

שכר ושכרון

אבנר רמו



The Drunkenness of Noah by Michelangelo

In the Book of Proverbs we read:

תנו- שכר לאובד; ויין, למרי נפש.
ישתה, וישכח רישו; ועמלו לא יזכר-עוד

“Give strong drink to him that is ready to perish, and wine to the bitter in soul;
Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more” (Pro 31:6-7).

In the Book of Samuel we read:

וחנה, היא מדברת על-לבה רק שפתיה נעות וקולה לא ישמע; ויחשבה עלי לשכרה.
ויאמר אליה עלי, עד-מתי תשתכרין; הסירי את-ייןך מעליך.

“And Hannah, she spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard; therefore, Eli thought she had been drunk.

And Eli said to her: How long will you be getting drunk? Put away your wine from you” (1 Sam 1:13-14).

ותען חנה ותאמר, לא אדני, אשה קשת-רוח אנכי, ויין ושכר לא שתיתי;

“And Hannah answered and said: No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink” (1 Sam 1:15).

These verses indicate that similarly to יין - “wine”, שכר (*shechar*) was a type of an intoxicating drink that was often consumed for comforting people that were suffering from some spiritual anguish or material hardship.

It seems that the biblical writers were aware of the fact that these beverages were employed sometimes for less virtuous causes. For example, we read in the Book of Proverbs:

לץ היין, המה שכר; וכל-שגה בו לא יחכם.

“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is riotous; and whosoever reels in them is not wise” (Pro 20:1).

אל למלכים שתו-יין; ולרוזנים, או (אי) שכר.
פן-ישתה וישכח מחקק; וישנה דין כל-בני-עני.

“it is not for kings to drink wine: nor for princes [to say]: Where is strong drink?”

Lest they drink, and forget that which is decreed, and pervert the justice due to any that is afflicted” (Pro 31:4-5).

In the Book of Isaiah we read: כהן ונביא שגו בשכר נבלעו מן-היין - “the priest and the prophet reel through strong drink, they are confused because of wine” (Is 28:7).

It is therefore not surprising to read in the Book of Leviticus:

וידבר יהוה אל-אהרן לאמר.

יין ושכר אל-תשת אתה ובניך אתך בבאכם אל-אהל מועד-ולא תמתו: חקת עולם לדרתיכם.
“And YHWH spoke to Aaron, saying:

Drink neither wine nor strong drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting that you die not; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations” (Lev 10:8-9).

Unlike the English translation, the Greeks just transliterated here שכר (*shechar*) to “*sikera*” (see also: Num 6:3; 28:7; Deu 14:26; 29:5; Jud 13:4, 7, 14; Is 5:11, 22; 28:7) which suggests that they were not certain what was the exact nature of the Hebrew שכר (*shechar*).

Furthermore, in a prophetic vision about the future of Egypt we find:

והיו שתתיה מדכאים; כל-עשי שכר אגמי-נפש.

“And her foundations shall be crushed, all they that make dams shall be grieved in soul” (Is 19:10).

It is not clear how the introducer of the biblical vowel-dot system determined that here שכר should be vocalized as *secher*. It appears that the English translator assumed that with this vocalization this word is a sibilant-exchange error of סכר (*secher*) - “dam” (e.g. Gen 8:2; Ps 63:12). However, the Greek translator apparently read here the word שכר as (*shechar*), but it is not known how he determined that here its meaning is “beer.” Furthermore, it was indicated by Damerow (1), that the contents of alcohol in beers brewed in the ancient Middle-East were always low, and to get drunk one had to drink large volume of these beers. Therefore it is unlikely that שכר (*shechar*) could have been both, a “beer” and a “strong drink.”

These biblical verses indicate that the Greek translators were not sure about the exact meaning of the Hebrew שכר (*shechar*). In fact, although the Bible describes the intoxicating effects of this beverage, it does not specify of which material שכר (*shechar*) is made of, or how it is produced.

We should also notice the linguistic connection between the intoxicating beverage שכר (*shechar*) and the Hebrew term שכרון (*shikaron*) - “drunkenness” (Jer 13:13; see also: Gen 9:21; 43:34; 1 Sam 1:13; 25:36; 2 Sam 11:13; 1 Ki 16:9; 20:16; Is 19:4; 24:2; 28:1, 3; 29:9; 49:26; 51:21; 63:6; Jer 23:9; 25:27; 51:7, 39, 57; Eze 23:33; 39:19; Joel 1:5; Nah 3:11; Hab 2:15; Hag 1:6; Ps 107:27; Job 12:25; Pro 26:9; Cant 5:1; Thr 4:21). Yet we cannot determine if the word for an intoxicating beverage: שכר (*shechar*) was derived from the term שכרון (*shikaron*) - “drunkenness” or vice-versa.

References:

1. Damerow P: Sumerian Beer: The origin of brewing technology in ancient Mesopotamia. Cuneiform Digital Library Journal 2012:2, pp1-20.