

**COMMON ASSUMPTIONS
ABOUT WINE IN THE BIBLE**

Pastor Russell Boone

In a sermon preached on March 24, 2002, entitled “Good Wine, Glad Hearts,” Mark Driscoll, a popular pastor especially among Christian young people, defended the enjoyment of alcoholic beverages among Christians.¹ His sermon is a good example of the common assumptions used by Christians today in attempting to defend social drinking. I believe that these assumptions are based on misconceptions about history and the Bible. We will examine six of the main assumptions in order to get a biblical understanding of the use of wine and alcoholic beverages.

1. IN THE BIBLE ‘WINE’ ALWAYS REFERS TO ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

In the above mentioned sermon, Driscoll promoted this misconception when he said,

A couple of things, if you were raised in the legalistic church are this. One, some say, “Oh, when the Bible says wine, it doesn’t mean wine.” What does it mean, pony? ...I mean, when it says wine, it means wine. Okay, when it says God, it means God. When it says hell, it means hell. It just – the Bible speaks of wine frequently, and every time it does, it means wine.²

If the word ‘wine’ in the Bible always refers to an alcoholic beverage, then there might be a case for social drinking. If it does not, then a case could be made for abstinence. This is why Driscoll felt it was necessary to say that the biblical writers always used the word ‘wine’ to mean alcoholic beverages. It could be said that the use of the word ‘wine’ in the Bible is so important that the case for social drinking rises and falls on it.

Consider the following uses of the word in the Bible. The KJV translators used ‘wine’ to express the meaning of 13 different original language words. Ten of the words are Hebrew, one is Aramaic, and two are Greek. We will consider each word to determine whether the word

¹ <http://marshill.com/media/proverbs/good-wine-glad-hearts>

² Ibid

'wine' was always referring to alcohol or if it was ever used for unfermented drinks.

1) *Chemer*, חֶמֶר

This word is used 2 times in the Old Testament. In *Isaiah 27:2*, it is translated as 'red wine'. In *Deuteronomy 32:14*, it is translated with the word 'pure', as in 'pure blood of the grape'. The root of this word can mean 'troubled' or possibly 'fermented'. It can also refer to the color red. So, in these 2 instances the word might refer either to the color of the grapes that would be pressed or to fermented wine.

2) *Chamar*, חָמַר

This word is related to the previous one, but it is Aramaic, not Hebrew. It is used 2 times in *Ezra 6:9* and *7:22*, referring to offerings given by the people in Jerusalem, and 4 times in *Daniel 5:1, 2, 4, and 23*, where it seems to refer to alcoholic wine served at Belshazzar's party.

3) *Yayin*, יַיִן

This is the most commonly used word for 'wine' in the Old Testament being used 134 times. Though it is assumed by many to only refer to fermented wine, its usage in the Bible proves that it is a general word referring to either fermented or unfermented wine. In *Genesis 9:21*, the word is obviously used of fermented wine since it is what caused Noah's drunkenness. *Isaiah 16:10* is a case where it clearly refers to unfermented wine. It speaks of treaders not being able to tread out 'wine in their presses'. Certainly wine that is still in the presses refers to unfermented juice.

4) *Yegeb*, יֵעֶבֶב

This word is used 16 times and normally refers to the winepress, the instrument used to make the wine. In *Deuteronomy 16:13*, the KJV translates it 'wine', since it speaks about gathering in the harvest. You would not gather in a winepress, but the grapes that go into the winepress to make the wine. In this case, was the wine that was

gathered in fermented or unfermented? It does not say specifically, but it would make sense that since it was just harvested, it would be unfermented.

5) *Mimsak*, מִמְסַק

This word is used just 2 times. In *Proverbs 23:30*, it is translated ‘mixed wine’, and in *Isaiah 65:11*, ‘drink offering’. The root word has the idea of something that is mixed. This could be referring to diluting with water or mixing with other juices or spices. In the example in *Proverbs* it seems to refer to an alcoholic beverage, since the verses surrounding it warn against drunkenness. In the other example it is not clear if it is alcoholic or not.

6) *Sobe*, סָבָא

This word comes from a root meaning ‘to drink heavily’. It definitely seems to be related to drunkenness. It is used 3 times. In *Isaiah 1:22*, it is translated ‘wine’. It is in a section that is metaphorically showing the hypocrisy of the leaders in Jerusalem. They were like alcohol that was watered down so that it was not what it appeared to be. God knew those drunken leaders would relate to that metaphor. In *Hosea 4:18*, it is translated ‘drink’ and seems to refer to an alcoholic beverage. Finally, in *Nahum 1:10*, it is translated ‘drunkards’. Here it could only refer to a fermented drink.

7) *Enab*, עֲנַב

This word is almost always translated ‘grapes’ and is used 17 times. Only once is it translated ‘wine’, in *Hosea 3:1*, and the marginal reading says, ‘or grapes’. This word does little to help us in determining whether all ‘wine’ in the Bible was fermented.

8) *Asis*, עָסִיס

This word is used 5 times in the Old Testament. It is translated ‘new wine’, ‘sweet wine’, and ‘juice’. It comes from a root meaning ‘to press

out'. It refers to freshly pressed out juice. In *Joel 1:5*, some might think it refers to an alcoholic drink since it is used while mentioning drunkards. But, after careful examination, it says that the drunkards and drinkers of wine (*yayin*, in this case fermented) should weep because God would cut off the harvest of 'new wine' (*asis*) from them. In other words, there would be no juice to make fermented wine from.

9) *Shekar*, שֵׁכָר

This word is normally translated 'strong drink'. It is used 20 times, though only once in, *Numbers 28:7*, is it translated 'strong wine'. The word comes from a root meaning, 'to be drunk'. So, it clearly refers to an intoxicating beverage.

10) *Shemer*, שֶׁמֶר

This word is used 4 times and refers to a part of the fermenting process. It is translated 'dregs', 'wines on the lees', and just 'lees'. Lees refers to the deposits of dead yeast that come during fermentation.

11) *Tirosh*, תִּירוֹשׁ

This is the most common Hebrew word for unfermented wine. It is often translated 'new wine'. Some would debate whether this word actually refers to unfermented wine. Driscoll seemed to imply this in the sermon referenced above,

Some will say, "Oh, well, it speaks of new wine and new wine is wine that's not fermented, doesn't have alcohol." But, the Bible says that, "Don't get drunk on new wine." So, obviously, new wine still has alcohol.³

It is not clear which Scripture reference Driscoll was referring to, since none of them speak about getting drunk on new wine. But, let us consider how the Old Testament text used *tirosh*. Most often the word appears with 'corn' as part of Israel's harvest. In this case it would make sense that it referred to unfermented juice that is newly pressed. In

³ Ibid

Psalm 4:7, David said that God had put 'gladness' in his heart, 'more than in the time that their corn and their wine (*tirosh*) increased'. Some assume that since *tirosh* is said to bring gladness, it have to have been fermented. But, David was not talking about the short-lived sensation of intoxication, but the joy of harvest season. Also, some point to *Hosea 4:11*, to say that *tirosh* refers to an intoxicating drink.

Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart.

They wonder how 'new wine' could take away the heart if it was not fermented. But, *Hosea* is speaking about 3 different things that sinful hearts lust after. 'Whoredom' refers to immorality. 'Wine' (*yayin*) refers to intoxication. 'New wine' (*tirosh*) refers to prosperity. *Isaiah 65:8* makes it clear that 'new wine' is indeed unfermented juice. It talks about new wine that is 'found in the cluster'. Since grapes do not ferment on the vine, this must be referring to unfermented juice.

12) *Gleukos*, γλεῦκος

This word is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *tirosh*. It refers to new wine or unfermented grape juice. The word itself refers to something that is sweet, as in the modern English word 'glucose'. It is only used 1 time in the New Testament, in *Acts 2:13*. Here the believers on the day of Pentecost were being mocked by the unbelievers in Jerusalem. They joked that the believers were 'full of new wine', implying that they were acting like drunken men. So, some would reason that *gleukos* must refer to fermented wine since the mockers implied that the apostles had gotten drunk on it. But this is to misunderstand the tenor of their taunting. Those blasphemers thought they were making a clever joke by implying that the believers were so odd that they could even get drunk on unfermented juice.

13) *Oinos*, οἶνος

This word is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *yayin*. It is the common word for wine. It is used 25 times in the New Testament. Like

yayin, it is a general word referring to either fermented or unfermented wine. Two examples should suffice. In *Ephesians 5:18*, believers are warned about being drunk with wine. Obviously the wine referred to would have to be fermented if you could get drunk from it. In *Matthew 9:17*, Jesus used the example that people put 'new wine' into new wineskins for it to be preserved. Here, the word *ainos* is combined with the word 'new' to refer to unfermented wine.

Considering the biblical words translated 'wine', it is clear that sometimes 'wine' was unfermented and sometimes it was fermented. To say that 'wine' in the Bible always means intoxicating drinks is an assumption not based on fact.

2. ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES OF TODAY ARE THE SAME AS IN THE BIBLE

This assumption is very histrocentric. It assumes that the wine the Bible refers to must be just like the wine people drink today. But, if it can be proven that the wine people drink today is substantially different from the wine referred to in the Bible, a case could be made for abstinence. Driscoll argues that wine in Bible times was never diluted with water.

Some – how many of you were told that the Christians only had mixed wine? Wine that was mixed with water to dilute it, okay? They lied to you.⁴

The very thing that he denies is actually a well substantiated historical fact. People in Bible times did mix their wine with water.

The process of mixing wine was so common that the Greeks had special vessels for this purpose. The *amphora* was a tall vessel used for storing the fermented wine. The *krater* was a bowl used for mixing the wine with water. The *kyathos* was a ladle-like cup used to dip into the

⁴ Ibid

krater. The *kylix* was a cup used to drink the diluted wine poured from the *kyathos*.



Amphora



Krater



Kyathos



Kylix

The writings of ancient Greek and Roman authors speak about the practice of diluting wine. In the 8th century BC, in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses spoke about a wine so strong that it had to be diluted.

I also took a goatskin of sweet black wine which had been given me by Maron, Apollo son of Euanthes, who was priest of Apollo the patron god of Ismarus, and lived within the wooded precincts of the temple. When we were sacking the city we respected him, and spared his life, as also his wife and child; so he made me some presents of great value- seven talents of fine gold, and a bowl of silver, with twelve jars of sweet wine, unblended, and of the most exquisite flavour. Not a man nor maid in the house knew about it, but only himself, his wife, and one housekeeper: when he drank it he mixed twenty parts of water to one of wine, and yet the fragrance from the mixing-bowl was so exquisite that it was impossible to refrain from drinking.⁵

⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, Book IX, trans. Samuel Butler, <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.9.ix.html>

In the 1st century AD, Pliny, the elder, also spoke about the wine of Maronea to which Homer had alluded. In his own day, he wrote about the amount of water that needed to be used in diluting it.

Mucianus, who thrice held the consulship, and one of our most recent authors, when in that part of the world was witness himself to the fact, that with one sextarius of this wine it was the custom to mix no less than eighty sextarii of water: he states, also, that this wine is black, has a strong bouquet, and is all the richer for being old.⁶

Plutarch, in the 1st century AD, wrote about the need to get the right mixture of wine and water.

Drink either five or three, but not four. For the fifth has the sesquialteral proportion, three cups of water being mingled with two of wine; the third has the double proportion, two cups of water being put to one of wine; but the fourth answereth to the epitrite proportion of three parts of water poured into one of wine.⁷

In the 3rd century AD, Athenaeus wrote about what he thought the proper mixture of wine should be. His opinion differed from that of Plutarch.

Wine to our daily feasts brings cheerful laughter,
When mix'd with proper quantities of water;
Men saucy get if one-third wine they quaff;
While downright madness flows from half-and-half.⁸

⁶ Pliny, the elder, *Natural History*, Book XIV, Chapter 6, trans. John Bostock, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D14%3Achapter%3D6>

⁷ Plutarch, *Symposiacs*, Book III, Question 9, in *Plutarch, The Morals, Vol. 3*, ed. William W Goodwin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1878).

⁸ Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists or Banquet of the Learned*, trans. C D Yonge (London: Henry G Bohn, 1854) 59.

The Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria recommended the mixture of water with wine in the 2nd century AD.

And it is best to mix the wine with as much water as possible, and not to have recourse to it as to water, and so get enervated to drunkenness, and not pour it in as water from love of wine. For both are works of God; and so the mixture of both, of water and of wine, conduces together to health, because life consists of what is necessary and of what is useful. With water, then, which is the necessary of life, and to be used in abundance, there is also to be mixed the useful.⁹

It is clear, then, that the process of diluting wine is historically verifiable. It was a common practice in ancient times. Not that the Greeks and Romans would always mix their wine with so much water that it would be difficult to get drunk on. Intoxication was a part of Greco/Roman culture. But, it is wrong to say that in Bible times wine was never mixed with water. If the practice of mixing wine with water was common in Roman culture, then it would not be far-fetched to say that the wine referred to in the Bible could have been diluted to a very low alcoholic content.

It seems reasonable that in the Greco/Roman culture of the first century the Christians would have wanted to drink heavily diluted wine. There are two good reasons for this. First, it would reduce the alcoholic content to such a degree that it would be virtually impossible to get drunk on. This would keep them from breaking the commands against intoxication. Second, it would be a way of making safe drinking water. Adding wine to water has a purifying effect. The Apocrypha, in 2 Maccabees 15:39, seems to allude to this practice.¹⁰

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, Book II, Chapter 2, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Vol. II, *Fathers of the Second Century*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.vi.iii.ii.ii.html>.

¹⁰ Not that we in any way endorse the Apocrypha as Scriptural. We only refer to it as a reference to ancient practices.

For as it is hurtful to drink wine or water alone; and as wine mingled with water is pleasant, and delighteth the taste: even so speech finely framed delighteth the ears of them that read the story.

It was hurtful to drink wine alone because it would lead to drunkenness. It was also hurtful to drink water alone because it might not be pure.

It is wrong to assume that Christians in Bible times drank the same type of wine for the same reasons as people today. Since the Bible clearly condemns drunkenness, we can assume that the first century Christians wanted to avoid intoxication. If the water that they had access to was known to not be safe, then they would have to drink something else. In this case they would have had two options. They could have drunken unfermented grape juice, or they could have mixed enough fermented wine with water in order to purify it, but not so much as to make it intoxicating.

3. THE BIBLE SAYS THAT ALCOHOLIC DRINKS ARE A BLESSING FROM GOD

There are several verses that are quoted that seem to say that God is blessing alcoholic beverages. If God blesses them, then they cannot be wrong. This is how the reasoning goes. But, are these blessings actually about alcoholic beverages or diluted wine or non-alcoholic wine? Consider the following examples.

Genesis 27:28 Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine.

This is the blessing that Isaac gave to Jacob, when he thought he was dying. Was Isaac asking God to bless Jacob with plenty of alcoholic wine to drink? No. The word 'wine' that is used is *tirosh*. This refers to new wine or wine that is not yet fermented. Isaac's blessing was that God would make Jacob's vineyards prosper, as well as his fields.

Deuteronomy 7:13 And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee.

This was a blessing promised to Israel if they would obey God when they arrived in the Promised Land. Moses said that if they obeyed, God would bless them in every aspect of life in the land. This would include their 'wine'. Again the word used here is *tirosh*. God would bless their vineyards by making the grapes grow. It is wrong to assume that the grapes would only be used to make alcoholic wine.

Psalms 104:14-15 He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth; And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart.

This is probably one of the most common verses used to support the idea that God blesses alcoholic beverages. After all, it says that wine makes the heart glad. Immediately it is assumed that this must refer to the intoxicating effects of alcohol. While it is sadly true that many people cannot have glad hearts without being intoxicated, it does not mean that this verse is speaking of intoxication. Christians are fully capable of being glad and having a good time without the need of alcohol. In this verse, the word 'wine' is *yayin*. This is the general word that can either mean unfermented or fermented wine. In this case, David was praising God for the bounties that He supplied. David thought about some of the main items grown in Israel. Along with olive oil and grain for bread, he mentioned wine. There is nothing in this text that would imply that David was thinking about alcoholic beverages. It seems clearer that David was thinking about the grapes in the vineyard and the harvesting and pressing of them.

Proverbs 3:9-10 Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.

Here Solomon lays down the principle that when we give to the Lord, He will bless us. It is a reality that you cannot out-give the Lord. It seems quite clear that the wine referred to here is unfermented. The word used is *tirosh*, and it is even translated here as 'new wine'. This refers to newly pressed grape juice.

It is interesting that in the texts where God blesses wine the Hebrew words used are the ones that refer to new wine (*tirosh*) or that can refer to unfermented wine (*yayin*). It is also interesting that you cannot find a place in the Bible where God blesses 'strong drink' or words that can only refer to alcoholic beverages.

4. JESUS DRANK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

This is perhaps the most common misconception used to promote social drinking. We all can remember that when Michael Jackson was on trial, he referred to alcohol as 'Jesus juice'. Of course, his reasoning was that if Jesus drank wine, then it is okay for us to drink alcoholic beverages. There are two main texts that people refer to that fuel this misconception. We will consider both.

John 2:1-11

This is the text where Jesus performed His first public miracle at Cana in Galilee. At a wedding feast, He turned the water in six stone

pots (amounting to about sixty or seventy gallons) into wine. Often the assumption is that Jesus made alcohol because the word 'wine' is used. But, as we have seen already, this is not always the case. The word 'wine' throughout the text is the general word *oinos*. It could refer to unfermented or fermented wine.

Also, people point to the statement of the governor of the feast in v.10.

And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou has kept the good wine until now.

They assume that the governor of the feast meant that at weddings they put out the strongest wine first, so that when everyone is intoxicated they will not notice the weak wine. Though this is a common interpretation of his words, it is very problematic. If this is what he meant, then the people at the feast must have been so intoxicated that they could not tell the difference between strong or weak wine. If the people at the feast were already that drunk, how could Jesus have turned the water into fermented wine without promoting their drunkenness. Now, almost all Christians who promote social drinking will say that it is only okay to drink if one does not get drunk. So, how could Jesus give more alcohol to those who were already tipsy? Even bar tenders know there is a limit.

Perhaps we need to reconsider what the governor of the feast was really saying. Think of his statement without reference to fermented wine at all. The head of the wedding party normally puts out the best quality juice at the beginning of the feast. Then, after everyone has enjoyed the meal for some time, he puts out the lower quality. We must not assume that 'good wine' means wine with the highest alcohol content. 'Good' wine only means 'high alcohol content' to someone who likes to get intoxicated. In New Testament times there were many different qualities of grape juice. 'Good wine' simply means the best quality. It does not need to have any reference to alcoholic content at all. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the 'good wine' at the wedding feast meant the best quality grape juice, not fermented wine. Otherwise, we would have Jesus taking part in a feast where people are so intoxicated that they can no longer tell what they are drinking. This is unthinkable.

Matthew 11:19

This verse is often used to say that Jesus was a social drinker. It does say that Jesus came eating and drinking. The question is whether this refers to social drinking. In this verse, Jesus quoted what others said about Him. This was in contrast with what they said about John the Baptist. John was not one to eat and drink like everyone else. He was a Nazarite, so he could not touch anything from the vine, whether fermented or unfermented. He lived in the wilderness and ate locusts and wild honey. The scoffers said that since John acted that way he must have been demon-possessed. However, since Jesus was not a Nazarite nor ascetic like John, they exaggerated about Him in the other direction. They claimed that he was a glutton and a drunkard.

Should we use the exaggeration of the scoffers to assume that Jesus was a social drinker? Must 'drinking' always refer to alcoholic beverages? It makes just as much sense to say that Jesus ate normal food and drank unfermented grape juice or diluted wine. The scoffers exaggerated this to make Him into a glutton and drunkard. We do not have to imply that this means that Jesus was a social drinker. This verse does not really settle the issue one way or another.

Neither the text in John 2 nor the one in Matthew 11 definitively prove that Jesus was involved in drinking alcoholic beverages at all. You have to make assumptions to conclude that He was.

5. ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES WERE USED IN THE LORD'S SUPPER

This misconception comes from an assumption based on 1 Corinthians 11:21.

For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken.

The word 'drunken' (*methuo*, μεθύω) is the normal word in the New Testament for intoxication. The assumption is that if there were people in the church in Corinth who were drunk at the Lord's Supper, they must have used fermented wine in their Communion service. If they used fermented wine in their worship of God, then there must be times when it is okay to drink alcoholic beverages. But, this is just an assumption. Paul did not say that the Corinthian church used fermented wine at the Lord's Table. He merely said that some of the Corinthians were drunk while the church observed Communion. At this point, some would object and ask, "How could they get drunk if the Communion wine was anything less than alcoholic?" There are two other reasonable options.

First, the Communion wine could have been fermented and diluted, but some of the Corinthians chose not to dilute theirs. It was not uncommon among the Jews to dilute fermented wine for the Passover meal. In the Mishna it says,

R. Jehudah said in the name of Samuel: "Each cup must contain wine which, when mixed with three parts of water, will be good wine."¹¹

If this was a practice of the Jews, it is not unreasonable to think that the Christians would have followed it.

Second, the Communion wine could have been unfermented, while some of the Corinthians brought their own fermented wine. There is evidence that the early church used fresh grape juice at the Lord's Supper. In the *Acts and Martyrdom of St. Matthew the Apostle*, it says,

O bishop Plato, carry the Gospel and the Psalter of David; go along with the multitude of the brethren to the east of the palace, and sing the Alleluia, and read the Gospel, and bring as an offering the holy bread; and having pressed three clusters from the vine into a cup, communicate with me, as

¹¹ Mishna, Tractate Pesachim, Chapter 10,
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Talmud/pesachim10.html>

the Lord Jesus showed us how to offer up when He rose from the dead on the third day.¹²

If the church in Corinth used unfermented juice, then the offending Corinthians would have had to bring fermented wine with them. It does seem clear that when the Lord's Supper was observed in Corinth it was done at a full meal. In the early church this was referred to as a 'love feast'. It would be like a modern day fellowship meal. People would have brought their own food and drink in addition to the bread and wine used for Communion.

It is a misconception to say that the early church always used fermented wine at the Lord's Supper.

6. THERE ARE NO BIBLICAL WARNINGS ABOUT ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES, ONLY ABOUT DRUNKENNESS

It is true that there are no outright prohibitions against fermented wine in the Bible. It is also true that there are many prohibitions against drunkenness. Because of this the assumption is made that there is nothing wrong with alcoholic beverages, but only with drunkenness. While God did not give a blanket condemnation against everything fermented, He did give clear warnings about alcohol itself and not just drunkenness.

Proverbs 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.

¹² *Acts and Martyrdom of St. Matthew the Apostle, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 533. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf08.vii.xxxii.html>

The warning in this verse is against the deceptive nature of the alcohol itself, not just against drunkenness. The Contemporary English Version completely misses this point in its poor translation of the same verse.

It isn't smart to get drunk! Drinking makes a fool of you and leads to fights.¹³

Notwithstanding what the CEV says, it must be noted that in this verse Solomon was concerned about the thing that gets you drunk, not just the intoxication.

Proverbs 23:31-32 Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.

These verses warn against even looking on fermented wine. The alcohol itself is destructive in nature. Alcohol bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. The warning is not against the misuse of alcohol, but against the alcohol itself.

While God did not give a strict prohibition against all fermented wine, He did warn about the use of it. Why did He not give an outright prohibition against all alcoholic beverages? If He had given a blanket condemnation of it, then it would have been wrong to use diluted wine as a substitute for unsafe water or alcohol for medicinal purposes. He evidently did not want to prohibit that. But, to use the lack of a direct prohibition as an argument to promote social drinking does not seem to fit with the tenor of Scripture.

As we have seen, the most common arguments for social drinking are based on wrong assumptions and misconceptions. As Christians, we must carefully consider that social drinking as it is done today is not the same thing as drinking diluted wine or unfermented juice in Bible times. We must be careful to not confuse the two.

¹³ *Contemporary English Version*, (New York: American Bible Society, 1995).

It is my conclusion that the Christians in the first century would have either drunken unfermented grape juice or diluted wine. Knowing the warnings in Scripture against fermented wine, they would have used it only for medicinal purposes or mixed with enough water to take away its intoxicating effect. The Scriptures do not approve of social drinking as we know it today. To claim that the Bible teaches otherwise is a misconception.