



Transcript

Episode 8: Alcohol in the Levant and the Bible, Jacob Damm (College of the Holy Cross)

Lauren Dogaer

Have you ever found yourself asking why alcohol plays such a big role across so many cultures? Striking a balance between moderation and excess isn't just a modern struggle. It goes back to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire. I'm Lauren, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow in Egyptology at the University of Oxford. I'm fascinated by how today's issues mirror the past, from ancient health warnings to peer pressure at Greek symposia. We're exploring it all. Join me as we get Drunk on History and uncover the timeless truth behind our drinking habits. Hello everyone, and welcome to the Drunk on History podcast. In this episode, we will discuss alcohol in the Levant and for this I will talk with Jacob Damm, who is a visiting assistant professor at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts. He is specialised in Levantine archaeology and archaeological science, including ceramic analysis, organic residue analysis, and human environment interactions, therewith reconstructing ancient food waste and alcohol usage. Jacob, welcome to the podcast.

Jacob Damm

Thank you so much for having me, Lauren. I'm really excited to be here.

Lauren Dogaer

The Levant is of course a rather large area and also has a quite complicated history with a lot of different people living there during different periods of time. So I think it's best that we sort of discuss the alcohol evidence in a kind of chronological way. But to start, what is the Levant, actually? Which modern countries does the area cover and from which centuries onwards are we actually speaking of the Levant?

Jacob Damm

Yeah, this is a great question and one, honestly, where even picking the term Levant is kind of meaningless. It's a modern term. It comes from the French sort of colonial sense of the term as the place effectively to the east where the sun rises. So it's a fairly arbitrary term, but if we think in terms of what modern countries it entails, we're really thinking



from really the southernmost portion of Turkey at the sort of greatest northern extent, really probably more modern Syria, down further south through Lebanon, modern day Israel-Palestine, Jordan, and It gets a little dicey when you talk about the southern extent, because even portions moving into, say, the Sinai Peninsula and what's modern day Egypt are still very Levantine in character. And I say Levantine, it's this broad term, because as you already mentioned, right, this is many distinct cultures over time. The Levant, by virtue of its position in the Eastern Mediterranean, is something of a transit point. So we see sort of a confluence of Europe, of sort of the broader Central Asia into the Near East into sort of modern North Africa. So people constantly passing through, empires constantly passing through. So it is this sort of mixing bowl of cultures. And yet there does seem to be something of a cultural continuity throughout that whole region that we can think about archaeologically. Time period wise, again, that cultural continuity has deep roots in very ancient sort of pre-agricultural history all the way up through, again, sort of modern histories of entanglements in these regions. For the focus on beer, though, we're really going to be, I think, especially thinking in terms of the Bronze and the Iron Ages. And this is also our big sort of ancient textual periods, whether we're talking about Ugarit in modern-day Syria with the whole collection of texts from there from the late Bronze Age up through the biblical text and sort of that late Iron Age into the Persian period stratum that that represents.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, thank you for setting the stage and already showing that we are going back quite a bit in time, actually up until the Bible, let's say. But to start, I would like to ask you about, I think, one of the earliest evidences that we have for a brewery, which is in the Raqefet cave from around 13,000 BCE. It's a burial site in the north of Israel, and there was beer brewed as part of a, yeah, mortuary ritual. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

Jacob Damm

Yeah, so this is admittedly actually something quite controversial, and it sets a nice stage for talking about, you know, what exactly is beer archaeologically. And so what we have at this site, which is quite remarkable, is work that was done especially by Li Liu, among others, basically doing this micro, what we call microbotany, right? Looking at these microscopic botanical evidence, in this case, especially starch, and looking in these wide variety of contexts, especially these things that look like... what we would often call say a mortar, a place where things would be pounded, and finding evidence for especially starches from various grain species. And keep in mind at this point, this is all wild grain, right? This is not an agricultural society. This is material that's being gathered. With those



starch grains showing evidence for really two things. One is this malting, right? How we germinate grain. It's really considered oftentimes the beginning of the brewing process where you get the natural process of grain basically being a seed becoming a plant. It starts to convert some of these starches into sugars, something that's necessary for the brewing process. So we see evidence of that in the starch. And then simultaneously, there's evidence for the starch also being subjected to fermentation, right? That secondary process where these sugars are converted into alcohol by microscopic organisms. Now, I said controversial, and that's where this gets kind of interesting, because from an archaeological standpoint, when we want to identify ancient beer, we have to ask the question, okay, we see malting, we see fermentation. Now, does that intrinsically mean we see beer production? I'm admittedly kind of a stickler and probably on the more boring side. So I don't necessarily think those things go one to one, especially because when we look at the broad ethnographic record of everything that's made by malting or even fermenting, it's not always beer, even from grain. There's any number of fermented dishes that use fermented grains like gashka, other types of porridge is essentially even. So the diversity of what can be made with fermentation is actually quite broad. Now, that's not to say that this isn't evidence of the production of beer. It's just that we probably need to hedge our bets a little bit. I think it's very plausible though, if anything, it shows very early knowledge of this act of fermentation, taking grain and doing almost this alchemical transformation into something else. It actually, even in periods where we know they're making beer, we still struggle with the act of identifying beer chemically. You kind of think in terms of, well, we know this is here, but how can we prove it? And the proof side is where things get really frustrating and archaeologists shout at each other about things that nobody really cares about.

Lauren Dogaer

Well, thank you for explaining that there is still so much to discover and that when people are talking about the earliest brewery, that there might be a little bit more to it than we would think. And talking about this early beer production and especially the early brewing process, we seem to have quite some evidence from Chalcolithic sites, which is like roughly 6000 to 3800 BCE, sort of a transitional area between the Stone Age and the Bronze Age. But what kind of evidence do we already have in this early period? Do we have like grinding stones, mortars, and so on, is it already easier here to actually identify the brewing process?

Jacob Damm



I think that depends heavily on sort of where you're looking and where you're working. So I would say for one of the things we do see in the Chalcolithic and something that this period is incredibly famous for, it's often talked about as, you know, this aspect of secondary products revolutions, right? We're not just producing things, growing certain crops or raising certain animals just for their direct values of food stuff. We're working with them, modifying them, transforming them to exploit other products related to them, thinking about a sheep for wool or milk, not just necessarily meat, or grapes, not necessarily for the fruit, but perhaps to produce wine. And it's during this period that we do see, for instance, some of our earliest evidence for what is fairly clearly wine production. And this is starting to get a bit outside of the Levant, getting really into places like modern day Armenia. Actually, one of my mentors in learning organic residue analysis was on the team that identified some of the earliest wine production during this period, about, say, 4,000-ish BCE in modern day Armenia. And this has actually formed the basis for a lot of different theories about certain kinds of cultures moving around. We actually have this pottery that's, depending on who you read and where they're publishing from, is variably called Khirbet Kerak ware or early Trans-Caucasian ware. Supposedly, or at least, according to some authors, right, is representing almost winemaking specialists. When we see this pottery show up around, we're seeing a movement of peoples who specialize in viticulture in growing grapes for wine. Now, it's been interpreted in other ways, but there's this idea that what we're looking at perhaps is some sort of specialized drinking kit, brewing kit. I would love to see more chemical analytical work done on this because that unfortunately not a lot has been done yet. But it's a very compelling hypothesis. It'll just be curious to see how it develops. When we talk about the Chalcolithic, though, we do see a lot of behaviours where we really would expect something like alcohol consumption. Lots of evidence for feasting. What's often thought of is either being feasting for the purposes of almost like social hierarchy, right? You think of a medieval movie and a king's feast and everyone coming in and having, you know, a giant raucous meal in the castle, something like that, or even something like a mortuary feast, a ritual feast. And I've worked on materials from a Chalcolithic site in modern day Israel called Neve Ur. It looks like feasting going on there. The chemical results of the vessels that we identified, this type of bowl, often called a V-shaped bowl, barely unclear exactly what they were used for, but at the very least they all seem to be used for about the same thing. So we have this probably drinking or food vessel and they're being dumped in these pits and this massive deposit of stuff that seems to be left over from a feast. So we have all the bits and pieces in circulation, including the knowledge that wine is by this point certainly being produced and beer elsewhere as well. So it's plausible that we're looking at this period for certainly a proliferation and this type of consuming of



alcohol or production of alcohol. It is one again where I would love to see more of the analytical work done. I think there's a lot of great work to be done here, and I'm excited sort of for where it goes, because it's drawn a lot of attention in the past couple of years now.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, well, hopefully, a lot of people are going to be interested in it now and are going to have a look at the more chemical side of things, because it seems to be very difficult based on the archaeological evidence to identify these kinds of feasting practices. But we do have, and you already mentioned this in the introduction, we also have textual evidence, especially at the end of the Bronze Age, we get these Ugaritic texts. So we're talking like 14, 13th century BCE. And these texts are sometimes, yeah, magical, ritual kind of texts that address these *marzēah*, which are sort of religious banquets. Could you tell me a little bit more about what these texts actually tell us?

Jacob Damm

Yeah, so this is, this is a fascinating question. And honestly, every time I look into this *marzēah*, I find that there's probably about 15 news sources that I haven't encountered before. It is a, a huge question. And this term appears really beginning as early as the Middle Bronze Age in places like Ebla and continues all the way down into like the 7th century CE. So in the Madaba map, a mosaic map in modern day Jordan. So this term has this incredibly long period of usage. It seems to have a fairly consistent meaning through time, at least in a very generic sense. But Ugarit is one of the places where we hear about it a lot. And this is, about, say, 1400 BCE to about 1200 BCE, where a lot of these texts are current. There's been a lot of dispute about what exactly it means. You either get sort of a social drinking club, almost like you would envision like a modern-day frat at a US university. This would certainly be the most secular of readings. It has been argued in the past that this is something like a mortuary feast, a mortuary drinking banquet, which I would say has really fallen out of vogue. Not too many people make that argument anymore. More recently, and I would say sort of more overtly common now, is this idea that the *marzēah*, which seems to be an actual group of people. We actually have individuals, they're called the sons of the *marzēah*, sometimes the sons of the *marzēah* of a certain deity, of Ilu, and so on. So it's a social community for sure. It seems to hinge on a lot of alcohol consumption. And since it seems to be associated with the deity, it does seem to be related to some sort of religious ritual. You can tell I'm kind of caging the way I talk about it here because the texts that we see are so incredibly diverse and sometimes unfortunately very fragmentary. But for instance, we do have one text where



the sons of the marzēaḥ put down a thousand talents of silver. in payment in a legal contract with, I think, something like 13 witnesses. So this is an incredibly unusual for given how much power, wealth, et cetera, that they have. So this does seem to be something of the purview of the elites. We have other contracts involving Sons of the marzēaḥ that are actually signed off on by the king of Ugarit. So again, this seems to be in the elite realm. And then we have this incredibly weird text, often called the drunkenness of Ilu, where the god Ilu, or El, as we might think of him biblically, participates in a marzēaḥ and just gets absolutely obscenely drunk. But there seems to be this ritualistic component to it, that Ilu is, depending on who you read and how they read this particular text, the drinking himself into a stupor to the point where he actually becomes frightened and soils himself, this seems to be thought of as being part of a ritualistic act, almost like a necromancy, seeking some sort of interaction with the dead. And we get into this very hazy realm, but it seems that the marzēaḥ perhaps could be this ritualistic function centring on almost inquiry, getting into an altered state of consciousness via drunkenness to commune with the spirits. And we even have one text from Ugarit where an individual is actually inviting shades of the dead, what we would refer to as the Rapainu or the Refaim, again to use a biblical term. They're actually being invited to a marzēaḥ banquet. I will not pretend that this term is not hilariously controversial. People have been fighting about it for decades, but there does seem to be some generic agreement now. Social community, lots of drinking, and some sort of religious or ritual component, and that seems to be the thick of it. And it does show up later in the biblical text in two specific places where it's being condemned, not necessarily on account of the drinking, but as being sort of this, at least an amos, this place of the elite, lounging in beds covered in ivory while the rest of the country is sort of falling apart. So it's an interesting sort of phenomenon that seems to have currency for millennia.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, and this drinking like so much alcohol in order to get in touch with the divine, with the gods. It's something that we also see in other cultures. So it does make a lot of sense. And when we now go a little bit more recent in time, so the Iron Age, we again have quite some, yeah, archaeological evidence. We have all of these Philistine beer jugs, which could be used for filtering beer. If I'm not mistaken, it's a little bit similar to those metal filter tips that you have in Mesopotamia. And we also have from many archaeological sites across the Levant, we also have these fermentation stoppers. We do get also more specific grinding technology in the Iron Age. So what kind of more specific archaeological evidence do we start getting and how does it help us to reconstruct the beer-brewing



process in a more specific way as opposed to those Chalcolithic sites that we discussed earlier?

Jacob Damm

Yeah, so this is a great question and there's a lot of different pieces to this that I think are really fascinating, especially as we think about the Late Bronze Age into the Iron Age. Because for instance, if we think about the Late Bronze Age, much of the Levant is under the control of the Egyptian New Kingdom Empire. And in some of my past work, I've especially talked about how the Egyptian garrisons in the region seem to bring their specific Egyptian style of brewing. And thankfully to the extreme amount of work that's been done in Egypt on this subject, Delwen Samuel has just a remarkable corpus of work about sort of the science and process of Egyptian brewing during this period. We have a very good understanding of the Egyptian brewing, and to the point where we can even go into these garrisons, so Jaffa, where I excavated for many years, we have the Egyptian brewing kit in a kitchen in Jaffa, which is quite phenomenal. Now, that's to be kind of juxtaposed with the Levantine style of brewing, which we know a good deal about, and a great deal more work has been done, especially using some of these analytical techniques that kind of I notioned or motioned at earlier. And we see a couple of things. Now, the Philistine beer jar, I'll start with that, which is fascinating because it is this really interesting and kind of weird intersection of modern scholarly bias and analytical work archaeologically. When we first found these jars, they were associated with the Philistines because the pottery was decorated and in the Philistine style. Early scholars, biblical archaeologists like W.F. Albright called them beer jars basically for kind of weird classist reasons. They're like, okay, the Philistines are the beer-swilling barbarians, the Israelites are the good wine drinkers. And so we associated these with beer right from the get-go. You know, flashback to about the I'd say roughly the 90s especially, one of my mentors in archaeology, Larry Stager, was digging at a site in Ashkelon, and he wanted to sort of flip the script and say, no, these are wine jars, the Philistines are good, wine drinkers, you know, kind of resetting the narrative. And the very odd thing about all of this is nobody really had any data to make this assessment. It was just kind of a push and pull of rhetoric. But recently, and this is where this gets rather exciting, there was some analytical work done where yeast strains were recovered from these jars, and they were demonstrated to be good domesticated, fermenting yeast strains, the type of things very akin to what we would use to brew beer or wine in the modern era. And this is done via genetic matching. This is done by sort of even looking at the entire genetic tree of these and place these strains of yeast that were recovered. And so we do know that these were used in the consumption of alcohol. And they actually did very good work testing other



vessels, testing the soil, just trying to recover yeast strains from all sorts of different places, including vessels that absolutely could not have been associated with brewing, things like lamps. And they were able to demonstrate not only the unusual concentration of yeast cells in these vessels, but also what they were genetically, that they were good fermenting yeast. Now, that study had one shortcoming that I was a little bummed about, which was they only tested these yeasts in brewing beer. They did, however, find that they brewed excellent beer, and they even used a modern tasting panel, which I thought was a really fun part of the study. They didn't test them on fermenting wine, so any fruit juice or anything like that, to see how it responded to the sugars from fruits, which is the same yeast strain today is used for beer and wine commercially. There are definitely variations within that make things better or worse suited or happier in certain environments or not. So I don't think whether or not those were used for beer versus wine is resolved, but they do have this very clear alcohol association, which I thought that study was brilliant. Really, really wonderful, wonderful work. You also mentioned this fermentation lock system, these jars and the fermentation stoppers. And this is really been highlighted through the work of one scholar in particular, Michael Homan, but recently picked up also with Jenny Ebbeling. And they've done some very interesting work here because this is an example of an object that was sitting in plain sight and largely ignored for much of the history of it being excavated. But contextually, we have these huge clay stoppers with a hole punched through them, and they're actually nested in the neck of a jar, probably with a cloth or some other element around it. And effectively, these are meant to allow fermentation to release gas, however, also to block off any sort of exterior substances, particles, et cetera, from getting in, from ruining the fermentation, or maybe allowing like bad bacteria to get in there and outcompete the good yeast that you want working. Much in the same way that someone brewing, like a home brew kit today would have a glass carboy and a little liquid stopper jammed in the top to allow bubbles to escape. And these seem to be predominantly something that we're finding in the earlier Iron Age. To my knowledge, I don't know as much about them in the Bronze Age. I'm not aware of anyone identifying them. And so this seems to be a very distinct tradition of brewing, again, separating it from the Egyptian brewing that I talked about earlier that seems to be very local, very homegrown. This might be foreshadowing a bit, something I know we're going to talk about, but this also gets into this whole dispute about how much beer was actually consumed in the Levant compared to wine. This is a big fight that a lot of people have been having, again, sometimes for very weird reasons. But this does seem to be representative of it. And while no one's done the chemical analytical work on these, there's very, very strong contextual evidence, for instance, jars with crushed grain inside of them that's been carbonized because the building burned down with one of these



fermentation locks stuck in the lid. So we do seem to have the constituent components of the beer making process. Hopefully this is again something that'll get more work in the future because I think there's some very exciting work to be done if people bring together all the different kinds of analysis because it's botanical, it's chemical, it's functional, just looking at how the vessels, you know, been modified by use. So all these things really come together, and that's what often clinches the identification of beer.

Lauren Dogaer

And I think it's also, it clearly is very difficult to identify also the beer versus wine. But I'm also wondering, like, how much does that distinction make sense? Because if I'm not mistaken, cereals and fruits could also be mixed up in ancient times. So I'm wondering whether this very strict identification of beer versus wine, which again, of course, comes from this classical background of barbarians drink beer, but how much does this distinction actually make sense?

Jacob Damm

At some level, it's a very modern distinction. It's very coming from us, and it's something we're very much projecting onto the archaeological record. We do have, for instance, classical texts from Greece and Rome talking about beer versus wine, very similar in the ways that we tend to think about it today. And odds are, a lot of our bias even comes from that, right? Reading that particular culture. But again, keeping in mind that we're reading elites of that culture, and yet also simultaneously that those same texts also contain references to beer that is of a fine quality, not much different from wine coming from Egypt or the widespread consumption of beer quite literally everywhere, including in Greece and Italy. So I think we've even read our own biases into those texts and made them more profound than they really are. As for whether or not there is this major distinction between the two, I do think it's something of a forced reality that isn't really there. You'll see long discourses by certain scholars that'll be talking about how like one region's ecologically better for wine than it is for beer. And that doesn't really seem to be a distinction that actually holds truth at all. For one, you can grow barley in all of these places where wine does quite well, and people did so and continue to do so today. So I'm not really certain where those ideas have come that there's this very rigid like geographic reason for it. We're not even really at, I think, on firm footing when we're even thinking that beer and wine are even in the same sort of semantic category for many of these ancient civilizations. We don't often hear about the juxtaposition of beer and wine. We do maybe see a little bit of it in say the biblical text in that like wine is definitely considered the higher and better of the two. And I think that probably holds true in many other ancient



societies, but it's not necessarily that they're the same category. Just that wine is definitely the nicer of all the beverages or something along those lines because it is more expensive, more complicated to produce. Beer is a little bit more quotidian, a little bit more household. And if you read certain texts that I do think actually have the right of it, recent work by like Jenny Ebbeling especially, beer seems to be very much the domain of almost domestic women producing and therefore something that elite male texts are kind of pushing away for very patriarchal reasons.

Lauren Dogaer

I think there are definitely a lot of different factors to take into account. And I think it's really important to really realize how much the classical world has influenced our modern thinking. And yet the usage of alcohol has clearly a very long history in Levant and you already touched upon it a couple of times. A lot of these aspects also ended up in the Hebrew Bible, in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And you maybe start off this topic with a little bit of a more fun and light question. Noah, so the one from, you know, the Ark of Noah, he is supposed to be the one who invented viticulture and he planted a vineyard. And there is this story in the Bible where Noah gets like really, really drunk. Tell me more.

Jacob Damm

Yeah. So this is a very bizarre story, and there's a lot of different things that have been done with it over the years. Very different groups have read it very differently, but the gist of the story is, you know, after the flood, Noah plants the first vineyard, makes wine, so he becomes the first sort of vintner, and then drinks it and gets incredibly drunk, falls asleep, naked in the tent. And then he has his, you know, three sons post-flood, the ones that will sort of repopulate the earth, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham is the one who spots him, runs and tells his brothers, and Shem and Japheth walk into the tent kind of backwards so that they're not looking at their dad and then drape a cloak over him. And the end result of this is that Noah curses the sons of Ham, specifically Canaan, who as we all know, the Canaanites are the bad guys later. And so they're descended from this son who looked at his dad naked while he was drunk situation. Obviously a very, very strange story, and there's a lot to do with this here. I would say a couple things that are important to think about sort of beyond the most simplistic readings that people have often used, you know, about the evils of drunkenness, so on and so forth. One, we have one of the first things Noah does after the flood, the restoration of humanity, is hinging on wine, on creating, planting the vine. So this is very restorative, this idea that this is sort of civilization come back. And interestingly enough, even in much, much texts that describe later periods of Israelite history, one of the things that happens after the major



destructions, either by the Assyrians or the Babylonians, is bumper crops of the vines. So that wine will be part of this restoration. So that's an interesting thing in and of itself. The other kind of weird thing about this story is It really strongly parallels another story in Genesis, the story of Lot, who gets very, very drunk and then sleeps with his daughters because they're convinced that after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, no humans exist in the world anymore. Again, very strange story involving the male being sort of drunk to the point of either unconsciousness or a stupor. But very importantly, both of them end the same way in that the sort of story of one of Israel's enemies beginnings is told. So Noah curses his son that looks on him naked, and that becomes, that's the father of the Canaanites. The children of Lot's incest with his daughters are the Moabites and the Ammonites. So In more ways than one, right? There's a lot of politics underlying these texts that I think people tend to forget about because they focus on the drunk part. But it seems that Israel's trying to tell sort of tongue-in-cheek stories, making fun of its neighbours and enemies and their origins. Like, yeah, we're related, but like not in a good way. So, kind of questioning the family tree.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, it's also very interesting and something I never really thought about that much. But drinking is clearly not an issue in the Bible. I mean, wine is offered to God, Christ turned water into wine. But the Hebrew Bible, and especially the Old Testament, they make a distinction between yayin wine, which is said to make the heart glad and shekar, strong drink, which seems to be more associated with actual drunkenness and seems to be more regarded more problematic and condemned, but it can be used when people are suffering very much. So how does the Bible make this distinction between these two kinds of drinks? And is this something that you can still see in modern Christian traditions?

Jacob Damm

So yeah, this is an interesting question, and again, taps into something. where I think we see a lot of ourselves in the readings rather than necessarily what's in the original ancient text. You're absolutely right that this sort of drinking is not necessarily something that's overly condemned, right? Just flashing back to that Noah or Lot story. At no point is the drunkenness ever considered the problem. And as we push forward through time, we get this yayin - shekar situation that, and I call it a situation because we actually still pretty heavily dispute what exactly shekar is. There are some scholars that actually just translated as beer. There are other scholars who go the direction of strong drink. And this is a huge dispute that has played out, again, I think in ways that are more reflective on us



than really the ancient text. The term shekar, I mean, if you go to Akkadian for the cognate, that's just related to the Akkadian word for beer. It is just the same word. However, in the biblical text, there's a lot of fights over it because there's the idea of could we possibly think that shekar, which is offered in the temple to God. So God receives an allotment of something like almost 16 hin a day. And I'm trying to remember exactly how much that factors out. Something like a, it's a pretty substantial amount of beer. I mean, it's, I always, I forget my biblical liquid conversion. So it's this liquid that is perfectly reasonable to offer to God. And I've, read sort of Jewish theological texts that are uncomfortable with the idea of anything other than wine being offered to the divinity. We obviously have this sort of modern tea-totalling Baptist sort of pushback against any form of alcohol. The interesting thing about shekar is you mentioned offhand, right? The noun that shekar, we dispute about what it actually means. I tend to be more in the camp for beer, I think it makes sense. However, it is also the root of a verb that indicates drunkenness, but not necessarily bad drunkenness. We even have this idea of it often being translated as like modern translators just taking the word as almost being an individual showing their gladness or their happiness, right? That they're merry from drink. So I would say that at some level, I don't think it necessarily gets strong condemnation overall. It actually seems to be in parallel to wine more often than not. We have this pretty common instance in Semitic languages, where you'll see a phrase and then it'll be followed by a phrase that very much mirrors the language of it. We call it parallelism. And so a phrase ending with wine will often be followed by a phrase ending with shekar. So they're clearly semantically related to one another. And both seem to be capable of causing drunkenness. Both seem to be reasonable things to offer the deity in the temple. So at some level, they're similar but not related. If anything, actually, the fact that we often spend so much time fighting over two distinct terms for alcohol in Hebrew, I think is a very interesting juxtaposition to, say, Egyptian or languages like Akkadian, which have an extraordinary array of terms for different kinds of beer, different kinds of alcohol. And the biblical texts doesn't, really. It has these two sort of major terms. And I think that helps kind of set up a problem as we're thinking about drinking and alcohol in the biblical text, which is the biblical text wasn't written to tell us a lot about an ancient society. It was written for a very specific sort of rhetorical purpose by a small elite community of scribal types from a certain religious tradition. And so we only really have what they saw fit to use and how they saw fit to use it. So sometimes when we're asking these questions about drunkenness and drinking, we really are seeking answers to questions that we want, but that they weren't necessarily keen on answering by virtue of what they gave us. So it raises a lot of complicated questions, but I do think, for instance, even with shekar, even with drunkenness, and this has been some excellent work has been done on this by



Rebecca Welton in Biblical Studies, this idea about like, is drunkenness intrinsically bad, what actually constitutes bad drunkenness in the biblical text. And we do have to, I think, really think through the cultural logic presented in the text instead of imposing our own, because we have such a confusing modern history of Judeo-Christian engagement with alcohol that we kind of have to separate ourselves from prior to examining the ancient context. I feel like that was a very ranging response that may or may not have answered what you were asking.

Lauren Dogaer

No, no, it was super interesting. I didn't know there was like that much fighting about like two terms.

Jacob Damm

Oh, yes, no. Shekar, the etymology there is hilarious.

Lauren Dogaer

It's interesting, especially since you mentioned that there are indeed so many more terms in other ancient languages. But you're already touching upon a little bit like this point of moderation and that, yeah, whether or not we can like see this in the Bible, is there bad drunkenness versus good drunkenness. And in this sense, I'm wondering because you do have these different views of looking at the text. So the prohibitionist view that says that, oh, alcohol is forbidden, the abstentionist view in which you would say, okay, it's better for Christians not to drink, and then the moderationist view that says, okay, Christians need to use the alcohol moderately. Like, where do these views actually come from? And are the people presenting these views using any like official sounding prescriptions or biblical prohibitions, so to say.

Jacob Damm

Yeah, so this, again, part of this incredibly long, confusing history of the relationship with alcohol, which you know, I don't think you can really consider separate from the history of alcohol itself. So for instance, a lot of these prohibition type movements developing out of the wide availability of distilled alcohols of a very, very high strength, right? That's something that becomes industrially much more common, much more available, especially in the 1800s on. Somewhat unsurprisingly, this is also when we see really some of the heavy beginnings of these types of Christian anti-alcohol movements. I should say 18th century, not necessarily 1800s. And obviously, this is probably, while we do think very strong alcohols were capable of being produced in the ancient world,



certainly not at the scale in the post-industrial era. So when we go back to the text then and we try to think, okay, what's the actual logic that's present there? For instance, we do see groups in the biblical text that are prohibited from any kind of alcohol. So this would specifically be a group that are referred to as the Nazarites. They're sort of a special small religious community, a lot of vows of abstention from a lot of different things, really an aesthetic type vow, aesthetic rather type vow within the Israelite community, but they are remarkable and unusual. So we should note then that this notion of total abstinence being a religious prescription. This is remarked upon in the text as being unusual, atypical for a select few. We do, however, have, for instance, texts saying, okay, well, the priests should not consume alcohol prior to their priestly duties. And a lot of this has been taken into various levels of consideration. What exactly does this mean? Given the juxtaposition of this verse in numbers with incidents where priests have sort of made mistakes and been destroyed by the divinity for having messed up, there has been some thought that maybe this is more of an idea that you really kind of have to be on your A game when you're doing the priestly thing so that you don't accidentally invite destruction upon yourself and the Israelites. Overall, though, this idea of alcohol, abstention versus consumption. So some of the more famous texts are in Proverbs, for instance, this idea that, you know, the princely elite, the kings, et cetera, should not be consuming alcohol, lest they sort of forget to do their duties correctly. And I would say if there's anything in this notion of abstention, there is this aspect of forgetfulness, right? There's this idea that, you know, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with the alcohol, but its consumption can lead to some form of forgetfulness. So you have this sort of civic forgetfulness where the leaders are not doing their roles effectively. But even this aspect of almost a theological forgetfulness where individuals forget about the divine, forget about Yahweh's role in the world around them. And so that seems to be the negative, but that doesn't seem to apply across all cases, that this is sort of a catastrophe if any drinking is done. And in fact, that same verse in Proverbs, or that same rather collection of verses in Proverbs that tells leaders not to be drinking follows up by this idea that actually the poor and the sick should be the ones drinking alcohol because it will allow them to forget their troubles for a time. And so this sort of juxtaposition of abstention with positivity is really something I think of value.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, thank you so much. I think it's truly fascinating that much of the more current Judeo-Christian tradition is already going back to what was happening in the Bronze and Iron Age Levant. And I also think this fascinating juxtaposition between beer and wine and where it is actually coming from that is also very interesting for our listeners and there

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Alcohol in the Levant and
the Bible

Jacob Damm
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are these sort of abstentionist, moderationist aspects in the Bible, but at the same time, wine is basically everywhere. So thank you so much, Jacob, for getting Drunk on the Bible and the Levant with me.

Jacob Damm

Yeah, it's a been a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Lauren Dogaer

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Drunk on History. If you're thirsty for more tales from the ancient world, don't miss our next episode. It's full of even more drinking stories from past civilizations. Drunk on History is made in cooperation with the New Media Centre of the University of Basel.