

Alcohol Consumption: What Would Jesus Do?

R. Philip Roberts

President

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Kansas City, Missouri 64118

In this article Phil Roberts calls attention to an excellent yet neglected resource on wine-drinking in New Testament times. He draws from historical and secondary sources on alcohol consumption in antiquity to determine whether Jesus would drink alcoholic beverages in the present day. Roberts concludes that Jesus would do in modern times just what he did in the first century.

After the 2006 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, debate swirled related to the rightness of alcohol consumption. The matter which fueled this issue was a resolution approved by messengers opposing the consumption of alcoholic beverages with an amendment attached disqualifying imbibers from appointment as agency or entity trustees.

Much of the debate, as expected, focused on a key question. That question is not “What would Jesus do?” but “What did Jesus do?” when it comes to this important concern. After all, many say, did not Jesus miraculously produce wine at the marriage feast in Cana (John 2:1-12)? Additionally, other references such as the “cup” of the Lord’s last supper would indicate, some argue, that alcohol consumption was involved. Surely, if alcohol consumption was routine in Jesus’ day and culture, then there is no way that he could have avoided it. And if Jesus consumed alcoholic beverages, then certainly his twenty-first century disciples should have no scruples about it. This argument would suffice, it would seem, for reasonably minded folk.

It is important for us, however, to step back a moment and ask an important historical question. That query is, “What was it that Jesus did?” Would it have been the case that Jesus created and consumed a beverage akin to the one marked “wine” that would be found in a local package or grocery store? Just what would have been the custom in Jesus’ day related to beverage consumption? Therefore, when we

discover what Jesus did, we can more accurately pose the question, “What would Jesus do?” when it comes to today’s context.

As a start to an answer I turn to an important, but now little read, resource that more Baptists ought to know about. This resource is an article written by now-retired Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor of New Testament Interpretation, Robert H. Stein entitled, “Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times,” published over thirty years ago by *Christianity Today*, Volume 19 (1975): 923-25. It was brought again to my attention by Daniel Akin’s excellent Baptist Press commentary on this issue of June 30, 2006.

Stein adroitly and succinctly reviews the historical evidence for alcohol consumption in the New Testament era. Secular sources are taken into consideration. He consequently answers the questions of “Was alcohol consumed in the New Testament period?” and “Was it similar to alcohol consumption in our modern context?” with a yes–no response.

Yes, alcohol was consumed as a general custom, and no, it was customarily not synonymous with modern day consumption in the form of table wines, cocktails, mixed drinks, or even beer. Alcohol consumption in that fashion would have been viewed as a prelude to riotous debauchery.

As a rule, alcohol was mixed with water for general consumption in order to provide both a safe or sterile drink, when fresh water was not available, as well as a non-intoxicating one. In essence, alcohol consumed in the first century was so diluted and moderated that, in Stein’s words, “one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind.” Surprisingly, even in strictly pagan contexts, alcohol was always diluted except in preparation for the most raucous and debauched of circumstances in the form of a pagan celebration mixed with lewd actions and behavior.

The ancients understood the potency of and the problem with alcohol when drunk without careful precautions. It would cause drunkenness often without warning. And drunkenness was a condition viewed by the ancients as undignified and undisciplined. Inebriation was a condition only barbarians tolerated and undiluted alcohol a drink only they would imbibe.

Notably *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* comments wine “. . . was invariably heavily diluted with water. It was considered a mark of uncivilized peoples, untouched by classical culture, that they drank wine neat (undiluted) with supposed disastrous effects on their mental and physical health.”¹ Other historians comment that wine was “always

¹ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1623.

mixed . . . with water and used more water than wine. Pliny mentions one sort of wine that would stand being mixed with eight times its own bulk of water. To drink wine unmixed was thought typical of barbarians, and among the Romans it was so drunk only by the dissipated at their wildest revels.”²

Mixing water with wine both sterilized the drink, avoiding the costly and time-consuming process of boiling, and lightly flavored the beverage. At a very minimum, wine was served by the general public, including the Romans themselves, at a one-to-one ratio, i.e., one part wine with one part water. At this level and certainly with anything less diluted, daily functions and responsibilities would have been impossible for the average person. In this mixture, it was still referred to as “strong wine.” This designation is evidenced among Old Testament writers who made a clear distinction between “strong drink” and “wine” (cf. Lev 10:8, 9; Num 6:3, Deut 14:26, 29:6; Jdgs 13:4, 7, 14, etc.).³ Wine mixed with more water in the ration was “wine.” In Jewish practice and custom, it was generally three parts of water to one of wine. This beverage was still referred to as wine or *oinos* in the Greek. Even then, Nazarites, Aaron and his sons and others were directed not to consume this form of strongly diluted alcohol.

Additionally in his article Stein notes that 2 Maccabees 15:39 comments, “It is harmful to drink wine alone, or again to drink water alone . . .” Obviously this last directive refers to the danger of drinking unpurified water. Even in the post-New Testament era the process of mixing water and wine for generic use was continued. And interestingly it was this diluted form of wine that early church witnesses directed to be used at the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper (see Justin Martyr, *Apology* I, 67, 5; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Traditions* XXIII, 1; Cyprian, *Epistle* LXII, 2, 11 and 13).

Ah, but some might say, you still have not addressed the question of what did Jesus do when it comes to the question of the wedding feast at Cana (cf. John 2:1-11)? After all, my Bible says “wine” when it comments on the miracle of Jesus. Again, this word is *oinos*, referring to the generally diluted form of wine or perhaps even to an unfermented “fruit of the vine” or juice.

So, what would Jesus do when it comes to contemporary alcoholic beverage consumption? In my thinking, he would do what he did. And that is to utilize only beverages that have absolutely zero chance of causing inebriation. In our modern context, in my opinion, where healthy non-alcoholic drinks are readily available, and where alcoholic drinks are

² Harold Whetstone Johnston, *The Private Life of the Romans*, 199.

³ See Paige Patterson’s Baptist Press article of July 7, 2006, for further clarification on this matter.

undiluted, carrying the potential of intoxication and are often consumed to the point of drunkenness, it would be very probable that Jesus would be a total abstainer.