

# Beer in the Bible

Arranged by Rabbi Drew Kaplan

## I. Introduction to Beer(?) in the Bible

### Text #1

The Hebrew Bible contains some two hundred passages referring to wine, strong drink and other alcoholic beverages. By far, the largest number of such references speak of wine, or fermented grape juice, as an agricultural product universally utilized as food or harmless beverage. Still other numerous passages in the Old Testament mention wine in connection with sacrificial rites, as an offering symbolizing one of man's most cherished and valuable material possessions. It would require too much space to quote all such passages in reference to wine.

David I. Macht, "A Pharmacological Appreciation of References to Alcohol in the Hebrew Bible", *The Scientific Monthly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (August 1929), 168.

### Text #2

Beer was a staple in the Israelite diet, just as it was throughout the ancient Near East. Yet a search of most English translations of the Bible will produce few, if any, occurrences of the word "beer." Ancient Israel's affinity for beer has largely been ignored. I believe this is for three reasons: (1) confusion about the meaning of the Hebrew word *shekhar* (שכר), (2) a general snobbery in academia causing scholars to scorn beer drinking while celebrating wine culture, and (3) the unique challenges archaeologists have faced in finding (or identifying) beer remains in the Israelite material record.

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, beer was, in many ways, a super-food. By producing and drinking beer, one could dramatically multiply the calories in harvested grains while consuming needed vitamins; the alcohol was also effective at killing bacteria found in tainted water supplies. Given the difficulty of producing food in the ancient world, beer gave you a lot of nutritional bang for your buck.

Michael M. Homan, "Did the Ancient Israelites Drink Beer?", *Biblical Archaeology Review*, vol. 36, no. 5 (September/October 2010), 49-50.

Text #3

In the Hebrew Bible, nominal שֵׁכָר is attested 20 times, and, in all but one of these (Num 28:7), it stands parallel to “wine”. Both wine and שֵׁכָר are alcoholic beverages, so their parallelism in poetry would be expected. Yet, the parallel use of wine and שֵׁכָר in prose dictates that, somehow, שֵׁכָר is different from ordinary יַיִן.

Michael M. Homan, "Beer, Barley, and שֵׁכָר in the Hebrew Bible" in *Le David Maskil: A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Freedman*, eds. Richard Elliott Friedman and William H.C. Propp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 30.

Text #4

Today, while ‘strong drink’ remains the most frequent English translation of שֵׁכָר, confusion about its identity persists. The problem of rendering שֵׁכָר into English is best exemplified by the JPS translation of the Hebrew Bible, which uses ten terms for the single Hebrew word: “liquor”, “fermented drink” (with footnote ‘i.e. wine’), “other liquor”, “drink”, “strong drink”, “any strong drink”, “other intoxicant”, “any other intoxicant”, and “drunkards” (for drinkers of שֵׁכָר).

Michael M. Homan, "Beer, Barley, and שֵׁכָר in the Hebrew Bible" in *Le David Maskil: A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Freedman*, eds. Richard Elliott Friedman and William H.C. Propp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 26.



## II. Beer in the Torah

Lev. 10.9	Prohibition of drinking when coming into tent of meeting
Num. 6.3, 6.3	Nazir
Num. 28.7	Twice-daily libation offering (for special days, libations are with wine)
Deut. 14.26	Tithes – spending money on whatever you want...
Deut. 29.5	Israelites having neither bread, wine, nor beer while in the desert

### III. Beer in the Early Prophetic Works

Judg. 13.4, 7, 14 Samson's mother to consumer neither wine nor beer while with child

1Sam. 1.15 Hannah had drank neither wine nor beer

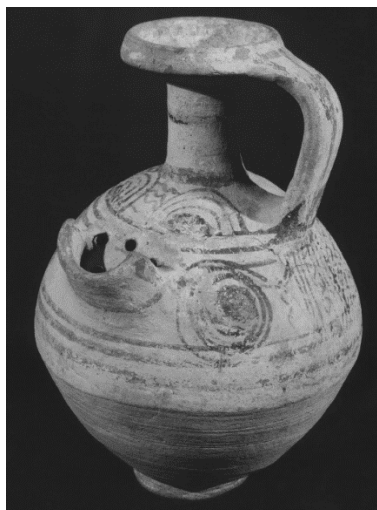
### IV. Brief Textual Interlude About The Word for Beer

#### Text #5

The importance of beer in the ancient Near East can be seen by the fact that, in time, the word for beer came to designate the state of drunkenness. The word for beer became synonymous with inebriation in Akkadian, Aramaic, Ugaritic and Arabic. Similarly in the Egyptian language, "beer" (*hnqt*) was used for general drunkenness. And in the Bible, *shekhar* is often a verb that means "to get drunk" (e.g., Genesis 9:21; Isaiah 29:9), a parallel linguistic usage that furthers the case for *shekhar* as "beer." (This parallel usage has also survived in modern Hebrew: A drunk is a *shekhor* (שכור), and *shekhar* (שכר) means beer, although beer is also commonly called simply *beera*.)

Some have argued that *shekhar* is actually a fermented wine made from dates rather than barley beer. This argument stems primarily from the belief that certain sandy regions in Israel, including Ashkelon and Jericho, were better suited for date production than for barley. Yet barley remains have been found at both sites, and one need not travel far from such sites to find soil well-suited to barley production.

Michael M. Homan, "Did the Ancient Israelites Drink Beer?", *Biblical Archaeology Review*, vol. 36, no. 5 (September/October 2010), 52-53.



## V. Beer in the Later Prophetic Writings

Isaiah 5.11

**יא** הוּי מְשָׁכִימֵי בַבֶּקֶר, שֶׁכָּר יִרְדּוּ; מֵאַחֲרֵי בִנְשׂוֹף, יַיִן יִדְלִיקֵם. **11** Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow beer; that tarry late into the night, till wine inflame them!

**יב** וְהָיָה כְּנֹזֵר וְנִבְלָה, תִּנְיָ וְחֲלִיל וְיַיִן--מִשְׁתִּיָּהֶם; וְאֵת פְּעַל ה' לֹא נִבְיטוּ, וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו לֹא רָאוּ. **12** And the harp and the psaltery, the tabret and the pipe, and wine, are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither have they considered the operation of His hands.

Isaiah 5.22

**כב** הוּי, גִּבּוֹרִים לְשִׁתּוֹת יַיִן; וְאֲנָשֵׁי-חֵיל, לְמִסַּךְ שֶׁכָּר. **22** Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle beer;

Isaiah 24.9

**ט** בְּשִׁיר, לֹא יִשְׁתּוּ-יַיִן; יִמַּר שֶׁכָּר, לְשִׁתּוֹ. **9** They drink not wine with a song; beer is bitter to them that drink it.

Isaiah 28.7, 28.7, 28.7

**ז** וְגַם-אַלֶּה בַּיַּיִן שָׁגוּ, וּבַשֶּׁכָּר תָּעוּ: כֹּהֵן וְנָבִיא שָׁגוּ בַשֶּׁכָּר נִבְלְעוּ מִן-הַיַּיִן, תָּעוּ מִן-הַשֶּׁכָּר, שָׁגוּ בְּרֵאָה, פָּקוּ פְּלִילִיָּה. **7** But these also reel through wine, and stagger through beer; the priest and the prophet reel through beer, they are confused because of wine, they stagger because of beer; they reel in vision, they totter in judgment.

Isaiah 29.9

**ט** הִתְמַהְמְהוּ וְהִתְמָהוּ, הִשְׁתַּעֲשְׂעוּ וְהִשְׁעוּ; שֶׁכְּרוּ וְלֹא-יַיִן, נָעוּ וְלֹא שֶׁכָּר. **9** Stupefy yourselves, and be stupid! Blind yourselves, and be blind! ye that are drunken, but not with wine, that stagger, but not with beer.

Isaiah 56.12

**יב** אֶתְיוּ אֶקְחָהּ-יַיִן, וְנִסְבְּאַהּ  
שָׂכָר; וְהָיָה כְּזֶה יוֹם מְחֹר,  
גְּדוֹל יִתֵּר מְאֹד. **12** 'Come ye, I will fetch wine, and we will fill  
ourselves with beer; and to-morrow shall be as  
this day, and much more abundant.'

Mic. 2.11

**יא** לוֹ-אִישׁ הַלֵּךְ רוּחַ, וְשָׁקָר  
כְּזָב, אֶטֶף לְךָ, לַיַּיִן וְלַשָּׂכָר;  
וְהָיָה מְטִיף, הָעָם הַזֶּה. **11** If a man walking in wind and falsehood do  
lie: 'I will preach unto thee of wine and of beer';  
he shall even be the preacher of this people.

## VI. Beer in the Writings

Ps. 69.13

**יג** יְשִׁיחוּ בִי, יִשְׁבְּי  
שְׁעָר; וְנִגְיִנוֹת, שׁוֹתֵי שָׂכָר. **13** They that sit in the gate talk of me; and I  
am the song of the beer-drinkers.

Proverbs 20.1

**א** לַיַּץ הַיַּיִן, הַמָּה שָׂכָר; וְכָל-שָׂגָה בּוֹ, לֹא  
יִחְכַּם. **1** Wine is a mocker, beer is riotous;  
and whosoever reeleth thereby is not  
wise.

Proverbs 31.4, 31.6

**ד** אֵל לְמַלְכִים, לְמוֹאֵל--אֵל לְמַלְכִים  
שְׁתוּ-יַיִן; וְלְרוֹזְנִים, אִי שָׂכָר. **4** It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for  
kings to drink wine: nor for princes to say:  
'Where is beer?'

ה פן-ישָׁתָה, וְיִשְׁכַּח מַחֲקָק; וְיִשְׁנָה, דִּין כָּל-בְּנֵי-עֹנִי. 5 Lest they drink, and forget that which is decreed, and pervert the justice due to any that is afflicted.

ו תנו-שֶׁכֶר לְאוֹבֵד; וַיֵּן, לְמָרִי נַפְשׁ. 6 Give beer unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto the bitter in soul;

ז יִשְׁתָּה, וְיִשְׁכַּח רִישׁוֹ; וְעָמְלוֹ, לֹא יִזְכֵּר-עוֹד. 7 Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.

## VII. More on the language for Beer in the Bible

### Text #6

Compounding the difficulty in identifying שֶׁכֶר is the fact that beverages in antiquity most often contained many ingredients: products solely composed of barley, grapes, or dates were rare. Dates were among the most frequent additives to beer, though other fruits (especially grapes, sycamore, and figs), honey (fruit and bee), and spices were also common. Similarly, wine was often flavored with a variety of items, including dates, pomegranates, figs, terebinth, honey (fruit and bee), egg whites, and crushed barley. There are also ample cases in which beer and wine products were mixed together and then consumed.

Michael M. Homan, "Beer, Barley, and שֶׁכֶר in the Hebrew Bible" in *Le David Maskil: A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Freedman*, eds. Richard Elliott Friedman and William H.C. Propp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 31-32.

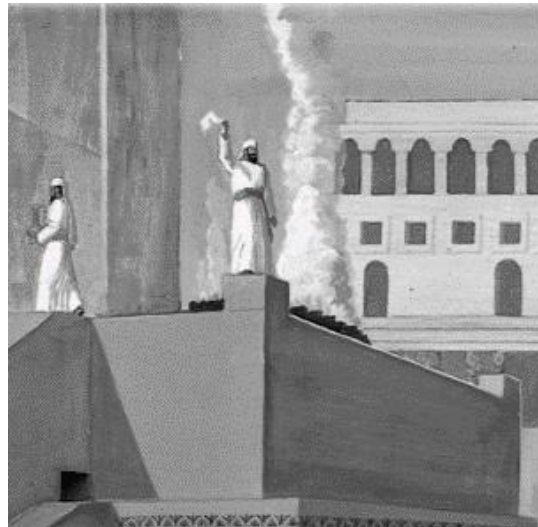


### Text #7

...the Hebrew Bible records barley (שְׁעֵרָה) as one of the most abundant and important crops of ancient Israel. It is one of the seven species by which the Promised Land is blessed (Deut. 8:8). In fact, it was so common that its price was approximately half that of wheat (2 Kgs 7:1, 16, 18; cf. Rev 6:6), and the value of a field was determined by the amount of barley required to sow it (Lev 27:16). Vast quantities of barley were

allegedly needed to maintain Solomon’s palace economy, because barley paid the Temple workers (2 Chr 2:9) and fed his 40,000 horses (1 Kgs 4:28). Barley also had a cultic function, since it was frequently offered to Yahweh (LEv 27:16; Num 5:15; cf. Lev 23:10-14). Thus, there is no doubt that ancient Israel, like its neighbors, planted, harvested, and consumed mass quantities of barley. The Hebrew Bible attests to barley’s being eaten raw (2 Kgs 4:42), parched (2 Sam 17:28), and perhaps in porridge (Ezek 4:9). Barley was ground into flour (Num 5:15) and baked into bread (Judg 7:13; Ezek 4:12). It was also used as animal feed (1 Kgs 2:28). Additionally, there is no direct textual evidence in the Hebrew Bible linking barley to שֵׁכָר. But, if ancient Israel did not drink beer, their abstention was unique in the entire ancient Near East.

Michael M. Homan, "Beer, Barley, and שֵׁכָר in the Hebrew Bible" in *Le David Maskil: A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Freedman*, eds. Richard Elliott Friedman and William H.C. Propp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 37-38.



Text #8

...the fact that ancient Israel produced, consumed, and cherished wine by no means precludes beer production. Though often mistranslated as “strong drink” or “wine”, linguistic and archaeological evidence suggests that biblical šēkār is best translated as beer. Šēkār, or beer, played a large role in Israelite society. It was libated to Yahweh twice daily (Num 28:7-10), and Israelites drank it at sacrificial meals (Deut 14:26). While people who consumed beer in excess were condemned (Isa 5:11; 28:7; Prov 20:1; 31:4), its absence signified a melancholy occasion (Isa 24:9), and it was prescribed to the forlorn to temporarily erase their tribulations (Prov 31:6). Ancient Israel, like its neighbors, produced and consumed massive quantities of beer.

Michael M. Homan, “Beer and Its Drinkers: An Ancient Near Eastern Love Story”, *Near Eastern Archaeology*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2004), 93.

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