



BEST WINE SERVED LAST!

A bit of chemistry – Matthew 9: 14-17

It is in John chapter 2 that we encounter the Lord's first recorded miracle, during the wedding at Cana. The "master of the banquet" has tasted the wine provided through Jesus and makes a highly surprised comment which Christians, down through two millennia, have recognized as expressing a profound theological truth. On tasting the new wine, the "banquet master" says privately to the bridegroom:

"Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

Is it true that God also has saved something good – indeed the very best – until our own day? What, you might ask, could possibly be better than the assurance of faith through the saving power of Jesus won on the cross at Calvary? The answer to that question, of course, is that nothing could be better! Jesus' victory on the cross is emphatic and seminal – there is one gospel and one faith "delivered unto the saints" (Jude 1: 3). But God had a special mission to create **One New Man** as we began to explore in our previous essay ("The Baby and The Bathwater"). God will finally put to rest the age old rivalry between the Jew – those born into the chosen family, and the Gentile believer – those from outside who are adopted into that same family. The sometimes unhealthy tension between these two sets of Jesus' descendants must ultimately, and permanently, be resolved. Are we seeing the beginning of that final resolution in our own day?

Are we indeed *today* living in biblical times, as surprising as that question may seem?

Jesus used wine as an illustration (not a parable) in Matthew 9: 14 - 17 as He responded to the searching questioning of the disciples of John the Baptist: "how is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus then made His famous response about new wine and old wineskins. Before we unpack this illustration, first some chemistry!

In ancient Israel, grapes were pressed in the winepress and left in collection vats for a few days. Fermentation starts immediately on pressing, and this allows the first "tumultuous" (gassy) phase to pass. Then the must (fermenting juice) was put into clay jars to be stored, or into wineskins if it was to be transported some distance. The wineskins were partially tanned goat skins, sewn at the holes where the leg and tail had been. The skins were filled with must (partially fermented wine) through the opening at the neck and then tied off, sealing the fermenting wine.

If one was to put freshly pressed must directly into an old, already stretched skin and close it off, the tumultuous stage of fermentation would burst the old wineskin. However by using a new wine skin, we have a material with enough stretchiness to cope with the fermentation process. Skins that have already been used and are fully stretched ("old wineskins") cannot be used again since they cannot stretch any more. If they are used again for holding wine that is in the process of fermenting ("new wine"), they will simply burst.

New Wine

The question about fasting was enlarged by Jesus into the question of the relationship of the new faith in Messiah versus the old faith in the Mosaic covenant promises. What did it mean to be a disciple of Jesus, and how would Judaism cope with this? Indeed this remains a pressing question in our own day. We might say that Judaism (specifically, *second temple* Judaism) was represented at its best by John the Baptist, and at its worst by narrow Pharisaism. There was a

real danger of schism, not only between the followers of Messiah and the followers of John, but also *within* Messiah's new order of discipleship. The deep wisdom of Messiah Jesus is here made plain: His illustration of the patch of cloth sown on to an old garment (Matthew 9: 16) was equally a comment upon Judaism versus the *expanded - Judaism* that would be represented in Jesus' global Kingdom.

Christianity is not a new patch of cloth on something old. It is a new robe altogether. The illustration of the old wineskin is a striking statement of the revolutionary character, the creative fermentation, of this globally expanding new faith system, rooted in Israel but with a life distinct. If unwisely, the church had tried to contain itself within the old wineskin of *second temple* Judaism (or indeed *any* temple Judaism!) it would be like putting new wine into an old wineskin. Both would be destroyed in the attempted compromise.

Why, Why, Why?

We can perhaps hear the steady grumble of the Pharisees in John's disciple's specific question about fasting. The Pharisees followed Jesus around, heard His words and witnessed His actions. Four times in the series of controversies recorded in Mark chapter 2, we encounter hostile questions beginning with "why?" in connection with the healing of a paralytic, eating with tax collectors, fasting and violating the Sabbath. These critics were too busy attacking Jesus and asking petulantly "why?" to really SEE what had been said and done by Him. They were not conducting honest enquiry; they were rendering a premature condemnation.

Here was cherished tradition blinding people to truth, that constant risk when traditions are elevated to supreme veneration! The word "tradition" may represent a great and noble inheritance. The word should simply imply something "passed-on" or "handed down". This may be a tradition of faith in God or some courageous living. But the common use of the word can so easily imply a spiritual straitjacket, as it was tragically, with the Pharisees. Their spiritual blindness represents a constant danger to all of us today! We too may be

blinded to the workings of God that are under our very eyes, if we cherish a particular form of words, or ways of doing things, above spiritual truth expressed in new forms. Social, and even economic, traditions can blind us to the Word of God. We have only to think of slavery as practiced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to see how pervasive this can become. Likewise we can cherish economic traditions that have been profitable to us and demand angrily “why must anyone criticise this?” Pressure for change may be in reality the voice of God saying to the oppressor “let my people go” (Exodus 8:1). In this respect we really must heed Jesus’ specific warning “beware the leaven of the Pharisees” (Mark 8: 15).

Best wine last?

Can we read a deeper meaning or even an obscured primary meaning into the wine steward’s question? We have already explored the primary message unwittingly expressed by that nameless wine steward. But has this anything to do, today, with the emergence of the Messianic Jewish movement? Has this to do with the rediscovery of the Hebraic root which is today so joyfully explored through initiatives such as Hebraic.Church? We must of course be very cautious in adapting teaching because a fresh interpretation reflects the particular needs of the present hour. With that caveat, however, we really do have to take a second look at what Jesus said in relation to new wine and new wineskins, bearing in mind the wine steward’s surprised exclamation. We need to ensure two things:

- we understand correctly what Jesus meant in the context He was saying it
- that current (and eschatological?) realities do not cause us to seek new interpretations that are at variance with the wider thrust of the Lord Jesus’ primary mission and commission to His church

We remember, do we not, that the apostle Paul stated that we look through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13: 12)? There are some things that we may never fully understand in this life. But surely there are other things where the ultimate meaning only becomes fully apparent

as biblical prophecy is fulfilled. The position of the Hebrew people back in their promised land (Israel) is today surely just such a case. Apostle Paul did not say we would *always* be looking through a glass darkly! He actually acknowledged that it was “now” in the first century that some elements of understanding were obscure. As we draw nearer to the Lord’s certain return in Glory, are we right to assume that some things will be made more plain to us to help us to interpret signs of the times? I think we are correct in this assumption

So what can this very best wine be, that may be reserved for our very own day? I would suggest that a strong candidate must be the reemergence of a vibrant Messianic Jewish movement – a movement that looks set to become a “pathfinder” for the broader Jewish community to discover for themselves Yeshua ha Massiasch (Jesus the Messiah) and to turn to Him in faith and repentance.

The Holy Spirit said it would happen (Romans chapter 12). It is now happening! What joys await the whole church when the Jewish people in large numbers come into the Kingdom (Romans 11:26)? What portents that will open up! Allowing that God always made it plain that there would be immense joy in the future under His plans and His timing, we can be very certain of two things:

- ***new wine is not going to be deposited in old wineskins***: are we justified in thinking that the old, and today increasingly compromised *institutional church*, which is today busily making friends with the world and its agendas, represents old wineskins? Wineskins that simply cannot accommodate (and indeed seemingly cannot comprehend) the reconnection with the Hebraic root?
- ***the richest new wine of all is the amazing reconnection of huge numbers of Jews with their Jewish Messiah***: and this involves, wonderfully, a reevaluation of all the commanded biblical feasts as being typological (= types) of the life, death, resurrection, salvific mission and ultimate second coming of Messiah Jesus. Praise God!

Beware intoxication!

We must, of course, be aware of the danger of becoming intoxicated with this new wine. Some believers have definitely gone overboard with this, trying to emulate Jews and in some way to elevate Law – even to the point of placing themselves back under Law! This is surprising since Galatians chapter 5 (and in a sense the entire epistle to the Hebrews) has dealt with this quite specifically and certainly definitively. However, as someone once said “no one counterfeits florins any more!”. If the devil is to counterfeit anything he has to counterfeit that which is ultimately true, not something that is ultimately false. That is what counterfeit is all about. The fact of the devil’s prodding in this area must, ironically, persuade us that we are on the right path!

We must also recognize both a spiritual and an eschatological truth, that Jesus has indeed reserved the very best wine until last. That wine will be sweet indeed as we face perhaps the final challenges that this world will throw up against the gospel and to the message of new life in Jesus. We need that new wine, to be sure! But we also need to recognize, quite simply, that God is on His programme and on His timeframe. He said that “all Israel” would be saved. Scripture makes plain this is, in some way, connected with end times realities. And many, many, Christians are today rejoicing as they see Jesus revealed throughout the Tanakh, as well as the steady progress towards those events set forth in the book of Revelation. Some of us are ready and waiting, as Jesus said we would be (Mathew chapter 24).

Praise God! There are significant blessings reserved until the last things!

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Anyone who wants to explore the position of Israel in the End Times is recommended to read David Pawson’s “Israel in the New Testament (Anchor recordings). Steve Maltz’s “Outcast Nation” is another helpful exploration of the position of Israel in God’s purposes.