

NOTES

Wine on the lees (Zeph 1.12 and Jer 48.11)

The production and use of wine is something central to the Biblical culture in both Old and New Testaments. However, wine is an unknown or unfamiliar item in many parts of the world and reference to wine and wine-making can sometimes give problems to translators. The purpose of this note is to discuss the interpretation of two OT passages which take a figurative or "picture" meaning from part of the wine-making process. The passages are Zeph 1.12 and Jer 48.11-12.

First of all, a brief outline of the procedures followed in wine-making is necessary. When the grapes were ripe, they were gathered and taken promptly to the wine press. This consisted of two pits, usually dug out of rock; one would be higher than the other, and they would be connected by a channel or pipe. The grapes were placed in the upper pit and were trodden by foot to squeeze out the juice, which ran down the channel into the lower pit.

The juice would begin to ferment almost immediately, and for some days would be very active. When the most active stage was over, the juice was transferred to jars or wineskins in order to be stored and to continue to ferment more gently. After 40 days it was considered to be wine, and thus to be suitable for drinking. During this period, the sediment known as lees would gradually settle at the bottom. Some wines were allowed to mature on the lees, and these needed to be strained very carefully before being drunk (see Is 25.6, RSV). But in most cases the wine was taken after 40 days and poured into another jar or skin to separate it from the lees. If this was not done, the wine would become too sweet and thick and thus would spoil.

This is the effect referred to in Zeph 1.12, where the RSV reads "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are thickening upon their lees, those who say in their hearts, The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill." It is clear here that "the men who are thickening upon their lees" have become spoiled and deserve the displeasure of the Lord. Commentators are agreed on this: see for instance the commentary by G. A. Smith, page 51. The Good News Bible drops the picture, but gives the meaning clearly with the words "I will punish the people who are self-satisfied and confident."

In the other reference to wine on the lees, in Jer 48.11-12, the meaning is not quite so clear. The RSV translates these verses "Moab has been at ease from his youth and has settled on his lees; he has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into exile; so his taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I shall send to him tilters who will tilt him, and empty his vessels and break his jars in pieces." The main question here is whether the settling on the lees is reckoned to improve the wine, as in Is 25.6, or to spoil it as in Zeph 1.12. The words about the taste remaining and the scent not being changed could be taken either way. Most modern English versions translate Jer 48.11 rather literally, and are thus just as ambiguous as the Hebrew. RSV, JB, NEB and NIV are all in this category.

Moab was famous for its wine (see Is 16.8-10), and some scholars consider the reference here to be to a good quality of wine which has matured on the

lees: see for instance TOB, and Bright, page 320. The Good News Bible accepts this interpretation and translates the relevant part of verse 11, "Moab is like wine left to settle undisturbed and never poured from jar to jar. Its flavour has never been ruined, and it tastes as good as ever." In verse 12, Moab is threatened with exile and the threat is stated through a continuation of the wine-making picture. GNB interprets this as a picture of wine being poured away: "I will send people to pour Moab out like wine." This pouring out is apparently to be understood as ruining the flavour and taste of the wine altogether by getting rid of it completely. This does not link up very well with the thought of verse 11, nor does it lead up effectively to verse 13 which speaks of the Moabites being "disillusioned with their god Chemosh" (GNB).

It is doubtful therefore whether the interpretation of verse 11 given in the GNB is the best one. Several reasons can be given. First of all, it does not really fit the context, either the immediate context of verses 11-13 or the wider context of judgment on Moab throughout the whole of chapter 48. In verses 11-13 the prophet is giving a threat of exile as a punishment for the people of Moab. It is therefore more appropriate if the picture of the wine is taken as speaking of something bad which deserves this punishment.

Secondly it would be very curious if a picture which occurs only twice in the OT had opposite meanings in its two occurrences. The reference in Zeph 1.12 is definitely to something bad, and this makes it probable that the reference in Jer 48.11 is also to something bad. Thirdly, the majority of reference books I have looked at state or imply that the meaning of Jer 48.11 is similar to that in Zeph 1.12. The clearest statement is that of Easton (*International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, page 3087) who explains Jer 48.11 as "Therefore his flavor remains unchanged (or 'becomes insipid') and his scent is unimproved (or 'lacks freshness') cf Zeph 1.12." Moffatt in his translation indicates clearly that he interprets the picture as speaking of something bad, and even manages to translate verse 11 with quite effective rhymes:

"Moab from the first has lain at ease,
never known exile afar,
lain like wine left on the lees,
never poured from jar to jar,
that tastes the same as ever,
and its scent mellows never."

This interpretation has several advantages:

- (a) It supplies a reason for the punishment threatened in verse 12: Moab's "flavour" had not developed as it should have.
- (b) It gives a better link between the picture in verse 11 and its continuation in verse 12: Moab was like wine that was spoiling on its lees and therefore needed to be poured from one jar to another to remove it from the influence of the lees. Verse 12 does not actually speak of the wine being poured out and wasted as GNB implies. Rather it speaks of the wine being poured off (into another vessel) and the jars left holding only the useless lees being broken. This pouring from one vessel to another is a picture of exile, or "pouring" of the people of Moab from one country to another.
- (c) It offers a better connection with verse 13, where the false god Chemosh

may perhaps be taken as the reality to which the lees corresponds. As the wine poured from one vessel to another is removed from the bad influence on the lees, so the Moabites “poured” from one country to another, would be removed from the bad influence of Chemosh, of whom they would then be “ashamed” (RSV). This turning away from a false god would, so to speak, improve their “flavour” in the sight of the Lord, and might perhaps be taken as foreshadowing the note of hope in verse 47.

For these reasons, this interpretation seems more probable than the one in the Good News Bible. Translators should in any case avoid being ambiguous, as most English versions are, and should make clear which interpretation they are following. If they choose the one recommended in this note, a translation base for Jer 48.11-13 could be:

11. The Lord said, “Moab has always lived in safety, and has never gone into exile. Moab is like wine left to settle on its lees (or sediment) and never poured from jar to jar. Its flavour remains weak and its taste never develops well. 12. Now just as wine needs to be poured from one jar to another, so the time is coming when I will send people to take Moab into exile in another country. The jar in which he has settled will be emptied and smashed. 13. Then the Moabites will no longer trust their god Chemosh, just as the people of Israel no longer trust the god Bethel.”

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Matthew 2.13-15, 19-23: some pronoun problems

Recently I became aware of a problem with the pronouns in Matthew 2.13-15 and Matthew 2.19-23. The problem is caused by the fact that Joseph is the main actor in these passages, and is represented as acting alone, with “the child and his mother” as passive participants. In verse 13, Joseph is told by the angel,

“Rise and take the child and his mother, and flee (singular) to Egypt, and stay (singular) there until I tell you (singular).”

The same thing is found in verse 14:

So he (Joseph) rose and took the child and his mother, and by night went away (singular) into Egypt.

The same kind of construction is also found in verses 19-23. Most translation, including the Good News Bible, follow the *form* of the Greek pronouns and verbs in all these passages.

The use of the singular pronoun helps in keeping the focus of the passages, with Joseph as the main participant. But it also creates some difficulties. For one thing, it is not natural in many languages to use the singular pronoun when more than one participant is involved in the action. In these passages, since there are three participants, it is more natural to use the plural form. For another thing, the prophetic quotations in these passages are directed toward the child, and not to Joseph. But because the focus of the narrative is on Joseph, it is possible for an uninformed reader to understand these prophetic quotations as referring to Joseph and not to the child. Verses 22 and 23 provide a good example of this difficulty: