps away from oxygen), by filtering or by settling and separating (removes the gluten essential to fermentation) and by fumigation (stops any fermentation that has begun). Perhaps the boiling was the easiest and most effective — it would result in a sweet, thick syrup, delicious in taste and pleasant in smell, to which water was added when consumed. Water was even added to fermented wines, up to 75%, before they were consumed in many cases.
5. The unfermented, sweet “*wine*,” was commonly preferred for its superior taste, its pleasing odor and its nourishing qualities. Where did modern readers get the idea that “the best” was surely the most “potent” in alcoholic content?
6. The sweeter the grapes, the slower the process of fermentation. In warmer climates the grapes grow sweeter; the climate of Palestine is very warm. Temperatures in excess of 100 degrees are not uncommon. The juice that flows from the presses before the grapes are trod upon or pressed is the most desired and sweetest. Fermentation of grape juice calls for a temperature of between 45 and 75 degrees. It can be preserved without fermentation at cooler temperatures (below 45 degrees) for some time. At higher temperatures (above 75 degrees) the grape juice has a tendency to become acetous, resulting in a sour, vinegar-like liquid.

Now what was that about Jesus drinking? and Paul recommending that Timothy drink? Yes, Satan is very clever.

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