

CHAPTER 1

Wine and the Bible

Why Wine?

Why write a book about the theology of wine in the Bible? For millennia wine has been central to agrarian life in many Near Eastern civilizations. From the cities of ancient Sumer to the early inhabitants of Palestine and the land of Canaan, wine was considered a drink of the gods and one that brought joy to humanity. For many cultures wine was also a sacred drink that was essential to social, economic, political, and religious life. Ancient Israel was no different and from the beginning of the Bible to the end, wine takes on its own theological meaning and symbolism in the writings of the biblical authors.

From the days of Noah extending to the patriarchs, the kings, the prophets, the exiles in Babylon, the Essenes of Qumran, and Jesus and his disciples, wine has played a critical role in helping articulate the divine–human relationship and the abundance and blessing of God’s salvation in the land. Of all the agricultural products produced by the ancient Israelites, wine functioned as a multilayered sign and symbol of life, joy, and celebration, but it also became a sign of judgment, punishment, and condemnation. But why wine? Why not milk, olive oil, honey, dates, pomegranates, or some other fruit? What is it about the vine, the soil, grapes, and wine that carried the capacity to express so deeply the covenant relationship between God and his people and the expression of his salvation on earth?

One of the reasons why wine is so rich a symbol is that it comes from a simple harvest of grapes that, once crushed and fermented, can become a drink of profound depth, complexity, and uniqueness. The humble grape contains the mystery of the land, the soil, the weather, and the attributes of a particular location. As clusters of fruit grow on the vine, their character

and composition are altered every time the sun shines, the rain falls, or the temperature rises and drops. This means that every vintage is distinct, and even within particular vintages there can be subtle differences. Vines that are grown on the lower part of a hill may produce different characteristics than vines on the upper part of the very same hill. The soil quality in one section of a vineyard may have better drainage than another section, which will also affect the characteristics of the grape. Even the yeast signatures on some grapes in the vineyard may differ from those on others. There is a multiplicity of factors involved in growing a simple cluster of grapes, and all of them were attributed to the mercy of the God, who through his wisdom and grace offered humanity a gift from the earth unlike any other.

Wine is also a diverse symbol because it can be made from hundreds of varieties of grapes. Some vines thrive in certain soil and weather conditions but may not do so in other geographic locations. The Pinot Noir grapes grown in the Champagne region will not produce the same quality in other parts of the world. In the cool French climate that offers little sun, the vines must be tended in specific ways. The seventeenth-century Benedictine monk Dom Pérignon was a master winemaker at the abbey of Hautvillers (now the headquarters of Moët & Chandon) and dedicated his life to discovering how to produce the best wines. He pruned the vines severely to create lower yields with higher concentration in the grapes. He harvested grapes only early in the morning to preserve their balance before the heat of the afternoon sun altered their flavors. Pérignon is thought to have been one of the first vintners to blend different still wines and store them in glass rather than wooden barrels. Later monks of his abbey claimed that he discovered the process of secondary fermentation (what gives Champagne its bubbles), even though at first he tried to prevent the wine from becoming too fizzy.¹ Champagne, or sparkling white wine, is known throughout the world, but take the same Pinot Noir grape, plant it in California or England, and craft it according to the Champagne method and you will have a drink that will contain distinctly different nuances in taste.

One of the reasons that wines can offer such complexity in taste and smell is because of the vine's relation to the soil. Contemporary winemakers will often talk about *terroir*, a French word which has no single equivalent in English but literally refers to "soil" or "land." There is some debate as to what *terroir* actually means in relation to wine, but traditionally it has been defined as "the sum of every environmental force affecting a given vineyard site. Soil, slope, orientation to the sun, and elevation are all part of a vineyard's *terroir*, as is every nuance of climate, including rainfall, wind velocity, frequency of fog, cumulative hours of sunshine, average

high and low temperatures, and so forth.”² However one uses the term, *terroir* encompasses the idea that *wine is intimately connected to place*. Unlike the fast-food chains of our world, which reproduce similar flavors and tastes across the globe, grapes of different varieties can reflect the characteristics of soil, climate, and all the other vast complexities that exist in a particular locale. A typical fast-food hamburger will likely taste the same in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, or Tokyo, but identical grape varieties grown in Napa Valley, Bordeaux, Stellenbosch, or the Barossa Valley will each have their own character and will produce wines that speak of each unique place.

One of the most critical elements in the concept of *terroir* is the soil. Without the right type of soil a vine will not produce the best possible grapes. The soil contains the nutrients, water, and drainage needed for vines to be healthy. It also helps create conditions for the vines to become stressed. Contrary to what one normally might think of as good gardening practice, grape vines will produce better, more concentrated grapes if they are pruned and deprived of too much water. If a vine is given enough sun, water, and nutrients without being pruned, it will happily grow and grow but will produce very few grapes. If a vine is stressed, however, it will extend its roots deep into the earth in search of water and will concentrate its energy to produce more grapes in order to reproduce itself. The deeper its roots go, the more diverse minerals and nutrients the vine draws out from the soil. If there is too much stress, however, the vine will wither. Too little stress, and the vine will not produce quality grapes. This is one reason why many vintners hope for hot, dry summers, because late rains before the harvest can saturate the vines and cause the grapes to bloat with water and lose their concentration. The ancient Roman author Pliny the Elder (ca. 70 CE) understood the unique interaction between soil and vine, writing, “For in fact some vines have so strong an affection for certain localities that they leave all their reputation behind there and cannot be transplanted elsewhere in their full vigour.”³

There are various kinds of soils, in which different grape varieties thrive. Some are mineral-rich and some contain layers of limestone (e.g., the regions of Champagne and Burgundy), while others are clay-based or sandy. The extensive variety of soils, minerals, and rocks in any given place are a significant part of its *terroir*. This was also true in ancient Israel. The biblical authors knew of “choice vines” (*šōrēq*) (cf. Isa 5:2; Jer 2:21) that needed to be planted in the right locations to produce the best wines. In Isaiah’s “Song of the Vineyard” the vintner plants his vineyard on a hillside which is often seen as an optimal location (Isa 5:1). Whether in the

hot, arid region of the southern Negev where limestone and sandstone dominate, or in the cooler hills of Galilee where limestone and rocky basalts from volcanic activity are found, the Israelites understood the connection between soil, vine, and wine.

The uniqueness of *terroir* is what provides the building blocks for making great wines. Each wine bears its own fragrance, whether it is the floral bouquet of a Pinot Noir, or the crisp citrus of an Assyrtiko, or the smooth oak and butter of a Chardonnay. The aroma of a wine can also reflect its taste. Some wines are bold and powerful while others are fruity and soft, and still others crisp and dry. They all bear their own textures on the palate and can taste of anything from minerals or green herbs to dark red fruits or leather. Some wines go down smoothly and some are fresh and lively, while others might be silky or soft. Each grape produces something distinctive, making wine a drink with depth, complexity, and variety. Though they did not have as many varieties of wines as are found on the market today, the ancient Israelites knew how to distinguish between new and old wines, choice wines, spiced wines, and other varieties that made wine such a dynamic symbol.

Contemporary wine critics have a vast array of words to describe wine's distinctive qualities. In fact, some may feel they need a degree just to begin tasting or understanding wine. Apart from modern wine-speak, however, there are some basic features of wine that offer insights into its structure, smell, and taste. Wine connoisseurs will often speak of the complexity in a wine, which refers to the layers one experiences while drinking. In a well-crafted wine one will notice different aromas, flavors, and textures that come through after an initial sip, but these may change moments later. Once the wine has been exposed to oxygen after the bottle has been opened and the glass poured, its character begins to unfold. In this way, drinking wine can be like having a conversation that takes new turns at every moment.

Good wines are dialogical in that they can encourage profound conversations as they reveal their different qualities. Gisela Kreglinger, following the wine critic Émile Peynaud, writes that “wine brings to us an infinite variety of natural flavors and aromas; it is complex and multifaceted, just as human beings are . . . Savoring wine at its best is like praying. It takes effort and willingness to engage in something that is far more complex than what we are used to when we are simply consuming foods.”⁴ Experiencing wine requires a level of attentiveness that, like prayer, focuses body, mind, and spirit to attune oneself to what the wine conveys. In a discussion of prayer and study, the French philosopher Simone Weil writes that “prayer consists

of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer.”⁵ Attentiveness to wine leads to an appreciation of its depths and complexities.

For one to experience fully the diverse bouquets or tastes that enliven the senses, wine requires concentration and consideration in ways that are not required for other drinks. C. S. Lewis writes about the pleasures of appreciation in considering a wine:

The connoisseur does not merely enjoy his claret as he might enjoy warming his feet when they were cold. He feels that here is a wine that deserves his full attention; that justifies all the tradition and skill that have gone to its making and all the years of training that have made his own palate fit to judge it. There is even a glimmering of unselfishness in his attitude. He wants the wine to be preserved and kept in good condition, not entirely for his own sake.⁶

The quality of our attentiveness to wine and how it is linked to time, place, memories, and events helps shape the quality of our experience of wine.

Within this multifaceted complexity, there is also a sense of balance in wine that comes when things like alcohol, acid, tannin, and fruitiness all achieve a certain harmony. Too much alcohol, and your nose will feel a burning sensation that will dominate other fragrances. If a wine has too little acidity it may taste flat and lifeless rather than being crisp and lively. Wines with overpowering tannins may make your palate feel bitter and dry, like the effect of drinking a strong shot of espresso followed by a hunk of dark chocolate. Some wines may taste overly fruity, as though you are drinking a diluted glass of jam. Well-crafted wines will take all these different facets and integrate them into a harmonious whole with each characteristic in balance with the others.

There is also a choreography that can be found in great wines. Like an orchestra playing one of Mozart’s symphonies, choice wines strike the exact notes at the right time as you drink them. Wine expert Karen MacNeil describes the choreography of wine as a fifth dimension of taste and experience. She writes of how the wine’s flavors almost move “physically and spatially” as if they are blossoming in the mouth. “The finest wines are multi-dimensional on the palate. There are wavelengths of flavor, force, volume, and velocity.”⁷ Wine is anything but monochromatic. It offers different-tasting notes that reflect grape, soil, weather, and a sense of place (*terroir*), which is one reason why it proved to be a dynamic symbol for the biblical authors.

Beyond individual consumption and description of taste, wine also connects human beings to one another. In the ancient world, as it is today, wine was used for feasting, celebration, and religious rituals. Wine was woven into the fabric of society and reflected hospitality, familial bonds, worship, and covenant relationships. The human connections engendered through wine were essential to the functioning of society and to maintaining friendship and strengthening citizenship. Wine was a communal drink that influenced all levels of social hierarchies, whether in the king's palace or the peasant's home.

Finally, wine is also an exceptional symbol in the Bible because of its capacity to alter the physical state of the body. One consequence of consuming too much wine is losing control of one's faculties and physical capabilities. Drunkenness is something that the biblical authors explicitly condemn. The sages of Israel denounce the drunkard as a fool because he loses control of his senses and does not follow the path of wisdom. The prophets disparage drunkenness because it represents vulnerability and exposure to attacks from the enemy, which can end in defeat or death. Too much revelry and debauchery are often depicted by the biblical authors as the way of the gentiles, and some Israelites, which leads one away from the good life. It is important to emphasize, however, that the biblical authors do not condemn wine itself. Instead, wine remains a cherished and valued gift from God that brings joy to the heart, eases the toils of life, and allows for the experience of his salvation.

More recent studies in neuroscience have revealed that intoxication is not the only physical effect of wine. Neuroscientists have demonstrated that the consumption of wine involves multisensory perception that is integrated with memory. Almost everyone has had the experience of smelling or tasting something that evokes strong memories or emotions, like Proust's madeleines. What is happening in these instances is that flavor images in our brains have been tied to more complex memories and experiences that are accessed through smell and taste.⁸ The neuroscientist Gordon Shepherd argues that sensory stimuli which accompany our memories are "stored in their respective central sensory representations, bound together by their connections to the hippocampus, and reaccessed, beginning with partial flavor cues, as a unified internal image or object by the brain mechanisms of attention, motivation, and emotion."⁹ Wine, taste, memory, and emotion are all bound together in the neural synapses of the brain.

In a work devoted to the neurological patterns that emerge in our brains when drinking wine ("neuroenology"), Shepherd writes that "our sensory

experience is heavily dependent on our own memories and emotions and those of our companions.”¹⁰ His work details the extensive neurological activity that takes place when drinking wine, and though the research is in its early stages, it demonstrates that sensory systems in our bodies (touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing) all contribute to a multidimensional experience when we taste wine. Wine activates our senses and the pleasure networks of the brain to create the feeling of enjoyment associated with the wine’s flavor that is linked to our memory. Though the biblical authors would not have known the neuroscience behind consuming wine, they understood its ability to evoke emotion, memory, and pleasure.

So why is wine such an important sign and symbol for the biblical authors? This simple, yet multifaceted, fermented grape drink engages with our sensory experiences in a way that almost no other agricultural product can. Visually, wine can reflect the deepest of reds that call to mind images of blood often used by the prophets or by Christ at the Last Supper. It reveals layers of aromas and offers complex tastes on the palate which can summon powerful emotions or memories. Wine even appeals to our auditory senses as we hear a bottle open, or bubbles bursting in a glass of sparkling Champagne or Prosecco. Wine offers a diverse and expressive sign which engages our physical senses, emotions, and memories on so many levels that it becomes a critical vehicle for the biblical authors to convey the depth and complexity of God’s relationship to his people and their experience of his blessings.

Wine in the Ancient World

The beginnings of wine go back to the mountainous areas of Turkey, Armenia, and northern Iran. It is in this area that archaeologists have discovered Neolithic settlements (ca. 5400–8000 BCE) that have yielded some of the earliest evidence of the domesticated Eurasian grape. Resinated wine found on pottery shards and grape pips discovered by archaeologists demonstrate that wine was being produced in large quantities at the site of Hajji Firuz Tepe in the northern Zagros mountains of Iran.¹¹ Other recent discoveries of grape residues found on broken pottery in northern Greece date from the fifth millennium BCE and point to viticulture and grape domestication in regions beyond Transcaucasia.¹² Though the archaeobotanical evidence remains fragmentary and subject to interpretation, it is likely that the upland regions of the Taurus and Zagros mountains were the first place where the fruit of the domesticated

vine (*Vitis vinifera vinifera*) was fermented and turned into the earliest examples of wine.¹³

Wine trade flourished in the ancient world among the earliest civilizations of Mesopotamia. The cost was prohibitive for most, since the wine would have been shipped from the north along the Tigris and Euphrates to the ancient kingdoms of Ur and Sumer in the south. McGovern argues that by the second millennium BCE, wines shipped from Armenia or Turkey would have been extremely expensive and could have been acquired only by royalty.¹⁴ By the fourth millennium BCE, however, the spread of viticulture in the ancient Near East and the Levant became an integral part of life, and trade soon expanded between other nations, especially those producing wine in and around Palestine.¹⁵

In ancient Egypt the main cereal crops were wheat and barley, which provided the ingredients for making beer. Though this fermented drink was an important part of their culture, Egyptian pharaohs also imported wine from other areas including the land of Canaan. Around 3000 BCE, however, they established a royal winemaking industry in the Nile Delta. Vineyards, winepresses, and winemaking became part Egyptian life.¹⁶ Wine was incorporated into religious rituals and was offered daily by the priests to the gods. In some temple inscriptions the king is shown offering a wine jug to Hathor, the goddess of love, who was worshiped with wine, music, and dance.¹⁷ In the palace of Amenhotep III, lists of commodities were found on pottery shards (ostraca), and apart from meat, the most common reference was to wine. Some of the inscriptions indicate different purposes for wine such as “wine for offerings,” “wine for taxes,” “wine for merry-making,” and “wine for a happy return.” Other fragments note the regnal year of the pharaoh, sometimes including details like the place where the wine was made or the vintner who made it.¹⁸

The Egyptians also praised the medicinal value of wine as a gift from the gods; as one inscription states, “He [god] created remedies to end illness, wine to end affliction.”¹⁹ They saw wine as an essential part of a man’s life. “Wine, women, and food give gladness to the heart. He who uses them without loud shouting is not reproached in the street. He who is deprived of one of them becomes the enemy of his body.”²⁰ Like many other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, the Egyptians incorporated wine into various aspects of social, religious, and political life.

Wine production in Egypt became an important agricultural staple for society, but the Egyptians also regarded wines from Palestine highly, a fact which is documented in some of their earliest historical records. The Egyptians recorded many military campaigns into areas of Palestine, where

they took wine as part of their spoils. Accounts from the reign of Thutmose III (1483–1450 BCE) speak of the abundance of wine that was taken from port cities along the coast of Palestine. Other accounts of his conquests in Djahi (presumably Palestine) speak of the fecundity of the region. “Their wines were found lying in their vats, as water flows, and their grains on the threshing floors, being ground. They were more plentiful than the sands of the shore. The army overflowed with its possessions . . . Now his majesty’s army was as drunk and anointed with oil every day as if at feasts in Egypt.”²¹ The picture of the lavish bounty may have been exaggerated, but the language demonstrates that Palestine was known as a fertile land that was associated with prolific wine production from the second millennium BCE onward.

In the Egyptian story “The Tale of Sinuhe” a man travels to the land of “Yaa” (Palestine) and describes its agricultural abundance. “Figs were in it and grapes. It had more wine than water. Abundant was its honey, plentiful its oil . . . Loaves were made for me daily, and wine as daily fare, cooked meat, roast fowl, as well as desert game.”²² Other monument inscriptions also speak of a place that “has more wine than water,”²³ offering an idyllic vision of a land where fertility abounds and the drink of the gods flows like rivers.²⁴

The evidence for wine as an integral part of Egyptian culture and religion is important for the biblical story because this is the place where the Hebrew slaves were imprisoned for over four hundred years according to the scriptures (Exod 12:40–41). We are told that the Hebrew slaves were forced to make bricks under the tyranny of Pharaoh before the exodus took place (Exod 5:7–8). Prior to that period, however, it is likely that the slaves might have taken on other roles in the kingdom. Mural paintings at Thebes from the tomb of Amenhotep II (1450–1425 BCE) portray the “Apirou” (possibly “Hebrews”) as they press grapes in a wine vat. Another scene entitled “Wine from the Vineyard of the Roads of Horus” illustrates men decanting wine into wine jugs. It is possible that the Hebrew slaves, some brought from Palestine, were already known as skilled vintners and practiced their trade in Egypt.²⁵ By the nineteenth dynasty of Pharaohs (eleventh century BCE) wine was commonplace among the upper classes, with records of Egypt importing large amounts of wine from Palestine. This was during the period of Ramses II, who many scholars argue was the pharaoh during the biblical exodus from Egypt.

Wine in Ancient Israel

Before Egyptian bondage, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, lived in the land of Canaan, where the domesticated grapevine (*Vitis vinifera*

vinifera) had been planted and harvested to make wine since at least 3500 BCE. The earliest evidence of grape pips was found at Tell esh-Shuna in the northern Jordan Valley.²⁶ Winepresses have been unearthed throughout ancient Palestine, but one of the most significant sites is Meggido where 117 winepresses were discovered.²⁷ Though the dating of these winepresses is difficult, this site, along with others, demonstrates that wine production was central to agricultural life in many regions of ancient Israel.

Wine was a staple of life for the Israelites.²⁸ This can be seen through some of the historical place names mentioned in the land. The book of Numbers describes the wadi Eshcol (Valley of the Grape Cluster) where the spies cut down a cluster of grapes so large that it had to be carried on a pole between men (Num 13:23). The book of Judges speaks of Abelkeramim (Abel by the Vineyards) (Judg 11:33) and the Nahal Sorek (Valley of the Sorek Grape) (Judg 16:4). Joshua defeated those living in Anab (Grape) near Hebron (Josh 11:21), and Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (Mount of the Vineyard) (1 Kgs 18:19). Other texts also attest to vineyards in both the north and the south, from the hills of Galilee to the southern areas of Judea and the Negev.

The ancient Israelites were primarily an agrarian and pastoral people that lived with deep connections to the land. Almost all families operated within the structures of small farms which provided their subsistence and possibly some extra to be used for trade. Agricultural products included grains, olives, and grapes along with livestock. Rosen estimates that a family of five around Iron Age I (ca. 1200–1000 BCE) could have supported a farm of around fourteen acres.²⁹ This would allow the family to use one to two acres for a small vineyard.³⁰ Even a smaller vineyard of half an acre could produce enough wine for consumption throughout the year.

Walsh estimates that if a plot of such a size were planted with vines according to modern practice, it could hold up to 275 vines. If one vine yields approximately 3.6 kg (8 lb) of grapes, then this would result in a harvest of 990 kg (2,200 lb).³¹ If it normally takes 5.4 kg (12 lb) of grapes to produce 3.8 liters (1 gallon), then a half-acre farm could produce approximately 693 liters (183 gallons) of wine per year, which in typical modern packaging (0.75 liters) would equate to 924 bottles.³² This means that a family would have around 2.5 bottles to drink daily during the year.

Depending on their location, many Israelites would have planted their vineyards in rocky soils that were not suitable for growing grains. Often these would be terraced plots along a hillside, which were optimal for growing vines. In the heat of the summer the vines would stretch their roots deep into the soil to absorb moisture and concentrate their energy into a

limited number of grapes. The terraces also helped with drainage, as heavy rainfall would not wash away the soil but would allow for limited amounts of water to reach the vines. Hillsides were also ideal because the slopes helped to circulate air through the vines. The incline would allow the warm air to rise and the cool air to sink below. On the upper portion the grapes would be protected from the cooler air in the valleys, which could damage the crops if there was a heavy frost during the growing season. The natural flow of air also helped prevent mold spores or fungi from forming on the vines. The Israelite vintners knew that the location of a vineyard is key to producing excellent grapes for wine, which is why the prophet Isaiah begins his Song of the Vineyard with the words “My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill” (Isa 5:1).³³ In the Mediterranean climate, terraced vineyards proved to be an exceptional way to take advantage of the natural geological features available and to utilize land that was unfit for growing other crops.

The Israelites stored their wine in amphorae (large clay jars) in the home. According to archaeological finds in Judean excavations, the clay jars that the Israelites used would have stored up to 45 liters (11.8 gallons).³⁴ These jars were also used for food storage and likely took up almost half the living space in the home. Since bread, wine, and oil were the staples of the Israelite diet it was important to secure these food sources for daily consumption and for special occasions.³⁵ Some biblical texts mention the royal wine cellars (1 Chr 27:27; cf. 2 Chr 11:11) where amphorae would have been stored. Jeremiah is told to prophesy to the people that every wine jar should be filled, to which they respond, “Do you think we do not know that every wine-jar should be filled with wine?” (Jer 13:12). The Israelites were familiar with the process of filling and sealing each vessel with mud, pitch, or an organic substance. There was often a small hole left open for ventilation to release the final gases of fermentation. These holes would later be filled before storage.

Caring for a vineyard took much time and patience and involved different levels of work throughout the seasons. During the year, the Israelites would have done a significant amount of pruning. This included the removal of canes, shoots, and leaves. In the winter vintners cut off excess canes, which were stacked and burned. This allowed new shoots to emerge for the next harvest. From the spring onward, the vines were thinned to remove any excess growth and to help direct their nutrients into the chosen shoots and thus concentrate its production. Once the vines were in full growth, the vintner trimmed the canopy by getting rid of unwanted shoots or removing leaves to expose the grapes to the sun.

Some clusters might be cut off at this time to direct the vine's life into a limited number of grapes. The whole process of pruning and removing vegetation was intended to concentrate the life of the vine and to produce the best possible grapes.

We gain an insight into the rhythm of life for the ancient Israelite farmer through the oldest "calendar," which comes from an inscription found in the ancient Canaanite city of Gezer (about twenty miles west of Jerusalem). It details the yearly cycles of harvest and dates to around the tenth century BCE.³⁶

Two months gathering
 Two months sowing
 Two months late planting
 One month cutting flax
 One month barley reaping
 One month end of reaping
 Two months pruning
 One month summer fruit.

This may have been a folk song or an exercise for writing practice, but it reveals the rhythm of ancient Israel around the yearly cycles of seedtime and harvest in the land.

The understanding of time in an ancient agrarian society is something that is foreign to modern urban and suburban dwellers in today's world. Knierim rightly argues that Israel's conception of time was not primarily linear with a view toward an end.³⁷ Instead, the ancient Israelites viewed time as cyclical and repetitive within a linear framework. In other words, the cycles of time and seasons were central to agrarian life and food production. These continuous cycles laid the foundation for particular events throughout history. Time, however, was a continuous cycle that flowed from the natural life cycles of the earth. The Israelites understood their lives as taking place within the patterns dictated by the seasons and harvests which shaped their yearly work and festivals.

The first crops of barley would have been gathered around April, or the spring equinox, near the Passover feast, which was followed by the wheat harvest a month later or near the time of Pentecost (fifty days after Passover). After reaping the harvest of grains, the Israelite farmers turned their attention to the work of the vineyard. "Two months pruning" likely indicates that the grape vines were tended and harvested from June to July, with other summer fruits being gathered afterward. The Israelites used "pruning hooks" (*mazmērâ*) to cut the grapes from the vine. This is why

the prophets looked forward to a time of peace when Israel would beat “their spears into pruning hooks” (Isa 2:4; 18:5; cf. Mic 4:3) so that they could tend their vines rather than go to war. The end of the agricultural cycle came with the harvest of olives and other late fruit from September to October, which was followed by the festival of Booths or “ingathering.”³⁸

Once the grapes were harvested the winemaking process began with grapes being crushed by foot in a winepress (*gat*). This was often located near the vineyard and would have been used communally. Winepresses were typically simple rectangular shaped installations carved in the rock. The upper portion was sloping so that the grape juice could flow downward into a channel or bore in the stone. Below, it was collected into a lower vat where it could be filtered and poured into containers.³⁹ After the grapes had been pressed and stored in amphorae they would ferment for several days before the amphorae were sealed.

The ancient Israelites were aware that wine is a living substance that needs to be nurtured and well-crafted. The prophet Hosea speaks of the pleasing bouquet that comes from excellent wines and compares Israel to the beautiful fragrance of “the wine of Lebanon” (Hos 14:7). These characteristics begin development during the fermentation process as the grape juice responds to different things like yeast, bacteria, and oxygen. If the juices remain exposed to oxygen after the yeast converts sugars into alcohol, it will eventually change into vinegar or soured wine. Some wines also go through a secondary fermentation process called malolactic fermentation which converts malic acid into lactic acid and helps with the aging and softening of the wine. With no written instructions, it is likely that winemaking techniques in ancient Israel were passed on from generation to generation.

During the monarchic period Israel became a large-scale producer of wine since it was a lucrative product for trade.⁴⁰ Winepresses and vineyards were commonplace throughout the north and the south, and there is evidence of vineyards in cities around Jerusalem.⁴¹ The archaeological record reveals potsherds from Samaria dating from the eight century BCE which contain information regarding commerce and trade in Israel. The records detail transactions pertaining to wine and oil and demonstrate that wine was one of the most significant items of trade during that period.⁴² Other pottery jars from the reign of King Hezekiah display the inscription *lmlk* (“to/for the king”) on the handle, indicating the royal procurement of wine.⁴³ The prophets also make mention of the wine trade: Ezekiel comments on how the people traded wine from Helbon and casks of wine from Uzal.⁴⁴

The archaeological and biblical evidence demonstrates that viticulture permeated the whole of Israelite society. Before the monarchy, vineyards were planted within subsistence farming communities mainly for family use, while larger vineyards allowed for trade. With the rise of a centralized government beginning with the Davidic monarchy, wine became connected to royal households, tribute, and taxes. Winemaking was a profitable industry that was essential for Israelite commerce because the Israelites were able to produce some of the most desirable wines in the ancient Near East.

In an ancient agrarian society wine touched the lives of nearly all Israelites. Whether people were managing a vineyard, treading grapes, or celebrating a festival, the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes associated with wine were a daily part of life that connected them to the land, to the vine, to God, and to one another. It is no wonder that viticulture and wine became such a prominent symbol, helping to express the relationship between God and his people. The agrarian life offered the basis for powerful metaphors from the natural world. The prophets and others drew on these images to convey to the people both the blessing and salvation of God as well as his judgment and wrath. To understand the Bible the reader is required to grasp why and how things like the vine, grapes, and wine became such prominent symbols of the divine-human relationship. To do so, we must turn now to the biblical authors and the Hebrew poets to get a sense of how they use wine to teach, warn, and encourage God's people.

Wine in the Literature of the Bible: Poetry and Metaphor

It is one thing to speak of the archaeological record of wine, viticulture, and consumption in the ancient world, but to learn about how wine affected cultures and people groups we must turn to their literature. The biblical authors frequently used wine as a sign or metaphor, and this was especially true of the prophets. Whether it is the dark, richness of its blood-like color, or its intoxicating effects, wine is used as a multivalent symbol that can speak of both blessing and curse. By using wine as both sign and metaphor, the biblical authors create vivid images that reveal theological truths about God and his covenant relationship with his people. Wine as both metaphor and symbol provided a literary means to comprehend the depths of God's grace and the potential of his devastating judgment.

Metaphor theory in theological and biblical studies has developed over the past decades and has produced important insights into how we might interpret biblical texts.⁴⁵ The study of metaphor dates back to Aristotle, and

since that time there have been debates concerning the merits of using figurative language. Aristotle understood that the skill of creating good metaphors lies in the ability to perceive the resemblance between two things.⁴⁶ In the biblical texts, metaphors provide an analogical word picture that allows the reader to connect experiences from everyday life to the divine–human relationship.

In the Bible, and in other ancient Near Eastern texts, metaphor is often used as a literary tool that helps give shape to abstract theological ideas. Soskice notes that “Since the time of Athenagoras at least, the good theologian and insightful faithful have recognized the language of both popular devotion and formal theology to be highly metaphorical and not found that to be particularly problematic.”⁴⁷ Paul Ricoeur contends that metaphors offer a unique way of expressing how we perceive the world around us and that figurative language “contributes to the opening up and the discovery of a field of reality other than that which ordinary language lays bare.”⁴⁸ Others, however, have often considered metaphor a stylistic tool that simply adds poetic description rather than contributing to the understanding of the subject matter.⁴⁹ Still others have regarded metaphor as secondary to a literal description and have seen it as a hindrance to religious thought.⁵⁰

More recent studies in cognitive linguistics have turned the discussion to the cognitive force of metaphoric language that promotes the deeper thought processes which help in understanding certain concepts.⁵¹ Metaphors enhance cognitive function and knowledge by linking abstract concepts with physical realities and bodily experience. They do not merely offer a comparison between two things, but extend to whole sets of corresponding experiences. For example, when the biblical authors use the soil, grapes, or wine as a metaphor it naturally extends into an entire agrarian ecosystem and the physical experience one has in that domain. Agricultural metaphors use the concrete experience of working the land to explain more abstract theological concepts such as God’s blessing or curse.⁵²

Several theories and definitions of metaphor exist, but Soskice offers a broad description that defines metaphor as “*that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.*”⁵³ The essence of a metaphor is bringing two things together to create a word picture that offers a different perspective on the subject. Zóltan Kövecses offers a more nuanced summary of conceptual metaphor theory. “*A conceptual metaphor is understanding one domain of experience (that is typically abstract) in terms of another (that is typically concrete).*”⁵⁴ This captures the idea that metaphors require a cognitive process of linking

our physical experience in the world with an abstract concept. To understand how God relates to his people the biblical authors may speak of Israel as the sheep and God as the shepherd (Ezek 34). In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd and of his followers as the sheep who hear his voice (John 10:11–16). In these examples, the pastoral domain in the physical world becomes a bridge to understanding the theological concept of how God, or Christ, relates to the care of his people.

In the Bible metaphors often bring together the concrete realities of agrarian life and the land with theological concepts about God. The great biblical translator, Jerome (Hieronymus), understood this all too well when commenting on Jeremiah, who is told by God to go to the potter's house and watch the artisan shape the clay into a vessel (Jer 19:1–11). He writes, "Whatever is discerned by the eyes arrives to the judgment and understanding of the soul through every other sense, through hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, but is retained even more so by the mind. Thus, the prophet was commanded to go to the potter's house and there to hear the instructions of the Lord."⁵⁵ Jerome rightly argues that the metaphor of God as potter and Israel as clay had a greater impact on the prophet because he was able to perceive the theological truth of the divine–human relationship through the experience of his senses.

To understand biblical metaphors it is essential to grasp how the physical world or the "domain" is being mapped onto the abstract. For example, if Scripture says that God is the vintner and Israel is the vine/vineyard (Isa 5:1–7), then the impression of the metaphor will likely have the greatest impact on those who have the *experience* of planting and caring for a vineyard. The metaphor will have significantly less effect on the listener who is far removed from agricultural work because they do not have experience in that domain. In a similar manner, if one never drank wine or alcohol it would be difficult to fully comprehend the meaning of the psalmist when he writes of God's judgment, "you have given us wine to drink that made us reel" (Ps 60:3). The embodied experience provides the potential for the poetic metaphor to sharpen one's understanding of the theological concept of judgment. In the psalm the loss of balance and control that comes from drinking too much wine relates to being judged by the divine.

The most powerful biblical metaphors depict the most common and well-known examples from daily life in connection with the natural world.⁵⁶ In the case of ancient Israel, people's daily experience was primarily that of a subsistence agrarian society. Since the people were connected

to the land through farming, it is not surprising that the majority of metaphors used by the biblical authors have to do with plants, growth, and the agricultural seasons.⁵⁷ The more intimate the experience, the more powerful the metaphor, which is why grapes and wine are a sustained image throughout the Bible that helps reveal God's relationship with his people.

The psychiatrist and scholar Ian McGilchrist argues that metaphor is fundamental to our understanding of the world because it links language to the physical realities of life. In his analysis of the different functions of the right and left hemispheres of the brain, he contends that metaphor helps us understand one thing in terms of another by grounding it in what we experience in the body. "Metaphor *embodies* thought and places it in a living *context* . . . Metaphors, even the simple ones hidden in expressions like feeling 'down,' derive from our experience of living as embodied creatures in the everyday world."⁵⁸ McGilchrist goes on to argue that metaphor is essential to human thought because it provides a bridge to connect abstract concepts to physical realities.

If we take one of the examples above, such as Israel as vine/vineyard, we see how the prophet brings together the theological realities of God's relationship to Israel with agrarian life. Rather than offering a propositional truth such as "God loves Israel but the people have become corrupt and unfaithful" the prophet employs the metaphor of vine/vineyard to connect the neurological and physical experience of the vintner in order to reveal a deeper reality that expresses God's relationship with them. Vintners know well the exhausting work, patience, and cost required to plant a vineyard that will produce the best grapes. They understand the mental resilience required to persevere during long hours of work in the hot sun and the fatigue that comes at the end of the day. They know the anxiety of changes in the weather, animals that might break in, or outbreaks of pests and diseases. The joys and hardships they experience mentally and physically, all to produce great wine, become the bridge to a theological understanding of how they relate to God.

The metaphor of the LORD as vintner and Israel as vine is brought to its tragic climax when the prophet writes that God went to look for fruit, but it produced only "rancid grapes"⁵⁹ or "wild grapes" (Isa 5:2). The shock, frustration, and disgust would immediately resonate with the daily experience of the people. A crop of useless grapes would affect the entire family, as it would severely damage the household economy. The harvest, even if crushed and fermented into wine, would be worthless because it would taste terrible and would be fit for no good use. This simple story of the

prophet would evoke powerful emotions in any Israelite connected to the land and to viticulture. By taking the blessing that comes from hard work, which results in well-crafted wines, and turning it into a curse of rancid grapes, the prophet creates in the listener an emotional response which offers theological insights into what God experiences when his people are disobedient to his commands.

In other scriptures wine is also a part of more complex metaphors. Plant imagery that includes vineyards, vines, and the growth of grapes is all connected to viticulture, and offers different aspects of what is required to produce wine. The main focus in the coming chapters, however, will be on the specific use of wine as symbol and metaphor in the Bible; but invariably there will be some overlap with the broader agricultural work of viticulture and its connection to the soil.

The literary category of “metaphor” is vast and complex. Modern scholarship has shed light on the use of conceptual metaphors and their importance for our comprehension of abstract concepts through our physical experience. Cognitive linguistics has demonstrated that metaphor is a critical linguistic tool by means of which we understand and view the world. Though we must remain cautious of impressing modern literary theories on ancient Hebrew or Greek texts, these tools can help to shed light on the experiences of an agrarian Israelite society that used metaphors and word pictures to elucidate rich theological subjects. Wine became a critical symbol and metaphor that was deeply embedded in the everyday work of ancient Israel. It was consumed in most households, it was offered daily at God’s altar, and it brought joy and life to great celebrations and religious festivals throughout the year. This is why wine is such a prominent literary symbol, used by the biblical authors to express both the judgment and salvation of God.

The Celebration of Life

In a debate about why a special prayer of blessing is said over wine, the rabbis argued that the fruit of the vine is unlike other produce from the earth. They quote from a parable told in Judges where the vine says, “Shall I stop producing my wine that cheers gods and mortals?” (Judg 9:13).⁶⁰ The rabbis go on to ask, how does wine cheer God? No direct answer is given, but they allude to the reason for why a blessing is said specifically over wine. When God sees a thankful heart and a life overflowing with benediction for the gifts he gives, it makes him glad. The rabbis go on to say that it is forbidden for God’s people to enjoy anything of this world without

benediction. To enjoy the fruit of the earth without praise or thanksgiving would be to commit sacrilege. It would be like consuming gifts from heaven as if they were stolen from the divine. Instead, wine was given to humanity as a gift and was worthy of its own blessing every time it was consumed or offered at the altar.

The rabbis offer an important insight into the biblical theology of wine. As we shall discover, wine was seen by the biblical authors as a gift from God that brought relief and joy to humanity. From the days of Noah to the final judgment of Revelation, God's people were to plant vineyards, make wine, and celebrate the abundance that he provides from the earth. Wine was central to festivals, worship, and living in communion with the land. Vineyards, grapes, and viticulture were woven into the fabric of Israel's life and were recognized as an expression of God's abundance, generosity, and salvation. *To drink wine when there was peace, justice, and prosperity in the land was to experience the salvation of God's kingdom and the promise of his covenant blessing here on earth.* The early Israelites did not look to future heavenly rewards but, rather, they understood that the gifts of God's faithfulness and promise were connected to life in land.

Later in Israel's history, and into the New Testament period, wine continued to be a sign of God's presence and blessing both in the physical world and in anticipation of the world to come. The Essenes of Qumran drank wine and looked forward to God's future blessings through the coming Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth drank wine with his disciples and others while he traveled around Galilee and Judea teaching and healing. He offered signs of God's kingdom by changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11). Jesus abstained from wine after the Last Supper until his death but vowed to his disciples that he would drink it anew in the coming of God's kingdom (Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25). The continuity of drinking wine before and after the resurrection was a sign for Christians that God's salvation for his people would continue to be associated with the fruit of the vine especially in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The joy of the kingdom of God is not the only way wine is depicted throughout the scriptures. We shall also explore the darker side of wine in the Bible, because the gift of blessing can be transformed into a curse if not used with consideration. Drunkenness, intoxication, and other inappropriate uses of wine are resolutely condemned by the biblical authors. The laws of Leviticus command priests not to consume wine or strong drink when they minister inside the holy space of the tabernacle (Lev 10:9; cf. Ezek 44:21). The prophet Amos denounces the Israelites for making the Nazirites drink wine when they have taken vows of abstinence (Amos

2:12). He criticizes the people for bringing wine that was procured unlawfully into the temple as an offering (Amos 2:8; cf. Joel 3:3). The prophet Micah condemns the practice of drinking wine to prophesy and preach, which was a practice of the prophets in ancient Mari (Mic 2:11).⁶¹ The wisdom sayings consistently speak against the folly of the drunkard and encourage people to pursue a sober and righteous life. The various voices from the scriptures remind the reader that the abuse of God's gift can have severe consequences.

Though wine is given to celebrate life, there are also times and seasons when abstinence is recommended by the biblical authors. The laws of Moses make clear that in some circumstances men or women may make vows not to drink wine at all. One example is that of the Nazirites, who separate themselves in order to be holy to God. They must abstain from any drink or food made from grapes and not allow a razor to touch their hair or go near dead bodies (Num 6:2–8). This is the command that was given to Samson's mother because he was to be set apart as holy to save the Israelites from the Philistines (Judg 13:4–5; cf. 1 Sam 1:11). She too was to abstain from wine, presumably to preserve her own holiness (Judg 13:14). Another example is found in the Rechabites, who willingly hold to the vow passed on to them by their ancestors never to drink wine. Jeremiah praises them for their example of faithfulness and compares their loyalty to a human oath with the disloyalty of Israel to God's command (Jer 35:1–14; cf. Dan 10:3).

Periods of fasting and mourning, purification, or prayer could also be accompanied by abstinence. Moses reminds the Israelites that when God led them through the wilderness they did not drink wine as they prepared to enter the promised land (Deut 29:6). Hannah abstains from wine as she prays fervently to God for a son (1 Sam 1:15). In these examples, the scriptures show that oaths to refrain from drinking wine were primarily voluntary and could be taken for a period of time or, in more extreme cases, over the course of one's life.

In some instances, abstaining from wine was seen as a sign of Jewish purity among the gentiles, who were often portrayed as heavy drinkers. The prophet Daniel refused to be defiled by the rations of food and wine that were given to him in Babylon (Dan 1:5, 8, 16). In the Persian empire, the heroine Esther also abstained from wine to demonstrate her purity among the gentiles and her wisdom in how to navigate life within the king's palace. In a similar manner, Judith maintained her senses by abstaining from the wine offered by Holofernes (Jdt 12:2) until the moment before she cut off his head and said, "I will gladly drink, my lord, because today is the greatest day in my whole life" (Jdt 12:8). In these narratives we find that

abstinence from drinking is a response of the people's faithfulness when living among the gentiles, who were often depicted as wild and excessive drinkers at their feasts.

Some of the examples above will be explored in further detail, but it is sufficient to say that the biblical authors suggest that, in certain times and circumstances, refraining from wine is an appropriate response for the faithful. What the Bible does not express is any form of teetotalism that wholly condemns the drinking of wine or its enjoyment. The biblical witness overwhelmingly points to the fruit of the vine as an exceptional gift from God that is to be enjoyed by humanity. Wine is associated with the joy and life of God's kingdom and his salvation and blessing on earth. To drink it is to taste of the promised delights that come from the land, especially when there is faithfulness, righteousness, and peace among God's people. Though the abuse of wine was always a potential danger, the gift itself is never rejected or dismissed by the biblical authors.

Wine has always had a tenuous relationship with Jews and Christians throughout history. Some have called for complete abstinence because of wine's alcoholic content, while others have called for moderation. Alcoholism continues to be a serious disease that affects people across the globe. The World Health Organization estimates that over three million deaths each year are due to harmful uses of alcohol.⁶² This does not account for the number of broken families or relationships that have suffered because of alcoholism. It is no wonder that some Jews and Christians alike have rejected the use of any form of alcohol among the faithful.

Despite the tragic statistics, however, the association of wine with distilled spirits, or other forms of alcohol, is misleading. Though both contain alcohol, they derive from very different processes, and the levels of alcohol are vastly increased in distilled spirits. Whereas the average glass of wine may contain anywhere from 8 to 14 percent alcohol, the average shot of whiskey can contain 40–60 percent alcohol. It is likely that wine in the ancient world did not contain as high an alcoholic content as many of the wines we drink today. In the Greco-Roman period it was also customary to dilute wine with water. The biblical texts are clear that wine has the potential to lead to alcoholism, but wine was still seen as something to be enjoyed, and for many it was consumed on a daily basis in a moderate way. As G. K. Chesterton writes, "the dipsomaniac and the abstainer are not only both mistaken, but they both make the same mistake. They both regard wine as a drug and not as a drink."⁶³

Wine, for the biblical authors, is part of God's creation that has been established through his wisdom and grace. The vine comes from God

alone. He made it, he provides the means to make it grow, and he is the one who directs its life from soil, roots, and vine to create a cluster of grapes. Humans must then take what God gives and turn it into wine which the psalmist says was given to “gladden the human heart” (Ps 104:15). Though there may be times for abstinence, the Bible presents wine as a gift from God that allows humanity to experience his blessing and salvation in the land. To receive the gift, however, humanity must fulfill its own task in keeping and caring for the earth, honoring its use of creation, tending to the soil, and caring for its communities.