

QUICK THEOLOGY

Is it a Sin to Drink Alcohol?



PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER

Copyright © 2024 by Every Woman a Theologian LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. For more information, address: phylicia@phyliciamasonheimer.com

Published by Every Woman a Theologian LLC

Cover design by Eric Novak.

Every Woman a Theologian and the Every Woman a Theologian logo are trademarks of Every Woman a Theologian LLC.

Printed in the United States of America.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet explores questions many Christians have about alcohol. Is drinking a sin, and if not, how do we engage with alcohol in a healthy way? How do we walk with our brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle in this area? We will take a high-level look at what Scripture says and dip our toes into church and Jewish history around alcohol—specifically wine, which we see most often described in Scripture.

CHAPTER ONE

Wine in Scripture

We will start by looking at the symbolism of wine in the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament, wine is usually a symbol of rejoicing and gladdening of the heart. Psalm 104:14-15 says:

“He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.” And Ecclesiastes 9:7 says: “Go, eat your food with gladness, drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do.”

From the Jewish Encyclopedia of 1906, we have this quote that describes the function of wine:

“In metaphorical usage, wine represents the essence of goodness. The Torah, Jerusalem, Israel, the Messiah, the righteous—all are compared to wine. The wicked are likened unto vinegar, and the good man who turns to wickedness is compared to sour wine. The wine which is kept for the righteous in the world to come has been preserved in the grape ever since the six days of creation.”

This Jewish blessing, preserved in the Cairo Genizah, also portrays this concept of wine and rejoicing. It was expanded from a shorter blessing given by rabbis before drinking wine:

“Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe who created sweet wine, good must from grapevines, that is pleasing to a person and good for man, that gladdens the heart and makes the

face shine. It is consolation to mourners, and those of bitter spirit forget their misery. It is medicine to all who drink it. (to him who drinks it sensibly). It is heart's joy, gladness, and great delight to its drinkers. He, our God, created it of old for pleasure, among the works established from the beginning, so that all who drink it shall bless God, and praise the Author of understanding, who prepared the delicacies of the world, and formed the sweet things of the earth."

This is a beautiful blessing over wine, and both quotes contain truths we can look to, to guide our understanding of how to engage with alcohol. However, a tension plays out between rejoicing and wine as depicted in Scripture and the foolishness of drunkenness. Almost every time the Old Testament mentions alcohol in a negative context it refers to alcohol in excess:

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Proverbs 20:1).

“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine” (Proverbs 23:29-30).

“Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags” (Proverbs 23:20-21).

While these passages warn against strong drink, they do not forbid alcohol completely. Rabbi Kahane gives us further context on the traditional Jewish perspective: *“If drunk in moderation, [wine] gives leadership; if drunk in excess, it leads to poverty.”* This agrees with what we see about alcohol throughout Scripture.

Church traditions can also play a role in how Christians view alcohol. Some rabbinic traditions teach that the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden was a grapevine. There is also a theory that the vineyard Noah planted after the flood was part of that grapevine from the Garden of Eden. That vineyard ended in a dastardly event for Noah which

you can read about in Genesis 9.

The tradition of the grapevine, stories of drunkenness in Scripture, and personal experience with alcohol have caused some Christians to become extremely anti-alcohol. They use examples like Noah's to say: "This is sin caused by drunkenness; therefore, all alcohol is a sin." Some say alcohol is not okay under any circumstances and some people go as far as to argue that what Eve took in the Garden of Eden was straight alcohol, but when we look at Scripture presents wine, none of this can be argued.

Now that we understand some of what the Bible says about alcohol, we need to understand ancient wine and whether it is the same as alcohol consumed today. That will help us understand how what the Bible says applies to our lives. This comes from the work of Scott Duvall, who teaches something called The Theological Bridge, where you understand the historical context of a passage, isolate the core principle, then apply that principle to a modern context.

A typical glass of wine contains roughly 9% to 13% alcohol. Sometimes, you can get something with a little bit less. Was biblical wine that alcoholic? Here we have a quote from an article by Jo Ann H. Seely on what wine was like in the ancient world: