
FAQ

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Alcohol

J.K. McKee revised 12 August, 2019

What is the appropriate way for me to approach the issue of drinking alcohol, not only in terms of Biblical ethics, but also in terms of the whole issue of “kosher”?

In much of contemporary Christianity, there are ongoing debates between those who think that the Bible completely prohibits the consumption of alcohol, those who think that it does not *but* that people should not drink alcohol, and those who think that the Bible permits people to drink alcohol in moderation.¹ It is undeniable from reading either the Hebrew or Greek Scriptures that wine was a part of the Biblical world, and both of the Ancient Near Eastern and Ancient Mediterranean diet and way of life.² The two main Biblical terms appearing for “wine,” which are often regarded as representative of alcohol in general, are *yayin* (יַיִן) and *oinos* (οἶνος). The following are some standard theological definitions of these terms:

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament for yayin:

Probably a loan word. It has cognates in Indo-European: Greek *oinos*, Latin *vinum*, German *Wein*. It also appears in the Semitic languages, Akkadian *īnu*, Arabic *wayn* (meaning “black grapes”), and Ugaritic *yn* (UT 19: no. 1093). The word is used 140 times, 12 of these in combination with *shēkār* [שֶׁכָּר] (KJV “wine and strong drink”; NIV sometimes “wine and beer”). Its intoxicating properties are mentioned at least twenty times. It is mentioned as a common drink, an element in banquets and as the material used in libation offerings...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 twenty per cent fortified wines were unknown in Bible times. Beer was brewed by various methods, but its alcoholic content was light. 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 or 11 percent, the yeast cells are killed and fermentation ceases. Probably ancient wines were 7-10 per cent. Drunkenness therefore was of course an ancient curse, but alcoholism was not as common or as severe as it is today. And in an agricultural age, its effects were less deadly than now. Still, even then it had its dangers and Prov 20:1 and Prov 23:29-35 are emphatic in their warnings. To avoid the sin of drunkenness, mingling of wine with water was practiced. This dilution was specified by the Rabbis in NT times for the wine then customary at Passover. The original Passover did not include wine (Deut 20:6).³

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament for oinos:

The vine was cultivated from prehistoric times, and wine comes into early use both socially and cultically. The god Dionysus is equated with wine, and it has a special place in his cult. Noah cultivates the vine in Gen. 9:20. Many OT texts praise wine (Judg. 9:13; Ps. 104:15). Fullness of wine is a divine blessing (Gen. 27:28). The Rechabites abstain from wine (Jer. 35), and Hos. 2:10ff. links it to Baal worship. There are also warnings against overindulgence (Is. 5:11-12; Prov. 20:1).

¹ Consult the general remarks by Nancy J. Duff, “Alcohol,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, pp 52-53.

² Cf. B.L. Bandstra, “Wine,” in *ISBE*, 4:1068-1072; R. Dennis Cole, “Wine,” in *EDB*, pp 1379-1380.

³ R. Laird Harris, “יַיִן,” in *TWOT*, 1:375-376.

Wine has cultic significance in the OT (Ex. 29:38ff.). The vine also serves frequently as a metaphor. In the NT *oínos* has a literal sense and never occurs in a cultic connection. The Baptist abstains from it (Lk. 1:15); his mission demands that he be controlled solely by the Spirit. Jesus partakes of wine (Mt. 11:19), for the time of the bridegroom's presence is a time of festivity (Mk. 2:18ff.). The new wine of the new age demands new skins. At Cana (Jn. 2:1ff.) Jesus turns a great amount of water into wine. If the nature of Johannine miracles as signs is considered, a deeper meaning must be sought. Thus law and gospel may be contrasted as water and wine, of wine may be equated with Logos (Philo). While *oínos* is not used in the accounts of the Last Supper, it is obvious that the cup contains wine, and with the cup (Mk. 14:25 and par.) Jesus is triumphantly looking ahead to the consummation (cf. Mt. 8:11). On the cross Jesus is handed a mixture of wine and myrrh (Mk. 15:23) to dull his senses (cf. Mt. 27:34). Paul recommends abstinence should weaker believers be upset about eating and drinking (Rom. 14:21). In Eph. 5:18 he warns against excess (cf. Prov. 23:31), and calls instead for infilling with the Spirit. A moderate use of wine may be beneficial to health (1 Tim. 5:23), but overindulgence is to be avoided (3:3, 8). In Revelation *oínos* is one of the commodities that the fleet can no longer sell when Babylon falls (18:13). The term denotes the crop in 6:6; this is to be spared when the yield of wheat and barley falls short. In 14:10; 16:19; 19:15 *oínos* denotes the wrath of God in a figure that is taken from the OT (cf. Jer. 25:15-16; 49:12, etc.). In 14:10 "poured unmixed" indicates the great and terrible nature of the divine wrath. The metaphor is rather different in 14:8 (cf. 17:2; 18:3), where the wine is that of impure passion. But the figures merge into one another inasmuch as those who drink this wine fall victim to God's wrath.⁴

With the small exception of a variety of Christian fundamentalists in North America, most in Protestantism the world over—both conservative and liberal alike—recognize that the "wine" in the Bible is an alcoholic beverage, and not some kind of non-alcoholic grape juice. Such alcoholic wine, even if diluted with water at times, was a part of the diet of the Ancient Israelites—and did feature as a part of the life of those within Second Temple Judaism, including Yeshua and His Apostles. Second-Fourth Century Christianity was also widely favorable to the moderate usage of wine, as a part of one's diet and enjoyment of life.⁵ Most significant to Messianic people would be the role that wine has played in Judaism since, both for religious and cultural purposes. As is summarized by the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*,

"The rabbinic use of the Hebrew word for wine, *yayin*, connotes the undiluted extract of grapes. It was mixed or diluted with water before the liquid was consumed. Rabbinic custom prescribed that grace recited over every meal be accompanied by a cup of wine (Ber. 50a). The individual blessing over wine was central to the table ritual for the inauguration and conclusion of Sabbaths and festivals (namely, the rituals of *kiddush* and *habdalah*). Four cups of wine were drunk at the Passover Seder and a fifth was set aside for Elijah (m. Pesah 10). Mourners drank several cups of wine as consolation according to custom (Ketub. 8b). The Talmud encouraged moderation in drinking wine, citing its medical and health values (B. Bat. 58b). Alcohol abuse was not a dominant concern, although the Talmud prescribed some remedies for drunkenness (Shabb. 66b). Wine used in pagan ritual was deemed unclean and prohibited. Any ordinary wine prepared or handled by non-Jews also was prohibited either because it was suspected to have been a libation to a pagan god or because the rabbis wanted to restrict social interaction between Jews and Gentiles (Aḥod. Zar. 36b)."⁶

For contemporary evangelical Christians, there are many who have little problems with Believers drinking wine, beer, or spirits in moderation. Kenneth L. Gentry, *God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says About Alcohol* (Lincoln, CA: Oakdown, 2001), probably represents one of the most widespread evangelical defenses in favor of moderate drinking. Yet with the fact that for multiplied millennia, alcohol abuse has been rampant in many societies, there should be no surprise that both the Tanach or Old Testament (i.e., Deuteronomy 21:20; Isaiah 19:14; 28:7-8; 56:12; Jeremiah 13:13-14; 25:27; Habakkuk 2:15-16; Proverbs 20:1; 23:21, 29-35), and the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament (i.e., Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34; 21:34; 1 Corinthians 6:10; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:18), present many avid warnings to God's people against drunkenness, how it impairs human judgment, and the various ways that it can cause severe problems. In his book *What Would Jesus Drink?*, in which he strongly defends the right of Believers to drink alcohol, Joel McDurmon does rightly issue warnings about the need for responsibility, stating,

"[A]s much as I personally defend and uphold the Christian's right to enjoy wine, beer, and spirits, let me add a warning to temper the mood. If you have ever experienced anyone struggling with the demons of alcoholism, you'll understand this point. Christians should never flaunt this liberty or make these arguments flippantly...Alcoholism emaciates once strong men, cripples lives, destroys marriages, shreds friendships, ends jobs, ends careers, and ends lives. It is a serious and sad business. No one enjoying themselves in any social setting that tempts a recovering alcoholic to drink again can be said to be acting in a spirit of Christian love. It's simply selfish and irresponsible. When we say 'Please drink responsibly,' it refers

⁴ H. Sessemann, "oínos," in *TDNT*, pp 680-681.

⁵ Cf. David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), pp 685-687.

⁶ Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 671.

to more than whether you will be driving. It refers to more than the volume of alcohol. Sometimes it does mean having none at all for the sake of your brother. If you're not responsible enough to make that call for him, then you're probably not responsible enough to drink for yourself either."⁷

Further on, McDermon, making light of the idolater's dilemma in Isaiah 44:13-17, makes a comparison between the idolater and the alcoholic, concluding,

"The drunk does the same thing. Well, of course, he doesn't literally fall down and worship booze; but he does succumb to drunkenness over and over for the false deliverance it provides—deliverance from the cares of this life.

"So the drunkard ends up denying God's reality in two ways: 1) he denies that he has a problem, and 2) he runs from God's reality by seeking the false one drunkenness provides."⁸

As can be borne out among many people who may be classified as "alcoholics," drinking alcohol in large quantities is a way that they can somehow escape the perceived difficulties of life, and try to feel better in some way. Unfortunately for too many, the very means they use to escape, tends to be the means of their demise.

Certainly while there are important ethical questions, which will always be present, concerning the responsible use of alcoholic beverages—there is the question of the kosher status of alcoholic beverages and their production. The Jewish community has certainly had to formulate various procedures and *halachot* for consuming alcohol,⁹ particularly whether wine produced by non-Jews was produced for idolatry (cf. Daniel 1:5). While Orthodox Jews today are likely to be very careful regarding the wine they drink, checking for a *hechsher*, the Conservative movement is far less stringent, recognizing that kosher-certified wine—with the exception of wine for the week of Passover—is not really necessary. While encouraging Jews to purchase kosher-certified wine, and most especially wine from Israel, Isaac Klein's 1979 *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, representing the Conservative position, summarizes how the worry about wine produced by non-Jews being idolatrous is widely a thing of the distant past:

"The permissibility of יין גוי (wines of the gentiles) is...a controversial subject. *Yein nesekh* was originally prohibited because it was also used for libations in idol worship, and anything used in idol worship is forbidden to Jews. The rabbis considered this interdict to be a biblical commandment (see Dan. 1:5; b. *A.Z.* 29b; Maimonides, *Sefer Hamitswot*, no. 194; *Y.D.* 123-35.

"In our day, however, there is no *yein nesekh* since there is no longer any idol worship (*B. A.Z.* 57b in *Tos...Y.D.* 123:1 in Rama). Rather, we are concerned nowadays with יין גוי [setam yeinam]—ordinary wines made or handled by gentiles. The Talmud forbids such wines as a precautionary measure to prevent socializing with gentiles since it might lead to intermarriage (*B. A.Z.* 31b) or because those who use such wines might be exposed to the religious influence of gentiles and thus be persuaded to apostatize. A *hekhsher* on wine, therefore, insists that no gentiles were directly involved in any stage of the wine-making process (i.e., from the pressing of the grapes through the bottling and sealing of the wine).

"At the request of the Committee on Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Israel Silverman made a study of the question and reported his findings in a responsum. Rabbi Silverman found that winemaking in the United States is fully automated (his study did not cover imported wines, many of which are not produced by automated processes), and no human hand comes in contact with the wine from the moment the grapes are put into containers and brought to the winery until the wine appears in sealed bottles. Wines manufactured by this automated process may not be classified as wines manufactured by gentiles and thus do not come under the interdict against the use of יין גוי.

"Rabbi Silverman called attention to several additional considerations, however. Since it is a *mitswah* [command] to support Israel, he suggested, we should give priority to wines imported from Israel, all of which are kosher according to the traditional standard, as indicated by the *hekhsher* they bear. Moreover, he deemed it advisable, for psychological reasons, that only wines with a *hekhsher* be used in religious ceremonies (i.e., for Qiddush or Havdalah). Similarly, on Pesah only wines marked Kosher Lepasah should be used."¹⁰

⁷ Joel McDurmon, *What Would Jesus Drink? A Spirit-Filled Study* (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2011), pp 84-85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁹ Cf. Yacov Lipschutz, *Kashruth: A comprehensive background and reference guide to the principles of Kashruth* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd, 1989), pp 71-76.

Do note *Ibid.*, 73, where it is appreciably asserted,

"The common practice of social drinking presents a challenge to the maintenance of kashruth standards in business and social situations. In addition to questions of the kashruth of the ingredients, however, it is vital for kashruth observers to recognize that at all times alcohol consumption must be kept at the disciplined levels that do not compromise Torah standards of ethical conduct and self-discipline."

¹⁰ Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979), pp 306-307; cf. Samuel H. Dresner, *The Jewish Dietary Laws: Their Meaning for Our Time* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly of America, 1982), pp 73-74.

Large liquor stores or outlets will often have a section dedicated to kosher-certified wines and/or wines imported from Israel. It would not seem, however, that any Biblical or Rabbinic prohibition on drinking wine produced by non-Jews—even if not really followed by most Jews today, in various degrees—tends to extend to other alcoholic beverages. Orthodox Jews will be found consuming liquor (i.e., whiskey, vodka, gin, rum) or many beers, which may not necessarily have a *hechsher*. Reform Jews, even if many may prefer kosher-certified or Israeli wines, are not likely to be too picky when it comes to drinking alcohol and whether something has been approved “kosher.”

When one looks at the broad Messianic community, it is pretty easy to detect how very, very few, completely abstain from alcoholic beverages. While there is certainly a preference on the part of many to patronize either kosher-certified or Israeli-produced wines and spirits—Messianic people will often drink wine, beer, or hard liquor of *any kind*. Much of the attitude present in the Messianic movement toward alcohol tends to mirror that of evangelical Christians who approve of moderate drinking. Certainly at dinner parties held at the homes of Messianic people, one should expect not only to see wine or beer served, but even pre- or after- dinner cocktails offered. It must be steadfastly observed, however—particularly with the wide numbers of non-Jewish Messianic people entering in from Christian backgrounds where alcohol was viewed as a moral evil—that many such (middle aged) people, have been known to try to “catch up,” if you will, for the years that they never consumed a drop of alcohol. *This means that some will be found to over-indulge in alcohol, from time to time, in various settings.*

Much of the moderate drinking that today’s Messianic people are likely to partake of, is the same as that of many Christians who drink moderately: a glass or two of wine, one or two beers, or a cocktail after a long day of work to unwind. This kind of moderate consumption of alcohol will not often make a person inebriated and unable to make sound judgments, but will relax a person long enough to take away many of the small aches and pains caused throughout the work day.

There is little doubting that drinking too much alcohol will retard one’s faculties. Given the presumed “kosher” status of most alcoholic beverages, this does not permit any man or woman of faith to just drink to excess. Spiritually speaking, there are not only many warnings given to us in the Bible against drunkenness—but relying too much on a chemical substance like alcohol, can make one susceptible to dark spiritual influences. Each person who chooses to drink alcoholic beverages, needs to be disciplined, and know what his or her tolerance level and/or limit is, **and follow it.**