Life in Biblical Israel

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for lighting the lamps and for votive offerings in the temple. Olive wood was used, as today, for making furniture, paneling, and statues.

Grapevine

The earliest evidence for the cultivation of the vine dates from EB I. Grape presses carved in bedrock in the Levant date as early as the third millennium.

The story of Noah describes him as the first to plant a vineyard (Gen. 9:20), suggesting Anatolia, the traditional location of the mountains of Ararat, as the site where viticulture originated. In fact, the Levant and the Aegean were two of the earliest centers of grape cultivation. The Assyrian records make no mention of wine in the Bronze Age. In contrast, wine culture was well developed in the period of the Neo-Assyrian empire during the first half of the first millennium, where by the ninth century wine was popular but expensive. During the first millennium there is evidence of “a well developed wine culture not only in Syria but all along the borderlands between Turkey in the north and Syria and Iraq to the south.” A hot, dry climate is not conducive to the cultivation of grapes. In Mesopotamia, grapevines could be nurtured only in the north, notably in the region of Carchemish. With the exception of some oases, vineyards do not grow well in Egypt; therefore the Egyptians imported much of their wine from the Levant and Greece.

Because it requires several years before vines yield grapes of high quality, only a stable society can successfully engage in productive viticulture and exploit its economic advantages, especially in export. Some continuity over time is also required for the labor-intensive task of building and maintaining the hillside terraces on which the vineyards thrive and grow during the summer drought. Stone watchtowers (māgdālim) were constructed in the vineyards to guard the ripening fruit. During the harvest season the Israelites lodged in booths made from branches and vines, from which practice the feast of Booths developed.

‘ēnāb (pl. ‘ānābim) is the common Hebrew word for “grape.” sērēq designates a special kind of dark red grape from the vines of the Soreq Valley in the foothills southwest of Jerusalem (Isa. 5:2; Jer. 2:21). ‘āsis may be the juice that is naturally exuded by the weight of the grape pile; thus the comment that it “flows down the mountain side” (Amos 9:13; see above). It would be the grape counterpart of virgin oil.

Vine cultivation is done not from seeds but from plant cuttings and shoots, and grapevines were manipulated in several ways. The vines could be draped over a trellis, or trained to climb trees, or allowed to trail on the ground, or worked in a vineyard (kerēm). The love of restoration to again be bough culture as he rec although in this tion, the vineyard from the root b parable represent love of the vine.

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Ill. 39: Tomb of Nakht of Thebes, dated late fifteenth century B.C.E. Trapping, plucking, and butchering the geese (lower right); gathering grapes, treading and storing wine in “Canaanite jars” with stoppers (scene above). (Courtesy of the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1915)

yard (kerem). To plant a vineyard was a sign of permanent settlement. As assurance of restoration to Judah, Yahweh predicts that “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (Jer. 32:15). Isaiah provides a detailed picture of viticulture as he recounts a parable about a vineyard planted with “choice vines” (šōrēq), although in this case it proved to be unfruitful (Isa. 5:1-7). Despite careful cultivation, the vineyard produced only “wild grapes” (bē’usīm, literally “rotten grapes,” from the root b’s, “to stink”). The prophet reveals that the useless vineyard in this parable represents the faithless house of Israel, which failed to respond to the tender love of the vineyard keeper, pictured here as Yahweh.

The early grapes ripen in June or July, and the vintage season occurs in August and September. In ancient Israel, harvesting the grapes was apparently a joyous occasion accompanied by celebrating, feasting, shouting, and rejoicing as the family members treaded the grapes, slipping and sliding in their bare feet. In a lament over the destruction of the vineyards of Moab, Isaiah says: “Joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field; and in the vineyard no songs are sung, no shouts are raised” (Isa. 16:10; also Jer. 48:33). The story recorded in Judges 21 suggests that during the
vintage harvest at Shiloh the young women of the town danced around the vineyards. At such a celebration Shiloh became the scene of the abduction and rape of the young women by the Benjaminites, who were hidden in the nearby vineyards: “As soon as you see the young men of Shiloh coming out to join the dances, come out from the vineyards; let each of you seize a wife from among the young women of Shiloh” (Judg. 21:21).

Harvesting was done by cutting clusters of grapes from the vine with pruning knives. Then the grapes were placed in baskets and carried to the winepress, ordinarily situated within the vineyard but sometimes in the city. Winepresses were hewn from bedrock to form a flat surface for treading. They consisted of a pair of square or circular vats (called gat and yeqeb in Hebrew) arranged at different levels and connected by a channel. The grapes were trodden by bare feet in the treading platform (gat), which was higher and larger than the deeper yeqeb, the receptacle into which the new wine flowed from the press. In a judgment on Moab Yahweh declares through Jeremiah: “I have stopped the wine from the wine presses (yēqāḥēm [pars pro toto]); no one treads a Greek invented to a wall, the beneath. The lenistic period and grape bea...
no one treads them with shouts of joy” (Jer. 48:33). The grape beam-press came later, a Greek invention dating to the sixth century B.C.E. One end of the beam was secured to a wall, the other end weighted with stones, and the baskets of grapes placed beneath. The earliest evidence of the use of the beam-press in Israel dates to the Hellenistic period (third century B.C.E.). The only apparent difference between the olive and grape beam-presses is that less pressure needs to be exerted on the grapes.

After the grapes were treaded, the expressed juice ran into vats carved in the bedrock or constructed and lined with plaster. The juice collected in these vats was then set in a cool place for fermentation. In Iron II at Ashkelon fat-bellied jars were used for fermentation and storage. Here pressing was done in rooms within a large, centrally located ashlar building, or winery. Press rooms alternated with storerooms in this large complex (III. 41).

While grapes were used primarily for wine making, some were spread on mats to dry in the sun and to be made into raisin cakes (šimmuaqm or ‘āššāy). Others were used to make “dibs,” a fruit honey produced by boiling the juice of the grapes, which served as an ingredient for sweetening cakes.

Beverages

Hebrew mîšṭeb, derived from šālā, “to drink,” is commonly translated “festival” or “banquet,” suggesting that the essence of a feast was the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Yahweh prohibited Jeremiah from entering the “house of mourning” (bêṯ mărzaḵāy) to participate in a mourning rite (mărzaḵ) that consisted of eating and drinking: “You shall not go into the house of feasting (bêṯ mîšṭeb) to sit with them (Judahites), to eat (leʾēḵōl) and drink (lîšṭāt)” (Jer. 16:8). Here the “house of mourning” and the “house of feasting” are parallel (Jer. 16:5–9).

Mentioned 185 times in the Hebrew Bible, wine served as the commonly consumed beverage in ancient Israel, since water was often contaminated. Nine names for “wine” appear in the Hebrew Bible, although they do not necessarily designate different kinds of wine. Some names may be derived from the wine’s place of origin or from certain characteristics of the wine, as the “dark wine” from Judah is called kâhōl, from kâl meaning “to paint the eyes”; some of the various names may merely be synonyms. The most common word for wine is yəyin, appearing more than 140 times in the Bible. The root of yəyin, perhaps a non-Semitic loan word, is found in several languages of the East Mediterranean. The Hebrew tîrōṣ (“new wine” or simply “wine”) appears thirty-eight times. ’āsīs (from ’āšās, “to crush”), literally “juice,” is unfermented; tîrōṣ is newly fermented. hēmer (Aramaic), a poetic term for “red wine,” appears only in Deuteronomy 32:14. The Septuagint uses only oinos for wine.

The pomace of the grape was “distilled” into grappa, a brandy. The simple technology for its production was available in the Bronze Age. It is probably this brandy,
with an alcoholic content of 20 to 60 percent, that was known in Hebrew as šekar, giving rise to the verb šēkar, “to be drunk,” which occurs nineteen times in the Bible. “Nazirite” (from nāzar, “to consecrate, separate”) designates a man or woman who vows to abstain from (1) wine or any other intoxicants (yayin ušēkar); (2) cutting the hair; and (3) contact with dead bodies (Num. 6:1–8). This vow could be taken permanently or only temporarily. Based on this passage in Numbers, šēkar cannot refer to “beer” (as it does in Mesopotamia) but can only be a grape product. šēkar is usually parallel with “wine” in the Bible. At Ashkelon it is second on a list of beverages after “red wine” (yayin ‘ādōm).¹⁴

Wine was stored in large jars, and a juglet was used for dipping from the store jar. Pitchers and carafes served for pouring wine into drinking cup-bowls (kōsōt). It was strained to keep the drinker from ingesting the dregs or other foreign matter, and archaeologists have uncovered various types of strainer jugs for this purpose. In the early seventh century in Phrygia, the strainer was built into the spout of the jugs used to transfer the liquid from the large bowls to the drinking bowls. These strainer jugs were actually composite carafes, serving as decanter and strainer. These wine sets were important vessels in the Philistine repertoire, illustrating that the Philistines drank wine and not beer, as generally assumed. The Philistine wine set, of Iron I, was composed of krater, skyphos (drinking cup), and side-strainer spouted jug (II. 65). The Canaanite and Egyptian bronze wine sets consisted of three pieces—bowl, juglet, and strainer. A typical example came to light at Tell es-Sa‘idīyeh in Jordan, dating to the thirteenth century, and also in a Persian period tomb at Tell el-Far‘ah (S), where strainer, ladle, and bowl were uncovered. A small sheet-metal strainer was sometimes fitted to the bottom of the reed.

Besides being a common table beverage, wine was offered as a libation in sacrifice (Ex. 29:40) and was used medicinally. In Egypt and Mesopotamia, beer was the predominant drink, wine being restricted to religious purposes and banqueting among the affluent. On the basis of the biblical warnings against abuse, drunkenness (šikkārōn) was considered a disgrace: “Wine (yayin) and new wine (tīrōś) take away the understanding” (Hos. 4:11). Isaiah denounces those “who rise early in the morning in pursuit of šēkar [usually mistranslated by the vague locution ‘strong drink’], who linger in the evening to be inflamed by wine (yayin)” (Isa. 5:11).

Beer (probably from Latin bibere, “to drink”) is one of the oldest beverages in the region, dating to the fourth millennium or earlier. Made mainly from barley and wheat, it was the common drink in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The earliest written sources from Mesopotamia mention beer and provide elaborate descriptions of the brewing process. Plaques and cylinders from early Mesopotamia illustrate that beer was drunk through a reed or tube with a sieve on the end to keep it free of straw and chaff. In Meso-

EBREW AS ŠÈKAR, CHAFF. In Mesopotamia, there were many types of beer. “Babylonia like Bavaria was essentially a beer drinking culture.”

In Israel, on the other hand, it was not a popular beverage; there is not even an ancient Hebrew word for beer if šèkar refers to a grape product, such as grappa.

Milk (hālāb) was part of the staple diet, consumed in the form of curds and cheese and occasionally drunk with meals in biblical times. Goats were the primary milk producers in the ancient Near East; goat milk is richer in protein and fat than sheep and cow’s milk. The milk was kept in a leather skin (no’d, Judg. 4:19), as the story of Sisera, commander of the Canaanite forces, and Jael, a Kenite woman, illustrates. After feigning hospitality by offering Sisera milk in a bowl (sépel) as a thirst-quencher, she slew him by crushing his skull:

Water he asked,
Milk (hālāb) she gave,
In a majestic bowl,
She brought ghee (hem’ā).
(Judg. 5:25)

Ghee (hem’ā) and milk (hālāb) appear together several other times in the Bible. They were served to the three strangers who visited Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 18:8; also Deut. 32:14; Judg. 5:25). Hem’ā, variously described as curdled milk resembling yogurt, was prepared by churning fresh milk. Churning consists in rocking a skin of milk (no’d behālāb), or by beating a suspended skin of milk with a stick. Wine and milk are mentioned together in Isaiah’s eloquent invitation to the messianic banquet for all peoples: “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine (yayín) and milk (hālāb) without money and without price” (Isa. 55:1).

Cheese was a common food made from the milk of the ewe or the nanny. In the David and Goliath story, Jesse orders David to “take these ten cuts of cheese (hārisé behālāb) [lit. “slices of milk”] to the commander of their thousands” (1 Sam. 17:18). “Slices of milk” designates a soft cheese that can be sliced.

**Other Fruits**

tāmār, “date palm,” is a Hebrew name often given both to women and to places. Grace and elegance characterize the date palm tree, which with its immense fronds can reach a height of eighteen to twenty-four meters. Jericho is known as the “city of palm trees” (ʿir hattāmārīm, Deut. 34:3). The dense growth of the date palm is evident in the Jordan Valley, the Arabah, and parts of the Coastal Plain. The palmette

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