

John 2:1–11. WHAT KIND OF WINE DID JESUS MAKE AT CANA?

[The headwaiter said to the bridegroom] “Every man serves the good wine first, and when *men* have drunk freely, *then* that which is poorer; you have kept the good wine until now.” John 2:10

The miracle of turning water into wine, the first recorded miracle of Jesus, is mentioned only in John (2:1-11). The question is, what kind of wine did Jesus make – fermented wine or grape juice? While the miracle is described in the briefest of terms, it is clearly implied that all the water in the jars became wine, totalling well over one hundred gallons.¹ Was the wine fermented? Such a quantity of fine wine would be enough to intoxicate even one hundred guests a day for several days. Did Jesus lay the basis for a drunkfest? It is helpful to recall that, on the cross, Jesus himself refused wine when it was offered (Mark 15:23 par).²

Ancient wine-preservation methods – The Greek word translated “wine” in verses 3, 9, and 10 (*oinos*) can refer to either fermented or unfermented wine.³ In order, then, to determine what kind of beverage is meant we must consider other important points from the text and from the historical context. Judging from the translation of verse 10, the master of the festivities seems to imply that fermented wine was being served because he refers to the normal practice of serving inferior wine only after everyone is drunk. But if that is the meaning, his speech would fall on deaf (and drunk) ears since no one should care at this point in the celebration anyway! In fact, however, the word “drink” (Gr. *methusko*) need not imply drinking too much or drunkenness as many versions suggest. In this passage it simply means that all the guests have “drunk well.”⁴ Only when everyone has had plenty of the best quality drink is the inferior kind served. Clearly, the words themselves do not tell us whether the wine is fermented or unfermented. We must look elsewhere for an answer to this question.

Some argue that, in ancient Israel, it was impossible to hermetically seal grape juice before fermentation would set in to some extent. This is a serious question. Did

methods exist to preserve grape juice for long periods of time? While information on this point from first-century Jewish sources is limited, we have good evidence from Greek and Roman writers of the time about methods of preservation:

Grape juice could be boiled down into a jelly. This would be pressed into a clay pot until all the air was removed. Then a thin layer of olive oil across the top would preserve the contents for months or even years. At a later date, the preserves could be mixed with water for use. The end result would be unfermented.⁵

The “wine” Jesus made – However, even if it was possible to keep juice from fermenting for long periods of time, is it really likely that no wine was served at this wedding celebration in Cana? An even more important question is, what drink would be so desirable that the master of the festivities felt compelled to make such a speech? To many people today, it seems preposterous that the guests at such an occasion could be satisfied with grape juice. But the Jewish culture of that time is not ours. For one thing, girls normally got married at the tender age of just twelve or thirteen. The groom may not have been much older. Highly fermented wine could have led rather easily to drunkenness and disorder which pious Jews, concerned with purification as the massive jars indicate that they were (2:6), would have scrupulously sought to avoid on such occasions.⁶ There is even evidence from ancient writers of a preference for drinks with little or no alcohol. “Pliny expressly says that a ‘good wine’ was one that was destitute of spirit.”⁷ The Greeks recommended diluting wine with at least three or four parts water.⁸ The “best” wine seems to have been that which was the freshest and touched the least by fermentation, because it could be enjoyed in greater quantities for a longer period of time.⁹

This miracle was also, according to John, the first time Christ manifested His “glory” (v. 11; cf. 1:14). More than simply “icing” on the wedding cake, it shows Jesus’ “new wine” ministry outshining and outclassing the traditions of Judaism (cf. Mark 2:22). Imagine the wonder of tasting “wine” fresh from the Creator Himself! Its quality must have surpassed even the juice from grapes of the most select variety. Through this

first miracle, Jesus announces His intention not just to reform but to transform, not merely to make the old better but to make it new.

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“The wine which Christ provided for the feast, and that which He gave to the disciples as a symbol of His own blood, was the pure juice of the grape. To this the prophet Isaiah refers when he speaks of the new wine ‘in the cluster,’ and says, ‘Destroy it not; for a blessing is in it.’” Isaiah 65:8. (DA 149).

¹ The capacity of the stone jars is estimated at two or three “measures.” A measure equals about nine gallons (72 sextarii, Josephus, *Ant.* 8:57; 15:314) so that each jar could hold between 18 and 27 gallons.

² While he had already promised not to drink of the “fruit of the vine” until he would drink it with his followers in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25 parr), it seems that the main reason was not to becloud his mind (DA 746). Significantly, the Babylonian Talmud refers to the practice in Jerusalem of giving drugged wine to those about to be executed in order to dull the pain (*b.Sanh.* 43a).

³ In Ephesians 5:18, LXX Psalm 74:9 [ET 75:8], Proverbs 23:31, and Isaiah 28:7, *oinos* refers to fermented wine and it refers to unfermented wine in Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; LXX Judges 19:19; Joel 2:24; Isaiah 16:10.

⁴ This is how the word is translated by H. Preisker, “*methē, methuō, methusos, methuskomai*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:547.

⁵ Jon Paulien, *John: Jesus Gives Life to a New Generation* (The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier; Boise, Id.: Pacific Press, 1995), 70. See also Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages*, 127, 28.

⁶ The Hebrew Bible’s characterization of wine and “strong drink” as a source of moral confusion and inappropriate behavior (e.g., Gen 9:21; 19:32; Prov 20:1; 21:17; 23:31-35; Isa 5:11, 12; 28:7) was not lost on the Jews of the time or Christians (Gal 5:21; Eph 5:18; 1 Pet 4:3).

⁷ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical, Luke-John* (London, 1875; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: vBaker, 1949), 193.

⁸ See James Grout, “Wine,” *Encyclopaedia Romana*. Online: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/wine/wine.html; accessed 18 July 2018.

⁹ Bacchiocchi, 123, citing among others Pliny, *Natural History*, 14, 28 and Plutarch, *Symposiacs*, 8, 7.