

Wine in the Ancient World, Part 2

By R.A. Baker, Ph.D

I continue to be amazed that “Wine in the Ancient World, Part I” is now accessed 300-700 times every month: over 10,000 times since 2009. There are many preachers/writers who believe this is a sign of growing acceptance of alcohol among evangelical Christians, and moral weakness. Although I might agree that evangelicals are slipping in our values, it is not the focus of this paper.

Some of what motivates me is to present the historical data accurately. Anyone who has read my writings knows that I am disappointed with how many things I was taught as a young Christian in a Protestant/Free Church environment that were mostly opinions and dogma, but NOT a simple and accurate presentation of the New Testament data. I typically refrain from using the term “facts,” preferring the use of “data.” “Fact” comes with the implication that the presenter is obviously correct, when even “facts” must oftentimes be interpreted.

For several years I believed and adhered to total abstinence of alcohol. As a young man I had been presented with a tract arguing that the wine in the Bible was non-alcoholic. The more I studied the biblical text the less I could be persuaded of this position, after all, if Paul tells believers not to get drunk they obviously had alcoholic beverages.

I am going to interact with a couple authors/articles in this paper, but mostly I am going to present my opinions and interpretations of the data. Some of the articles I will interact with represent what I heard as a young man. One argument is that wine in the New Testament was of a weaker alcoholic content and was diluted with water so that it was virtually not alcoholic. Another author claims that there were both fermented wine and non-fermented grape juice available. He claims that when the scriptures speak positively about “wine” it is referring to non-alcoholic grape juice; negative references are speaking about the fermented wine. This second work actually cites my paper as a source for his evidence that some “wine” was indeed only grape juice. He says that some writers have claimed that it was impossible to keep wine from fermenting, thus simple grape juice did not exist. I have not come across this view, but I do not doubt that some hold this position.

At the end of Part I some questions remained for me:

1. How can any wine be diluted with water and continue to taste good?
2. Was there a way to have a concentrated wine with a higher alcoholic content that could withstand dilution, keep good flavor and yet contain enough alcohol to allow for fairly easy intoxication?

I want to offer my possible answers to these questions.

I want to offer some arguments against the positions given by others.

Possibly more importantly, I want to offer some pastoral thoughts about matters of conscience and how I believe Christians should approach alcohol.

It needs to be kept in mind that much of what is read in Part 2 will be my personal opinions and interpretations of the data (from historical documents and from communications with professional winemakers). I will try to make a clear distinction between my opinions and when I am using data agreed upon by most scholars.

As I point out in Part 1, the evidence from ancient writers does indicate that non-alcoholic “wine” was commonly served mainly to women, children and slaves. Wine was commonly diluted with water, apparently to stretch the wine and make it last longer, and to cut down the alcoholic volume and the risk of quick intoxication.

SECTIONS PLANNED FOR PART 2

I. Possibility of “spiking” wine with sweetener, like “must” to keep it from over-fermentation

II. Emotional arguments against Christians drinking alcohol

Over the years I have heard and read some arguments advocating for total abstinence that I want to address. I am sure that I will not deal with every argument, but these are the ones I have heard the most.

I will give credit for some truthfulness in an emotional argument, but in the end emotional arguments are not allowed in logical debate for discovering truth.

Let me make it clear from the start that I want to uphold the stance given by the New Testament. I am against Christians being intoxicated. Paul is clear about this in *Ephesians 5:18*. When I give my arguments against the views below it is NOT because I am arguing *for* alcohol. Abstinence from alcohol is certainly a good option, but I am *against* the stance that the New Testament teaches abstinence because in my opinion this is just not true.

Emotional arguments go like this: “Consuming alcohol is wrong (or sinful) because being drunk leads to DUI and traffic deaths.”

Probably anyone more than 25 years old knows of someone who was killed in a car accident that included alcohol. Everyone would agree that people should not die due to the mixing of alcohol and driving. But why take away the alcohol? Why not use the same logic to say “Driving a motor vehicle is wrong (or sinful)?”

Being drunk leads to stupid decision-making, injury and death.

No doubt about this. It is impossible to argue against this statement, but if this is our logic we should abstain from driving automobiles and call it “sin.”

- you can get impatient in congested traffic and drive recklessly
- teenagers (especially boys) are tempted to drive fast, act stupid and get into accidents.

Over 33,000 people died in car accidents in 2012. While 30% of these accidents involved alcohol, over 20,000 deaths did not involve alcohol. Yet we continue to drive automobiles and allow our teenagers to drive.

Alcoholism has torn so many families apart

Yes, but the same logic would call all Christians, even married ones, to abstain from sex (live in celibacy). Some men seem to have very little power over their sex drive and their need of multiple women - adultery has torn apart many families as well. There were Gnostic sects that taught sexual abstinence. The third century gnostic-like forgery known as *Acts of Paul and Thecla* represents extreme sexual abstinence. The Shakers, an 18th century Protestant, charismatic sect also taught sexual abstinence. All of these proclaimed freedom from sexuality even for married couples.

If we interviewed divorced women and asked what led to their divorce we would ultimately come to the conclusion that *selfishness* is what threatens any marriage. It could be the man is a workaholic or the woman is a spendaholic, but we would not teach abstinence from work or from shopping.

Drinking alcohol is bad for the body, thus the Temple

Using this logic Christians should abstain from eating fast food; McDonald’s would have to be labeled “sin.”

This emotional argument has lost ground in the last decade or so as medical science has shown moderate drinking of alcohol (especially red wine) to be good for the cardiovascular system.

Jesus would not have turned water into alcoholic wine and put pregnant women/fetuses at risk or tempted those who might have propensity to be alcoholics.

This is an argument I have heard referencing John 2. As was mentioned in *Wine, Part 1*, women and children were typically not allowed to drink alcoholic wine and were given a grape juice drink.

Yes, the wine would have tempted some who struggled with alcoholism, but the logic would demand that Jesus did *not* multiply fish and bread or else He would have tempted some to gluttony.

Alcoholism has a genetic marker which makes certain people more likely to become addicted

For me this is the best emotional argument for total abstinence. But most people with a disposition to excess will “sin” in many other areas: work, food, sex, TV, video games, golf, gambling etc. It remains dangerous for those who have a genetic predisposition, but to demand abstinence for ALL would demand abstinence of virtually *everything* until we can be certain that a person does not have any inclination to being compulsive.

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e. Christian leaders are urged to abstain

This is not as much emotional as just a very poor reading of the NT text.

This has to do with the comments you cited by John McArthur.

Like so many Christian leaders, McArthur is committed to his particular strain of doctrine and therefore has great difficulty reading/interpreting the NT text when it appears to go against his position. Allow me to refer to the web site you pointed me to below. There are many obvious points that I agree with, but when he gets to specifics I tend to find it difficult to take him seriously. In the section where he is saying that rulers were to stay away from alcohol He cites the requirements for bishops/deacons in the Pastoral epistles:

“And it’s also crystal-clear on the issue of people in leadership, staying away from that because they have responsibility before God not only to render right judgments and to teach truth accurately, but to set a pure example.”

He just cited the texts correctly, neither of which states total abstinence, yet he gives the summary above, "...it's crystal-clear...people in leadership [speaking of church leadership], staying away from that [alcohol] because they have responsibility...to teach accurately..."

This kind of biblical text usage is NOT responsible. The text IS crystal-clear:

1 Timothy 3 Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task.2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness... 8 In the same way, deacons[b] are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine...

The text does NOT say complete abstinence, yet this author says in summary that it does.

Titus 1 6 An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe[b] and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient...he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness...

Paul says the same thing regarding the women. It would be different if these passages had some disagreement, but there is clarity - avoid drunkenness. It does not even say "he must NEVER be drunk," thus one could argue that a one time failing would not disqualify such a leader.

THIS is the position the Church has always held. I realize that Protestants are not keen on looking at the Catholic Church for guidance, but do you really think Catholic priests and monks would drink ANY alcohol if the text clearly forbid it? Not only the Catholic Church, but Orthodox Church and the Anglicans (Episcopalians) - all consume alcohol. It is very difficult for me to take this writer seriously when he cannot cite/represent clear biblical text properly. At least admit what the text says and then give your rationale, but this is sadly lacking in credibility.

f. Those who drink will lead their children to drink

I was a university pastor for 14 years. I did witness students go crazy who had

come from drinking parents, but just as many go crazy who come from strict Christian parents. This not only applied to alcohol, but to drugs, sex, you name it. The parents example does have influence, but in the end each young person makes their own choice.

I grew up with a chain-smoking father, but other than 2-3 times as a youth I have never smoked cigarettes. I cannot stand being around it. I have met numerous young men and women who never drank because they had grown up with an alcoholic parent, so anecdotal evidence and emotional argument can go both ways.

III. Church has never censored alcohol until modern-day Protestants and Prohibition.

- Church has always seen abstinence as more virtuous

IV. This is an issue of conscience - Rom 14

- like gambling, tatoos, playing/watching football, eating meat or caffeine

I would treat alcohol as a matter of conscience and use the principles laid out in Romans 14. Where the NT is not clear we should not be dogmatic. So, my thoughts on alcohol are the same as for gambling, tatoos, serving in the military or police, caffeine, playing football, watching R rated movies (or ANY movies), listening to secular music...on and on. The NT does not clearly condemn any of these actions, so neither should I. Interesting because the Church, with a capital "C" has typically not branded these issues as "sin," but has cautioned against them and urged Christians to be careful and prayerful. The Church has also always affirmed it as MORE virtuous if you choose to refrain from these activities due to your faith.

I will move on to the issue of how ancient wine could be mixed with water and still retain flavor. Interestingly, my theory on this involves the paste McArthur cites. They did boil wine down and make a paste/jam-like substance. Almost everything they did in the ancient world was to keep wine from over-fermenting and turning into vinegar which for the most part was useless. They wanted to drink the wine through the year until the next harvest - they did not want to reach the

midyear point and have no wine/juice to drink. I describe this in Part 1. The "must" was used to "spike" a wine jar - add sugar into the wine to feed the yeast, thus keeping the wine from spoiling and turning into vinegar. This was only possible IF the owner had the ability to keep the wine cool in a deep cellar underground OR by keeping the casks under water. Most people did not have this kind of facility, thus had to purchase their drinking wine/juice from a vendor. I am now using wine/juice because, as I described in Part 1, it was common practice to use the "must" as a way to add water for a grape drink - this was served to women and children, and to slaves. This juice or wine diluted with juice was probably what was sold to the commoner in the streets.

This is also what was probably expected at the wedding when Jesus turned water into wine and the guests exclaimed how good it was, 10 ...“Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.” This reference to "the best" is interesting. I am thinking it is new wine, thus fresh and with a lower alcoholic content, but we cannot know. Arguments for it being non-alcoholic are solely based on the presupposition that God would not want to tempt anyone with alcohol. Weak argument. I have read that Jesus would not have had pregnant women consuming alcohol that would/might damage the fetus. Well, women were not allowed to drink alcohol anyway, so that is just not a good argument. My theory is that adding the "must" to wine to keep it from turning to vinegar added flavor, sugar and possibly boosted the alcoholic level just a bit. This could be an explanation for why the ancients said that good wine could be diluted without killing the taste. This is a difficult one. I am hesitant to say that the ancients had a less sophisticated taste than moderns, but there is probably some of this happening especially among common people. I know that I am not a big wine drinker. I like adding regular juice (apple or grape) to wine, usually 20-30%. I like sweet wine. I tend to think ancient wine was more sweet than dry, but nobody really knows these kind of details. I just know that nobody would like regular wine diluted with 1/2 water - this would be disgustingly weak. I love fruit juice, but I could not stand apple or grape juice diluted with 1/2 water unless sugar/sweetener was added...like the use of this "jam" or "must." But 1/2 water is just too much. 1/3 dilution was more common, but even this has to have something else going on to keep the taste decent. Even 1/3 dilution of standard wine would yield 3-5% alcohol. McArthur says a local family would have wine at full strength of 2-4%. No idea where he gets this. Normal wine, developed without sophisticated processes yields 8-14% depending on the type of grape, the temperature, etc. I have NEVER heard of 2-

4% unless he is talking about the "new" wine. Is he saying that they diluted this? What did they drink after the "new" wine? The local grower is going to take steps to preserve their wine for longer than a few days or even weeks. The longer it sits, the more alcohol. Ok, so they dilute it. At some point these people had access to enough alcohol to get drunk if they wanted to. I do not know of any ancient text that indicates someone has to drink a gallon of wine to get drunk. The volumes seem to be consistent with what we would encounter. I cannot keep reading this article by McArthur. He does not know what he is talking about. He is relying on Robert Stein who misrepresents the ancient writers. McArthur should read Pliny and Columella for himself - he would then understand that these ancients were working hard to keep wine (and all other produce) consumable for as long as possible. In other words, to keep foods/drink from spoilage. Wine, left to itself, ferments until it becomes vinegar. Until that line is crossed the alcohol content is rising.

Sources:

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http://www.twc.co.il/en/Content_meeting.aspx?id=51

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