

Wine and Alcoholic Beverages in Ancient Israel: A Comparative Study with Ancient Near Eastern Nations

Edward Eddie Moyo, PhD¹, Christopher Kabwe Mukuka²

¹Rusangu University, Monze, Zambia.

²Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the attitudes towards wine and alcoholic beverages in ancient Israel in comparison to neighbouring ancient Near Eastern (ANE) countries such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Ugarit and Syro-Palestine. The archaeological and textual record indicates that wine and beer were universally consumed in the ANE serving nutritional, social, economic and religious roles. However, Israel's attitude to alcoholic drinks had distinctive characteristics shaped by its theological commitments to holiness and covenant faithfulness. Beer was a dietary staple in ANE cultures, but wine was a luxury item for elites and gods. Intoxication was often associated with a religious experience and divine communion. Finally, Israelite texts repeatedly and overwhelmingly describe drunkenness and impaired judgment negatively, linking it to moral failure and estrangement from God, but also use wine positively in cultic offerings and as a symbol of blessing. Prescriptive of a theological paradigm in which sobriety and discernment are central to specific sacred vocations and covenant responsibilities are context-specific prohibitions against alcohol imposed on priests in cultic contexts (Lev 10:9), Nazirites (Num 6:3), warnings to kings (Prov 31:4-5), and the Rechabites' ancestral practice (Jer 35). This study concludes that, like the rest of the ANE, Israel practiced wine production and consumption but its moral and religious views of drunkenness were greatly impacted by its unique covenant identity. The Hebrew Bible does not uniformly prohibit fermented wine. Instead, it repeatedly and overwhelmingly condemns drunkenness, impaired judgment, and drinking alcohol in a way that is inconsistent with certain sacred, vocational and covenantal responsibilities.

Keywords: ancient Israel, wine, beer, Ancient Near East, alcohol, priesthood, Nazirite, holiness, Old Testament, intoxication

INTRODUCTION

From the theological perspective of the biblical texts, Israel's understanding of Yahweh and covenant identity developed in sustained interaction and contrast with the religious world of the ancient Near East. As Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas (2000) observe, Israel emerged from among the nations with many shared cultural practices while developing distinctive theological commitments. One area of significant cultural overlap and potential distinction concerns the production and consumption of alcoholic beverages. While wine and beer were ubiquitous throughout the ANE, serving nutritional, social, economic, and religious functions, the question arises: did Israel's moral and religious standards regarding alcohol differ from those of its neighbors, and if so, in what ways?

This study undertakes a comparative historical analysis of Israelite attitudes toward wine and alcoholic beverages in relation to ANE nations. It examines production methods, terminology, consumption patterns, and religious significance, arguing that Israel's theological framework particularly its understanding of holiness and covenant produced a distinctive perspective on intoxication and its relationship to sacred service, moral discernment, and leadership. However, this distinctiveness should not be overstated; Israel shared with its neighbors the appreciation of wine as a gift of agriculture and the use of wine in cultic offerings, while developing particular

theological concerns about the incompatibility of intoxication with certain sacred vocations and covenantal responsibilities. From the theological perspective of the biblical texts, Israel's covenant traditions present its worship and moral practices as increasingly differentiated from certain religious practices of surrounding cultures.

The central thesis of this study is that Israel participated in the broader ANE culture of wine production and consumption, yet its covenantal theology generated a distinctive moral logic in which intoxication became especially problematic when it compromised holiness, discernment, justice, sacred service, and covenant responsibility. This thesis avoids two common extremes: claiming that Israel completely rejected alcoholic wine, and claiming that Israel was essentially indistinguishable from surrounding ANE cultures.

Statement of the Problem

The production and consumption of alcoholic beverages were universal phenomena throughout the Ancient Near East, serving nutritional, social, economic, and religious functions across all major civilizations. However, a significant gap exists in scholarly understanding of whether ancient Israel's attitudes toward wine and alcoholic beverages differed substantially from its neighboring cultures, and if so, what theological, cultural, and geographical factors contributed to these distinctions.

While extensive archaeological and textual evidence documents wine and beer production and consumption patterns across Egypt, Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Ugarit, and Syro-Palestine, and while biblical texts contain numerous references to wine and strong drink, the comparative analysis of Israelite attitudes versus ANE norms requires further investigation. Specifically, the following questions guide this research:

1. To what extent did Israel share the production methods, consumption patterns, and social functions of wine and beer common throughout the ANE?
2. What distinctive theological and moral frameworks shaped Israelite attitudes toward intoxication and alcohol consumption, and how do these frameworks compare with religious and cultural attitudes in neighboring nations?
3. What was the distinctive theological logic of the biblical restrictions, warnings, and abstinence practices regarding alcohol for priests, Nazirites, kings, and the Rechabites, and did the cultures of the ANE have similar practices?
4. What is the significance of this comparative study for understanding Israel's special character as a "holy nation" distinct from its surrounding nations, without overstating the distinction or belittling the continuities?

This study takes up these questions with a broad comparative historical study, arguing that although Israel participated in the general production and consumption of wine with its neighbors, its theological commitments to holiness and covenant resulted in unique concerns regarding the relationship of intoxication, discernment, sacred service, and leadership. These concerns did not amount to a blanket condemnation of intoxicating wine, but rather formed a more complex judgment where context, vocation and moral perception were decisive.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship by integrating archaeological, socio-economic, lexical, and theological evidence within a single comparative framework. Earlier studies have examined wine production (Frankel, 1999; Borowski, 2020), beer and diet (Samuel, 2001; Geller, 2018), and biblical references to alcohol (Bacchiocchi, 1989; Welton, 2025), but these strands are often treated separately. By bringing them together, the study clarifies both the cultural continuities between Israel and its neighbours and the particular moral logic by which biblical texts connect sobriety with holiness, discernment, justice, leadership, and covenant responsibility.

The study also advances interpretation beyond a simple fermented-versus-unfermented binary. Hebrew terms are read in their literary and social contexts, while prescriptive texts are distinguished from evidence of actual production, exchange, and consumption. This approach permits a balanced conclusion: wine could function as an agricultural blessing, household commodity, trade good, ration, medicine, and cultic offering, yet intoxication was repeatedly criticized where it impaired judgment or compromised sacred and public responsibilities.

Methodologically, the article demonstrates the value—and the limits—of combining installations, pottery, residue analysis, administrative records, literary texts, and biblical materials. Because these sources differ in date, genre, social location, and evidentiary value, the comparison is organized by period, region, class, and function rather than treating either Israel or the wider ANE as culturally uniform. This historically differentiated synthesis is the study's principal contribution to comparative biblical and ancient Near Eastern research.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative comparative-historical design based on archaeological, textual, and biblical evidence from ancient Israel and selected ancient Near Eastern societies. The unit of comparison is not an undifferentiated 'ANE attitude,' but a historically located practice or representation: production, exchange, household consumption, medical use, cultic use, intoxication, or restriction.

Chronological and Geographical Limits. The study covers approximately 2000–400 BCE, but it does not assume continuity across the whole period. Evidence is grouped, where the sources permit, into broad second-millennium, Iron Age/imperial, and Persian-period contexts. Ugaritic evidence is therefore treated primarily as Late Bronze Age material; Israelite evidence is concentrated in the Iron Age and Persian-period textual and archaeological record; Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Achaemenid materials are read within their respective imperial settings.

Evidence and Source Criticism. Archaeological installations, ceramic containers, and organic residues establish production, storage, or contents more securely than they establish attitudes or the identity of consumers. Administrative texts illuminate rations, taxation, labour, and institutional distribution but often privilege palaces and temples. Literary, wisdom, ritual, and biblical texts reveal ideals, evaluations, and representations, but they cannot automatically be treated as direct descriptions of ordinary behaviour. Conclusions are strongest where independent evidence types converge.

Social Differentiation. The analysis distinguishes elite banqueting and palace consumption from worker rations, household brewing, village viticulture, tavern activity, medical preparations, and cultic offerings. Gender and occupational status are considered when the evidence identifies brewers, priestesses, soldiers, administrators, priests, kings, Nazirites, or household groups. Silence in the surviving evidence is not interpreted as proof that a practice did not occur.

Data Sources. Archaeological evidence includes presses, fermentation or processing installations, storage jars, and residue studies (Amir, 2024; Tavger, 2024; Borowski, 2020). Comparative texts include Egyptian inscriptions and reference works; Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian legal or administrative records; Ugaritic ritual and economic texts; and Hebrew biblical materials. Secondary studies provide technological, lexical, historical, and theological interpretation.

Analytical Framework

The comparative analytical approach of the study takes into account four aspects of alcohol in each culture: how it is produced, its terminology and classification, how it is consumed, and the religious and moral evaluation of the substance. Particular attention is paid to similarities and differences, without treating either Israel or the ANE as monolithic entities. The study acknowledges the methodological difficulty of comparing ideal biblical theology with the everyday social practice of the ANE and addresses this by looking at prescriptive texts (legal

and wisdom materials) and descriptive texts (narratives and administrative documents) in each tradition.

The Comparative Method

The comparative method in the study finds similarities and differences between cultures. The comparison is thematic, examining each dimension of alcohol in relation to the specific historical and theological framework of each culture. The study acknowledges both the diversity of Israel and the ANE and does not overgeneralize either. Textual genre differences are controlled by comparing similar types of texts (e.g. wisdom literature with wisdom literature, legal texts with legal texts) as far as possible.

Hermeneutical Method

The study utilizes a historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation that takes into account the literary, historical and theological contexts of the biblical texts. The study engages with competing interpretive positions, including abstinence interpretations, moderation/anti-drunkenness interpretations, and lexically contextual interpretations, before arguing for its conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature on wine and alcoholic beverages in the ancient Near East and ancient Israel can be divided into three major debates, each with its unresolved scholarly issues. The review outlines the main contributions and open questions in each area.

Archaeological and Socio-Economic Studies of Alcohol in the ANE

The first scholarly conversation concerns the production, distribution, and consumption of wine and beer as evidenced by archaeology and socio-economic texts. Frankel (1999) provides the foundational study of wine and oil production in antiquity, examining technological processes including grape cultivation, treading, pressing, and fermentation. Frankel demonstrates that fermentation duration and conditions determined alcohol content, though the precise alcohol content of ancient wines remains debated. Borowski (2020) updates this discussion with a comprehensive study of agriculture in Iron Age Israel, providing detailed evidence for viticulture and wine production. McGovern (2003) provides a broader interdisciplinary study of ancient wine, incorporating archaeological and chemical evidence from across the ancient world, including organic residue analysis.

Recent archaeological studies have advanced this conversation significantly. Amir (2024) provides evidence from organic residue analysis of ceramic vessels, identifying ancient wine through chemical signatures. Tavger (2024) examines Iron Age II and Persian-period wine production in southern Samaria, documenting the scale and distribution of wine production in ancient Israel. These studies demonstrate that wine production was widespread and technologically sophisticated throughout the region.

The socio-economic dimensions of wine and beer have been examined by Samuel (2001) for Egypt, Nemet-Nejat (1998) for Mesopotamia, and Geller (2018) for the role of beer in Mesopotamian medicine and ritual. Samuel documents how beer and bread formed the staple food of Egypt, serving as a means of exchange, payment for wages, and offerings to the dead and gods. Nemet-Nejat demonstrates that beer was the most common drink in Mesopotamia, used as payment for palace employees and protected by female deities. Geller examines the medical and ritual uses of beer in Mesopotamian texts.

Despite these substantial contributions, a gap remains in understanding the comparative socio-economic significance of wine and beer across different ANE cultures. While individual studies have examined specific regions, comprehensive comparative analyses are less common. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing the archaeological and socio-economic evidence across seven ANE cultures.

Lexical and Exegetical Debates over Hebrew Alcohol Terminology

The second scholarly conversation concerns the interpretation of Hebrew terminology for wine and alcoholic beverages. The central debate concerns whether Hebrew terms such as *yayin*, *tîrôš*, and *šĕkār* encode information about alcohol content, and whether biblical texts distinguish between fermented and unfermented wine.

Standard lexicographical authorities provide the foundation for this discussion. Koehler and Baumgartner (2001) provide the comprehensive lexical foundation for understanding the semantic range of *yayin*, *tîrôš*, *šĕkār*, and related terms. Clines (1993–2011) provides the most comprehensive dictionary of classical Hebrew, offering detailed semantic analysis and contextual examples. Both works indicate that terminology alone does not consistently encode alcohol content; interpretation depends on context.

Wilson (1877) provides an early detailed examination of biblical wines, arguing against the unfermented wine theory and emphasizing that biblical texts do not uniformly prohibit fermented wine. Bacchiocchi (1989) represents the opposing interpretive tradition, arguing for a distinction between fermented and unfermented wine and emphasizing the negative portrayal of intoxicating wine throughout Scripture. Welton (2025) represents a more recent and nuanced position, arguing that Hebrew terminology does not consistently encode alcohol content and that interpretation depends on context.

The unresolved scholarly problem in this conversation concerns the degree to which biblical texts can be used to reconstruct ancient Israelite attitudes toward alcohol. While lexical analysis provides important evidence, the interpretation of specific texts remains contested. This study engages with all three positions and adopts the lexical-contextual approach while acknowledging the limitations of lexical evidence alone.

Comparative Theological Debates Concerning Israelite Distinctiveness

The third scholarly conversation concerns the theological distinctiveness of Israelite attitudes toward alcohol in comparison with neighboring cultures. This debate involves questions of continuity and discontinuity: to what extent did Israel share the cultural practices of its neighbors, and to what extent did its theological commitments produce distinctive attitudes and practices?

Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas (2000) provide comprehensive background commentary on the Old Testament, situating biblical texts within their ancient Near Eastern context. Their work demonstrates that Israel emerged from among the nations with many shared cultural practices while developing distinctive theological commitments. Harrison (1980) examines the priestly prohibition in Leviticus, demonstrating the connection between alcohol and discernment in sacred service. Briant (2002) and Henkelman (2008) provide evidence for Persian attitudes toward wine, while Pardee (2002) examines Ugaritic ritual texts, including references to wine in cultic contexts.

The unresolved scholarly problem in this conversation concerns the degree of Israel's distinctiveness. Some scholars emphasize continuity, arguing that Israel was largely indistinguishable from its neighbors in its attitudes toward alcohol. Others emphasize discontinuity, arguing that Israel's theological commitments produced fundamentally different attitudes. This study addresses this debate by demonstrating that Israel shared broader ANE practices while developing distinctive theological emphases, avoiding both extremes.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed demonstrates that while substantial research exists on wine and beer production and consumption in the ANE, and while biblical texts on alcohol have been extensively studied, the comparative analysis requires careful attention to both continuities and discontinuities. The three scholarly conversations identified above archaeological/socio-economic studies, lexical/exegetical debates, and comparative theological debates each contribute important insights while leaving unresolved questions. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive comparative analysis that integrates archaeological, textual, and biblical evidence while acknowledging the complexity and diversity within both Israel and the ANE.

Wine and Beer in the Ancient Near East

Production Methods

Wine Production. Ancient wine production involved three main processes: treading grapes to express the must, pressing remaining must from grape skins and stalks, and fermentation. As Frankel (1999) explains, grape juice undergoes primary fermentation lasting three to nine days, followed by secondary fermentation. The alcohol content rises as fermentation continues, reaching approximately 12-13% before yeast dies. The duration and conditions of fermentation determined whether wine became intoxicating. If wine was sealed early enough to halt the fermentation process, it could remain less intoxicating, though the precise alcohol content of ancient wines remains debated (McGovern, 2003; Borowski, 2020).

Beer Production. Beer, made from fermented cereals rich in starch—primarily emmer wheat and barley was produced through a process involving sprouting grain to produce enzymes that converted starch to sugar, mixing with cooked grain, sieving, and adding yeast for fermentation. Beer was a staple beverage throughout the ANE, particularly in Egypt and Mesopotamia (Samuel, 2001; Nemet-Nejat, 1998; Geller, 2018).

Agricultural Significance. The fruit of the vine, together with olive oil and wheat, formed traditional staple products of Mediterranean dry farming. These products could be stored for long periods and were suited to the climate. In Israel, grapes could be processed into juice and wine without tapping into precious water supplies, making viticulture a fortunate adaptation to the land's limited water resources (Frankel, 1999; Tavger, 2024; Borowski, 2020).

Types of Wine in Ancient Hebrew Literature

יַיִן (yayin). The most common term for wine in biblical Hebrew, occurring approximately 140 times, yayin appears in both Semitic and Indo-European languages. According to Koehler and Baumgartner (2001), yayin refers generally to wine, with the specific alcohol content determined by context rather than the term itself. Clines (1993–2011) notes that while yayin can refer to intoxicating wine, it is also used in positive contexts as a gift of God.

תִּירוֹשׁ (tîrôš—New Wine). Occurring about thirty-eight times, tîrôš is often portrayed as a staple crop alongside grain and oil, generally associated with God's blessing. However, negative associations appear in contexts where new wine is linked with drunkards and whoredom (Hos 4:11; Joel 1:5), suggesting that "new" refers to the harvest rather than necessarily indicating unfermented wine (Welton, 2025; Clines, 1993–2011).

שֶׁכָּר (šēkār—Strong Drink). Šēkār means intoxicating drink, beer, or fermented alcoholic beverage. It is a comprehensive term for all kinds of fermented drinks excluding wine. According to Koehler and Baumgartner (2001), the use of šēkār consistently pertains to alcoholic drinks, and in most cases, its use is either prohibited or ill-spoken of. The combination of yayin and šēkār appears approximately eighteen times as a poetic parallel denoting intoxicating drink (Bacchiocchi, 1989; Clines, 1993–2011).

Other Terms. Additional terms include ḥōmeš (vinegar), forbidden to Nazirites (Num 6:3); 'āsîs (sweet wine), occurring in contexts of either blessing or judgment; ḥāmer (wine), appearing as a synonym for well-fermented vintage wine; and sūmādar (the flower of the vine), probably referring to wine flavored with wild vine flower or made from unripe grapes (Wilson, 1877; Bacchiocchi, 1989; Clines, 1993–2011).

Wine and Beer in Ancient Near Eastern Nations

Egypt. Beer and bread formed the staple food of ancient Egypt, consumed by the entire population. Beer provided carbohydrates, sugars, fatty acids, amino acids, minerals, and vitamins. It served as a means of exchange, payment for wages and taxes, and an important ingredient in medication. Beer was used as part of offerings to the dead and gods (Samuel, 2001). Wine, pressed from grapes, was reserved for the rich and elite, with inscriptions on wine jars indicating quality gradings. Wine production involved considerable labor, making

it significantly more expensive than beer. Wine was used in religious rituals as an offering to deities like Osiris and Hathor. At banquets, both wine and beer were served in large quantities, as these were acceptable times for excessive drinking (Poo, 2001). The context of intoxication determined whether it was viewed with approval or disapproval. Generally, intoxication was considered a stimulus for pleasure, companionship, and a means of communicating with the dead and gods. However, loss of control, violence, vomiting, and undisciplined behavior were disapproved (Wilfong, 2001; Erman, 1971).

Mesopotamia. Beer was the most common drink for daily consumption as well as social and ritual occasions. Different varieties included dark beer, clear beer, freshly brewed beer, well-aged beer, sweet beer, and bitter beer. Beer was used as payment for palace employees, and brewing was performed by women and protected by female gods (Nemet-Nejat, 1998). Geller (2018) documents the use of beer in Mesopotamian medicine and ritual. Wine was seasonal, expensive, and a rare commodity, available primarily to gods and the wealthy. Certain priestesses were prohibited from entering taverns upon threat of death, suggesting that their office demanded a higher standard of conduct (Leick, 2003, 89–90).

Babylon. Babylonians were primarily beer drinkers. Beer was both nutritious and rich in vitamins and minerals. Temple workers received daily wages of barley, oil, and beer. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu was transformed into a human being upon eating food and drinking beer—described as "the destiny of the land" (Leick, 2003). Wine drinking was common among military personnel; during Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem, certain royal estates were apparently spared to supply wine to the army (Wiseman, 1985, 45). While drunkenness was often approved, the drunkard's vomit was associated with degradation and filth.

Assyria. Assyrians consumed less beer than their neighbors, and what they accessed was often over-diluted. Wine was a common commodity in the royal palace; tablets from Nimrud Palace indicate approximately two thousand liters stored between 791 and 779 BCE (Olmstead, 1975, 214; Radner, 2016, 78). However, rations to the royal household were limited to less than a half-pint per person. Conquered nations were forced to pay perpetual first-fruits of sheep, dates, and wine to Assyrian gods (Olmstead, 1975; Radner, 2016).

Persia. Both wine and beer played major roles in Persian life. According to Briant (2002), priests ministering to Cyrus's tomb received rations of sheep, wine, and flour. Henkelman (2008) documents that the Persepolis tablets list flour, beer, wine, grain, and dates as rations for administrators and sacrifices. Notably, when Persian kings wanted to get drunk, they sent away their lawful wives and brought in concubines to spare their wives the shame of the king's licentious behavior (Briant, 2002, 329).

Ugarit and Syro-Palestine. Legal and economic documents from Ugarit list wine and beer as part of tithes received from villages (Matthews, 1999; Pardee, 2002). Syro-Palestine's favorable climate and topography allowed for vineyards in nearly every hill-country village. The abundance of wine meant it served as the common beverage and an aspect of everyday social life, though its intemperate use could become a source of prophetic critique (Isa 56:12; Amos 2:8; Walton, Matthews, & Chavalas, 2000).

Chronological, Social, and Economic Differentiation

Chronology. The evidence belongs to different historical horizons and should not be flattened into a single pattern. Ugaritic ritual and economic texts principally illuminate Late Bronze Age palace-temple society, whereas the Assyrian palace records cited here belong to the first millennium BCE and the Persian ration texts to the Achaemenid period. Evidence for ancient Israel is strongest for Iron Age viticulture and for biblical traditions preserved and shaped across the monarchic and Persian periods. The comparisons that follow therefore identify broad functional parallels rather than claiming direct contemporaneity in every case.

Class and Household Consumption. Egyptian and Mesopotamian evidence shows that beer was not merely a ritual beverage: it formed part of ordinary diet and labour compensation. Wine, by contrast, was frequently associated with higher cost, palace storage, elite banquets, or divine offerings, although local abundance could widen access. Household production is most visible where brewing technology, village presses, or everyday containers survive; written records disproportionately represent temples, palaces, armies, and literate

administrators. The evidence therefore supports a class distinction without implying that beverage boundaries were absolute.

Production, Trade, and Institutional Distribution. Presses and processing installations attest local production, while jars, labels, ration lists, taxes, tithes, and tribute records reveal movement through institutional economies. In Egypt, labelled wine jars and the labour-intensive character of viniculture indicate quality differentiation and higher value. Mesopotamian and Babylonian ration systems connect beer with workers and temple personnel; Assyrian storage and tribute connect wine with palace and imperial extraction; Persian administrative tablets place wine and beer within systems of rations and sacrifice; and Ugaritic village tithes show agricultural transfer to central institutions.

Medical and Practical Uses. Alcoholic beverages also served practical purposes beyond pleasure and worship. Egyptian beer and Mesopotamian beer appear in medical preparations, while their caloric and nutritional value made them important within food systems. In Israel and Syro-Palestine, viticulture suited Mediterranean dry farming and produced a storable agricultural commodity. These uses complicate any analysis framed only in moral or religious terms: the same beverage could be food, medicine, wage, tax, trade commodity, offering, or source of intoxication depending on context.

Patterns and Diversity in ANE Attitudes

Across the societies examined, beverage choice and evaluation varied by ecology, period, class, institution, and occasion. Beer commonly functioned as food and ration in Egypt and Mesopotamia; wine carried greater elite and cultic value in several settings, while viticultural regions such as Syro-Palestine could support broader access. Palace, temple, military, village, household, and medical uses must therefore be distinguished. Intoxication was sometimes linked with festivity or religious experience, but loss of control, violence, shame, and degradation could also be censured. These patterns justify comparison while ruling out the treatment of the ANE as a single, timeless drinking culture.

Comparative Synthesis: ANE Attitudes Toward Alcohol

The following table synthesizes the comparative evidence across ANE cultures and ancient Israel:

Dimension	Egypt	Mesopotamia	Ugarit/Syro-Palestine	Ancient Israel
Primary beverage	Beer and wine	Mainly beer	Wine and beer	Primarily wine
Economic function	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Cultic use	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Divine/intoxication association	Present	Present	Present	Not emphasized
Restrictions on sacred personnel	Some	Some	Limited evidence	Explicit/contextual
Moral concern	Loss of control	Excess/degradation	Variable	Discernment, justice, holiness
Wine as blessing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Intoxication evaluated	Context-dependent	Often positive	Variable	Predominantly negative
Production evidence	Presses, jars, residues	Brewing and ration records	Village viticulture, tithes	Presses, jars, agricultural texts
Household/daily role	Beer staple across classes	Beer as daily ration; women brewers	Wine in village social life	Wine as agricultural commodity; uneven household evidence
Trade/institutional role	Wages, taxes, graded wine	Palace/temple rations	Village tithes	Storage, exchange, offerings

Medical use	Beer in preparations	Beer in medicine and ritual	Limited evidence in this corpus	Limited direct evidence in this corpus
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Note. Synthesized by the authors from the archaeological, textual, and biblical evidence discussed in this study. Categories represent broad comparative tendencies rather than uniform attitudes within each culture.

Wine and Strong Drink in Ancient Israel

Wine in the Pentateuch

Narrative Warnings. The first recorded use of wine in Scripture occurs with Noah (Gen 9:20-25), a righteous man who, under the influence of alcohol, lay naked and unaware. The second instance involves Lot, whose daughters used alcohol to weaken his sexual inhibitions, resulting in incest (Gen 19:31-38). Both narratives serve as implicit warnings about the effects of alcohol on judgment. As Harrison (1980) observes, alcohol works directly upon the central nervous system, affecting advanced mental functions such as thinking and making judgments.

Wine as Drink Offering. Wine was used in libation offerings accompanying burnt offerings and grain offerings (Exod 29:40; Lev 23:13; Num 15:5, 7, 10). The proportion of wine was determined by the type of animal sacrificed. These offerings were poured out upon the burning sacrifice and consumed by fire; they were not drunk. Unlike ANE gods, the God of Israel is not depicted as drinking or becoming intoxicated from offerings (Bacchiocchi, 1989).

Texts Commending Wine. Several texts appear to commend wine, including Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Gen 27:28), Psalm 104:14-15 (wine that "makes man's heart glad"), and Amos 9:13 (the promise of abundance). These texts should be understood within their contexts: Isaac is blessing Jacob's agricultural prosperity; Psalm 104 celebrates God as provider of basic needs; Amos envisions restoration under God's blessing. The "gladness" associated with wine parallels the gladness found in seeking the Lord (1 Chr 16:10; Ps 105:3), beholding salvation (Ps 21:1), and trusting God (Ps 33:21). The interpretation of these texts remains debated among scholars, with some seeing them as approving wine consumption in moderation and others arguing they refer to non-intoxicating wine.

Context-Specific Restrictions and Warnings

Priests (Lev 10:8-11). Following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, God commanded Aaron and his sons: "Do not drink wine or strong drink... when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you may not die." This prohibition was tied to the priests' duties of distinguishing between holy and profane, clean and unclean, and teaching Israel God's statutes. The timing and placement of this prohibition have led some scholars to suggest that Nadab and Abihu may have acted under the influence of alcohol (Harrison, 1980; Walton, Matthews, & Chavalas, 2000). The prohibition is specifically connected to entering the tent of meeting, suggesting a context-specific restriction rather than a permanent prohibition for all priests at all times.

Nazirites (Num 6:1-4). Those taking the Nazirite vow were required to abstain from wine and strong drink, including all grape products from seeds to skin. The Nazirite vow democratized holiness, allowing any Israelite to experience a heightened level of sanctity through visible self-denial (Welton, 2025). The vow redirected the cultural reality of alcohol consumption toward Yahweh by instituting a counter-cultural abstinence. The abstinence extends beyond intoxicating beverages to grape products generally, suggesting that the vow is primarily about consecration rather than alcohol toxicity alone. No direct ANE parallel has yet been securely established for the Nazirite vow, making it a distinctive Israelite institution (Welton, 2025).

Kings (Prov 31:1-5). King Lemuel's mother counseled: "It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, lest they drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted." The reason

given is that alcohol impairs judgment, particularly affecting the poor who depend on the king's justice. This is presented as wisdom instruction concerning impaired judgment, not a Torah prohibition applicable to every Israelite king.

Rechabites (Jer 35). The Rechabites, descendants of Jonadab son of Rechab, refused Jeremiah's offer of wine, citing their ancestor's command: "You shall not drink wine, you or your sons, forever." Their obedience served as a contrast to Israel's disobedience. The Rechabite abstinence is based on an ancestral command and functions in Jeremiah 35 primarily as an illustration of obedience. Their abstinence is not a Torah requirement but a distinctive family practice.

Wine and Strong Drink in Proverbs

The book of Proverbs offers sustained critique of excessive alcohol consumption:

Proverbs 20:1: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise." The personification of wine and strong drink portrays how alcohol turns individuals into mockers and brawlers.

Proverbs 23:19-21: The son is admonished not to be with heavy drinkers or gluttons, for both lead to poverty. Pairing heavy drinking with gluttony emphasizes the problem of excess.

Proverbs 23:29-35: This extended passage describes alcohol as a source of woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds, and redness of eyes. The admonition warns against the seductive attraction of wine and the progression toward intoxication and loss of self-control. Ultimately, alcohol bites like a serpent and stings like a viper, enslaving its victims.

Competing Interpretive Positions

Scholarly interpretation of biblical texts on alcohol encompasses several competing positions:

1. **Abstinence Interpretation.** Some scholars argue that biblical texts consistently condemn alcohol consumption and that positive references to wine refer to non-intoxicating grape juice (Bacchiocchi, 1989). This position emphasizes the negative portrayals of wine and the restrictions for priests, Nazirites, and others.
2. **Moderation/Anti-Drunkenness Interpretation.** Other scholars argue that biblical texts do not prohibit wine consumption but condemn drunkenness and excess (Wilson, 1877). This position emphasizes texts that commend wine as a gift of God and the use of wine in cultic offerings.
3. **Lexically Contextual Interpretation.** A third position argues that Hebrew terminology does not consistently encode alcohol content and that interpretation depends on context (Welton, 2025). This position recognizes the ambiguity of terms like *yayin* and *tîrôš* and emphasizes the diversity of perspectives within the biblical text.

This study adopts the third position while arguing that the biblical text repeatedly and predominantly condemns drunkenness and impaired judgment, particularly when associated with sacred service, leadership, and covenantal responsibilities. The fermented versus unfermented distinction should not be treated as a settled result of the study.

Comparative Analysis: Continuity and Distinctiveness

Production and Consumption

Archaeological and textual evidence demonstrates that Israel shared the broader ANE practices of viticulture and wine consumption. Wine production techniques were similar across the region, and wine served as a staple beverage, particularly in Israel where water resources were limited. Beer production, while less prominent in

Israel than in Egypt and Mesopotamia, was also practiced. The terminology for wine and strong drink in Hebrew parallels terminology in other Semitic languages (Frankel, 1999; Amir, 2024; Tavger, 2024; Borowski, 2020).

Cultic Functions

Both Israel and its ANE neighbors used wine in religious contexts. In ANE cultures, wine was offered to gods and used in rituals (Poo, 2001; Matthews, 1999; Pardee, 2002). Israel also used wine in libation offerings (Exod 29:40; Lev 23:13; Num 15:5, 7, 10). However, a significant difference emerges: ANE gods were sometimes depicted as drinking and becoming intoxicated, while the God of Israel is never portrayed as drinking wine from offerings. The wine offerings in Israel were poured out and consumed by fire rather than drunk (Bacchiocchi, 1989).

Intoxication and Moral Evaluation

In ANE cultures, intoxication was often associated with religious experience, pleasure, and divine communion. Intoxication was generally considered a means of communicating with the dead and gods in Egypt (Wilfong, 2001). Ugaritic texts describe cultic use of wine in religious ceremonies (Matthews, 1999; Pardee, 2002). Mesopotamian texts describe beer as having divine protection (Leick, 2003). However, ANE cultures also expressed disapproval of loss of control, violence, and vomiting (Erman, 1971).

In Israel, a different emphasis emerges. While positive references to wine appear, drunkenness and alcohol-induced impairment are repeatedly and predominantly associated with compromised judgment, moral failure, and distance from God in wisdom literature (Prov 20:1; 23:29-35) and prophetic critique (Isa 56:12; Amos 2:8; Hos 4:11). The emphasis is on discernment, clear thinking, and the ability to distinguish between holy and profane (Lev 10:8-11). Israelite texts place a distinctive emphasis on sobriety and unimpaired discernment in particular contexts of sacred service, consecration, and leadership.

Sacred Service and Leadership

Israel developed distinctive concerns about alcohol and sacred service that, while not entirely unique, appear with particular emphasis. Priests were prohibited from drinking wine when entering the tent of meeting (Lev 10:8-11). Nazirites abstained from wine and grape products as part of a vow of consecration (Num 6:1-4). Kings were warned about the effects of alcohol on judgment (Prov 31:4-5). The Rechabites practiced abstinence as an expression of obedience (Jer 35). These restrictions reflect a theological framework in which sobriety and discernment are essential for particular sacred vocations and covenantal responsibilities.

Abstinence and Consecration

Abstinence from alcohol appears in Israel as an expression of consecration, discipline, and social identity. The Nazirite vow, with its simultaneous abstention from wine, hair-cutting, and corpse contact, has no direct ANE parallel that has yet been securely established (Welton, 2025). The Rechabite abstinence functioned as an illustration of obedience. The priestly prohibition was context-specific. These practices should not be treated as equivalent categories but rather as diverse expressions of the broader concern for holiness and discernment.

Summary of Comparative Findings

The comparative evidence reveals both continuity and distinctiveness. Israel shared the general practice of wine production and consumption with its neighbors. However, its theological framework produced distinctive concerns about the relationship between intoxication, discernment, sacred service, and leadership. The emphasis on sobriety for priests, Nazirites, and rulers, and the repeated condemnation of drunkenness in wisdom literature, reflect a theological logic that, while not entirely without parallel in ANE cultures (e.g., restrictions on priestesses in Mesopotamia), appears with particular emphasis and coherence in Israel.

The Question of Distinctiveness

This study demonstrates that Israel's attitudes toward alcoholic beverages were both continuous with and distinct from those of neighboring ANE nations. The continuity is evident in shared production methods, consumption patterns, and the use of wine in cultic offerings. The distinctiveness emerges in the theological framework that links sobriety with holiness, discernment, and covenant faithfulness.

However, the distinctiveness should not be overstated. The ANE was not a single religious culture, and Israel was not uniformly opposed to wine. The biblical text contains positive references to wine and uses wine in cultic offerings. The restrictions on alcohol are context-specific rather than universally prohibitive. The distinction between non-intoxicating wine as good and intoxicating wine as bad is not securely established by the evidence.

THE THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The theological framework that shaped Israelite attitudes toward alcohol can be characterized as follows:

Holiness and Discernment. Israel was called to be a holy nation (Exod 19:6). Those who drew near to God—priests, Nazirites were held to higher standards of sobriety because their roles required clear thinking, discernment, and the ability to distinguish between holy and profane (Lev 10:8-11).

Covenant Faithfulness. The connection between alcohol and impaired judgment was particularly concerning in contexts of leadership and covenantal responsibility. Kings were warned that alcohol would cause them to "forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted" (Prov 31:4-5).

Consecration and Identity. Abstinence from alcohol could function as an expression of consecration (Nazirite vow) or social identity (Rechabites). No direct ANE parallel has yet been securely established for these practices, reflecting Israel's distinctive identity (Welton, 2025).

Wine as Blessing. Wine was also celebrated as a gift from God, a staple of agricultural life, and a source of gladness (Ps 104:14-15; Amos 9:13). The biblical text does not present a uniformly negative view of wine but rather distinguishes between appropriate and inappropriate use.

Comparison with ANE Religious Practice

While ANE cultures also had restrictions on alcohol in some contexts, the emphasis on sobriety and unimpaired discernment in particular contexts of sacred service in Israel appears distinctive. In ANE cultures, intoxication was often associated with divine communion; in Israel, sober-minded worship was emphasized for those in positions of sacred service (Bacchiocchi, 1989; Welton, 2025). However, this contrast should be qualified: ANE cultures also expressed disapproval of loss of control, and Israel used wine in cultic offerings. The evidence for ANE attitudes is culturally uneven; Egypt, Ugarit, Mesopotamia, and Persia should not be compressed into a single ANE religious attitude.

Implications for Understanding Israel's Identity

The distinctiveness of Israel's attitudes toward alcohol, while not absolute, reflects its unique identity as a people called to be holy and set apart for God. The emphasis on sobriety for sacred service and leadership, and the repeated and predominant condemnation of drunkenness, reflect a theological framework in which clear thinking, moral discernment, and covenant faithfulness are essential. From the theological perspective of the biblical texts, Israel's covenant traditions present its worship and moral practices as increasingly differentiated from certain religious practices of surrounding cultures.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

1. **Archaeological Inference.** Production installations, containers, and residues can establish that beverages were made, stored, or transported, but rarely identify every consumer or reveal the social meaning of consumption. This study therefore avoids deriving attitudes from artefacts alone and gives greatest weight to conclusions supported by archaeological and textual convergence (Samuel, 2001; Amir, 2024; McGovern, 2003).
2. **Textual Limitations.** Textual evidence is unevenly distributed across cultures and time periods. Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts provide extensive evidence, but evidence from smaller cultures such as Ugarit and Syro-Palestine is more limited (Matthews, 1999; Hess, 2003; Pardee, 2002). Biblical texts are theological documents that may not provide a complete picture of Israelite practices.
3. **Chronological Unevenness.** The evidence spans approximately 2000–400 BCE and is not evenly distributed. Period-specific groupings have been introduced to reduce anachronistic comparison, but the available sources do not permit equally detailed diachronic reconstruction for every region.
4. **Terminology Ambiguity.** The terminology for wine and alcoholic beverages is not always precise. Terms such as *yayin* and *tîrôš* may have overlapping meanings, and the distinction between fermented and unfermented wine is not always clear (Bacchiocchi, 1989; Wilson, 1877; Clines, 1993–2011; Koehler & Baumgartner, 2001).
5. **Uneven Functional Evidence.** Although the revised analysis includes production, trade, rations, medicine, and household consumption, the surviving record remains strongest for religious and institutional contexts. Household practices and informal exchange are especially liable to underrepresentation.
6. **Uneven Regional and Social Coverage.** Egypt and Mesopotamia preserve richer written records than Ugarit and Syro-Palestine, and elite institutions are more visible than rural households. The comparison consequently presents calibrated tendencies rather than equal or exhaustive cultural profiles.
7. **Interpretive Limitations.** The study's interpretation of biblical texts is shaped by the authors' interpretive framework. The conclusion that biblical texts repeatedly condemn drunkenness and impaired judgment while not uniformly prohibiting wine consumption is supported by the evidence but is not the only possible interpretation.
8. **Generalization Limitations.** The study's findings may not apply uniformly across all Israelite society. The study draws primarily on biblical texts, which reflect the perspectives of Israel's religious leadership.
9. **Methodological Limitation: Comparing Ideal and Practice.** The study recognizes the methodological challenge of comparing the ideal theology of biblical texts with the everyday social practice of ANE cultures. While the study attempts to address this by examining both prescriptive and descriptive texts in both traditions, the available evidence does not always allow for direct comparison.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following recommendations are offered for future research.

1. **Expand Archaeological and Archaeometric Evidence.** Future work should combine surveys of presses and brewing installations with ceramic typology, residue analysis, archaeobotanical remains, storage capacity, and spatial distribution. Such integration can clarify scale, product movement, and differences between household, village, temple, and palace production (Amir, 2024; Tavger, 2024; Borowski, 2020).
2. **Textual and Philological Studies.** Further research is needed on the terminology for wine and alcoholic beverages, including analysis of the semantic range of terms such as *yayin*, *tîrôš*, and *šēkār* using standard lexicographical authorities (Koehler & Baumgartner, 2001; Clines, 1993–2011).

3. **Use Period-Matched Comparisons.** Future studies should compare defined horizons—such as Late Bronze Age Ugarit, Iron Age Israel, the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires, and Achaemenid Persia—rather than combining evidence across centuries. Changes in political economy, cult, class structure, and local ecology should be treated as explanatory variables.
4. **Interdisciplinary Research.** Future research should continue to integrate archaeological, textual, and biblical evidence to achieve a comprehensive understanding of ancient attitudes toward alcohol.
5. **Deepen Social and Economic Analysis.** Research should trace production technology, household consumption, gendered labour, taverns and banquets, wages and rations, taxation and tribute, interregional trade, medicinal preparations, and differences between elite and non-elite access. Administrative records should be read alongside material evidence so that institutional documentation is not mistaken for the whole society.
6. **Engagement with Competing Interpretations.** Scholarship on biblical texts on alcohol should engage more explicitly with competing interpretive positions, including abstinence, moderation, and contextual interpretations.
7. **Methodological Refinement.** Future research should develop more refined methods for comparing the ideal theology of biblical texts with the everyday social practice of ANE cultures, addressing the methodological challenge identified in this study.
8. **Further Exploration of Distinctive Institutions.** The Nazirite vow (Num 6:1-4) merits further study as a distinctive Israelite institution with no direct ANE parallel that has yet been securely established (Welton, 2025).

Contemporary Implications

The findings of this study have implications for contemporary religious communities that look to biblical texts for guidance on alcohol use. Rather than extracting a single proof-text or assuming a uniform position, communities are best served by attending to the theological framework that shaped Israelite attitudes: the relationship between sobriety, discernment, holiness, justice, leadership, and covenant responsibility. The biblical texts do not present a single uniform position but reflect diverse contexts and concerns. Faith communities should therefore approach the question of alcohol with attention to context, vocation, moral discernment, and the specific responsibilities of leadership and sacred service.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study reveals a nuanced picture of Israelite attitudes toward wine and alcoholic beverages in relation to neighboring ANE nations. Israel shared the broader ANE practices of viticulture and wine consumption, including the use of wine in cultic offerings and the appreciation of wine as a gift of agricultural blessing. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Ugarit, and Syro-Palestine, beer and wine served as dietary staples, economic commodities, and religious instruments. Intoxication was often associated with pleasure, social bonding, and in some contexts, divine communion, though loss of control was frequently disapproved. However, the evidence for ANE attitudes is culturally uneven; Egypt, Ugarit, Mesopotamia, and Persia should not be compressed into a single ANE religious attitude.

In ancient Israel, a distinctive emphasis emerges. While wine consumption was not uniformly condemned, drunkenness and alcohol-induced impairment were repeatedly and predominantly associated with compromised judgment and moral danger, particularly in wisdom and prophetic texts. Context-specific restrictions against alcohol for priests in cultic contexts (Lev 10:9), Nazirites (Num 6:3), warnings to kings (Prov 31:4-5), and the Rechabites' ancestral practice (Jer 35) reflect a theological logic in which sobriety and discernment are essential for particular sacred vocations and covenantal responsibilities. The Nazirite vow, with its simultaneous abstention from wine, hair-cutting, and corpse contact, has no direct ANE parallel that has yet been securely established, reflecting Israel's distinctive identity (Welton, 2025).

The central contribution of this study is its demonstration that Israel participated in the broader ANE culture of wine production and consumption, yet its covenantal theology generated a distinctive moral logic in which intoxication became especially problematic when it compromised holiness, discernment, justice, sacred service, and covenant responsibility. This thesis avoids two common extremes: claiming that Israel completely rejected alcoholic wine, and claiming that Israel was essentially indistinguishable from surrounding ANE cultures.

The findings demonstrate that Israel's theological framework—centered on holiness, covenant, and moral discernment—shaped its attitudes toward alcohol in distinctive ways while also participating in broader ANE cultural patterns. This distinctiveness, understood with appropriate nuance and qualification, reflects Israel's unique identity as a people called to be holy, set apart for God, and governed by a God who demanded clear-minded worship and faithful obedience. From the theological perspective of the biblical texts, Israel's covenant traditions present its worship and moral practices as increasingly differentiated from certain religious practices of surrounding cultures.

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