

The Spirituality of Wine in Christian Life

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Scientists suggest that between 10,000 and 8,000 BCE, many human cultures began the transition from living as mobile hunter-gatherers to sedentary herder-farmers. While gatherers would have picked wild grapes for food, farmers learned to cultivate grape vines. Such labor appeared first in China (7,000 BCE), then Georgia and Armenia (6,000 BCE), the Levant: Syria, Lebanon, and Israel (5,000 BCE), Greece (4,500 BCE), and then Italy and Spain (4,000 BCE). What they cultivated was the *vitis vinifera*, the common grape vine, of which there are 5,000 to 10,000 varieties in the world.

Wine and winemaking in Israel and the Mediterranean

Given the widespread presence of winemaking in the Levant, it should not surprise us that vineyards, wine production, and wine went their way through the biblical narrative. According to the book of Genesis, **Noah** was the first planter of grapevines and maker of wine (Genesis 9:18-28). But Noah did more than produce wine; he drank copious amounts of his creation, though there is no condemnation of his inebriation. As one biblical scholar notes, the world in which the mythical Noah was raised had been drowned by the flood: who would not want to drown their grief over a world of lost friends as one prepared to build a new one?



Abram, the progenitor of Israel, after a successful rescue of his nephew, Lot, was greeted by Melchizedek, a priest of the Most High and ruler of Salem (Jerusalem), who offered him bread and wine and then gave him a blessing (Genesis 14:17-20). It was at the oaks of Mamre where **Sarah** and Abraham made their home. What might interest the reader is that the site of their home, near Horeb, was located in the wine region of the

Judean Hills, a viticultural zone known today for its splendid white wines. When Abraham's son, **Isaac**, announced his intention to give his blessing to his first-born son, **Esau** (and confirm him as patriarch of the family), his second-born son, **Jacob**, tricked him, with the help of his mother, **Rebekah**, into giving him his blessing as he fed him savory food and cups of Judean wine. [Above left: Melchizedek (right) offers a wine cup to Abram]

Isaac's blessing is significant for a number of reasons but the one that interests us is this: he sees wine as a blessing from God. What does he say? *May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine* (Genesis 27:28) – fatness: **olive oil**; grain: **bread**; and **wine**. It is this notion – that wine is a divine blessing – which frames the Jewish and Christian use of wine.

Indeed, in her massive *History of Food*, Mageulonne Toussaint-Samat refers to olive oil, bread, and wine as “the three sacramental foods” of all Mediterranean cultures and spiritualities – a “trinity fundamental to the prosperity of the state and the health of its people,” flowing from the hand of a benevolent and earth-loving God (204). We hear this same sentiment in a Hebrew Psalm: *O LORD, my God, you bring forth wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart* (Psalm 104:15).

While winemaking appeared in Israel by 5,000 BCE, it was not until 1,500 BC that viticulture emerged in the Nile Delta. When **Joseph**, son of Jacob and Rachel, was imprisoned in Pharaonic Egypt, he was able to interpret the dream of pharaoh’s cupbearer: *In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand* (Genesis 40:9-11). Joseph correctly interpreted the dream (the cupbearer would be restored to his role in the imperial household) and later was called forth to interpret one of pharaoh’s troubling nightmares, gaining him a position in the monarch’s court.



In time, another pharaoh enslaved the descendants of Joseph and his brothers. Their cry “to the God of their ancestors” was heard and they received God’s promise, through **Moses**, that they would be liberated from imperial oppression and guided to their ancestral home, a land “flowing with milk and honey.” Upon their arrival, *Moses sent men to spy out the land of Canaan ... They came to the Wadi Eshkol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them ... And they came to Moses and the congregation of the Israelites ... and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, “The land to which you sent us flows with milk and honey, and this (the grape cluster) is its fruit”* (Numbers 13:17, 23, 26-27).

The Mishnah, the 3rd c. CE collection of Jewish oral traditions from the Second Temple period (536 BCE – 70 CE), prescribes the drinking of **four glasses of wine** at the Passover meal, the annual domestic celebration of the liberation of the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery; four cups in imitation of the four terms used for this deliverance: *I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and I will deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians* (Exodus 6:6-7).

At the present, archeologists have discovered some 27 large municipal winepresses throughout Israel from the period of Roman imperial occupation (63 BCE – 390 CE), a number that does not include the hundreds of small family-owned winepresses. Indeed, the Bible mentions the word vineyard (*kerem*) 230 times. Archeological sites suggest the **process of winemaking**: grapes (*anavim*) were harvested from grape vines (*gefen*) by hand with small pruning knives; the grapes



were then placed in baskets and carried to a stone winepress (*gat*) where they were crushed by foot, the juice (*tirosh*) flowing downward into a second stone receptacle (*yekev*). The process of fermentation – the production of wine alcohol – begins as the natural yeasts on the skins of the grapes transform the sugar in the grape juice into wine alcohol. The

initial fermentation would take three to five days. Before the wine (*yayin*) could begin to oxidize, it was channeled into stone or terracotta jars and sealed with resin. At times the jars were placed below the second receptacle in the earth, providing a stable temperature for the wine. In other places, the jars were moved to a cool, stone cave. [Above left: vineyard, grape collection, wine press, wine jugs]

Wine was the **normal beverage** that accompanied meals. Indeed where water was stale or considered impure, wine was added to enliven or purify water. Given the many mentions of vineyards, vines, grapes, winepresses, and wine in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures, it becomes apparent that wine played a significant role in the lives of Israelites as well as Greeks and Romans and all those territories that came under Roman control. The mention of vineyards, laborers in the vine fields, pressing grapes, drinking wine, giving wine as a gift, sour wine, wild grapes, vintage, treading the vintage, wine vat, wine cup, being poured out, drinking from one wine cup, drinking heavily, drunkenness, feasting, vines, new wine, tendrils, and wine jug would have resonated with anyone who lived in Israel and the many who enjoyed wine culture from Persia in the east to Spain in the west, from Gaul (France) in the north to Ethiopia in the south. There is scarce mention of beer in the Scriptures; wine dominates as the everyday drink of choice.

While some religious groups in the U.S. have suggested that unfermented grape juice was a primary drink in ancient Israel before and during the time of Jesus of Nazareth (albeit in keeping with their post-16th c. prohibitions), there is little evidence to support such a claim. Juices made from apples and pomegranates were consumed and grapes were boiled before fermentation to produce sweet syrup, but wine was consumed daily, along with potable water and goat's milk.

Jesus' experience and knowledge of wine

It is good to remember that Jesus was raised in the Galilee region of northern Israel and spent almost his entire life in this area close to its large lake, the Sea of Galilee. The gospels note that Jesus' first three followers were fishermen who labored in Lake Gennesaret (another name for the Galilean Sea). What many may not know is that the Galilee was (and is) a significant **viticultrual zone** renowned for its rich red wines. Indeed, large winepresses dating from the 1st c. have been found at Korazim, close to Capernaum where much of Jesus's public activity was centered; at Migdal Haemek and at Sepphoris close to Nazareth, as well as Karmi'El. Thus, when Mark writes that "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God" (Mark 1:14), his announcement of the gospel was made in wine country.



We also know that Jesus had knowledge of wine and winemaking. For instance, he grasped the power of **fermentation** when he claimed that "no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mark 2:22). A brittle older skin could not contain the expansion of the liquid due to fermentation and would crack open,

losing the wine. He was well aware of **viniculture** (oenology), the process of winemaking: *A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watchtower* (Mark 12:1). In this parable, he quotes Psalm 118:22-23 concerning the "rejected stone," Mark's reference to Jesus himself. Could it be that this is a reference to the stone of the winepress, an image for Jesus who will be crushed as grapes are crushed yet brought to new life? [Above left: *aerial view of the Korazim winepress*]

When he was invited with his mother, Mary, to a wedding feast in Cana – also the site of a major winepress – the festive wine ran out, a source of considerable embarrassment for the bridegroom and his family who were hosts of the banquet (John 2:1-12). At the beseeching of Mary, Jesus transformed **water into wine**, a wine that was greeted with astonishment for its high quality. Christians have frequently proclaimed such an act a "miracle," an intervention in nature. Perhaps this is so because Christianity has been and remains a largely urban phenomenon in which people are cut off from agriculture and the natural processes of the earth. That is, they have not witnessed the miraculous transformation of grapes – through sunlight, soil, and water – into wine. Would Jesus not have known of this "miraculous" yet remarkably natural occurrence in the winemaking process?

A good number of New Testament scholars suggest that Jesus believed the **reign of God** was present in his eating and healing practices; it was not so much something to be longed for in the future as a reality alive in the present and experienced in the generous and **equitable sharing of wine**, bread, and fish (the peasant diet), in access to **free healing** for anyone in need, and in **restorative justice** (forgiveness) rather than the more common act of violent retribution. In the reign of God, so different than the reign of Herod and Caesar, God's generosity toward all people would confound those who were stingy in their largess – largess doled out only to family or close friends, or those who appeared to work harder than others. Thus, in his parable of the astonishing generosity of God, Jesus spoke of laborers in the vineyard who received the same generous wage, whether they had worked from early morning or started their labors in the late afternoon (Matthew 20:1-16). Such liberality was offensive to many who listened to his story of wages in the vineyard – a story that is lived out today by women grape harvesters who earn minimum wage with no benefits for backbreaking work in many West Coast vineyards.



This parable bears touching resemblance to the rhetoric of the Hebrew prophets who spoke of **ungenerous and unjust elites as fruitless grapevines**, wild grapes, or soured wine unfit for drinking. Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah: *My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile*

hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard: what more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? The Lord of hosts expected justice, but saw bloodshed (Isaiah 5: 1-4, 7).

Of what does the prophet accuse those who dwell in “beautiful houses” and “drink fine wines in the evening”? These are the people who claim to be spiritually devout but fail to heed the just and life-giving law of God: they have no regard for impoverished laborers who pick grapes; they live in comfort while their neighbors languish; they bribe officials in order to gain greater wealth; they are proud of their deceit; they deprive the innocent of their God-given rights; they grind the face of the poor in the dirt through neglect – they have ruined the vineyard of the LORD. [Above: *as the poor, homeless, and infected man begs for scraps, the well stocked family enjoys fine food and wine, indifferent to his suffering: “Lazarus and the Rich Man,” illumination from the Codex Aureus of Echternach, 11th c.*]

Viewed within the agricultural, economic, and social context of 1st c. Roman Palestine, one recognizes that Jesus participated in this **prophetic tradition**, a tradition marked by a commitment to social justice and thus directed at the dehumanizing, distorting, and death-dealing voices and forces alive in his world, a criticism often voiced in terms of viticulture. His commitment to God's love for the socially marginalized and God's justice for the oppressed placed him at odds with those who supported the cultural and religious caste systems alive in the ancient world. What did he say to his critics? *A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" [His critics] said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him (Matthew 21:28-32).*



To those who believed they were spiritually devout and upstanding citizens, Jesus' words would be received as nothing less than an insult. One is mindful of Flannery O'Connor's telling story, "Revelation," in which a "good

Christian woman" of the Deep South is shocked to recognize that the people she views as inferior to herself will enter heaven before her.

No wonder Jesus' critics accused him of suspect behavior and lumped him in with those who in his society were excluded by pious legalisms: *John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'* (Matthew 11:18-19). Jesus drinks wine with those perceived to be socially inferior. In that world then, **sharing wine** with others **meant sharing in their lives and social status**. To drink wine and share life with a prophet of God would be good news for those who were told by their culture that they were of little value, second-class, or inferior.

But let's be clear: Jesus' alliance with those who were perceived as being insufficiently religious or socially inferior was not inspired by a bland "do-gooder" attitude but rather was rooted in his commitment to the God of Israel ("the vineyard owner") and what Jesus perceived as the merciful, loving, and just intentions of God for all people.

His public work was animated by an intimate relationship with God and his commitment to the Reign or Rule of God in all dimensions of life. To say the least, the vision and public work of Jesus collided with what a good number of people cherished or thought was “normal” and thus unchanging; you know: men are superior to women; one race is greater than all others; the wealthy are better than the poor; retribution trumps forgiveness; might always makes right; God blesses those who follow the rules.

No wonder, then, that after he made a troubling demonstration in the Jerusalem Temple against the collusion of priestly elites with the Roman occupying force and the imperial tax that ensured cruel poverty for the many, the plot to arrest him emerged. Matthew includes a vineyard story that bears striking resemblance to the plot intended to silence Jesus: at the time of the grape harvest, the vineyard owner sends his servants to collect the grapes but the tenants kill them. He then sends his son who meets the same fate. Jesus concludes the parable by asking the question, “Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” His listeners answer that he will put the tenant workers to death and lease the vineyard to others. How did Jesus’ critics respond to the parable – which they realized was aimed at *them*? “They wanted to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet” (Matthew 21:33-46). They wanted to arrest him because they quickly discerned that Jesus was suggesting *they* were the tenants ready to kill the son, ready to silence Jesus with death.



On the night he was arrested, Jesus kept the Passover meal – a meal invoking God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery. He kept this supper in the early 1st c. when the Israelites were held captive to Roman imperial power. The three synoptic gospels tell the story of Jesus sharing bread and a wine cup with his followers: *While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God”* (Mark 14:22-25).

While much blood and ink have been spilled over the conflicted question concerning what his words mean – “Is the wine *really* his blood or a *memory* of his blood?” – keep in mind this other viewpoint: **his life was poured out in love for others**. It was the kind of love, however, that was made tangible through action.

And it was those actions and words – **his good trouble** – that *got* him in trouble. In other words, the manner of his life – poured out for others – was aptly demonstrated in the pouring out of wine for all to drink. Not long after the meal ended, he was arrested by the police, interrogated and quickly tried, tortured, and then put to death by the Roman imperial guard.

Wine appears in his final moments: *They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them* (Mark 15:22-24). Why was **wine mixed with myrrh**? Red wine contains the natural chemical compound *resveratrol*; it is an antioxidant (though this claim is still under study) and has pain-diminishing properties. Myrrh, a fragrant plant, contains two pain-relieving properties: *furanoeudesmadiene* and *curzarene* (say that ten times quickly!). Wine mixed with myrrh would thus serve as a pain-suppressor. Death by crucifixion was due to asphyxiation. It is possible that the wine-myrrh mixture served as mild sedative.

Wine and community



The earliest evidence we have outside the New Testament of a meal shared among early Christians in memory of Jesus is from a text called the *Didache* (*did-ah-kee*) or *The Teaching*, written in the 1st c. or early 2nd c. As an early Christian handbook, it includes this blessing, inspired by Jewish domestic practice, to be said over the cup of wine at the supper's beginning: *Now concerning the Eucharist [thanksgiving meal] give thanks this way. First, concerning the cup: "We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you made known to us through Jesus your Servant; to you be glory forever."* The mention of a holy vine echoes a saying of Jesus in John's gospel: **I am the true vine** and my Father is the vine grower ... Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear

more fruit ... Abide in me as I abide in you [all]. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you [all], unless you [all] abide in me. I am the vine; you [all] are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (John 15: 1, 2, 4-5). [Above: "The Good Use of the Wine," 15th c. Germany]

The relationship between vine, branches, and grapes highlights two very different views of life. For 21st c. Americans socialized from childhood into a high degree of **individualism** (what anthropologists call a "weak group society"), life, faith, and spirituality are usually conceived in terms of the individual's rights and freedoms

and an individual's private relationship with God or one's higher power or, in the Pacific Northwest, oneself. In a "weak group society" such as ours, one is expected to leave one's family and go forth into the world by oneself: "Make it on your own." In all things, the needs and desires of the individual are prominent.

This view of life had its origins in the late Renaissance (15th c.) and Protestant Reformation (16th c.), and was subsequently secularized in the Enlightenment origins of the United States (18th c.) where individual liberties continue to reign supreme. After all, how many of us get up in the morning and ask: "How will we serve the common good today?" It's not a common American question (though it is common in some sub-cultures in the U.S. and other cultures in the world).

This aggressively individualized society was *not* present for the first 1,500 years of Christian history. Rather, Jesus, his followers, and subsequent generations of Christians lived in a "strong group society," one in which **relationship with others** was of primary importance. I am the vine and you are the branches. In this society, one was socialized into a communal identity and discovered one's purpose within community, not by "making it on your own." In this regard, Christian spirituality was experienced as *larger than the self*: one's identity and purpose were inextricably bound up with other people, with the natural world, with the dead, and with the Holy Three – not a divine monad but a community of divine persons. Thus, when Jesus says "you" in John 15 (quoted above), and when he says at his last supper, "given for you," that "you" is voiced in the second person *plural* – *you all* – or *y'all* (as if he were a native of Alabama).

As the viniculturalist and theologian, Gisela Kreglinger, notes: a community of soil, sun, and water make the vineyard possible; a community of people cares for the vineyard; it is a community that makes wine; and wine is meant to be shared with others rather than consumed alone.

Wine as food

This brief and very selective summary of wine in Jewish and Christian practice reveals various uses of wine, one being food. As noted previously, wine was the daily drink of choice in many cultures and remains so to this day. That Jews and Christians used wine (and continue to do so) in their rituals meant that religious leaders would promote wine making. Indeed, it was Benedictine communities of



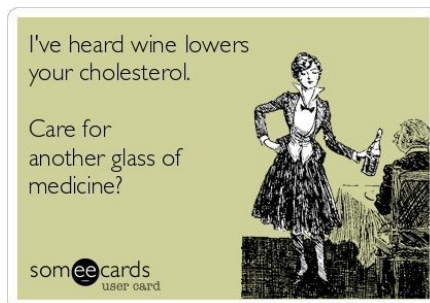
monks and nuns who continued the work of winemaking once the Roman Empire collapsed. After all, St. Benedict gave specific instructions in his Rule for the amount of wine to be consumed daily by each monk or nun.

While wine is a popular drink that accompanies a wide range of cuisines – from Japanese to South African to Lebanese to Italian to Argentine – it is an integral part of food preparation. Wine serves as a flavoring

element in cakes, cheeses, sauces, and stocks. Its acidity can bring balance to richer savory dishes. When reduced through heating, a wine reduction offers intensity of flavor. Its use as vinegar (e.g., rice wine, red wine) complements many dishes, is a preservative, and serves as an amiable companion to olive oil. Wine, especially red wine, is low in saturated fats, low in sodium, cholesterol-free, fat-free, and gluten-free. Books are devoted to one subject: cooking with wine.

At the same time, it is important to remember that there is a great difference between processed food in the grocery store and the organic, farm to table food from one's local CSA, one's regional farms; the same is true for wine. Do you really want to consume food or wine that is marked with an abundance of **chemical saturation**? Alas, most Americans don't seem too concerned about the question. *Yet many wines are not the simple, pastoral expressions of an agricultural culture. They are assembly-line wines, farmed industrially with chemical sprays, churned out in factories with additives, and tailored, just as processed foods are, to specifications derived from substantial audience research and the use of focus groups* (Eric Asimov, *The New York Times*, March 6, 2017). While spokespersons for the wine industry have not been all that transparent in discussing how wine is actually made, persistent questions about chemical sprays and additives express consumer concerns and let winemakers know that harm to soil, water drainage, grapes, laborers in the field, and the wine-drinking public are not frivolous matters.

More than teaching "marketable skills," universities are called to teach **critical thinking** (what I call maturing thoughtfulness). This incredibly important ability is cultivated in part by asking questions: Why are you asking me to buy your product? What sound reasons support your claim that this might be a "good" or "excellent" wine to drink? Where is the evidence that substantiates your claim that this wine is not contaminated with harmful chemicals or additives? While many people may simply desire a good-tasting and reasonably priced wine, isn't it important to take responsibility for what one will consume or offer family members? Does the practice of hospitality not ask that we care for the wellbeing of our guests? *When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, he called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now"* (John 2:9-11).



Wine as medicine

In his gospel, Luke includes a parable told by Jesus concerning a man from Judea mugged and almost beaten to death who was assisted by an unlikely stranger, a man from a people called Samaritans, a group considered inferior if not "fake" Jews by Judeans and Galileans. What did Jesus say? *A Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.*

He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him (Luke 10:33-34).

Note this: he “poured oil and wine” on the man’s wounds. Papyri from Sumer, (modern Iraq) dating to ca. 2200 BCE, document the use of wine as a medicine, making wine one of the oldest if not the oldest human-made medicine. The progenitor of modern medicine, Hippocrates of Greece, actively promoted wine as a disinfectant for wounds. In this practice he was followed by the well-known Roman physician, Galen, who treated wounded gladiators and soldiers with considerable success in comparison to other physicians who did not use wine in their treatment of injuries. Such success they attributed to the *alcohol content* in wine. Indeed, in studies done by medical faculties at the University of California San Diego and the University of Toronto, the drinking of wine from a common silver cup during the Christian practice of Holy Communion was found to be far more hygienic than the very unhygienic practice of worshippers dipping a bread fragment or wafer in the cup with their germ-laden fingers: ick. No fingers in cups, please, no endangering the health of others. Hippocrates would agree as he praised the delicious and antiseptic nature of wine. He prescribed moderate but daily consumption– it was an integral element of a healthy diet, he said – and he mixed other drugs with wine for his patients’ use.



Contemporary medical studies of wine suggest that bacterial infection associated with inflammation of the stomach lining (gastritis) is reduced considerably with moderate wine consumption. No wonder, then, that the anonymous author of a New Testament letter made this suggestion:

Take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments (1 Timothy 5:23). Some scientists – and wine producers – suggest that the natural chemical compound resveratrol, found with a higher concentration in red wine, has beneficial health effects. Resveratrol is a natural phenol produced in grapes (and other plants) in response to injury of the grape or in fighting off pathogens. Its ability to “defend and heal” is what makes this natural element of interest to those who study the medical uses of wine. The 12th c. Benedictine abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, promoted this claim in her two books on pharmacology: *the natural gifts of earth, created by God, hold properties that can heal the creatures created by God*. Without dismissing the advances of modern medical science, there is now increasing attention given to what has been overlooked during the previous 200 hundred years: the healing capacities within the natural world, including wine, used for centuries in all global cultures. What medical wisdom can be found in the study of nature’s gifts?

Wine and caution

The ancient Greek playwright, Ebulus, in his comedy *Dionysus* (the god of wine), wrote this cautionary word concerning wine: *Three bowls do I mix for the temperate: one to health, which they empty first, the second to love and pleasure, the third to sleep. When this bowl is drunk up, wise guests go home. The fourth bowl is ours no longer, but belongs to violence, the fifth to uproar, the sixth to drunken revel, the seventh to black eyes, the eighth is the policeman's, the ninth belongs to biliousness, and the tenth to madness and the hurling of furniture.*

Winemakers and physicians suggest moderate consumption of wine: one glass for women and two glasses for men per day. In his Rule for monks and nuns, St. Benedict offered similar advice. He was, after all, committed to **moderation** in all things: not too little and not too much. He avoided the puritanical restrictions of the desert monks of Egypt (and modern prohibitionists) and the drunken revels he witnessed as a student in Rome. In part this suggestion recognizes that too much wine can lead to what Ebulus called “black eyes and madness” as well as impaired health. There are clear risks in consuming too much alcohol – and then there are clear risks in consuming too much food, in behavioral additions to gambling, physical exercise, cybersex, narcotics, video games, texting and cell phone use



(walk on any university campus!), and shopping beyond one's means.

In her remarkable study of wine in culture and Christianity, Gisela Kreglinger notes that abuse of alcohol needs to be carefully differentiated: the largest portion of persons who drink too much consume hard liquor (spirits) and cheap beer. The failed American experience of Prohibition was a response to the widely available use of *gin* and *whiskey* – not wine – among industrial workers who spent their wages on drinking with their friends at saloons and pubs while their wives and children went without food and clothing – industrial workers along the Eastern seaboard and what has been called the Rust Belt (Illinois to Michigan to Ohio dipping into Kentucky and Tennessee). Unable to grow wine grapes (a small portion of New York being the exception), there was little wine production in these parts of the country.

Where is alcohol dependence the lowest? Studies produced by the Commission of the European Union note that the lowest rates are found in the ancient wine producing regions of the Mediterranean, from the Levant to Greece to Italy, and Southern France; the highest in the United Kingdom, Northern France, Austria, Germany, and the Nordic countries. In Italy, one of the largest wine-producing countries in the world, the rate of alcohol addiction is 1.1% of the population compared to 7.5% in the United States where there is a much, much higher rate of beer and hard liquor consumption. Can one become addicted to wine? Of course.

Yet study after study suggests that alcohol addiction is most frequently found among those who consume spirits and beer.

Can a good thing, God's gift of wine, be used for unhealthy ends? Can one's body, a gift of God, be used for unhealthy ends? Can one's mind, also a gift of God, be used for dark purposes? Yes. No doubt. But to paraphrase Martin Luther, married to a master brewer, one does not throw out wine, avoid sex, or dismiss one's rationale faculties because they could potentially be used for unsavory and unhealthy ends. Rather, one welcomes them as gifts and treats them well, sharing them out of love for others.

Wine and justice

Unhappy with their loose confederacy in which the twelve tribes enjoyed a good measure of equality, the Hebrews wanted to imitate their neighboring countries: "Give us a ruler," they demanded. The prophet **Samuel** heard and responded to their plea. If you want to be ruled by a king, keep in mind what he will do, said Samuel: *He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots ... and to make his implements of war* [due to his expansionist, imperial ambitions] ... *He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers* [and members of his harem]. *He will take the best of your vineyards and give them to his courtiers* [his business pals and Yes men]. *He will take one-tenth of your vineyards' produce and give it to his officers* [thus begins the taxation of produce]. After his recitation of what will happen to the people if they continue in their demand for a king, he concludes with this sobering promise: *You shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king* (1 Samuel 8:11-18).

David becomes the first and charismatic ruler (who put one of his generals to death in light of his illicit sexual affair with the general's wife), followed by **Solomon** who lived off his father's reputation and took even more from his people, conscripting them against their will as laborers on royal building projects (sounds a bit like Pharaoh and the Hebrews, yes?), to Solomon's son, **Rehoboam**, who scorned the people and was a paragon of social injustice (1 Kings 12).



One is mindful of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who through devious means sought and eventually gained the vineyard of Naboth. If one is searching for the origins of ugly disinformation and slander in politics, look no farther. Simply ready 1 Kings 21 where one encounters injustice after injustice against an innocent man in order to gain his fruitful vineyard by highly unfruitful means. And if one is looking for someone who spoke truth to power, look no farther than the prophet **Nathan** who exposed the injustice of this powerful and ruthless political couple (shades of President Frank and Claire Underwood featured in *House of Cards*). [Left: *Naboth murdered for his vineyard*]

If the God of Israel is angry about anything, it is about *social injustice*: about the ways in which the socially or politically powerful treat with contempt their fellow human beings. The prophet **Isaiah** accuses elite families and rulers: Your oppressive laws benefit you and harm everyone else; you rob the poor of their wages; you care not for the widow and orphan: they are nothing to you. You are sour grapes unfit for consumption! What will happen to this generation so arrogant in its attitude to God and neighbors? They will be crushed, trampled down as sour grapes (Isaiah 10:1-19). Does this warning ring a bell? We hear of the vineyard again in the lyrics written by the 19th c. abolitionist, Julia Ward Howe: “He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”

On the other hand, the vineyard can be a place where God’s **generosity** and **equity** are experienced. Jesus tells a parable of the vineyard owner who pays equal wages to those who labored in the vineyard from early morning and those who began their labor in the late afternoon (Matthew 20:1-18). To those who worked all day, the generosity of the owner was scandalous: Why should those who worked only a few hours receive such a generous wage? To their grumbling, the owner responds: *Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?* What a shock to those who had been waiting throughout the day for work: to receive an unexpected and generous wage.

The symbol of wine

While the term “symbol” in popular use tends to signify something insignificant – “a symbolic act devoid of any meaning” – poets, literary experts, and anthropologists understand its true meaning: a symbolic word, image, object, person, or action is that which always holds more than one meaning. A symbol holds a **surplus of meaning** that cannot be reduced to just one thing.

Such is the case with vineyard, vine, and wine. There is always more to explore than that one glass of wine. Indeed, the recognition that wine can mean **both this and that** is a healthy step away from the fundamentalist mindset that sees the world as **either my way or the highway**. Both education and religion should liberate us from narrow-minded thinking about purposeful living in the world. For there is always more than we can imagine, more wines to taste, and more friends and strangers with whom we can share the wine cup and what it can teach us about spirituality, community, generosity, and justice.

Let’s end here with a good word about **the life of wine**:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8P3kF2DHj4>

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On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Isaiah 25:6-8

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