

Drinking in the New Testament

Text: 1 Peter 4:1-7

(by John Hamilton)

I. One of the greatest difficulties in studying God's stance on drinking is the bias translators have brought to the meaning of words in the Bible.

A. We have seen in the Old Testament that "wine" did not always mean an intoxicating drink made from grape juice.

1. When the context clearly showed the liquid was intoxicating, it was either condemned or used for purposes that did not require consumption.
2. When the context clearly showed it was not intoxicating, it was always approved.

B. This same difficulty carries over into the New Testament

1. The most common word translated as "wine" is oinos which is a direct equivalent of the Hebrew word yayin.
 - a. The word refers to all products of grape juice and only the context can determine to which is being referred.
2. The Greek word sikera is equivalent to the Hebrew word shekar which refers to strong drinks made from juice or grains. It is only found in Luke 1:15 where John's parents are instructed to keep John away from wine and strong drinks.
3. The Greek word gleukos is equivalent to the Hebrew word tirosh. It literally means sweet or new, as in grape juice. It is only seen in Acts 2:13 when the Apostles are accused of getting drunk on grape juice (a mocking of their behavior).

II. Was drinking implied in the New Testament?

A. 1 Corinthians 11:20-22

1. The argument here is that the Corinthians were abusing the Lord's Supper by turning it into a common meal that wasn't being shared. Some were overeating and getting drunk, which was unacceptable behavior for Christians in a worship service so Paul tells them to take their meals and drinking home.
 - a. The implication is that Paul is saying "If you want to overindulge, do it at home."
 - b. Therefore, the Paul is permitting them to drink at home.
2. The key word is the one translated "drunk". It comes from the Greek word methuo, which literally means "filled to the full."
 - a. It can mean someone who has their fill of an alcoholic drink, but it can also mean someone who has their fill of any drink and no longer desires more.

- b. Example, in John 2:10, the governor is not saying everyone is in a drunken stupor, but that they had enough to drink before the good drink was brought out.
 - c. In the Septuagint, this Greek word is used in Psalms 23:5 when it says “My cup overflows”.
 - d. Notice that methuo in I Corinthians 11:21 is contrasted to the word hunger (peina). What is the opposite of being hungry? Why, being full. This then should have been the correct translation.
 - e. Leon C. Field, “Methuei, in this case, is plainly contrasted with peina which is correctly rendered as ‘hungry.’ The antithesis, therefore, requires the former to be understood in the generic sense of ‘surfeited,’ not in the narrow sense of ‘drunken.’ The overfilled man is compared to the under filled man. This is the interpretation adopted by the great body of expositors, ancient and modern.”
 - f. Paul’s point is that people were coming at different times. While some had the satisfaction of partaking of the Lord’s Supper, others were missing out completely.
3. Besides, why would Paul condemn drunkenness in I Corinthians 5:11 and 6:10 (same Greek word) and then in I Corinthians 11:22 tell them to do their drinking at home?
- a. The only sensible thing is to realize that the word is being used in two different senses.
 - b. Finally, the admonition to eat at home (I Corinthians 11:33-34) shows the problem Paul is address is overindulgence and not drunkenness.

B. Ephesians 5:18

1. The argument is that Paul condemns the misuse of wine, but not the moderate use of alcohol.
 - a. Markus Barth, “The condemnation of the misuse of wine does not preclude a proper use of alcoholic beverage.”
 - b. The claim is that if Paul was condemning all drinking, he would have said “Do not drink at all.”
2. Two states are being contrasted, being filled with wine and being filled with the Spirit. The point of the contrast is that you cannot have both at once, they are mutually exclusive. You cannot be partially filled with spirits and partially filled with the Spirit.
 - a. Similar exclusions
 - 1) Luke 1:15 - No drinking, he will be filled with the Spirit
 - 2) Acts 2:4, 15 - These men were filled with the Spirit, so they could not be drunk.
 - b. The indwelling of the Spirit is connected with the abstinence of liquor.
3. The clause which literally reads “in which is debauchery” refers to the wine.
 - a. Many translations change it to “that is debauchery” meaning getting drunk is debauchery, but that is not what the original text states.
 - b. Many believe Paul is alluding to Proverbs 23:31 “Do not look at wine when it is red.” Indicating there is a problem in intoxicating wine.

- c. In a letter to Laeta, a lady who wrote asking how to bring up her infant daughter, Jerome advised: "Let her learn even now not to drink wine 'wherein is excess.'" A quote of Ephesians 5:18 showing that Jerome say it was the wine, not the drunkenness that held the excess.
 - d. Albert Barnes "Let Christians when about to indulge in a glass of wine, think of this admonition [Ephesians 5:18]. Let them remember that their bodies should be the temple of the Holy Ghost rather than a receptacle for intoxicating drinks. Was any man ever made a better Christian by the use of wine? Was any minister ever better fitted to counsel an anxious sinner, or to pray, or to preach the gospel, by the use of intoxicating drinks? Let the history of wine-drinking and intemperate clergymen answer."
4. There is a reason why Paul did not say "Do not drink any wine."
- a. One there are limited proper times to use alcohol, such as in medicine - I Timothy 5:23
 - b. Since the Greek work oinis includes all grape juice products, a statement saying drink no oinis at all would eliminate grape juice from the Christian's diet.

C. Jesus approved of drinking by turning water to wine - John 2:1-10

1. Remember that the Bible is very clear in its condemnation of drunkenness
2. Jesus had 6 jars, each holding 20 to 30 gallons, filled with wine
3. 120 to 180 gallons of alcoholic wine would make a large number of people drunk, especially after already drinking
4. "But the governor of the feast said it was good wine"
 - a. The argument assume that the higher the alcoholic content of the wine, the better it tastes
 - b. Such is not the case in general, and in a society that lacked refrigeration, fresh juice was prized over vinegary or fermented juice.
 - c. At best te governor's statement does not prove the oinos was alcoholic.
5. "The governor mentioned that everyone was already drunk"
 - a. Drunkenness was condemned in Jewish society, just as it is condemned in Christian society
 - b. One of the duties of a governor was to prevent drunkenness, so the argument would saying that the governor admitted to failing his job.
 - c. As mentioned before "drunk" (methuo) means filled to the full.
 - d. More in keeping is that the governor was saying that everyone had already had their fill of oinos.

III. Abstinence

A. The Greek adjective nephaios and the verb nepho.

1. It is the joining of two words ne “not” and piein “drink”
2. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, “The concept which underlies the verb nepho ‘to be sober’ and the whole word group is formally negative. It is the opposite of intoxication both in the literal sense of intoxication with wine and in the figurative sense of states of intoxication attributable to other causes.”
3. The Jewish philosopher Philo illustrates this definition: “So too soberness [nephein] and drunkenness are opposites.”
4. Liddel and Scott defines it as “to be sober, to drink no wine.”
5. Clement of Alexandria once said, “I therefore admire those who have adopted an austere [nephalion] life, and who are fond of water, the medicine of temperance, and flee as far as possible from wine, shunning it as they would the danger of fire.”

B. I Thessalonians 5:4-8

1. Nephomen is translated as sober in both verse 6 and 8.
2. Notice the contrasts: Light-Darkness, Awake-Sleeping, Sober-Drunk
3. It is apparent that Paul desires the Thessalonians to be “alert,” mentally watchful, and “sober,” physically abstinence.
 - a. Alertness is often connected with abstinence of intoxicating beverages - Luke 12:45
 - b. It is physical abstinence because it is contrasted with being drunk

C. I Peter 1:13

1. Here again mental vigilance is correlated to physical abstinence
2. You can see the translators’ bias in the NASB when they added “in spirit” even though the word is the opposite of drunkenness.
3. What is interesting is just after nepho is the word teleios which is an adverb meaning fully
 - a. Grammatically it can modify the “sober” before it or the “fix your hope” that comes after it.
 - b. Most translators attach it to the “fix your hope” because they believe the Bible teaches moderation instead of total abstinence.
 - c. Interestingly, older translations, such as the Latin Vulgate, attach the word “completely” to the word “sober,” causing it to read “perfectly sober” or “being wholly abstinent.”

D. I Peter 5:8

1. Again physical abstinence is joined with mental vigilance.
2. The wording corresponds to I Thessalonians 5:6
3. What is really interesting is the word devour is katapino which literally means “drink down”.
 - a. “Not drink” is contrasted with “drink down.”
 - b. Adam Clarke, “It is not every one that he can swallow down. Those who are sober and vigilant are proof against him; these he may not swallow down. There is a beauty in this verse, and striking apposition between the first and last words, which I think have not been noticed; – Be sober, nepsate, from ne, not, and piein, to drink – do not swallow down – and the word katapien, from kata, down and piein, to drink. If you swallow strong drink down, the devil will swallow you down. Hear this, ye drunkards, toppers, tipplers, or by whatsoever name ye are known in society, or among your fellow-sinners, strong drink is not only your way to the devil, but the devil’s way into you. Ye are such as the devil particularly may swallow down.”

IV. Sobriety

A. The Greek word *sophron* is used fifteen times in the New Testament.

1. It literally means “safe” “mind”
2. It means someone who is rational, in the sense of being intellectually sound.

B. It is commonly connected with the idea of physical abstinence, as in the proverb “a sound mind in a sound body.”

1. In classical Greek writings, Aristotle wrote “By abstaining from pleasures we become sober [sophrones]”.
2. He also stated “He who abstains from physical pleasure, and in this very thing takes delight, is sober [sophron]”
3. The Jewish philosopher Philo defined the opposite of *sophrosune*, namely *aphrosune*, as a person who “inflamed by wine drowns the whole life in ceaseless and unending drunkenness.”

C. I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 2:2

1. The terms “temperate” [*nephalion*] and “prudent” or “sensible” [*sophrona*] are joined together.
2. Adam Clarke, “He must be vigilant, *nephaleos*, from ne, not, and pino, to drink. Watchful; for as one who drinks is apt to sleep, so he who abstains from it is more likely to keep awake, and attend to his work and charge.”
3. Albert Barnes, “This word (*nephalios*) occurs only here and in verse 11; Titus 2:2. It means, properly, sober, temperate, abstinent, especially in respect to wine; then, sober-minded, watchful, circumspect.”

D. I Peter 4:1-3, 7

1. Sensuality or lasciviousness (aselgaiais) - a desire for sin so strong that you don't care what other people (or God) think about your sin. A person who thinks he has a license to sin
2. Lusts (epithumiais) - a desire for what is forbidden
3. Drunkenness (oinophlugiais) - "wine" + "bubble up". Thus, excess of wine. A down-and-out drunk. An alcoholic. This word was used to describe Alexander the Great's drinking bouts that eventually led to his death.
4. Reveling or carousals (komois) - Partying with heavy drinking. Binge drinking.
5. Drinking parties or banqueting (potois) - Social gatherings with light drinking. Cocktail parties, "having a few drinks with the boys," social drinking.
6. It ends with the admonition to be sound in mind and abstinent in body so we may be able to pray.
7. Similar warnings - Galatians 5:19-21, Romans 13:12-14

V. Not addicted to wine – 1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7

- A. Some argue that a literal translation of nephalios as abstinent contradicts Paul's later enjoinder for a bishop not to be a drunkard. They assume that by saying "not a drunkard," Paul is allowing the moderate use of wine, so long it is not in excess.**
- B. Actually, the literal translation means "not near wine"**
 1. Lees and Burns, "The ancient paroinos was a man accustomed to attend drinking parties, and, as a consequence, to become intimately associated with strong drink."
 2. This definition fits well with I Corinthians 5:11
 3. Albert Barnes, "The Greek word (paroinos) occurs in the New Testament only here [I Timothy 3:3] and in Titus 1:7. It means, properly, by wine; that is, spoken of what takes place by or over wine, as revelry, drinking-songs, etc. Then it denotes, as it does here, one who sits by wine; that is, who is in the habit of drinking it ... It means that one who is in the habit of drinking wine, or who is accustomed to sit with those who indulge in it, should not be admitted to the ministry. The way in which the apostle mentions the subject here would lead us fairly to suppose that he did not mean to commend its use in any sense; that he regarded it as dangerous and that he would wish the ministers of religion to avoid it altogether."

VI. Not given to much wine – 1 Timothy 3:8

A. me oino pollo prosechontas.

1. "Given" is too mild of a translation for prosechontas. The word means: paying attention, giving heed to, guarding, watching, devoting oneself to, or attached to.
2. Being addicted to much wine, as it is translated in the New American Standard Bible, or indulging in much wine, as translated in the New International Version, better captures the meaning.

B. A deacon is not to be a man whom alcohol plays a dominate role in his life.

C. It would be a mistake to assume this is permission for casual use.

1. Albert Barnes notes, "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."
2. We can only take it for what is said: an addict cannot be a deacon.
3. For anything thing else, we must look at other passages of the Bible to see how much, if any alcohol, was tolerated in a Christian's life.

VII. Obviously, the case for drinking cannot be made from the New Testament

A. Instead of supporting light drinking, the passages give clear warning against all drinking of intoxicants.

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