

The Christian and the Use of Alcohol #2

How wine was used in the ancient Mediterranean world

Intro: In our first lesson we looked at the Biblical texts in showing how the produce of the vineyard was made and preserved in the ancient world.

In this lesson, we continue to look at the historical-cultural background to see how wine was used in the Mediterranean world.

Most people are not aware that the ancient people, being aware of the potency of natural wine, commonly diluted the wine's potency by mixing water with it.

Wine use in the Greco-Roman world

We should be especially interested in the Greco-Roman culture since it provides the background of the NT texts on wine. Much of the NT was written to people who were influenced by the customs and practices of the ancient Greeks.

At the British Museum you can see all kinds of Greek pottery that show how the Greeks served the wine they produced.

Amphorae with small necks were used to store the wine.

The wine was served in a drinking cup (kylix). But the wine was not poured from the amphorae directly to the cup, but to the krater!

Kraters were large mouth bowls that were used to pour the wine in and to which water was added to lighten it and reduce its inebriating potency.

The president would determine the mix; and thus would begin the Greek "symposium".

By looking at the literature over a long period of time one can see frequent references to the mixing of water with the wine to produce the beverage served to guests. Robert Stein published in Christianity Today in 1975 a well-researched article called "Wine drinking in NT Times". In it he cites numerous literary references as to how wine was served in the Greco-Roman world.

"The ratio of water to wine varied. Homer (Odyssey IX, 208f.)

mentions a ratio of 20 to 1, twenty parts water to one part wine.

Pliny (Natural History XIV, vi, 54) mentions a ratio of eight parts water to one part wine.

In one ancient work, Athenaeus's "The Learned Banquet", written around A.D. 200, we find in Book Ten a collection of statements from earlier writers about drinking practices.

A quotation from a play by Aristophanes reads: "'Here, drink this also, mingled three and two.' DEMUS. 'Zeus! But it's sweet and bears the three parts will!'"

The poet Eunos, who lived in the fifth century B.C., is also quoted: The best measure of wine is neither much nor very little; For 'tis the cause of either grief or madness. It pleases

the wine to be the fourth, mixed with three nymphs. Here is the ration of water to wine is 3 to 1.

Others mentioned are:

3 to 1 – Hesiod

4 to 1 – Alexis

2 to 1 – Diocles

3 to 1 – Ion

5 to 1 – Nichocharēs

2 to 1 – Anacreon

Sometimes the ratio goes down to 1 to 1 (and even lower), but it should be noted that such a mixture is referred to as "strong wine."

The mixing of wine was considered necessary to prevent the bad consequences of drinking strong drinks.

Drinking wine unmixed, on the other hand, was looked upon as a "Scythian" or barbarian custom.

Athenaeus in this work quotes Mnesitheus of Athens: The god has revealed wine to mortals, to be the greatest blessing for those who use it aright, but for those who use it without measure, the reverse. For it gives food to them that take it and strength in mind and body. In medicine it is most beneficial; it can be mixed with liquid and drugs and it brings aid to the wounded. In daily intercourse, to those who mix and drink it moderately, it gives good cheer; but if you overstep the bounds, it brings violence. Mix it half and half, and you get madness; unmixed, bodily collapse.

The mixture of wine in water was still called "wine" and it was presumed that "wine" was a mixed beverage.

It is evident that wine was seen in ancient times as a medicine (and as a solvent for medicines) and of course as a beverage. Yet as a beverage it was always thought of as a mixed drink.

Plutarch (Symposiacs III, ix) states. "We call a mixture 'wine,' although the larger of the component parts is water."

The ration of water might vary, but only barbarians drank it unmixed, and a mixture of wine and water of equal parts was seen as "strong drink" and frowned upon. The term "wine" or oinos in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water. Usually a writer simply referred to the mixture of water and wine as "wine." To indicate that the beverage was not a mixture of water and wine he would say "unmixed (akratesteron) wine."

Wine use among the Jews

A number of OT texts also allude to the custom of mixing wine.

Wisdom entertains her guests to a banquet:

She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine; She has also set her table; "Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed. (Proverbs 9:2,5)

It is interesting here to see the translation in the LXX (“I have mixed the wine in the mixing bowl”).

Those who linger long over wine, those who go to taste mixed wine. (Proverbs 23:30)

“But you who forsake the Lord, who forget My holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune, and who fill cups with mixed wine for Destiny, (Isaiah 65:11)

For a cup is in the hand of the Lord, and the wine foams; It is well mixed, and He pours out of this; Surely all the wicked of the earth must drain and drink down its dregs. (Psalm 75:8)

Similarly we see in Revelation in the judgment of the harlot the figure of mixing water with wine.

“Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her. (Revelation 18:6)

The book of 2 Maccabees, written during the inter-testamental period comments in the use of wine:

“It is harmful to drink wine alone, or again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one’s enjoyment” (2 Mac. 15:39).

In the Talmud, which contains the oral traditions of Judaism from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200, there are several tractates in which the mixture of water and wine is discussed.

One tractate (Shabbath 77a) states that wine that does not carry three parts of water well is not wine. The normal mixture is said to consist of two parts water to one part wine.

In a most important reference (Pesachim 108b) it is stated that the four cups every Jew was to drink during the Passover ritual were to be mixed in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine:

R. Jehudah said in the name of Samuel: “Each cup must contain wine which, when mixed with three parts of water, will be good wine. If unmixed wine was drunk, the duty has nevertheless been fulfilled. (Pesachim, Book 10)

It is interesting to study the Biblical accounts of the Last Supper in view of the standing Passover customs as presented in Jewish literature of the same period.

Wine use among Christians outside the NT

Christians seem to continue the practice of the Jews, Greeks, and Roman in how wine was drunk. Justin Martyr gives this description of the worship of the Christians in the middle second century:

When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assent, saying the “Amen.” A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person,

and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons. (Justin Martyr, AD 150)

So here in the early church we see again the custom of mixing water with wine for use in the Lord's Supper.

Early church father Clement of Alexandria writes concerning the use of wine as a beverage:

It has therefore been well said, "A joy of the soul and heart was wine created from the beginning, when drunk in moderate sufficiency." [64](#) And it is best to mix the wine with as much water as possible, and not to have recourse to it as to water, and so get enervated to drunkenness, and not pour it in as water from love of wine. For both are works of God; and so the mixture of both, of water and of wine, conduces together to health, because life consists of what is necessary and of what is useful. With water, then, which is the necessary of life, and to be used in abundance, there is also to be mixed the useful. (Instructor, Book II).

Observations and conclusions

The first task of Biblical interpretation is ask, "What did the words mean in their historical and cultural context?"

By taking a look at the background culture we have a better sense of how wine was commonly used over a period of several centuries. And it is clear that the common use of wine involved mixing it with water.

Thus the Biblical references to wine consumption should be weighed in view of the customary usage among the Jews, Greeks, Romans, and Christians. Two very important truths come out of this background study:

The wines of the Biblical culture unmixing had an alcoholic content of 6-12%. The distilled wines of our modern culture have an alcoholic content of 14-21%. Modern wines are twice as potent. Other alcoholic beverages are many times more alcoholic.

The common use of wine in the ancient world was to mix it with water. It was believed to drink unmixed wine was to invite trouble and was frowned upon even by those not believers in the true God.