

A young man with dark hair and glasses is looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a grey V-neck sweater over a black turtleneck. He is holding a glass of whiskey in his right hand and adjusting his glasses with his left hand. The background is plain white.

**DOES THE BIBLE
GIVE APPROVAL
FOR CHRISTIANS
TO DRINK
ALCOHOLIC
BEVERAGES?**

Colin McKee

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**World Evangelism Publications
P.O. Box 72
Winona, MS 38967**

**662.283.1192
www.WorldEvangelism.org
www.GospelGazette.com
cohamckee@att.net**

Publisher's Statement

Betty Burton Choate

Through the decades that we, of the World Evangelism team, have written, printed, and circulated books throughout the world. In addition to “books”, we have numerous tri-fold tracts on biblical subjects, and some “booklet tracts” such as this one.

Alcoholism has grown to be more and more accepted, not only in the United States but also in most of the world. This study shows clear evidence why God has never approved of the use of alcoholic beverages, and why Christians must totally abstain, if they desire to accomplish with their lives what they have been left in this world to do.

May God help us to be strong in Him, and to resist the temptations Satan puts before us every day.

DOES THE BIBLE GIVE APPROVAL FOR CHRISTIANS TO DRINK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES?

Colin McKee

Throughout history countless lives have been lost or tragically affected by alcohol. Many Christians who thought they could drink socially ended up as alcoholics and consequently lost their possessions and ruptured their families. Some have been responsible for the deaths of others, including their own family members.

Many years ago the president of a large Christian University caused an automobile accident which resulted in the death of two women while he was under the influence of alcohol.

In the church where my wife attended in the 50's and 60's, a member who was intoxicated, got into a heated argument with his wife and began to beat her. On hearing his mother's screams, their teenage son tried to

intervene but finally shot and killed his father. Both families, of the mother and father, who were all Christians, were torn apart because of alcohol, and a tremendous number of other families have experienced similar devastating losses.

Some Christians try to justify their use of alcohol by pointing to Christ's first miracle of turning water into wine. Some also refer to the Psalmist saying that wine makes the heart glad, or use other scriptures that they feel sanction their use of alcoholic beverages. But does the Bible actually approve of Christians drinking alcohol? Please examine the following material for what I believe is the scriptural answer to questions about drinking alcohol.

But before we consider the teaching of the Bible regarding drinking of alcoholic beverages, let us give some thought to the practical aspects of the effect of alcohol on the human mind and body:

1. One standard drink of alcoholic beverage contains 14 grams of alcohol. That is one 12 ounce can of beer which

contains 5% alcohol; 5 ounces of wine which contains 12% alcohol, or one shot of distilled liquor which contains 40% alcohol.

2. A study at San Diego State University in California shows that one drink can impair one's ability to make decisions, though we are not aware of it. (Medical News Today by Homer Whiteman 3/20/2018). That is supported by other research: Rolla N. Harger, *"The Response of the Body to Different Concentrations of Alcohol"* New York, 1964).

3. Light beer has 85% as much alcohol as regular beer (4.2% compared to 5%).

4. A person usually gets "high" after two drinks in one hour. At that level, side vision drops 18 degrees and depth perception drops 74%. (Lorna G. Davies, *"The Christian and Social Drinking"*, The Baptist Bulletin, March 1977).

5. There are more than 18 million alcoholics in the U.S.A. Each one began with one drink.

6. 88,000 to 100,000 are killed each

year in the U.S. from alcohol related traffic accidents.

7. The cost of alcohol misuse in the U.S. is more than \$250 billion per year. If tobacco and other drugs are included, the total is around \$800 billion.

8. Alcohol is a poison that adversely affects every part of the human body. It contributes to heart disease, liver disease, vascular disease, stomach cancer, etc.

9. No one plans to be an alcoholic, but it begins with the first drink. Most people will say, “I can handle it; I only take a drink every now and then”. One never knows when he will be tempted to go beyond the occasional drink to more frequent regular drinking. If he never takes the first drink, he will never become an alcoholic.

10. A parent who drinks only moderately is providing an example of approval of alcoholic beverages to his children. What if the child “cannot handle it” and becomes addicted because the parent gave implicit approval to drinking? What about the influence of seeing parents drinking

which may lead the child to conclude that there is no difference in drinking alcohol and taking recreational drugs?

11. Why would a Christian give support to an industry, or practice, that wreaks havoc worldwide, causes death and destruction on every hand, and causes the loss of inhibitions because of the narcotic effect on his brain?

12. Alcohol is a hard drug and kills more each year than those who die of overdoses of heroin, cocaine, and other hard drugs. (check the facts online).

“By drinking alcohol you place your health at risk. **You risk damaging your brain** which may result in: memory loss, confusion, disorganization, decreased work performance, poor coordination, impaired ability to learn new things, hallucinations, fits, permanent brain damage, aggression, suspicion or paranoia, impulsiveness. **You risk damaging your heart** which may lead to: high blood pressure, irregular pulse, damaged heart muscle. **You risk damaging your liver** resulting in: impaired liver function, severe

swelling and pain, inflamed liver (hepatitis), largely irreversible cirrhosis (scarring), liver cancer. **You risk damaging your stomach** which may result in the stomach lining becoming inflamed, bleeding and ulcers. **You risk damaging your intestines** which may lead to inflammation, bleeding and ulcers. **You risk damaging your pancreas** causing painful inflammation and bleeding. **You risk damaging your muscles** resulting in weakness and loss of muscle tissue. **You risk damaging your nervous system** leading to a loss of sensation in your hands and feet caused by damaged nerves (tingling) (*Mark Davey, "Alcohol" The Drug Data Series, 1998 - excerpt from Louis Rushmore, Beverage Alcohol, p.27*).

"Alcohol is a drug and a poison. Consuming it involves a risk that increases with the amount consumed – the only absolutely safe level is zero" (ibid, p. 31).

If someone says, "But studies have shown that moderate drinking is good for your health", it must be pointed out that the same benefits are obtained by drinking grape

juice, without risking harmful results.

“You don’t need to drink alcohol to enjoy these heart benefits. Other studies being presented at the ACC meeting indicated that purple grape juice is also a very potent shield against heart problems – and may even outweigh aspirin, the most popular blood clotting preventive remedy. Dr. John Folts of the University of Wisconsin, conducted some smaller studies, and found that grape juice helps to reduce the “stickiness” of blood clotting cells, called platelets.

In one study, funded by Welch Foods Incorporated, he examined consumption of grape juice to orange and grapefruit juices. Three glasses of grape juice reduced platelet stickiness by 40%, compared to other juices, which yielded only a 10-15% reduction. When grape juice was tested against red wine and aspirin, the grape juice came out ahead: 75% reduction of platelet stickiness compared to 45% for aspirin and red wine. (*Michele Badash for Health Gate Data Corp, 1997, (ibid., pgs.33,34).*

“If you prefer to remain non-alcohol

users, a daily 12 ounce glass of purple grape juice for men and a 9 ounce grape juice for women also does the trick” (Dr. Paul G. Donohue, *“Alcohol Consumption Could Prevent Heart and Eye Disease”* To Your Health, 1998, *ibid.* , p. 35).

“Booze irritates the lining of your stomach and makes your digestive juices flow.”

“Thirty seconds after your first sip, alcohol races into your brain. It slows down the chemicals and pathways that your brain cells use to send messages. That alters your mood, slows your reflexes, and throws off your balance. You also can’t think straight, which you may not recall later, because you’ll struggle to store things in long-term memory.” (WebMD, online 11/5/2020)

“Any potential benefits of alcohol are relatively small and may not apply to all individuals. In fact, the latest dietary guidelines make it clear that no one should begin drinking alcohol or drink more often on the basis of potential health benefits. For

many people, the possible benefits don't outweigh the risks and avoiding alcohol is the best course." (Mayo Clinic, online, 11/5/2020)

"Alcohol is a drug. Just like marijuana, cocaine, heroin. When a man drinks, he is taking drugs. A man in the alcohol industry is a drug pusher. Don't sugar coat it, don't excuse it. If you have anything to do with beverage alcohol you are involved in drugs. Men do not drink alcohol for the taste. If it is solely for the taste, non-alcoholic drinks can be mixed that taste just like alcohol. Men drink because of the drug effect; that and nothing less." (**Ancient Wine and the Bible**, David Brumbelow, p. 227).

"Remember that alcohol is used solely for its effect (or for some degree of inebriation), never to satisfy thirst or to cool off, since it does the opposite" (Willaim B. Terhune, M.D.). This statement is made, not by an abstainer, but by one who advocates the moderate use of alcohol" (ibid., p.227).

All of this evidence should convince a Christian to stay as far away from alcohol

as he would a poisonous snake. Why bring a poisonous snake into your house and endanger your family for what you consider to be a harmless pass time for pleasure? “...*in the end it bites like a serpent and stings like and adder*” (Proverbs 23:32).

Section One:

Wine in the O.T.

To understand what the Bible teaches about alcoholic drinks, we need to understand something about the various words that are translated “wine” both in the Old and New Testaments.

In the Old Testament, there are primarily three Hebrew words which are translated as wine: “yayin”, “tirosh” and “shekar”. Yayin can refer to alcoholic or non-alcoholic drinks. We have to examine the context of a passage to determine which is under consideration in those particular verses. When “yayin” is spoken of critically, or condemned, it is obviously alcoholic. When it is praised, or spoken of as a blessing, then it is obviously non-alcoholic as God would never praise or endorse any state of

drunkenness. I believe the evidence will support the conclusion that “shekar” can also refer to both kinds of wine, and the meaning again must be determined by the context. TirosH always is unfermented drink.

Yayin

Isaiah 16:10, *“And gladness and joy are gathered out of the plentiful field; and in the vineyards there is no singing and no shouting. The treader shall tread out no wine in the presses; I have made their shouting to cease”*. The word “wine” in this passage is from “**yayin**” in Hebrew and it is clear that it refers to fresh pressed grape juice and could not be fermented, or alcoholic. The Septuagint uses the Greek word “**oinos**” to translate wine here, showing that the Greek word “**oinos**” can also refer to non-alcoholic, non-fermented drink.

Jeremiah 40:10,12, *“As for me, behold, I will live at Mizpah to serve the Chaldeans, who have come to us. But you go gather wine, and summer fruits, and oil, and put them in your vessels, and live in your cities that you have taken...even all the*

Jews returned out of all places where they were driven, and came to the land of Judah, to Gedaliah, to Mizpah, and gathered wine and summer fruits in abundance.” It should be obvious that “**yayin**”/wine in these verses cannot be alcoholic drink as you cannot gather alcoholic drink from the vine.

Jeremiah 48:33, *“And joy and gladness is taken from the plentiful field, and from the land of Moab. And I have caused wine to fail from the winepresses; none shall tread the grapes with shouting; their shouting shall be no shouting.”* Wine would fail from the winepresses. Fresh pressed grape juice could not be alcoholic. That which is pressed is juice of the grape, referred to as “**yayin**”/wine.

Micah 6:15, *“You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread the olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil; and you shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.”* (ESV, HCSB). This passage shows that what is newly pressed (by treading), is called “**yayin**”/wine, which certainly is not fermented or alcoholic. Also note that grapes is from “**tirosh**” which could

not contain alcohol while still in its state of being grapes.

Numbers 15:5,7, “...of a *hin* of wine (*yayin*)” for a drink offering. Offerings were to be made without leaven/fermentation. (Exodus 34:25). Priests were forbidden anything alcoholic when they served in tabernacle (Leviticus 10:8,9). **Exodus 29:40** says the “..*hin* of wine (*yayin*)” was to be offered as drink offering with daily sacrifice, but **Numbers 28:7** says with the daily lamb offering they should “...*pour out the drink (sekar) to the Lord,*” then in verse 14, the drink offering of wine (*yayin*) was to offered with other animals. Other versions translate “**sekar**” in Num. 28:7 as “**old wine**” (Targum of Onkelos), “**choice wine**” (Jerusalem Targum), and “**sikera**” (LXX). Young in his Analytical Concordance defines “**sakar**” as a sweet drink (what “satiates and intoxicates”) showing that it can mean either, and defines “**sikera**” as “a sweet drink, often fermented” (p. 273).

These verses prove that “**yayin**” can refer to non-alcoholic, or unfermented grape

drinks.

II. Tirosh (teerosh)

Tirosh refers to grapes or freshly pressed grape juice.

Isaiah 65:8, ***“So says Jehovah, As the new wine is found in the cluster, and one says, Do not destroy it, for a blessing is in it; so I will do to My servants, that I may not destroy them all.”*** New wine is from “**tirosh**” and certainly there could be no fermented juice while it is still in the cluster of grapes.

Deuteronomy 11:14, ***“I will give the rain of your land in its due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.”*** The people of Israel gathered their grain from their fields, their grapes from their vineyards, and their olives from their orchards so that everything could be processed into wheat, grape juice and olive oil. They certainly could not gather wine directly from their vineyards or oil from their orchards. Here again, “**tirosh**” means simply grapes.

Proverbs 3:10, ***“...and your barns shall be filled with plenty, and your presses***

shall burst with new wine.” Here we see that “new wine” (**tirosh**) is the result of pressing or treading the grapes which would only produce unfermented drink.

Haggai 1:11, *“And I called for a drought in the land, and on the mountains, and on the grain, and on the new wine, and on the oil, and on that which the ground brings forth, and on men, and on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.”* God called for a drought on their “new wine”, that is, on their vineyards. “New wine” is from “**tirosh**” which could not mean fermented drink, only to the grapes in the vineyard.

Thus “**tirosh**” always refers to either grapes or drink that is non- alcoholic.

III. Shekar (English: sugar, saccharine) (Arabic: sakkar) (Persian: shakar) (Greek: sikera)

Many scholars believe that **shekar/ sakar** always mean alcoholic drink. Is there evidence that it can mean non-alcoholic drink? Let us consider some passages of Scripture:

1. Numbers 28:7. “...*pour out the drink (sakar) to the Lord.*” Many versions translate “sakar” in this verse as “drink” (NKJV), “old wine” (Targum of Onkelos), “choice wine” (Jerusalem Targum). The sources are multiple where sakar is not translated as “strong/fermented” drink in this passage. Even if it were granted that “sakar/sekar” means fermented drink, the drink was to be **poured out** – not drunk!

2. Deuteronomy 14:26. “...for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink...” (sekar) (NKJV). Many versions translate “sekar” as “strong drink” in this passage. This verse is one of the favorites of those claiming the Bible gives sanction to drinking alcoholic drinks. Let us consider: **According to Deuteronomy 12:12,18,19, the Levites were to be included in the eating of sacrificial meals that the Israelites brought to the sanctuary. But priests/Levites were forbidden to have anything leavened, or alcoholic, when they served at the sanctuary!** (Exodus 34:25; Leviticus 10:8,9). Exodus 29:40 says that a fourth of a hin of wine (**yayin**) was to offered

with sacrifices. Yayin can be unfermented. Were the priests/Levites obligated to refrain from fermented drink, while the worshippers could drink fermented beverages in their presence before the Lord? **How could the priest/Levite share in the meal if the worshipper had fermented drink which was prohibited to him?** The Old Testament is replete with warnings and prohibitions about drinking fermented beverages. Is this the one place where an exception is made, even to sanction drinking alcohol before the Lord and to rejoice with the family, including children, while doing so?

In **Deuteronomy 14:22,23**, worshippers were to bring their tithes, including tithes of “new wine” (**tirosh**, which was always unfermented) to **“eat before the Lord.”** Did Moses then turn around in verse 26 and give permission to those who had to travel to buy fermented beverage to **“eat before the Lord”** along with their children and wives, and do so before the priests who were prohibited from doing that??

The logical conclusion is that **“sakar/**

sekar” in verse 26 does not mean “**strong drink/fermented beverage**”, but rather unfermented drink, just as the worshippers who were near brought with their tithes. The Targum of Onkelos has for sakar in verse 26, “old wine”, the Targum of Jonathan has “old wine” and the Arabic translates it, “squeezed/expressed juice”. (Definitions taken from The Temperance Bible Commentary, Frederic Richard Lees, Dawson Burns, London, 1868. p.53). Young’s Analytical Concordance defines “sekar” as **sweet drink** (what satiates or intoxicates), and defines “sikera”, the LXX translation of “sekar”, (Dt.14:26) as **sweet drink**, often fermented. He uses the same Hebrew word for both definitions. The conclusion is that one can be satiated (filled) without being intoxicated, and that sekar was often NOT fermented.

3.Sakar/Shakar/Schakar/Sekar/Schekar:

A. May have originally denoted juices of all kinds (other than grape juice) (Temperance Commentary p.36).

B. Is related to the word for sugar in

all Indo-Germanic and Semitic languages. Used in East (India, etc.) for palm sap, date juice, syrup and sugar and fermented palm wine. So it has the basic idea of sweetness. (Temperance, p.XXVII).

Sugar in Arabic is “sukkar”, in Persian is, “shakar”, in Sanskrit is “sakara”, candied sugar. (World Book Dictionary, Thorndike and Barnhart). See Isaiah 24:9 where the contrast is between “sakar” and “bitter”. “Sakar” is bitter to those who drink it. Alcoholic drink does not become bitter when it spoils, but “sweet drink” becomes bitter when spoiled. That seems to be the intent of the writer in this verse where things have deteriorated because of sins of the people. Because of the judgement of God, conditions had become so bad that what should taste sweet tastes bitter in the midst of upheaval and change. So shakar was valued for its sweetness which disappears as it ferments.

C. Robert Teachout in his *“The Use Of Wine In The Old Testament, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980”* says shekar, like yayin, can refer to grape juice as well

as wine, and that the verb shakar, related to shekar, means to **drink deeply**, and does not inherently mean drunkenness. (Bacchiocchi, *Wine In The Bible*, 2004 p. 228). (c.f. Song of Solomon 5:1; NKJV, NIV, ASV, Youngs Literal Translation). See also **Isaiah 49:26** where God said Israel's oppressors would be "drunk" with their own blood as with "sweet wine". The word translated "drunk" is from sakar, and "sweet wine" is from asis. Asis is only grape juice and cannot be fermented. Therefore one could not be drunken from asis. So it has to mean that one would be "filled to the full" "satiated", "drink deeply". Here is clear support that the verb form of sakar does not inherently mean drunken.

D. Samuel Fallows says that "shakar" means:

1. Luscious saccharine drink or sweet syrup especially sugar or honey of dates or of the palm tree. "It seems more probable that the palm syrup or honey denoted by shay-kawr (shakar) was used both as a sweetmeat or article of food and as a drink like the Hebrew "sobbe" and the Roman "sapa"(boiled wine)

diluted with water”.

2. Date or palm wine in its fresh and unfermented state. (He gives numerous sources to support this statement). (Samuel Fallows, *Popular And Critical Bible Encyclopedia And Scriptural Dictionary*, 1909, p. 546).

E. Leon C. Field in his, *Oinos: A Discussion of the Bible Wine Question*, 1883, says:

1. The LXX often renders “shachar” to “drink to repletion”. (P.79)

2. He quotes William Gesenius in A Hebrew And English Lexicon of the Old Testament Including The Biblical Chaldee as saying, “Sakar “does not always refer to drunkenness but sometimes to drink to the full” (p.1063; Field, p. 80).

3. He quotes Professor Lee as saying, “Shechar is etymologically akin to the word for sugar in all Aryan and Semitic tongues”. (Field, p. 81).

4. He says, “Shechar is the generic term for liquor of any other fruit than grape”. (P. 76)

5. He says, “*juice (asis) of pomegranates*” (Song of Solomon 8:2) was an unfermented beverage and a species of shekar. P.81. Asis was always just juice, never wine.

6. He says, “the juice of the palm tree in an unfermented state when just fresh from the tree, is a common and favorite beverage of the natives of Arabia and is called by a name whose root is the same as that of shekar. P.81

F. As noted above, *Young’s Analytical Concordance* defines sekar as “as sweet drink (what satiates or intoxicates), and defines “sikera”, the Greek translation in the LXX of “sekar”, (Dt.14:26) as **sweet drink**, often fermented. He uses the same Hebrew word for both definitions (p.273). The conclusion is that one can be satiated (filled with sekar) without being intoxicated, and that sekar was often NOT fermented. Sekar of course could be fermented, but the context will determine which is intended. It DOES NOT INHERENTLY MEAN INTOXICATING DRINK, but is a generic term like yayin.

Thus we have numerous authorities who aver that shekar/sakar can refer

to unfermented drinks produced from something other than grapes. That gives us ample support for concluding that such is the meaning in Deuteronomy 14:26 since the subject under consideration is the eating of tithes of the field that were to be shared with the Levites. That, along with the prohibitions for anyone imbibing strong drink throughout the Old Testament supports the conclusion that *sekar/sakar* in Deuteronomy 14:26 does not give sanction for drinking alcoholic beverages, but refers to an unfermented drink likely made from palm juice.

Section Two: **Examination of New Testament Passages Regarding Alcoholic Drinks**

Oinos (**οἶνος**) is the Greek word translated wine in the New Testament. We will see that it is a generic term referring to alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. It is also used in the LXX (Septuagint) to refer to both. Sometimes the Hebrew **yayin** is translated **oinos** in the LXX (Isaiah 16:10)

where it refers to treading grapes in the press and sometimes the Hebrew **tirosh** is translated **oinos** (Deuteronomy 18:4; 28:51; 33:28; Numbers 18:12; Nehemiah 10:37,39; Proverbs 3:10). Clearly in these passages where the Hebrew has tirosh, the fruit of the vine (grapes) is under consideration as it is the fruit of the harvest that is brought as first fruit offerings, along with first fruit of grain and olive trees. At times the LXX uses oinos to translate **yayin** where the context refers to fermented beverage. Thus we see that oinos in Greek **can refer** to that which is **non-alcoholic**, since the first fruit of the grape harvest could not be fermented, and treading fresh grapes would only produce non-fermented grape juice.

Based upon this cursory examination, it is not justifiable to interpret every instance of oinos in the New Testament as a reference to alcoholic **beverage**. Instead we should examine the context and the overall subject under consideration in the text.

Perhaps the most widely used passage used by some to justify drinking alcoholic

beverage is 1 Timothy 3:8 where it says a deacon must not ***“be given to much wine”***. The conclusion is then drawn that a deacon, and other Christians, can have “some” wine, since they would not be violating the prohibition of being given to *much wine*. Is that really what Paul intended to convey about the conduct or character of deacons?

Notice first, that elders are restricted by the phrase, ***“not given to wine”*** (1 Timothy 3:3). ***“Not given”*** is from the Greek, “prosechontas” (προσεχοντας). But the phrase “not given”, referring to the elder, is “me paroinon” (με παροινον), not “prosechontas”. Paroinon literally means, “alongside of”, “in the company of”, “associated with”. Prosechontas means “giving attention to”, “addicted to”, “devoted to”.

Prosechontas is found in 1 Timothy 4:13, where it is translated, ***“give heed to”*** (NKJV) (ASV), “to devote” (ESV) (NIV), “pay attention” (HCSB), and in 1 Timothy 4:1 where it is translated ***“giving heed to”*** (NKJV) (ASV), ***“follow”*** (NIV),

“pay attention to” (HCSB) **“devoting”** (ESV). It is also found in Titus 2:3 in reference to older women and is translated **“given to”** (NKJV), **“addicted”** (NIV) (HCSB), **“enslaved”** (ASV), **“slave to”** (ESV). It would seem that the translation **“not given to”** for **“me parionon”** in the case of the elder is not an accurate rendering. The translation of **“not given to”** for **“me...prosechontas”** is accurate if we understand that it means not devoted to, not enslaved to, or not addicted to.

So what does “me paroinon” mean in regard to an elder? Teachout quotes sources showing that the phrase means “in the presence of wine”, “befitting a drinking party” (Robert Teachout, p.473). An elder should not go to, or be in the places where it is the custom to drink alcohol, like taverns, bars, etc., as that would negatively impact his example as a spiritual leader. He should not be known as one who makes his habit of frequenting such establishments. As Solomon said, **“Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup,**

when it swirls around smoothly” (Proverbs 23:31). A man who habitually visits places where those drinks are consumed as the norm is disqualified from being an elder. Patton says, “the ancient paroinos was a man accustomed to attend drinking parties. Thus the Christian minister is required not only to be personally sober, but also to withhold his presence and sanction from those assemblies where alcoholic drinks are used..” (p. 93 William Patton, *Bible Wines*). Peter mentions the lifestyle of Gentiles prevalent in the first century: “...***drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties...***” and cautions Christians not to return to that kind of behavior (1 Peter 4:3).

There is another Greek word referring to elder’s qualifications that we need to consider. In 1 Timothy 3:2 the elder is to be “***temperate***”. Temperate is translated from the Greek, “nephalion”(νεφαλιον). That word means “to abstain from wine” (Strong’s Concordance, 3524). Check any Greek authority and that definition will be sustained. Vine says the root “nepho”(νεφω) (from which nephalion comes) means abstinence

from intoxicants. The New Analytical Greek Lexicon, Wesley J. Perschbacher, says it means, “to abstain from wine”. So inherent in the word “nephalion” is the command to **be abstinent from wine**. Thus the elder is to be abstinent from wine according to 1 Timothy 3:2. So the prohibition in verse 3 regarding “near to wine” does not primarily refer to drinking, but to making it a practice to frequent places where drinking alcohol is the main service of the establishment. The prohibition regarding drinking could not be clearer than in verse 2 where the real meaning of “nephalion” is abstinence from intoxicants, but that meaning is clouded by the translators in the use of the word “temperate”.

In 1 Timothy 3:11 wives (of elders, deacons) must be **“temperate”**. This is the same word “nephalion” that refers to the elder in v.2. Therefore according to the basic meaning of the word, wives of elders and deacons are to be **abstinent from wine**.

In Titus 2:2, older men are to be **“temperate”** (nephalion). Older women are not to be **“given to much wine”**

(dedoulomenas) (enslaved, addicted to).

If we follow the reasoning that says deacons can have *some* wine, because it says just don't take *too much*, then we come to this perplexing situation: Elders and their wives, and the wives of deacons and older men must *abstain* (nephalion) from wine, whereas deacons and older women are free to drink some alcohol *as long as they are not addicted to it*. Can one imagine the situation where elders and deacons and their wives get together with older men and women and the deacons and older women are free to drink alcoholic beverages in the presence of the rest of the company who are prohibited from doing that? What is there about deacons and older women that would exempt them from the prohibition? Are they granted that liberty because they are less spiritual and are given a concession, or are they more spiritual and are not bound by the weakness of elders, older men and their wives?

1. Older women are not to be enslaved to much wine so that they may teach younger women to be *“discreet”* (sophronos)

(σοφρονος) (Titus 2:5).

2. Younger men are to be “*sober minded*” (sophronein) (Titus 2:6).

3. Elders are to be “*sober*” (KJV), “*sober minded*” (NKJV), “*self-controlled*” (NIV) (ESV) (sophrona) (Titus 1:8).

The Greek word “sophrona” and its cognates mean to be self-controlled, or sober minded, but Lee Fields says, “sober mindedness is enjoined with explicit reference to physical abstinence on which its existence and exercise are conditional” (p. 215). In other words one cannot be truly sober minded or in control of self unless he is free from intoxicants.

In 1 Peter 5:8 Christians are warned to “*be sober*” (nephate) (νεφατε) because of the danger of Satan. Nephate is from the same root as nephalion, and literally means free from intoxicants. In 1 Thessalonians 5:6,8 Paul uses another form of that word to enjoin brethren to be “*sober*”, that is free from intoxicants.

The point is, older women could not teach younger women to be “*sober*” or

“sober minded” which is based on freedom from intoxicants if they themselves were not practicing such self-control. How could they teach younger women to be discreet (sophronos), which is based on abstinence from alcohol, if they were not abstinent?

Now for the phrase, **“not given to much wine”** in reference to deacons and older women. We have seen that the same Greek word is used in 1 Timothy 1:4, prohibiting brethren being **“given to, devoted to”** fables and genealogies. Would it be acceptable for brethren to pursue fables as long as they are not *devoted* to them? It would seem that this is a prohibition against giving attention to those useless and false systems that war against spirituality, rather than a sanction to delving into them short of being devoted to the endeavor. A similar prohibition is found in 1 Timothy 3:8 where the deacon is forbidden to be **“greedy of money/filthy lucre”, “sordid gain, shameful, base”** (Strong’s, 146) (some translate it **“dishonest gain”**).

Would it be acceptable for a deacon to pursue **“sordid gain, dishonest gain”** as long

as he is not devoted to it, greedy for it? If **“not given to, addicted to, much wine”** means he can have *some* as long as he is not *addicted*, then by the same reasoning he may pursue **“sordid, dishonest gain”** to some degree as long as he is not devoted to it. Sordid gain is not just money, it is gain that is tainted in some way.

Paul said, **“Do not let the sun go down upon your wrath”** (Ephesians 4:26). Does that mean it is acceptable to retain your wrath all day just as long as you release it by sun down? Proverbs 23:22 says, **“Do not despise your mother when she is old”**. Is it then acceptable to despise her when she is young? **Exodus 23:2** says, **“You shall not follow a crowd to do evil”**. Could we say, “Do not follow much people to do evil”? James 1:21 says, **“...lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness”** (NKJV) **“rampant wickedness”** (ESV) **“evil that is so prevalent”** (NIV). The word translated **“overflow”** (περισσειαν) is translated **“abundance”** in Romans 5:17 and 2 Corinthians 8:2. Does this imply that *some* wickedness is acceptable? Then if we use the

reasoning which says, “*not devoted to much wine*” sanctions the drinking of *some* wine, we could just as well say the statements, “*...not follow much people to do evil*” or “*...laying aside overflow of wickedness*” would sanction following “*some* people to do evil”, just as long as it is not a big crowd, or practicing “*some* wickedness” is acceptable as long as it is not an abundance!

But someone would object, “No one should follow anyone to do evil because we know from other scriptures that it should not be done. The same is true of drinking alcoholic beverages. There are abundant scriptures denouncing the partaking of alcoholic/fermented beverages. Did Paul grant an exception to those passages to deacons and older women?”

Some would want to translate the passage in 1 Timothy 3 to say, “*Elders must be abstinent*” (nephalion) (from alcohol) (3:2), but deacons can drink some for pleasure (3:8). Is that what Paul said? The negative prohibition of “*not devoted to*” cannot be wrested into a positive permission of “drink

some”. Paul could have used an entirely different vocabulary. In 1 Corinthians 14:34 he used the words “not permit” in referring to women taking leadership over men in the assembly. If he intended to forbid elders drinking alcohol but permitting deacons to drink some, why not use that phraseology, and say “elders must not drink at all, but deacons are permitted to drink some for pleasure”? It seems to me that he had no intention of giving permission for drinking *some* in his prohibition of being devoted to alcohol.

Under Old Testament law, the people were prohibited from raising an engraved stone in the land (Leviticus 26:1,2). Did that mean that it would be approved to raise one somewhere else, since that was not *prohibited*? The priests were not to drink alcoholic beverage when they served in the tabernacle in order to distinguish between holy and unholy (Leviticus 10:8-10). Did that mean they could drink it elsewhere, and that the requirement to distinguish between holy and unholy did not apply away from the tabernacle? Assuming *positive sanction* for

something based on the opposite of *a negative command* is not good hermeneutics. Ewing quotes Dawson Burns: “Cautions against excess can never be held to express approval of the acts referred to.” (p.150 Charles Wesley Ewing, *The Bible and Its Wines*).

The contrast is not between “given to, addicted to, **much** wine” and **having some** wine, but rather between “**given** to much wine” and “**given** to wine”. The emphasis should be on the “**given to, devoted to**”. So instead of “not given to much wine”, meaning it is permissible to drink “some” alcohol, we should see the contrast as saying it is acceptable to be “given to, devoted to” wine as long as it is not “much”. So the deacon should not be given to, **devoted to**, “much wine”, but he could be “**devoted to**” some wine. Again, the contrast is not between “**devoted to much**” and “**permitted to a lesser degree**”, but between “**devoted to/ given to much**” and “**devoted/given to some**” because that is the meaning of the word in the original language.

So the emphasis should be between

“not devoted” and **“devoted”** instead of between **“much”** and **“some/little”**. That same contrast is evident in 1 Timothy 1:4 where the same word is used to say ***“not devoted to fables and endless genealogies”***. The flip side of **“not devoted”** to fables would be **“devoted to”** fables, rather than finding permission to pursue fables as long as one is not devoted to them. So it is **“not devoted to”** versus **“devoted to”** rather than, **“not devoted to”** versus **“permitted to lesser degree”**. Being devoted to *much* or *little* would violate the admonition. To conclude that **“not given to, devoted to much”** allows **“given to some”** means that the deacon is allowed to be **“given to”** (be alongside, devoted to) the very thing that is prohibited to an elder!

Question: how does the drinker know where the dividing line is between drinking wine, and drinking “much” wine? How can a deacon or anyone else make sure that he does not become given to, devoted to, much wine, alcoholic beverage? *By leaving it entirely alone.*

If 1 Timothy 3:8 gives sanction to a deacon drinking *some* alcoholic beverage, it is the only place in Scripture where such sanction is given. The overwhelming consensus in both the Old and New Testaments is that alcoholic drink is a mocker and should be avoided by God fearing people (Proverbs 20:1). When wine is spoken of as a *blessing*, it is obvious from the context and the original language that it refers to **non-fermented beverage**. When it is spoken of **negatively**, it refers to **alcoholic beverage**.

We should not seek approval for drinking alcohol on the interpretation of a phrase in English that is based on a Greek phrase which may have had a different significance for the Greek speakers of the first century. Modern man wants to say that “not devoted to much, not given to much” means that one may “have some”. Would that be how a Greek speaker of the first century would reason?

Bacchiochi says: “The primary function of the phrase ‘not addicted to much wine’ is not to establish a general principle

regarding a moderate use of wine, but rather to exclude from the office of deacon any man known to be given to the use of much wine.” (Bacchiochi, *Wine in the Bible*, p.249). He further compares the phrase “*a little wine*” and “*much wine*” (1Timothy 5:23; 3:8). “Timothy was evidently totally abstinent and reluctant to take any wine at all. Paul advised him to take ‘*a little*’ for his stomach’s sake and other ailments, using wine as medicine. Would Paul then have given counsel to deacons to drink some simply for pleasure?” (ibid, p. 249). Alcohol is certainly not beneficial for stomach ailments so it would seem likely that whatever Timothy took would contain a very low content of alcohol and, in keeping with practices of the day and time, would likely have been diluted.

Albert Barnes said, “It is not affirmed that it would be proper for the deacon, any more than the bishop, to indulge in the use of wine in small quantities, but it is affirmed that a man who is much given to the use of wine ought not, on any consideration, to be a deacon” (Albert Barnes, *Notes on*

Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, p.144). He said further, “It may be remarked here, that this qualification was everywhere regarded as necessary for a minister of religion. Even the heathen priests, on entering a temple, did not drink wine (Bloomfield). The use of wines and of strong drinks of all kinds was absolutely prohibited to the Jewish ministers of every rank when they were about to engage in the service of God (Leviticus 10:9). Why should it then be any more proper for a Christian minister to drink wine than for a Jewish or heathen priest? Shall a minister of the Gospel be less holy than they? Shall he have a feebler sense of the purity of his vocation? (Barnes, p.144)

Bacchiochi concludes “***not addicted to much wine***” is most probably a loose form of speech intended to express abstinence from the use of wine. To interpret the phrase as implying consent to drink wine moderately would place this interpretation in open contradiction with the general teaching of Scripture and with the specific admonitions given by Paul regarding abstinence. (op

cit p. 250). Ewing says, “Another rule of Biblical interpretation is: when seeking to understand certain expressions in the Bible, we must keep in mind that we are dealing with writings that are two thousand to three thousand five hundred years old. They are expressions of an Oriental people who spoke different languages than we speak, and used terms peculiar to their customs which they clearly understood, but which we may not use or understand today. The languages used by these people were Hebrew, Chaldean, and Greek. In these languages they had idiomatic expressions which at times meant things entirely different in their day from what these expressions mean to us in the English language two thousand or more years later.” (op cit., p.148).

A second passage which is often appealed to for support of drinking alcohol is John chapter 2 when Jesus turned water into “wine”. Did Jesus provide more alcohol to people who were already “filled” with intoxicants at a wedding party? If He did so, would that not place him in conflict with the

injunctions of Proverbs 23:29-32? Would the holy Son of God provide a drink that ***“bites like a serpent and stings like a viper”***, causes, ***“woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, and wounds”*** to a wedding party that was already high on alcoholic drink? To do so would put Him in contradiction to everything that holiness means. Let us examine the text and see if there is any support for the conclusion that Jesus, the Holy Son of God provided alcoholic drink to wedding guests. He being divine, would certainly be aware of the warning in the prophet Habbakuk : ***“Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbor, pressing him to your bottle, even to make him drunk”*** (Habbakuk 2:15). If the guests had already freely drunk alcohol, they would have at least been intoxicated to some degree. Our Lord would then have been providing tipsy guests with more alcohol “to make them drunk”. Does that sound like something the Son of God would do??

Notice that the text does not say the guests were “drunk”. It does not even say that the master of the feast was referring to

the feast at hand. He was speaking in general terms about what was common practice at wedding feasts of the time. He says the usual practice was when guests have “**well drunk**” (NKJV), “*drunk freely*” (HCSB, ASV, ESV), “*too much to drink*” (NIV), “methusko” “μεθυσκω” of the best wine, then old wine is brought out.

Was the “wine” that the guests were drinking alcoholic, and then the “wine” that Jesus provided also alcoholic? Remember that the word wine in Greek is “oinos” and is a generic term that can mean either fermented or unfermented beverage. Therefore one cannot draw the conclusion that the drink at this wedding feast was alcoholic just from the use of the word “oinos”. The text, and other relevant texts, must determine the meaning in this passage.

What reason is there to conclude that the drink was non- alcoholic?

1. We have already shown that it would be contradictory to the very nature of the sinless Son of God to provide a beverage that “*bites like a serpent and stings like a*

viper” to anyone.

2. If it was alcoholic drink then the Son of God was complicit in promoting drunkenness. Who can believe it?

3. It has already been shown that “oinos” can refer to unfermented drink.

4. The phrase translated, “drunk freely”, “well drunk” “methusko” “μεθυσκω” does not necessarily mean drunken, but can mean “satiated” “filled to satisfaction” “filled to abundance”. Harold K Moulton in his Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised, 1979, says “methusko” (μεθυσκω) in John 2:10 means “to drink freely” (p.261). That is how it is translated in the ESV, ASV and HCSB. Notice these passages where the same word, or its cognates, is used in the LXX (Septuagint) to express the idea of being full, or filled to satisfaction.

A. Psalm 65:10 (LXX 64:10) ***“You water its ridges abundantly”***

B. Psalm 36:8 (LXX 35:8) ***“with the fullness of your house”***

C. Isaiah 55:10 ***“water the earth”***

D. Jeremiah 31:14,25 (LXX 38:14,25) ***“I will satiate the soul..” “I have***

satiated the weary soul”

E. Isaiah 58:11 “*satisfy your soul*”

F. Isaiah 34:5 “*sword shall be bathed*”,
“*drink its fill*” (ESV)

G. Psalm 23:7 “*cup runneth over*”

H. Haggai 1:6 “*not filled with drink*”,
“*never have your full*” (ESV).

The evidence thus shows that the expression relative to the wedding guests does not state, or imply, that they were drunk. It simply means that those that the master of the feast was referring to (which might not have been the feast at hand) had been satisfied with the beverage served. Certainly if they had drunk freely of fermented beverage they would have been intoxicated to some degree and it is inconceivable that Christ would have anything to do with such a party, much less be complicit in supplying them with additional alcoholic drink.

What reason is there to conclude that the drink which Jesus supplied was alcoholic? Only the indefensible position that “oinos”/“*wine*” only refers to alcoholic drink. It has been shown above that “oinos”

is a generic term and the context determines whether fermented or unfermented beverage is under consideration.

Did the Corinthian church get high on alcoholic drink in observing the Lord's Supper? (1 Corinthians 11:21). This passage has the same root word that is used in John 2:10. It is the verb "methuei" "μεθουει". It can have the same meaning as the cognates of methuo as explained above. There is no reason to translate it "drunk" or "drunken" in 1 Corinthians 11:21. There are two good reasons for this conclusion:

1. The beverage of the Lord's Supper was "***fruit of the vine***". Fruit of the vine is never translated "wine" in any passage. Paul calls it the "cup" (1 Corinthians 11:25) and the "***cup of blessing***" (1Corinthians 10:16). Solomon said, "***Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup***" (Proverbs 23:31) Would the Lord of Glory use such a drink in His Supper? Would Paul call that beverage sparkling in the cup the "***cup of blessing***" in Lord's Supper? How could a cup of poison (alcohol) be called "***the***

cup of blessing”?

During the Passover week, which was the time when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, there was to be NO LEAVEN in any Jew's house. Leaven is the same as fermentation. No leavened bread, no leavened (fermented) beverage, no leaven in anything was allowed. So the beverage that Jesus used and gave to His disciples to follow in practice was plain grape juice.

We observe the Lord's supper with unleavened bread because that is what Our Lord used when He instituted the supper. We should use unleavened juice (plain grape juice) just as He used for the same reason. The bread represents His Body so unleavened bread, with no taint of decay (fermentation) is a fitting symbol of His pure body. In the same manner, the fruit of the vine represents His blood. His blood was pure, without any taint of the poison of alcohol in it. Only the pure juice of the vine accurately represents His pure blood. Jews may have veered from the original practice in later times when they observed

the Passover, but there is no scriptural support for using fermented beverage in the Lord's Supper.

So the likelihood of the Corinthians using fermented beverage in the Lord's Supper is remote, and has no foundation or precedent in scripture.

2. It has already been shown the word translated "drunk" or "drunken" in 1 Corinthians 11:21 can mean "satiated" or "filled". The contrast in 1 Corinthians 11:21 is between one who is hungry and one who is full from a meal, not between one who is hungry and another who is drunken. ***"For in eating each one goes ahead with his own meal"*** (ESV). One goes hungry (no food) and another is filled (with food)"methuei". Hungry is the antithesis of "methuei", and thus the meaning would be "one is hungry and another is satiated".

Even if it were granted that the Corinthians were using alcoholic beverages in the Lord's Supper, it would give no support for drinking alcohol since Paul condemned their perversion of the Supper!

Let us reason from the text of scripture to determine the Lord's will for us as His disciples. Let us imitate his purity of life in word, thought, and deed. Let us not contaminate our bodies or our minds with the poison that *“bites like a serpent and stings like a viper”*.

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