

DID JESUS SANCTION THE USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES? ANALYSIS OF THE WORD ποτήριον IN MARK 10:38

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Abstract

Due to religious pluralism, which is attributed to globalization, there are a number of current issues that need to be examined in light of God's word as a guide for morality. One such much debated issue is whether the cup referred to in Mark 10:38 alludes to consumption of an alcoholic beverage. There are Christians across board who believe that Jesus sanctioned the use of alcoholic wine and this undoubtedly influences the drinking habits of millions of Christians around the world. Often times many view this cup as a drinking vessel, while others associate it with wine, water, Holy Communion, baptism, salvation or God's wrath. The thrust of this paper is to shed light on what Jesus meant in reference to the 'cup' (ποτήριον) within the larger context of the passage. It also endeavors to examine the significance of this word in this pericope and its parallelism within the range of its. Literary context will play a critical role in examining the author's intended meaning of the word and then its contribution to the overall meaning of the passage in view of the contemporary society today. It is hoped that by the end of this review, the reference or its sense will be established and thus the right exegetical context will add value to the understanding of the text by the reader.

Keywords: Globalization, pluralism, wine, alcoholic beverages, cup, pericope, exegetical context

Introduction

The production of wine and its usage date back to the ancient times such as from 5500 BCE in the Caucasian region (Hugh, 1989). It is also important to note that about 3000 BCE it was used for luxury by urban dwellers who transported it in bottle necked pottery jars. Slaves are also cited as having been serving wine to members of the royal household in Assyria of Nimrod (Jack, 1980:18–19). As from the 1990's and in the context of globalization, wine consumption started spreading from the elite to the middle classes. Throughout history, wine has been imbued with enormous cultural significance and values, from religion to literature and from literature to sexual customs (Gwyn & Guibert, 2007).

In ancient times, drinking was considered with the present and the afterlife in mind. For example, in the 14th BCE in the tombs of Egypt, there is a fresque that depicted an ampore from which a seated soldier was drinking wine. Furthermore, the ancient Greeks are noted for a three-day festival of *Anthestia*, linked to the cult of Dionysus, held to celebrate new wine, ((Berkeley, 1972). Wine is part of the Mediterranean heritage, as is reflected in the languages of the region: "wine," in Hebrew is *yayin*, in Greek, *oinos* and in

Latin, *vinum*—pronounced "winum."

Wine had a special place in the conscience of the Jewish people and they had three types: *dagan* (grain), *tirosh* (new wine), and *yizhar* (oil), produced in *Eretz in Israel* before Jews were forced into diaspora during the conquest of Titus and the destruction of the third temple (Molly and Yom, 1996). Moreover, Jews in diaspora continued to make wine and the *Judaica Encyclopedia* distinguishes ten kinds of wine during the Talmudic times (1997) which ascertain its importance.

Indeed, wine was such an essential part of Jewish life in both religious and social functions so much such that the Rabbis refused to ban its consumption at the time of mourning, during the destruction of the temple because such a decree would impose "unbearable hardship on the public." (*Talmud*, 60b). However, excessive drinking was not acceptable and a prayer uttered in a state of drunkenness was considered "an abomination." Consequently, one was only permitted to drink four cups during Passover, two at weddings and one at *Brit Milah* (circumcision). Traditionally, in Roden *Book of Jewish Food* there was a belief among the Jews that wine contained vital calories and pharmaceuti-



cal benefits.

To justify such presuppositions, there are those who argue that even the Bible teaches that a little wine is good. For example, Paul warns Timothy to stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of his stomach and his frequent illnesses (1 Timothy 5:23). Even some Rabbis considered wine taken in moderation as inducing appetite; for sustaining and making one glad and as beneficial to health. They asserted that wine was the greatest of all medicines: where wine was lacking, drugs were necessary, a theory upheld for many centuries. Some of these influences were derived from Elie Nicolas of the Nouvelle Gallia Judaica research group, who argued that when the (real) Messiah comes back, wine will form an integral part of the banquet (*Talmud*, 34b).

Old Testament Justification for Use of Wine

This controversial subject has evoked many passionate opinions among Christians resulting to two camps. Those in support argue that at Salem (Jerusalem), Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God, accepted bread and *wine* from Abram and his companions (Genesis 14:18). The wine referred to here is *yayin*, fermented wine. Such, if used excessively, causes drunkenness. For instance in (Genesis 9:2) Noah drank *yayin* and became drunk. Lot also became drunk on this beverage (Genesis 19:30-36), and so did Nabal (1 Samuel 25:36). God told his people to enjoy *yayin* at the yearly festivals (Deuteronomy 14:26).

God also commanded the levitical priests to include in their sacrifices a portion of wine (*yayin*) as a drink offering (Exodus 29:40). Proponents of moderate drinking find justification in these biblical texts and other ancient literature. They also argue that even the Lord gave “wine that makes glad the heart of man (Psalms 104:15). Again, a blessing of wine was prophesied as a heritage to the chosen people in (Genesis 27:28).

New Testament Validation of Wine

The camp that proposes drinking argues that Jesus Himself drank wine. They find solace in the New Testament that Jesus Christ did drink *oinos* (wine) as recorded in (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). They assert that Jesus did not preach against the use of wine and His first miracle in John 2:9-10 was to change water into wine (*oinos*). They further argue that Paul advised

Timothy to stop drinking only water, and use a little wine [*oinos*] because of his stomach and his frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23). It also appears that some Corinthian believers were getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:21). The implication is that there’s nothing wrong with the wine as far as Paul is concerned. Indeed, ancient writings, OT and NT leave room for Christians and non-Christians to debate the use of wine. Thus, this leaves many confused as to whether to drink or not, bearing in mind that even Jesus seems to have sanctioned the use of wine when He said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until in His Kingdom (Matthew 26:29).

Postmodern readers anchor their argument from Gentry who proposes that the cup in (Mark 10:38) represents wine: “...*You do not know what you are asking; are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*” (ESV). He purports that this cup is in reference to the wine Jesus manufactured at the wedding at Cana.

This reasoning is based on the Old Testament use of the word “cup”. It was used to signify “wine”, what it ‘contained’. Non-Jewish and non-biblical experts view this cup from different perspectives. To some, the cup represents a drinking vessel, while others associate it with wine, water, Holy Communion, baptism, salvation or God’s wrath. These assertions form the basis of exploring whether Jesus drank alcoholic wine or He gave it to his disciples during the Holy Communion as it is assumed by many. Apparently, Jesus gave the disciples wine, however, the next question is: what type of wine was it?

How is Alcohol Consumption a Global Challenge?

World Health Organization (2010) reported that alcohol causes an estimated 2.5 million deaths every year. A significant proportion of this population occurs among the youth. Globally, alcohol is the third-leading risk factor for premature death and disability.

From early times, wine has played a significant economic and social role in human history and as a result a number of major wine-producing countries have made it a global venture. From the 1990s, the use of wine changed radically. Consequently, in non-wine-producing countries, wine consumption is spreading from the elite to the middle classes as a result of this globalization.

Globalization is the process of international integration arising from the exchange of the world views, products, ideas and other aspects of culture (Albow, Martin, & Elizabeth, 1990). In this context is world view, we will focus on the term “world views” which is best understood in view of religious pluralism.

Pluralism is a state or a condition of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization (Webster's, 1966). The concept of pluralism is of a quite recent vintage and there is no doubt on the possibility of such a world view permitting deviation of the accepted morals and posing a serious threat to the society. Pluralism is a source of spectacular confusion today thus the confusion extends from personal faith to core values.

This poses a threat to the fabric of the society and thus the need to search for answers on how to combat such emerging issues in order to provide possible solutions from biblical perspective. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine whether the cup Jesus talked about refers to fermented wine (alcohol), as popularly advocated by some Christian in the contemporary society. It also seeks to determine if there is any relationship between Mark 10:38 and the use of texts provided to prove Jesus sanctioned the use of alcoholic wine.

Jesus ‘Manufactured’ High-quality (Alcoholic) Wine at Cana in John 2?

Some Christians believe that Jesus miraculously ‘manufactured’ high-quality (alcoholic) wine at Cana as recorded in John 2:10 and in the same stratum instituted the very last supper with alcoholic wine. Undoubtedly, this influences the drinking habits of millions of Christians around the world today. To some, Christ's changing water into wine at the wedding of Cana is the primary evidence of Jesus' sanction of alcoholic beverages. Such conjecture is echoed by Gentry who appeals to all Christian to defend moderate partaking of alcoholic beverages arguing that the Lord and His apostles partook of wine, despite the fact that sinful men indulge in it to their own hurt and degradation (Gentry, 1986).

The word “wine” in the Bible has different meanings. It refers to the new or fresh juice of the grape; other times it is used to describe the fermented product. The translators avoided the term “grape juice.” In the Hebrew text, the writers used the word *tîrôsh*,

for new unfermented wine, and *yayin*, for fermented wine. However, in the New Testament, only one Greek word *oinos* is used to describe both fermented and fresh grape juice.

Consequently, it is evident, especially from the New Testament, that the term wine is used to represent both the fermented and the unfermented interchangeably. Thus, the wine that Jesus made can be determined by the context and literary context. The Context plays critical role in understanding the meaning from the eye of the author while literary context is useful in helping the reader to appreciate the narrative as a communication of events between a writer and an audience (Donald, 1990).

Did God or Jesus Sanction the Use of Alcoholic Beverages?

Jesus turning water into wine, as earlier argued, is a clear indication to support the intake of wine. After all, it was a wedding and every Jewish wedding had wine. Subsequently, the mention of the cup in Mark and in references to the Lord supper is indeed noteworthy. The confusion of “the cup”, “the fruit of the vine and wine, will be clarified because Jesus' must have been conscious to distinguish the content of both cup and the fruit of the vine from what was commonly known as fermented wine.

It is evident that during festivities in both ancient and biblical times, unfermented and fermented wine was used. Customarily, outside religious meeting people used fermented wine. However; there is no evidence to prove God's endorsement, either implicitly or explicitly. To argue that Jesus partook of wine at the Last Supper, and even employed it as a symbol of His purifying blood is not enough justification to drink a little wine as there is no scriptural support to show it was fermented wine.

Biblical and ancient times provide sound argument for modern Christians to abstain from alcohol because of their religious spiritual heritage. Fermented wine was prohibited at all times especially to the priests, Nazarites, kings and princes (Proverbs 31:4-6). Not only was it outlawed to those who performed sacred, religious and leadership roles but woe was pronounced upon anyone who provided his neighbor with alcoholic wine and made him drunk (Habakkuk 2:15). Moses further agrees,

Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the

tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations: And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean. (Leviticus 10:9-10)

Could Christ have violated such prohibitions by sanctioning the use of alcoholic beverages? It would be inconsistent for Jesus to ignore such prohibitions since He was not only a priest but also a king and prince (Geisler, 1982: 49). Christ must have been conscious that the use of wine and strong drink was not permissible whether on social gatherings or when on sacred duty in the tabernacle. It is He who said “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophet; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill them... whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandment and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the Kingdom of heaven” (Mathew 5:17-19)

Drunkenness with all its consequences is held in abhorrence in both Testaments. In the OT “wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging” (*Proverbs 20:1*). In addition, divine displeasure is associated with intoxicating drink and its results, and it is denounced in strong terms by the prophets (*Isaiah 5:11-12; 22:13; 28:1,7-8; 56:12; Joel 1:5; Amos 6:6*). In the NT, like the OT, on a number of occasions Paul had to rebuke his listeners in no uncertain terms: “Let us walk honestly ... not in rioting and drunkenness” (*Romans 13:13*). He warned further, “Be not deceived ... nor drunkards ... shall inherit the kingdom of God” (*1 Corinthians 6:9-10*).

Again, “And be not drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit ...” (*Ephesians 5:18*). The Galatians, too, were warned that those who indulge in “drunkenness, reveling, and such like ... shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (*Galatians 5:21*). Similarly, Christians are not at liberty to handle, touch or taste alcoholic beverages (*Col. 2:2 NRSV*). After all, believers are reminded that Jesus Christ purchased them by His Blood, “... men of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation ...” to serve our God as priests (*Rev. 5:9-10*).

Analysis of the word ποτήριον (cup) in Mark 10:38

Those who advocate Jesus made good wine (*kalon oion*) in 2:9-10 say even Christ recognizes it when he ask his disciples if they will drink the cup he will drink. However, in John 2:10, the phrase ‘good wine’ has no such sense (Barnes, 1875). Chapter 10

of Mark sets Jesus’ journey through Judea toward Jerusalem with his disciples. On the way Jesus foretells his death and resurrection and explicitly stated his role as a servant who came to serve and not to be served, stating his mission was to pour out his life as a ransom for many (v. 45). This was the central message, by reminding them of His suffering (Coffman, 2015). The same has parallelism in Mathew 20:17-19 and Luke 18:31-34.

Jesus’ self-understanding of the suffering in Isaiah 50:7 shows his humility as displayed in His willingness to suffer. Edwards asserts that the synopsis to the whole biblical account, given the fact that the rudimentary prediction of Jesus rejection, death and resurrection, readily lent itself to such harmonization that Jesus will be handed over by the Sanhedrin and be killed by the Gentiles (Edwards, 2002:320). This prophecy is clearly portrayed in Psalm 16 and 23. The Psalmist credits the Lord with assigning his “portion and cup” in life, equating it to abundant life with an overflowing cup, culminating to giving His life for many (Psalm 116).

The metaphor of the cup, like life itself, can also be negative, as presented in numerous prophetic works; the cup retains its role as a representative of fate (Anderson, 1996). Conscious of the fact of Jesus’ death, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, made an ambitious request in (v.37). This is the only time James and John are mentioned apart from the other disciples (1:19-20; 3:19) or Peter (5:37; 9:2; 13:3 and 14:33). Jesus response to their request in verse 38 shows that the disciples were quick to claim the benefits of the kingdom without understanding its implication in respect to drinking his cup and his baptism.

The use of the present tense indicates an action already began and the question posed could be translated: Can you drink the cup that I am in the process of drinking? And did Jesus refer to oinos on this occasion, as many would suggest? The cup Jesus referred to in this verse has nothing to do with wine in terms of alcohol but it signifies his suffering and his voluntary service for the sins of men, while to His disciples, it suggests their moral participation in his passion (Lane, 1974).

In other words, the disciples understanding of sharing meant a symbol of prosperity (Ps 16:5; 23:5, 116:13), beyond the object of humiliation disclosed in verse 34, applying to the assurance of His vindication through resurrection. In addition, the cup of baptism in Greek usage speaks of being overwhelmed by

disaster and danger. Jesus reference to the cup shows that He must suffer in context of God's judgment upon humanity's sin (Edwards, 2002:323 mine emphases). "Baptism" metaphorically symbolizes suffering parallel to OT use of symbolic water of calamity that overtakes sinners (Ps.42:7, 69:2 and Is. 43:2).

The Meaning of Jesus' Statement in Mark 10:38

Mark 10:38 focuses on His trials in the hands of Sanhedrin and the scribes. He explicitly explained His maltreatment which included mockery, beating, spitting and execution. The implicit displays His glory as an eschatological restoration of the fallen man from sin to original state while disciples associated the kingdom to feasting, being served by the servants as alluded to by Jesus' statement that they would sit on the throne judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Lk. 22:30; Matt.19:28).

Their picture of the kingdom goes with throne, feasting, never lacking and seating just to be served by the servants. This was necessitated by the earlier statement of Jesus of drinking anew in the kingdom of God, during the Lord's Supper. They compared the kingdom to feasting according the Mathew.

The request by the sons of Zebedee was pregnant, "teacher" they said, "we want you to do for us we ask". The aorist tense of the Greek verbs for "ask" and "do" indicate they have a specific request. This shows that in the heart of every man, prosperity, worldly recognition, social standing and personal achievement count in the kingdom of God. This clearly shows human self-centeredness. It is the desire of every person to occupy prestigious position and as a result, given the opportunity to choose or pray for anything, we will not be different from the sons of Zebedee.

Exegetical Significance

The question raised earlier on whether Jesus made an alcoholic beverage at the wedding in Cana and during the commemoration of the Lord's Supper constitute the foundation and source of our exegetical journey. Some Christians insinuate that Jesus drunk and sanctioned the use of fermented wine.

The phrase "fruit of the vine" was used to designate the sweet, unfermented juice of the grape. Christ calls the content of the cup "the fruit of the vine" (*gennema tes ampelou*). The noun *gennema*

(fruit) derives from the verb *gennao*, to beget or produce, and signifies that which is produced in a natural state, just as it is gathered. The basic meaning of *gennema*, for example, in the Septuagint (Gen. 41:34; 47:24; Ex. 23:10) indicate the natural fruit or produce of the earth.

Josephus also observed that fermented wine is not the natural "fruit of the vine" but the unnatural fruit of fermentation and disintegration and thus to apply the phrase "the fruit of the vine" to alcoholic wine, which is the product of fermentation and decay, is just the same illogicality as to call death the fruit of life (Lees,1869: 50). White explicitly, says that the Passover wine placed in the table was untouched with fermentation (Desire of Ages, 1940: 653). Peter also adds, there is nothing corrupted by fermentation, the symbol of sin and death, could represent the 'Lamb without blemish and without spot' (1 Pet 1:19).

Conclusion

It is illogical to envisage that the "fruit of the vine" that Christ promised to drink with His followers in the Kingdom, will be fermented wine. It is explicit that the new earth will be free from intoxicating substances brought by the reign of sin and evil. There is no ground to suppose that Jesus, who had come to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17), would infringe the Passover law against the use of "fermented wine".

Christ himself acknowledged and affirmed the moral symbolism of fermentation when He warned His disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt 16:6). "Leaven" for Christ represented corrupt nature and teachings, as later understood by the disciples (Matt 16:12). White (1941) says that "leaven was used as an emblem of sin and that is why during the Passover the people were directed to remove all the leaven from their houses, as they were to put away sin from their hearts" (p. 96).

It is evident if fermented wine was a symbol of corruption and insincerity during the Jewish Passover, how much more unsuitable ought it to be during Christ's time. In our time, the cup during the Lord's Supper not only represents Christ suffering, death and sacrifice but also an act of cleansing when Christians partake of it. In addition, divine displeasure is associated with intoxicating drink and its results, and has been denounced in strong terms in the past, present and future. The wine Jesus made was unfermented grape juice as religious law required.



The Greek word for “cup” is “poterion.” In its literal application, it denotes a “drinking vessel.” The translation of “poterion” from English word is “pottery.” This leaves no room for some to think that the cup Christ spoke of is an earthen container, just as we are said to be earthly vessels. Paul’s advice to Timothy to not only drink water but use a little wine for his stomach’s sake and his frequent infirmities (1 Timothy 5:23) is no justification for use of fermented wine. It is assumed by many that the wine Paul recommends to Timothy is alcoholic. However; this is an assumption because since religious leaders were prohibited from using fermented wine.

Further, it could also be inconsistent because earlier in the same epistle, Paul instructs Timothy that bishops were to be abstinent [*nephalion*] (1 Timothy 3:2–3). The same apostle would not have encouraged Timothy to drink alcoholic beverages when in a previous letter he had forbidden the church leaders to use alcohol (1 Timothy 3:8). In addition, there are historical references attesting to the use of unfermented wine for medicinal purposes in the ancient world. For example, Athenaeus (AD 280) counsels to use unfermented grape juice for stomach disorders.

When a person had stomach problems or in the moment of dying in painful agony, one was given “wine mingled with myrrh” as it was the practice of the Jews (Mark 15:23). But when Jesus was offered on the cross such He refused to take it.

Therefore, Paul does not approve the general use of alcohol but recommends the unfermented wine as was to be used by people with such condition for its medicinal value and for those in specific situations such as of those who were in terminal misery.

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