

BY TERRY W. EDDINGER

Establishing, maintaining, and harvesting a vineyard was the most labor-intensive agricultural undertaking in biblical times.

made wine from its fruit, and became drunk (Gen. 9:20-21). Isaac used wine as an idiom of prosperity in blessing Jacob (who he thought was Esau, 27:28). Isaiah compared Israel's faithfulness to God with a vineyard and its owner (Isa. 5:1-7). Jesus likewise told several parables about wine (Matt. 9:17; Luke 5:39) and vineyards (Matt. 20:1-16; 21:33-42; and others). Furthermore, He referred to Himself as the vine and His followers as the branches (John 15:1-11). Also, at the Passover meal with His disciples the night before His crucifixion, Jesus used wine as a symbol of His blood to illustrate His sacrifice for the sins of the world (Luke 22:20). These are but a few of the Bible references to wine, grapes, and vineyards.²

What do we know, though, about viticulture and wine production in ancient Israel? Establishing, maintaining, and harvesting a vineyard was the most labor-intensive agricultural undertaking in biblical times.³ The farmer first had to prepare a place to plant a vineyard. Ancient people planted vineyards on all kinds of terrain, but the hillside was the most common. Farmers terraced the hillside to create areas that were relatively flat, easy to work, and not prone to erosion. Using rocks from the hillside, the Israelite farmers built retaining walls to hold the soil for the terrace. Since rocks hampered the growth of the vines and had to be removed from the field anyway, farmers built the terrace wall

using the rocks they cleared from their own vineyard fields. Furthermore, the farmer tilled the field (perhaps with a hoe or spade) to prepare the soil for planting (Isa. 5:2).

Next the farmer built a wall around the vineyard to keep out wild animals, such as foxes and jackals (see Song of Sol. 2:15), and thieves (Ps. 80:12-13). Although this was usually a stone wall, it could also be a hedge (Isa. 5:5). Then the owner constructed a tower in the vineyard. A guard kept watch over the vineyard from this tower while the vines bore fruit. The owner, his family, and his servants also lived in the tower during the harvest season, thus the tower became a second home.

Somewhere in the middle of the vineyard, the owner cut a winepress out of solid rock and lined it with plaster. Usually the winepress had at least two vats, an upper and a lower vat connected by a channel. The upper vat tended to be wide and shallow, about 12 inches deep, while the lower vat was narrower and deeper (up to 3 feet deep). The bottom of the upper vat declined slightly toward the channel to insure good flow of the must (juice from crushed grapes).

A vineyard was not complete without grapevines. The farmer planted young vines in the vineyard in rows about 8 to 12 feet apart. Usually these vines grew along the ground; however,

LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Proverbs 20:1; 23:19-21, 29-35; 31:4-7



Nabatean terra-cotta cup from Amman, Jordan, from 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D. ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ; DEPT. OF ANTIQUITIES IN JORDAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, AMMAN, JORDAN (8/25/10). Above: Mosaic of Dionysus, the god of wine from the Roman villa at Corinth. ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ; THE ANCIENT CORINTH MUSEUM (11/9/14).

farmers propped up fruit-bearing vines to prevent the fruit from rotting prematurely. Spread out on the ground, the vines received plenty of sunshine by day and trapped the dew by night. Sometimes farmers allowed vines to climb into the branches of a tree or over a trellis. A vine reached maturity and produced its first crop in about three years. No other plants grew in the vineyard (Deut. 22:9), except occasionally a fig tree (Luke 13:6).

Vineyards required constant care to produce a good crop. In the early spring, workers used pruning hooks (Joel 3:10) to prune the vines of superficial, diseased, or feeble branches so the sap flowed only into healthy branches. This technique allowed healthy branches to produce better fruit.⁴

After much hard work to establish a vineyard, the harvest came. Harvest time, typically July to September, was a festive and joyous occasion (Judg. 9:27). Harvesters sang as they gathered grapes (Isa. 16:10), and those who trod danced together as they smashed grapes (Jer. 25:30). Jeremiah illustrated the joy of harvest by describing a time when harvest would not be happy. He said, "Joy and gladness are gone from the orchards and fields of Moab. I have



A late Hellenistic period grape or olive press at the Lower Acropolis area of Rhodes. This angle shows the drain on the end of the press.

Below: Contemporary vineyard along the highway between Bethshemesh and Tel Azekah in central Israel.

Right: Terra-cotta wine or water jar from the 2nd-3rd centuries A.D.

Lower right: An artist's rendition of a first-century wine press.



stopped the flow of wine from the presses; no one treads them with shouts of joy. Although there are shouts, they are not shouts of joy" (48:33, NIV).

Harvest was a fairly simple process. Workers gathered the ripe grapes probably in large baskets (6:9, KJV) and carried them to the winepress.⁵ Next they poured the grapes into the upper vat while other workers trod the grapes with their bare feet (Amos 9:13). Juice from the grapes ran down a channel to the second vat. Workers skimmed off the must and placed it in wineskins or jars for fermenting. Last, the workers placed the mashed grapes in a bag and squeezed out any remaining juice, which they then used for making wine.

The Bible leaves no doubt that wine was fermented and provides no evidence of an unfermented version.⁶ The evidence also indicates that wine was not diluted with water in Old Testament times, as such a practice was an abomination (Isa. 1:22). Yet in New Testament times, wine may have been mixed at a ratio of two parts water and one part wine, according to the Mishna. But even this mixture would have been fairly potent.⁷

Because wine was fermented, intoxication occurred when one drank too much. The Bible has many passages that define intoxication as a sin or that illustrate its evil effects. Passages that define intoxication as sin include Proverbs 20:1; 21:17; 23:30-31, 32-34; and Isaiah 5:11; 28:1, 7. Noah (Gen. 9:20-23) and Lot (19:30-38) serve as examples of the foolishness of intoxication.

Paul (and others) warned believers about the sin of drunkenness and listed it as a deed of the flesh (Gal. 5:21). Paul told the Ephesians not to

"get drunk with wine" (5:18, NASB). He also warned overseers and deacons not to be "addicted to much wine" (1 Tim. 3:8, NASB). Paul even suggested abstinence—if drinking wine became a stumbling block for another believer (Rom. 14:21). Peter equated drunkenness with lust, carousing, and sensuality—items he labeled as the "desire of the Gentiles" (1 Pet. 4:3, NASB).

Only certain people were forbidden to drink wine, and this ban usually was for religious reasons. Nazirites could not drink wine (Num. 6:2-4) nor could priests while they performed their priestly duties in the sanctuary (Lev. 10:9). Drinking wine was otherwise a normal part of life (Gen. 14:18; Judg. 19:19; 1 Sam. 16:20). Not drinking seemed to draw criticism in the New Testament era. John the Baptist did not drink wine, and his critics said, "He has a demon" (Luke 7:33, NIV).

Although wine was a common beverage, it did have other uses. Paul prescribed wine as an internal medicine to Timothy, perhaps to relieve an uneasy stomach (1 Tim. 5:23). The Roman guards tried to give Jesus wine mixed



with myrrh, perhaps to dull His senses to pain (Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:23). Jesus told of the Good Samaritan's putting wine on the external wounds of a man who was beaten by thieves (Luke 10:34). Also the priests used wine liturgically as a libation or offering to the Lord (Ex. 29:40; Num. 15:5).

Although wine was thus a very common drink in Bible times, the Bible strongly warns against the sin of intoxication. We do well to heed this warning and avoid falling into the trap of drunkenness. **B**

¹Walter A. Elwell, ed., "Wine," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 2145.

²The word "wine" is used 235 times while "vineyard" occurs 123 times, according to *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, Edward W. Goodrick and John R. Kohlenberger III, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 1209, 1256-1257.

³Two good passages (parables) on the establishment of a vineyard are Isaiah 5:1-6 and Mark 12:1-11 (parallels in Matt. 21:33-46 and Luke 20:9-18).

⁴Jesus used an analogy of pruning to describe God's treatment of superficial or nonproductive believers (John 15:2).

⁵Not all grapes were used for making wine. Some were dried into raisins (1 Sam. 25:18) while others were used to make grape honey. Also people ate fresh grapes when they were in season (see Deut. 23:24).

⁶A. C. Shultz, "Wine and Strong Drink," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 938.

⁷"Wine," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2147.

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