

The sour wine, the gall, and the piercing

There is so much wonderful symbolism surrounding the accounts of Jesus' final hours, and so many details that we read each year before and during the Passover service. Many of them we are so familiar with that we can tend to read right over them without questioning their deep meanings and their rich symbolism.

For example, have you ever noticed how many mentions there are of "the cup" in relation to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? There are at least twenty-one references to this cup in the New Testament alone. Although there are many aspects of this cup that we should consider from time to time, we can touch on only a few of them in this short article.

The cup of Passover wine, as we all know so well, is symbolic of the blood and the sacrifice of our Saviour:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." (Matthew 26:27-28)

Relative to the subject of Jesus' cup and the pouring out of His blood, it is interesting to note that He told His disciples at His last Passover service:

I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. (Verse 29)

Jesus was well aware that He would spend forty days with His disciples after His resurrection in which He would have been able to enjoy a glass of wine with them. But the first part of this statement seems to have been a vow that He would abstain from wine until after the time of *their* resurrection.

The sour wine and the gall

It may be significant then that, just before His crucifixion, once He realized what it was, Jesus turned down the sour wine and gall mixture that was offered to Him:

They gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted, He would not drink. (Matthew 27:34; See also Mark 15:23 and Luke 23:36)

From our human points of view, we may think that a mere taste of this foul-tasting cocktail would not have caused Jesus to break His vow, and could hardly be construed as "drinking of the fruit of the vine" with His disciples. Jesus, however, looked at things from God's point of view, and He knew that all that His Father had assigned for Him to do was to be carried out perfectly (John 5:30), and not with an "Oh! That should do!" attitude.

The Greek verb for "taste" in Matthew 27:34 is *geuomai*, which can mean, "perceive the flavour" and suggests that perhaps Jesus did not actually *taste* the mixture at all. Later, as His human life moved into its final moments, He was offered sour wine a second time:

Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink. (Matthew 27:48; See also Mark 15:36 and John 19:29-30)

These "drink offerings" of sour wine and gall fulfilled David's prophecy of Psalm 69:21:

They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

But what was this "sour wine"? Here is what Easton's Bible Dictionary says about this drink in his article on the subject of *gall*:

The drink offered to our Lord was vinegar (made of light wine rendered acid, the common drink of Roman soldiers) "mingled with gall," or, according to Mark 15:23 "mingled with myrrh;" both expressions meaning the same thing, namely, that the vinegar was made bitter by the infusion of wormwood or some other bitter substance, usually given, according to a merciful custom, as an anodyne [*pain reliever*] to those who were crucified, to render them insensible to pain. Our Lord, knowing this, refuses to drink it. He would take nothing to cloud his faculties or blunt the pain of dying. He chooses to suffer every element of woe in the bitter cup of agony given him by the Father (John 18:11).

Other commentators opine that the gall – being a poison as well as a desensitizing drug – was meant to speed the death of the victim before the grisly effects of the crucifixion did. But surely not as, Easton suggests, for the comfort of the condemned! Rather for their own ease and, perhaps, for the benefit of the pitiless Jewish leaders who wanted the three victims dead and disposed of before the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31-33). Luke's account implies that the soldiers' offers of sour wine to Jesus were part of their mockery of Him:

**The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine.
(Luke 23:36)**

It is not logical that these soldiers would mock Jesus, beat Him, spit on Him, jam a crown of thorns on His head, flog Him terribly, and then make the effort to give a pain-relieving drink to Him as a "merciful custom." Later, to speed their deaths, the soldiers would break the legs of the two men who were crucified on either side of Jesus and would cruelly stab Him with a spear. They would have broken Jesus' legs too, but were prevented from doing so in order for the prophecies to be accurately fulfilled. Not much evidence of mercy here!

John's version of the second offering of sour wine reads as follows:

Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. (John 19:29-30)

Like this rendition from the New King James version, most Bible translations have it that Jesus *received* the sour wine, but this is not to say that He actually drank it. Strong's Greek Lexicon states that *lambano* – the Greek verb for *received* – can mean, "to have offered to one." In the overall context, this is a more logical translation. Also, if Jesus refused to drink the first offering, why would He accept the second? Knowing that only moments – perhaps even seconds – remained before He would die, why would He seek any temporary comfort from the effects of this drink?

Three of the probable reasons why Jesus turned down the mixture of sour wine and gall were, first, because its taste was so disgusting; second, because He knew that the offerings were part of the soldiers' mockery of Him; and third, because, as Easton wrote, He could not allow anything to desensitize His mind and body to the pain He was enduring. These were all parts of that terrifying "cup" that God the Father had given Jesus to drink from (Matthew 26:39-42; Mark 10:38-39; 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11). But Jesus' wine vow of Matthew 26:29 adds another interesting factor. If He would have accepted and drunk either of these offerings, would He not then, perhaps, have broken His vow?

At the time He made His vow, during His last Passover service, the wine and His blood, which it symbolized, were both physically pure. The wine relatively so. Jesus' blood perfectly so. The symbolism of the offerings in Numbers 15:7-10 suggests that the wine may have been of a sweet variety, perhaps similar to today's Israeli Concord grape wines (see also Amos 9:13 and Micah 6:15). As we have seen, Jesus promised to drink *new* wine with His disciples in His Father's Kingdom. But later that Passover evening, His Father laid the sins of the world on Jesus' head at Gethsemane. Those sins – even more deadly than any HIV or Hepatitis virus – passed into and polluted His blood, which then became tainted and besmirched – like the wine offered to Him before His crucifixion and some hours later as He was hanging on the stake:

**He has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drink wormwood...
Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall.
(Lamentations 3:15, 19)**

Putting all the relevant scriptures together, it appears that yet another reason why Jesus refused the sour wine was because His blood – the antitype of the formally pure wine – had already been soured by His Father's action of injecting the sins of the world into it.

When a soldier brutally speared Jesus in His side (John 19:34), the spear severed a major artery and, probably, His heart (Job 16:13; Psalm 69:20), His blood and some "water" poured out. As some commentators have written, this "water" may have been lymph or serous liquid from Jesus' ruptured pericardium (the membrane enveloping His heart), which flowed from the fatal gash, down His legs, His terribly injured ankles and feet, onto and into the soil of Golgotha. If the sour wine pictured Jesus' tainted blood, then perhaps the gall symbolized the water.

The piercing

Let us now examine the subject of this awful wound – this piercing – in some more detail. To further comprehend the suffering that our Saviour went through for us, we will briefly study verses 34 and 37 of John chapter 19:

But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out... And again another Scripture says, "They shall look on Him whom they pierced."

The *other scripture* mentioned by John is Zechariah 12:10:

And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.

The modern understanding of the English word "pierced" used in these verses (also in Job 16:13, Psalm 22:16, Lamentations 3:13, and Revelation 1:7) somehow does not adequately describe the magnitude of Jesus' terrible wound. When we think of the word "pierced," we might probably think of:

- The minor puncture from the tiny needle used for the medical blood-tests we might have from time to time,
- The minute holes required for earrings,
- The erroneous view of the classical artists who painted depictions of the crucified Christ with small, inoffensive wounds from which drip forth mere insignificant trickles of blood.

Webster's Dictionary definitions, however, show that the Bible's translators did an accurate job on this word:

- To run into or through as a pointed weapon does,
- To stab,
- To enter or thrust into sharply or painfully,
- To force or make a way into or through.

Here is an excerpt of what Albert Barnes has to say about John 19:34:

Spear: The common spear which soldiers used in war. There can be no doubt that such a stroke from the strong arm of a Roman soldier would have caused death, if He had not been already dead... Let the following circumstances be remembered, showing that death must have ensued from such a wound:

1st The Saviour was elevated but a little from the ground, so as to be easily reached by the spear of a soldier.

2nd The wound must have been transversely upward, so as to have penetrated into the body, as he could not have stood directly under Him.

3rd It was probably made with a strong arm and with violence.

4th The spear of the Roman soldier was a lance which tapered very gently to a point, and would penetrate easily.

5th The wound was comparatively a large wound. It was so large as to admit the hand (See John 20:27); but for a lance thus tapering to have made a wound so wide as to admit the hand, it must have been at least four or five inches in depth, and must have been such as to have made death certain.

If it be remembered that this blow was probably in the left side, the conclusion is inevitable that death would have been the consequence of such a blow... It is clear that the spear pierced to the region of the heart... Such a flowing of blood and water makes it probable that the spear reached the heart, and if Jesus had not before been dead, this would have closed His life... He [*John*] shows that those who were sent to hasten His death believed that He had expired; that then a soldier inflicted a wound which would have terminated life if He had not been already dead; and that the infliction of this wound was followed by the fullest proof that He had truly expired.

Further research tells us that some Roman spears had larger blades attached to their "business end" for the purpose of inflicting larger wounds. But if Barnes is correct that the point of this spear tapered gently to a point, the soldier must have viciously twisted it about in order to create a five inch gash.

Each year, as Passover approaches and we reflect upon the great sufferings of our Saviour, let us not be depressed by them. Although we should deeply appreciate the agonies that Jesus went through for us, we should also realize that His physical suffering is now over, and has been over for two thousand years. In this regard, Matthew Henry's commentary on John 19:34 is very interesting, positive, forward-looking, and worthy of some reflection, when he notes that the Creator – the One who later became Jesus Christ – pierced and opened Adam's side in order to create his wife, Eve. Likewise, Jesus Christ – the Second Adam – suffered His own side to be pierced and opened in order for His own Bride to be created.

The members of God's true church constitute the beloved Bride of Jesus Christ. Our tiny congregations have the wonderful privilege of being part of that church. As we have seen, Jesus calls on us to remember His affliction, including the piercing, the wormwood and the gall. No matter how many times we have kept the Passover, let us remember once again what our Saviour went through for us. Let us think on these things yet again, respectfully discerning the Lord's body.

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