

Wine or Grape Juice? The Use of the Noun יַיִן (Yayin) in the Old Testament: A Lexical-Semantic and Exegetical Analysis

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive lexical-semantic, philological, and comparative analysis of the Hebrew noun יַיִן (*yayin*) in the Old Testament, with particular focus on the long-debated question of whether the term denotes fermented wine exclusively or may also include unfermented grape juice. Through contextual exegesis, comparative Semitic linguistics, and the examination of ancient translations, the research investigates the semantic range and historical development of the term within Biblical Hebrew and the wider Northwest Semitic linguistic environment.

Special attention is devoted to the etymology of *yayin* and its cognates in Akkadian (*īnu*), Ugaritic (*yn*), and related Semitic traditions, demonstrating the antiquity and semantic continuity of the lexeme across the ancient Near East. The study further analyzes the relationship between *yayin* and other Hebrew terms connected with grape-derived beverages, particularly תִּירוֹשׁ (*tîrôš*) and שֶׁכָּר (*šēkār*), in order to clarify the internal lexical distinctions of Biblical Hebrew.

The article examines positive, neutral, and negative contexts of the usage of *yayin* throughout narrative, legal, poetic, wisdom, and prophetic literature. Particular emphasis is placed upon passages associated with intoxication, cultic practice, festivity, hospitality, covenantal symbolism, and moral critique. The study additionally evaluates the testimony of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and other early translation traditions, whose consistent rendering of *yayin* by Greek οἶνος (*oinos*) and Latin *vinum* provides important evidence for the ancient understanding of the term.

The findings indicate that the noun יַיִן (*yayin*) belongs to a stable and well-defined lexical stratum within Biblical Hebrew and the Semitic languages, consistently denoting wine as a fermented grape product. The research argues that attempts to reinterpret the dominant biblical meaning of the term as unfermented grape juice encounter substantial philological, contextual, comparative, and historical difficulties. More broadly, the study contributes to contemporary discussions in Biblical philology, Hebrew linguistics, Semitic studies, and the history of religion by demonstrating the importance of contextual and comparative methodology in the interpretation of ancient lexical systems.

Keywords

יַיִן (*yayin*); Biblical Hebrew; Old Testament; Hebrew linguistics; Semitic philology; wine in the Bible; lexical semantics; comparative Semitic linguistics; Septuagint; Vulgate; Akkadian; Ugaritic; Biblical lexicography; ancient wine culture; Hebrew Bible studies; philology; Semitic languages; *tîrôš*; *šēkār*; Biblical exegesis.

Introduction

In contemporary biblical philology and Hebraic studies, the lexical-semantic analysis of key terms constitutes an indispensable methodological foundation for understanding the Old Testament text. Among the terms that have generated long-standing scholarly debate, a particularly important place belongs to the noun יַיִן(yayin), which appears throughout the Hebrew text of the Tanakh in a wide variety of contexts — ranging from everyday usage and cultic-liturgical functions to moral-didactic warnings. The question of its precise meaning — whether it exclusively denotes fermented wine or may also encompass unfermented grape juice — carries significant implications not only for philology, but also for theology, the history of religion, and translation practice.¹

Within the Semitic languages, the noun yayin belongs to a broadly attested lexical stratum, with parallels in Akkadian (*īnu*), Ugaritic (*yn*), and other Northwest Semitic idioms, indicating its deep antiquity and semantic stability.² Such distribution of the term among cognate languages further confirms that it is not a late or secondary concept, but rather a fundamental lexical item designating a grape-derived product in various phases of its use within ancient Near Eastern cultures. Nevertheless, even in the earliest textual strata of the Hebrew Bible, this term appears in contexts implying a fermented beverage, particularly in narratives describing intoxication or its consequences (e.g., Gen 9:21), which has led the majority of modern lexicographers to define the primary meaning of the noun yayin as “wine” in the full sense, namely fermented wine.³

At the same time, certain interpreters, especially within theological and apologetic traditions, have attempted to broaden the semantic field of this concept so that it also includes unfermented grape juice. Such interpretations generally rest upon the assumption that the biblical text does not make a clear distinction between different stages of grape-derived products. However, a more detailed analysis of the Hebrew lexical system demonstrates the existence of additional terms, such as תִּירוֹשׁ(*tîrôš*) and שֶׁכָּר(*šēkār*), which more precisely differentiate types of beverages, thereby further narrowing the semantic range of the noun yayin and indicating its primary association with a fermented product.⁴

In addition to internal linguistic analysis, ancient translations play a significant role in understanding this term. The Septuagint consistently translates yayin with the Greek word οἶνος(*oinos*), while the Vulgate employs the Latin equivalent *vinum*, both of which, in classical and Hellenistic contexts, denote fermented wine.⁵ This translational tradition, originating from a period considerably closer to the original linguistic and cultural environment of the biblical text, constitutes an important witness in determining the primary meaning of the term under consideration, since it reflects the understanding of the concept in the ancient world.

In more recent Serbian Hebraic scholarship, the noun יַיִן(yayin) is likewise consistently defined as “wine,” with emphasis placed upon its central position within the biblical lexical and cultural system, thereby confirming continuity between contemporary linguistic research and the domestic scholarly tradition.⁶

Proceeding from the aforementioned philological, comparative, and translational data, the present study aims, through a systematic analysis of relevant Old Testament texts, to examine the semantic

field of the noun *yayin*, with particular attention devoted to the question of whether its usage can justify the meaning “grape juice,” or whether its primary and dominant meaning is “fermented wine.” Special attention will be given to contextual analysis, the distribution of the term within various literary strata of the Tanakh, and its relationship to cognate concepts within the Hebrew lexical system.

Footnotes

1. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000, s.v. יַיִן.
2. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965, §19; see also HALOT, s.v. יַיִן.
3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB)*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, 406.
4. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, vol. VI, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 600–619.
5. Alfred Rahlfs (ed.), *Septuaginta*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935; *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.
6. Željko Stanojević, *Hebrejsko-srpski rečnik*, Rad. Alfa I Omega. Belgrade, 2001, entry: יַיִן.

Methodology

The methodological approach employed in this study is based upon a combination of lexical-semantic analysis, contextual exegesis, and comparative-philological investigation, with the aim of determining as precisely as possible the meaning of the noun יַיִן (*yayin*) within the Old Testament text. The starting point of the research is the assumption that the meaning of an individual lexeme cannot be established in isolation, but only within its broader linguistic, literary, and cultural context, which represents a standard principle of contemporary biblical linguistics.

The first methodological step encompasses the lexical-semantic analysis of the noun *yayin*, based upon relevant lexicographical sources as well as insight into the wider Semitic linguistic environment. This analysis includes examination of the basic meaning of the word, its semantic field, and the possible semantic nuances arising from various contexts of usage. Particular attention is devoted to distinguishing between primary and secondary meanings, as well as to the question of whether there exists a legitimate basis for including the meaning “unfermented grape juice” within the semantic scope of this noun. In this regard, the study also considers the stability of meaning across different textual strata, from the earliest narrative traditions to later poetic and wisdom texts.

The second stage of the research consists of an analysis of all relevant Old Testament passages in which the noun *yayin* appears. This analysis encompasses the various literary genres of the Tanakh — narrative texts, legal materials, poetic compositions, and wisdom literature — in order to determine how context influences the meaning of the lexeme under examination. Particular emphasis is placed upon texts that explicitly discuss intoxication, the consequences of wine consumption, and its social or cultic function, since such contexts provide the clearest indicators regarding the nature of the beverage itself. In addition, the distribution of the term in positive, neutral, and negative contexts is analyzed, thereby providing a comprehensive insight into its functional usage within biblical discourse.

The third methodological component concerns comparison with ancient translations, primarily the Septuagint and the Vulgate. In the Septuagint, the Hebrew term *yayin* is consistently translated by the Greek word οἶνος (*oinos*), whereas the Vulgate employs the Latin equivalent *vinum*. The analysis of these translational solutions is conducted in light of their meanings within classical and Hellenistic contexts, where both terms designate fermented wine. Particular consideration is given to the fact that these translations originated within a temporal and cultural environment considerably closer to the original biblical context and therefore constitute valuable witnesses to the early interpretation of the Hebrew text. Such an approach permits a more precise understanding of semantic continuity across different linguistic traditions.

The fourth methodological aspect involves comparison with other Hebrew terms designating grape-based beverages, primarily תִּירוֹשׁ (*tîrôš*) and שֶׁכָּר (šēkār). This comparative analysis seeks to determine more precisely the place of the noun *yayin* within the Hebrew lexical system. The term *tîrôš* most frequently refers to “new wine” or must, namely a product in an earlier stage of processing, whereas *šēkār* designates “strong drink,” often with a higher degree of alcoholic potency. The distinction among these terms indicates the existence of a developed and differentiated lexical system in which each noun possesses a specific and functionally defined meaning. This further confirms that the noun *yayin* does not function as a general designation for any grape-derived product, but rather as a term with a relatively clearly defined semantic scope.

Finally, the methodological framework of the present study includes the synthesis of philological, lexicographical, and contextual data in order to reach a grounded conclusion regarding the nature and meaning of the noun *yayin*. Such an integrative approach makes it possible to transcend one-sided interpretations, particularly those arising from extralinguistic or ideological assumptions, and contributes to a more precise understanding of the biblical text within its original linguistic and cultural context.

1. Etymology and Lexical-Semantic Analysis of the Noun יַיִן (*Yayin*)

Etymology and Primary Meaning of *Yayin*

The Hebrew noun יַיִן (*yayin*) represents one of the oldest and most frequently attested terms within the lexical corpus of Biblical Hebrew referring to grape-derived beverages. Its frequency throughout the text of the Tanakh, as well as its presence across different literary strata — from the earliest narrative traditions to later poetic and wisdom texts — indicates both the stability and the deep rootedness of this lexeme within the Semitic linguistic and cultural tradition. A philological investigation of the etymology of the noun *yayin* therefore constitutes a crucial step in determining its primary meaning and semantic range.¹

From an etymological perspective, the noun יַיִן (*yayin*) is most commonly associated with cognate forms in other Semitic languages. Particularly significant are the Akkadian form (*īnu*) and the Ugaritic (*yn*), which point to the existence of a shared Proto-Semitic lexical heritage. Such parallelization confirms that the term does not represent an isolated Hebrew expression, but rather belongs to a broader Semitic linguistic system. Similar forms are also attested within other Northwest Semitic traditions, further strengthening the assumption of its considerable antiquity and continuous usage.²

The phonological and morphological structure of the form *yayin* exhibits the characteristic reduplication of the medial consonant, a phenomenon relatively common within the Semitic languages among nouns designating substances or products of everyday use. Such a structure may indicate the archaic nature of the lexeme itself, but also its collective or substantival character. In comparison with the Akkadian form *īnu*, where a simplification of the consonantal structure occurs, the Hebrew form preserves a more complex phonological pattern, which may represent either a more conservative linguistic stage or a secondary development within the Northwest Semitic branch.³

From a semantic perspective, comparative evidence from the Semitic languages indicates that the primary meaning of this lexeme from the earliest period was connected with a fermented grape beverage, that is, wine in the narrower sense of the term. In the Akkadian language, the term *īnu* appears in administrative, economic, and cultic texts precisely with the meaning of wine as a product that is stored, measured, and distributed, while within Ugaritic texts *yn* possesses a similar function in ritual and everyday contexts. Such consistency of meaning across different languages and cultural environments constitutes a strong argument in favor of the stability of the semantic core of this noun.⁴

Within Biblical Hebrew itself, the noun *yayin* functions as the general designation for wine, while its precise nuance is determined contextually, yet without significant deviation from its primary semantic framework. In narrative texts, the term appears in descriptions of banquets, social gatherings, and everyday life, whereas in legal and cultic texts it possesses a clearly defined role within the sacrificial system. In poetic and wisdom literature, the term additionally acquires a symbolic dimension, where it may denote joy, prosperity, but also the danger of excess and moral decline. Such polysemy does not undermine the primary meaning of the term, but rather demonstrates the functional breadth of the concept within a stable semantic nucleus.⁵

It is important to emphasize that the noun *yayin* is clearly distinguished from other Hebrew terms referring to grape-derived products. The term תִּירוֹשׁ (*tīrōš*) most frequently denotes new wine or must, that is, a product in an earlier stage of processing, whereas שֶׁכָּר (*šēkār*) denotes strong drink, often of different origin and possessing more pronounced intoxicating properties. The existence of such lexical distinctions within Hebrew indicates a developed and precise terminological system in which each lexeme possesses a specific and functionally determined meaning. In this context, it is difficult to justify interpretations according to which *yayin* could denote unfermented grape juice, since such a meaning would overlap with already existing terms within the language.⁶

On the basis of comparative Semitic, lexicographical, and contextual evidence, it may therefore be concluded that the noun יַיִן (*yayin*) belongs to a stable and clearly defined lexical stratum consistently denoting wine as a fermented product. Its presence throughout various Semitic languages, confirmed by forms such as (*īnu*) and (*yn*), points to a deep historical heritage and continuity of meaning. Such philological consistency provides a solid foundation for further analysis of the usage of this term within the Old Testament and for its precise understanding within the framework of Biblical Hebrew.

Footnotes

1. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT), Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000, s.v. יַיִן.
2. HALOT, s.v. יַיִן; Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965, §19.

3. Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 36–38.
4. Wolfram von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–1981, s.v. *īnu*.
5. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT), vol. VI, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 600–619.
6. HALOT, s.v. שכר; תירוש; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961.

Lexical-Semantic Analysis of the Noun יַיִן (Yayin)

The noun יַיִן (yayin) belongs to the most frequent and semantically significant terms connected with food, ritual, and everyday life in the Hebrew Bible. Its distribution throughout nearly all literary strata of the Old Testament demonstrates that the concept occupied an important position within the economic, religious, and symbolic world of ancient Israel. Precisely because of such frequency and semantic importance, the term has become the subject of numerous philological, theological, and translational discussions, particularly concerning the question of whether it denotes exclusively fermented wine or may also include unfermented grape juice.

The majority of contemporary Hebrew lexicons define yayin primarily as “wine,” that is, a fermented grape beverage. Thus, HALOT defines the noun as “wine” and connects it with cognate Semitic forms attested in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and other Northwest Semitic languages.¹ Similarly, BDB consistently interprets the term as fermented wine, especially in passages where intoxication or the consequences of consumption are explicitly mentioned.² Such lexicographical consistency is significant because it reflects not merely later interpretative tradition, but the cumulative result of comparative linguistic and contextual analysis.

Within Biblical Hebrew itself, the noun yayin appears in highly diverse literary contexts. It occurs in narrative texts, legal collections, poetic passages, wisdom literature, and prophetic discourse. In all these literary environments, the term retains a relatively stable semantic core associated with wine as a fermented beverage. One of the clearest examples appears in Genesis 9:21, where Noah becomes intoxicated after drinking yayin:

וַיִּשְׁתֵּי מִיַּיִן וַיִּשְׁכָּר

“And he drank of the wine and became drunk.”³

The significance of this verse lies in the explicit connection between yayin and intoxication. The verb שכר (šākar), “to become drunk,” leaves little room for interpreting the term merely as unfermented grape juice. Similar examples appear in numerous additional passages, where yayin is associated with altered states of consciousness, loss of judgment, or warnings against excess.

Particularly important in this regard is Proverbs 20:1:

לֵץ הֵינִי הִמָּה שֹׁכֵר

“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging.”⁴

In this passage, yayin is parallel to שֶׁכָּר (šēkār), “strong drink,” indicating that both belong to the category of intoxicating beverages. The poetic parallelism characteristic of Hebrew wisdom literature strongly suggests semantic compatibility between the two terms. If yayin primarily referred to unfermented grape juice, such a parallelism would lose much of its literary and semantic coherence.

A similar conclusion emerges from Isaiah 5:11:

הוֹי מְשֻׁכְּמֵי בִבְקָר שֶׁכָּר יִרְדְּפוּ

“Woe to those who rise early in the morning to pursue strong drink.”⁵

Although this verse specifically mentions šēkār, the broader context repeatedly associates wine consumption with intoxication and moral decline, indicating that fermented beverages occupied a central place in prophetic critiques of excess.

At the same time, the Hebrew Bible also contains positive and neutral references to yayin. Psalm 104:15 famously states:

וַיֵּן יִשְׂמַח לִבְבִּי-אֱנוֹשׁ

“And wine gladdens the heart of man.”⁶

This passage demonstrates that wine was not viewed exclusively negatively within biblical culture. Rather, its evaluation depended largely upon context and usage. Wine could function as a blessing, a symbol of abundance, and part of festive or cultic life, while simultaneously becoming a source of moral danger when consumed excessively.

Such ambivalence is particularly characteristic of ancient Near Eastern attitudes toward alcohol. Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Levantine cultures all regarded wine simultaneously as a gift, a luxury product, a ritual element, and a potential source of disorder.⁷ Biblical Israel appears fully integrated into this broader Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural environment.

An especially important aspect of the lexical-semantic analysis concerns the distinction between yayin and other Hebrew terms connected with grape products. The noun תִּירוֹשׁ (tîrôš) frequently refers to “new wine,” fresh must, or wine in an earlier stage of production.⁸ In many contexts, tîrôš appears together with grain and oil as part of agricultural blessing formulas:

דָּגָן וְתִירוֹשׁ וַיִּצְהָר

“grain, new wine, and oil.”⁹

The very existence of a distinct lexical item for freshly processed grape products strongly suggests that yayin possessed a more specific semantic range. If yayin itself already included all forms of grape juice regardless of fermentation, the consistent differentiation between yayin and tîrôš would become considerably more difficult to explain.

The noun שֶׁכָּר (šēkār) represents an additional important term. This word generally denotes “strong drink,” often associated with beverages possessing higher intoxicating potency.¹⁰ The distinction between yayin and šēkār demonstrates the sophistication of the Hebrew lexical system concerning

alcoholic beverages. Biblical Hebrew therefore did not employ a single generic word for all drinks, but rather maintained meaningful lexical distinctions.

Ancient translations further confirm the semantic stability of the noun *yayin*. In the Septuagint, the term is overwhelmingly translated by οἶνος (*oinos*), the standard Greek designation for wine.¹¹ Within classical Greek usage, *oinos* normally denotes fermented wine, even though the precise alcohol content of ancient wines varied considerably. The Vulgate likewise employs the Latin *vinum*, which carries the same fundamental meaning.¹² Such translational consistency across major ancient versions provides important evidence concerning how early translators understood the Hebrew text.

From a historical perspective, fermentation itself was an unavoidable aspect of grape preservation in the ancient world. Fresh grape juice could be maintained only for very short periods without fermentation unless special techniques were employed.¹³ Consequently, in ordinary daily life, grape-based beverages most frequently existed in fermented form. This historical reality further strengthens the probability that *yayin* primarily referred to fermented wine.

At the same time, caution remains necessary. Certain passages may indeed refer to wine at different stages of production, storage, or dilution. Ancient wine culture was considerably more diverse than many modern assumptions suggest. Wines could be mixed with water, herbs, spices, or honey, and their alcoholic strength could vary substantially.¹⁴ Nevertheless, such variability does not invalidate the broader lexical evidence indicating that *yayin* fundamentally denoted wine rather than ordinary grape juice.

An additional problem arises from later theological interpretations motivated by moral or denominational concerns. In certain religious traditions, attempts have been made to reinterpret biblical references to wine so that they refer exclusively to nonalcoholic beverages.¹⁵ While such interpretations may possess theological motivations, they frequently encounter serious philological difficulties because they conflict with the contextual evidence of intoxication, warnings against drunkenness, and lexical distinctions among Hebrew beverage terms.

For this reason, contemporary philological scholarship generally approaches the issue through contextual semantics rather than doctrinal assumptions. Meaning is determined not by later theological preference, but by actual linguistic usage within the biblical corpus itself. When all relevant evidence is considered together — lexical data, contextual analysis, comparative Semitic evidence, ancient translations, and historical-cultural background — the dominant meaning of the noun *yayin* appears to be fermented wine.

This conclusion does not imply that every occurrence of the term necessarily emphasizes intoxication. Rather, the noun functions within a broad semantic spectrum encompassing everyday consumption, ritual usage, festivity, blessing, agricultural abundance, moral warning, and social disorder. Precisely this semantic flexibility explains the richness and persistence of the concept throughout biblical literature.

Footnotes

1. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)*, Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000, s.v. יַיִן.

2. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (BDB), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, 406.
3. Genesis 9:21.
4. Proverbs 20:1.
5. Isaiah 5:11.
6. Psalm 104:15.
7. Patrick E. McGovern, Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
8. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren (eds.), Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT), vol. XV, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.
9. Deuteronomy 7:13.
10. HALOT, s.v. שכר.
11. Alfred Rahlfs (ed.), Septuaginta, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935.
12. Biblia Sacra Vulgata, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.
13. Robert Mondavi, Wine and the Ancient World, New York: HarperCollins, 1996.
14. Andrew Dalby, Food in the Ancient World from A to Z, London: Routledge, 2003.
15. Robert P. Teachout, The Use of “Wine” in the Old Testament, Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979.

2. Positive Contexts of the Use of יַיִן (Yayin) in the Old Testament

Although numerous biblical passages warn against drunkenness and the destructive consequences of excessive wine consumption, the Old Testament simultaneously contains a substantial number of texts in which the noun יַיִן (yayin) appears within explicitly positive or neutral contexts. Such passages are of particular importance because they demonstrate that wine, within the cultural and religious world of ancient Israel, was not regarded exclusively as a negative or morally problematic substance. On the contrary, in many instances wine functioned as a symbol of blessing, abundance, festivity, joy, hospitality, and divine favor.

One of the clearest examples appears in Psalm 104:14–15:

יַיִן יְשַׂמֵּחַ לִבְבַּיִּאָנוֹשׁ

“And wine gladdens the heart of man.”¹⁶

Within this poetic context, wine is presented alongside bread and oil as one of the gifts sustaining and enriching human life. The verse does not associate wine with intoxication or moral disorder, but rather with joy, festivity, and well-being. Particularly significant is the verb שָׂמַח (śāmah), “to rejoice,” which indicates that wine here functions as a positive element within the divine order of creation.

A similar positive evaluation appears in Ecclesiastes 9:7:

לֶךְ אֲכַל בְּשִׂמְחָה לֶחֶמֶךָ וּשְׂתֵה בְּלֵב-טוֹב יַיִן

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.”¹⁷

The wisdom tradition reflected in Ecclesiastes presents wine as part of legitimate human enjoyment within the limits of mortal existence. Once again, no indication exists that the term should be interpreted as unfermented grape juice. Rather, the broader context presupposes ordinary wine consumption within social and celebratory life.

Particularly important are texts in which wine appears as a sign of agricultural abundance and covenantal blessing. Deuteronomy 7:13 states:

וַיְבָרֶךְ ה' אֶת-בְּטֶנְתְּךָ וְאֶת-אֲדָמָתְךָ דְגָנְךָ וְתִירֹשְׁךָ וַיְצַדֵּקֶךָ

“And He will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain, your new wine, and your oil.”¹⁸

Although this passage employs the term תִּירֹשׁ (tîrôš), it belongs to the broader semantic field of grape-based products and demonstrates the positive symbolic value associated with viticulture in ancient Israel. Wine and related products formed part of the covenantal imagery of prosperity and divine blessing.

The prophetic literature likewise preserves idealized visions in which wine symbolizes eschatological abundance. Amos 9:13 declares:

וְהָטִיפוּ הַהָרִים עֲסִים

“the mountains shall drip sweet wine.”¹⁹

Here wine functions as a symbol of restored fertility and cosmic renewal. Similar imagery appears throughout prophetic literature, where vineyards and wine frequently represent peace, stability, and divine favor.

Within patriarchal narratives, wine also appears in contexts of hospitality and festivity. Melchizedek, king of Salem, brings out bread and wine in Genesis 14:18:

וּמֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שְׁלָם הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם וַיַּיִן

“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine.”²⁰

The pairing of bread and wine in this context strongly suggests ceremonial hospitality and social honor. Later Jewish and Christian traditions would assign profound symbolic significance to this passage, yet even within its original narrative framework wine already functions positively as part of a formal act of blessing and reception.

An additional important category includes cultic and sacrificial usage. Wine was employed in libation offerings within the Israelite cultic system. Numbers 15:5 prescribes:

וַיִּזֶן לְזֶבֶחַ

“and wine for the drink offering.”²¹

The use of wine within sacrificial ritual demonstrates that fermented wine itself was not considered intrinsically impure or morally unacceptable within biblical religion. On the contrary, wine formed part of the official liturgical system prescribed in priestly legislation.

This cultic dimension possesses considerable theological importance. If yayin fundamentally referred to a substance viewed as inherently sinful or ritually inappropriate, its inclusion within sacrificial practice would be difficult to explain. Instead, the biblical evidence suggests that the problem lay not in wine itself, but in misuse, excess, and loss of self-control.

Such a perspective becomes especially clear when positive and negative texts are examined together. The Old Testament consistently distinguishes between moderate use and destructive excess. Proverbs 23:29–35 warns against drunkenness and addiction, yet these condemnations do not abolish the positive functions of wine elsewhere in biblical literature.²² This balanced approach corresponds closely to broader ancient Mediterranean attitudes toward wine.

Comparative historical evidence confirms that wine occupied a central place in the civilizations surrounding ancient Israel. Egyptian banquets, Mesopotamian feasts, Greek symposia, and Levantine religious festivals all incorporated wine as an important social and ritual element.²³ Israelite culture developed within this wider Mediterranean world and shared many of its agricultural and symbolic assumptions regarding viticulture.

At the same time, biblical literature introduces a strong ethical dimension absent from many surrounding traditions. The problem is not wine as such, but human inability to maintain wisdom, moderation, and covenantal responsibility. This distinction is crucial for understanding the semantic function of yayin in biblical discourse.

Certain passages additionally connect wine with messianic and eschatological imagery. Isaiah 25:6 describes the future divine banquet:

וְעָשָׂה יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לְכָל־הָעַמִּים בְּהַר הַזֶּה מִשְׁתֵּה שְׂמָרִים מִשְׁתֵּה שְׂמָרִים

“The Lord of Hosts will prepare for all peoples on this mountain a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.”²⁴

The expression שְׂמָרִים (šēmārîm) refers specifically to aged or refined wine, leaving little doubt concerning fermentation. The eschatological banquet imagery therefore presupposes wine not merely as an agricultural product, but as a symbol of perfected abundance and divine celebration.

The Song of Songs likewise employs wine imagery extensively within erotic and poetic symbolism. Wine functions metaphorically as beauty, pleasure, fragrance, and desire:

טוֹבִים דְּדִידָה מִיַּיִן

“Your love is better than wine.”²⁵

Such metaphorical usage depends precisely upon wine’s established association with joy, delight, and sensual richness.

An especially important observation emerges from the cumulative contextual evidence: positive passages involving yayin consistently presuppose ordinary fermented wine within ancient social and

agricultural reality. Attempts to reinterpret all positive references as “grape juice” create significant exegetical difficulties because they disrupt the coherence of biblical imagery, ancient viticultural practice, and lexical distinctions within Hebrew itself.

At the same time, it remains important to recognize that the biblical text does not glorify intoxication. Positive references to wine are generally associated with moderation, blessing, covenantal abundance, festivity, hospitality, and worship. Excessive consumption, by contrast, becomes the object of prophetic and wisdom critique.

From a lexical-semantic perspective, the positive contexts therefore strengthen the conclusion that *yayin* primarily denotes fermented wine. The semantic issue is not whether the term may occasionally include various stages of grape-derived products, but whether its dominant and culturally normative meaning within the Hebrew Bible refers to wine in the ordinary ancient sense. The cumulative evidence strongly indicates that it does.

Footnotes

16. Psalm 104:15.

17. Ecclesiastes 9:7.

18. Deuteronomy 7:13.

19. Amos 9:13.

20. Genesis 14:18.

21. Numbers 15:5.

22. Proverbs 23:29–35.

23. Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

24. Isaiah 25:6.

25. Song of Songs 1:2.

3. Negative Contexts of the Use of יַיִן (Yayin) in the Old Testament

Alongside the numerous positive and neutral references to wine within the Hebrew Bible, a substantial body of Old Testament literature presents *yayin* within clearly negative contexts associated with intoxication, moral disorder, social instability, impaired judgment, and religious corruption. These passages are of particular importance for lexical-semantic analysis because they provide some of the clearest contextual indicators concerning the nature of the beverage designated by the noun יַיִן (*yayin*). Specifically, the repeated association of *yayin* with drunkenness and altered states of consciousness strongly supports the conclusion that the term primarily denotes fermented wine.

One of the earliest and most significant examples appears in the narrative concerning Noah after the flood:

וַיִּשְׂתֵּי מִן־הַיַּיִן וַיִּשְׁכַּר

“And he drank of the wine and became drunk.”²⁶

This verse from Genesis 9:21 occupies a central place in discussions concerning the meaning of yayin. The verb שָׁכַר (šākar), “to become intoxicated” or “to become drunk,” establishes an explicit causal relationship between the consumption of yayin and drunkenness. Within the immediate narrative context, Noah’s intoxication leads to shame, exposure, and familial tension, thereby introducing one of the earliest biblical examples of wine-associated moral vulnerability.

The importance of this passage extends beyond the narrative itself. From a philological perspective, it becomes extremely difficult to interpret yayin here as unfermented grape juice, since the semantic force of the verb šākar presupposes alcoholic intoxication. For this reason, the passage has traditionally served as one of the strongest contextual arguments for understanding yayin primarily as fermented wine.

The wisdom literature likewise contains numerous warnings concerning wine and drunkenness. Proverbs 20:1 states:

לִי הַיַּיִן הַמָּה שָׁכַר וְכָל־שִׁגְיָהּ בּוֹ לֹא יִחְכָּם

“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”²⁷

This verse personifies wine as a force capable of deceiving and destabilizing human judgment. The parallelism between yayin and šēkār (“strong drink”) again demonstrates that both terms belong to the semantic sphere of intoxicating beverages. Particularly significant is the phrase “whoever is led astray by it,” which indicates impaired discernment and loss of wisdom.

A more extensive critique appears in Proverbs 23:29–35, one of the most detailed biblical descriptions of intoxication and its consequences. The text describes confusion, sorrow, hallucination, physical injury, and addiction resulting from excessive wine consumption:

לְמִי אֹיֵל לְמִי אָבוֹי

“Who has woe? Who has sorrow?”²⁸

The passage culminates in a vivid description of dependency:

הַכּוֹנֵי בַל־חָלִיתִי הֶלְמוֹנִי בַל־יִדְעָתִי מִתִּי אָקִיץ אוֹסִיף אֲבַקְשׁוּנוּ עוֹד

“They struck me, but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.”²⁹

This text clearly presupposes the intoxicating and addictive properties of wine. The psychological and physiological symptoms described correspond closely to states associated with alcohol abuse, thereby providing additional contextual evidence concerning the meaning of yayin.

The prophetic literature frequently employs wine imagery within social and moral critique. Isaiah 5:11 declares:

הוּי מִשְׁכִּימֵי בַבֶּקֶר שָׁכַר יִרְדְּפוּ

“Woe to those who rise early in the morning to pursue strong drink.”³⁰

Here intoxication becomes symbolic of moral decay and spiritual irresponsibility. The prophetic critique is directed not merely against drinking itself, but against a social condition characterized by excess, self-indulgence, and disregard for divine justice.

Isaiah 28 develops this imagery even further by associating intoxication with corrupt leadership:

וְגַם־אֵלֶּה בַּיַּיִן וּבַשְּׂכָר תִּעְוּ

“These also reel with wine and stagger with strong drink.”³¹

Priests and prophets themselves are portrayed as impaired by intoxication, incapable of proper judgment or reliable instruction. Such passages demonstrate that wine, within biblical literature, could symbolize not only personal weakness but institutional and societal collapse.

An especially important legal context appears in Leviticus 10:9, where priests are commanded:

יִינְוּ וְשָׂכַר אֶל־תִּשְׂתֶּה

“Do not drink wine or strong drink.”³²

This prohibition applies specifically when entering the Tent of Meeting, suggesting concern regarding ritual precision, discernment, and holiness. The command does not imply that wine is inherently forbidden, since wine appears elsewhere within sacrificial contexts, but rather that intoxication is incompatible with priestly responsibility.

A similar principle appears in the Nazirite legislation of Numbers 6, where temporary abstention from wine forms part of a special vow of consecration.³³ Such passages indicate that wine was sufficiently integrated into ordinary life that abstention itself became a distinctive religious act.

The narrative concerning Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19 provides another example of wine-associated moral collapse. Lot is deliberately intoxicated so that he becomes unaware of his actions:

וַנְּשָׂקֵהוּ אֶת־אַבְיָנוּ יַיִן

“Let us make our father drink wine.”³⁴

The narrative presupposes the capacity of wine to impair consciousness and judgment. Once again, the semantic implications strongly favor fermented wine.

Historical narratives concerning kings likewise contain warnings related to intoxication. In Daniel 5, Belshazzar’s banquet becomes a symbol of arrogance, sacrilege, and impending destruction.³⁵ Wine here functions within a broader literary framework of excess and divine judgment.

The cumulative evidence from these negative contexts reveals several recurring themes: intoxication, impaired judgment, moral vulnerability, social disorder, religious corruption, addiction and dependency, and loss of self-control. Such themes consistently presuppose the intoxicating properties of the beverage designated by yayin. From a lexical-semantic standpoint, these passages therefore provide exceptionally strong evidence concerning the dominant meaning of the noun.

At the same time, the biblical critique remains carefully nuanced. The text does not uniformly condemn wine itself, but rather excess, lack of wisdom, and irresponsible behavior. This distinction is

crucial. The Old Testament worldview generally treats wine as a legitimate part of life when used appropriately, yet dangerous when consumed without restraint.

This balanced perspective differs significantly from later ideological attempts either to romanticize or entirely demonize wine. Biblical literature instead presents a complex anthropological and ethical understanding in which wine becomes a test of wisdom, moderation, and covenantal responsibility.

Comparative historical evidence demonstrates that such ambivalence was widespread throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. Greek symposia, Roman banquets, and Near Eastern feasting traditions frequently combined wine consumption with moral reflection concerning moderation and excess.³⁶ Israelite literature participates in this broader cultural discourse while simultaneously integrating it into a distinctive theological framework.

From the standpoint of philology, the negative contexts of yayin are especially significant because they frequently provide explicit behavioral consequences associated with intoxication. Such contextual specificity considerably narrows the range of possible meanings and makes purely nonalcoholic interpretations difficult to sustain.

When examined together with the positive and neutral passages discussed previously, the negative texts contribute to a coherent semantic profile. Yayin emerges as a culturally central beverage possessing both beneficial and dangerous potential depending upon context, quantity, and manner of use. Precisely this semantic complexity explains the term's persistence and importance throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Footnotes

26. Genesis 9:21.

27. Proverbs 20:1.

28. Proverbs 23:29.

29. Proverbs 23:35.

30. Isaiah 5:11.

31. Isaiah 28:7.

32. Leviticus 10:9.

33. Numbers 6:1–4.

34. Genesis 19:32.

35. Daniel 5.

36. Andrew Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*, London: Routledge, 2003.

4. Ancient Translations and the Semantic Continuity of the Term יַיִן (Yayin)

One of the most important methodological approaches in determining the meaning of biblical lexemes consists in the analysis of ancient translations. Such translations possess exceptional philological value because they originated within linguistic and cultural environments considerably closer to the original

context of the Hebrew Bible than modern interpretations. In the case of the noun יַיִן (yayin), the testimony of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and other early translations represents a particularly significant source for understanding how ancient interpreters understood the semantic content of the term.

The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced between the third and first centuries BCE, overwhelmingly renders yayin by the noun οἶνος (oinos).³⁷ This translational consistency is highly significant because the Greek word oinos in classical and Hellenistic usage normally denotes fermented wine. Although ancient Greek wine culture included numerous varieties and differing degrees of dilution, the basic semantic value of oinos referred to wine in the ordinary fermented sense.³⁸

The importance of the Septuagint extends beyond simple lexical equivalence. The translators of the Septuagint were deeply familiar with both Hebrew linguistic tradition and the broader Hellenistic cultural environment. Their choice of oinos therefore reflects not merely mechanical translation, but an interpretative understanding of the Hebrew term itself. If the translators had believed that yayin primarily referred to fresh grape juice or a nonalcoholic beverage, alternative Greek expressions could theoretically have been employed. The consistent use of oinos strongly suggests that the ancient Jewish translators understood yayin primarily as wine.

This becomes especially important in passages involving intoxication. For example, Genesis 9:21 in the Septuagint reads:

καὶ ἔπιεν ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου καὶ ἐμεθύσθη

“And he drank of the wine and became drunk.”³⁹

The verb μεθύσκω (methyskō), “to intoxicate” or “to make drunk,” directly parallels the Hebrew שכר (šākar). Such translation leaves little ambiguity regarding the understanding of the beverage involved. Similar patterns occur throughout wisdom and prophetic literature where wine is associated with drunkenness or impaired judgment.

The Vulgate, translated by Jerome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE, likewise consistently renders yayin as vinum.⁴⁰ Within classical and late antique Latin, vinum denoted fermented wine in ordinary cultural usage. Jerome’s translation is particularly important because of his extensive knowledge of Hebrew and his direct engagement with Jewish exegetical traditions. His lexical choices therefore possess substantial philological authority.

The consistency between the Septuagint and the Vulgate indicates a remarkable continuity of interpretation across linguistic traditions separated by several centuries. Both translations emerged within contexts much closer to the biblical world than modern theological debates concerning alcohol. Consequently, their testimony carries considerable weight in lexical-semantic analysis.

Additional evidence may be observed in the Aramaic Targums. Although the Targums often paraphrase or expand the biblical text interpretatively, they generally preserve the understanding of yayin as wine in the ordinary sense.⁴¹ This continuity across Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic

traditions strongly suggests that the primary semantic value of the term remained stable throughout antiquity.

Particularly important is the fact that ancient translators were fully capable of distinguishing among different categories of grape-based products when necessary. The Septuagint, for example, often differentiates between *yayin* and תִּירוֹשׁ (*tîrôš*), thereby preserving lexical distinctions already present within the Hebrew text.⁴² Such differentiation further undermines the argument that *yayin* functioned merely as a broad generic term encompassing all forms of grape juice regardless of fermentation.

The semantic continuity of the term becomes even clearer when examined within broader Mediterranean wine culture. In Greek and Roman society, wine occupied an extraordinarily central role in daily life, agriculture, medicine, religion, trade, and social ritual.⁴³ The translators of the Septuagint and Vulgate operated within worlds where wine was a culturally familiar and clearly defined product. Their lexical choices therefore reflect not abstract speculation, but ordinary linguistic reality.

At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that ancient wine culture differed substantially from modern assumptions. Ancient wines were often diluted with water, mixed with spices or honey, and stored under conditions very different from those of modern production.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, despite such differences, fermentation remained the defining characteristic distinguishing wine from fresh grape juice.

An especially important issue concerns the preservation of grape juice in antiquity. Modern methods of pasteurization and refrigeration did not exist in the ancient world. Fresh grape juice naturally fermented within a relatively short period unless extraordinary preservation methods were employed.⁴⁵ As a result, the ordinary meaning of terms such as *yayin*, *oinos*, and *vinum* would almost inevitably refer to fermented beverages in the vast majority of contexts.

This historical reality significantly strengthens the lexical evidence derived from biblical passages themselves. The cumulative force of contextual usage, comparative Semitic evidence, and ancient translation tradition produces a highly coherent semantic picture.

Certain modern interpreters have argued that ancient terms for wine may occasionally refer to unfermented juice.⁴⁶ While such exceptional cases cannot be entirely excluded in principle, the problem lies in semantic dominance rather than theoretical possibility. The central philological question is not whether ancient people could consume fresh grape juice, but whether the noun *yayin* primarily designated such a beverage within biblical usage. The evidence from ancient translations overwhelmingly indicates that it did not.

The New Testament provides additional indirect support for semantic continuity. The Greek noun οἶνος (*oinos*) continues to denote wine within early Christian texts, including passages concerning intoxication, ritual meals, and warnings against drunkenness.⁴⁷ Since the Septuagint strongly influenced New Testament vocabulary, this continuity further reinforces the established semantic tradition.

It is also significant that early Jewish and Christian commentators generally interpreted biblical references to wine within the ordinary ancient understanding of fermented beverages.⁴⁸ Debates

concerned moderation, ethics, ritual use, and spiritual discipline, but rarely the fundamental lexical meaning of the term itself.

From a methodological standpoint, ancient translations function as an important control against anachronistic reinterpretation. Modern ideological or denominational concerns may sometimes encourage reinterpretations of biblical vocabulary disconnected from ancient linguistic reality. The testimony of the Septuagint, Vulgate, and related traditions provides a corrective by preserving interpretations rooted much closer to the original historical environment.

At the same time, caution remains necessary. Ancient translations are not infallible and occasionally contain interpretative expansions or contextual adaptations. Yet when multiple early traditions converge consistently upon the same semantic understanding, their cumulative evidentiary value becomes extremely strong.

In the case of *yayin*, the evidence of the ancient translations supports several important conclusions: the term possessed relatively stable semantic continuity; it was primarily associated with fermented wine; ancient translators clearly distinguished it from other grape-based products when necessary; and the broader Mediterranean linguistic environment understood equivalent terms in essentially the same way.

Consequently, the testimony of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and related ancient traditions constitutes one of the strongest arguments supporting the conclusion that the dominant meaning of the noun יַיִן (*yayin*) in the Hebrew Bible is fermented wine rather than unfermented grape juice.

Footnotes

37. Alfred Rahlfs (ed.), *Septuaginta*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935.

38. Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., Jones, H. S., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, s.v. οἶνος.

39. Genesis 9:21 LXX.

40. *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994.

41. Michael Maher (trans.), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992.

42. Emanuel Tov, *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

43. Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

44. Andrew Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*, London: Routledge, 2003.

45. Robert Mondavi, *Wine and the Ancient World*, New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

46. Robert P. Teachout, *The Use of “Wine” in the Old Testament*, Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979.

47. Ephesians 5:18.

48. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014.

5. Comparative Semitic Analysis

The noun יַיִן (yayin) belongs to one of the oldest and most widely distributed lexical strata within the Semitic languages. Its appearance across multiple linguistic branches demonstrates both the antiquity of viticultural culture in the ancient Near East and the remarkable semantic continuity of the term itself. Comparative Semitic analysis is therefore of particular importance for determining the original meaning and historical development of the noun within Biblical Hebrew.

The Hebrew form יַיִן (yayin) possesses clear cognates in several related Semitic languages. In Ugaritic, the form yn appears in ritual and administrative texts referring to wine within cultic and economic contexts.⁴⁹ Akkadian preserves the related term īnu, likewise denoting wine.⁵⁰ Similar forms are attested in Phoenician and other Northwest Semitic inscriptions. The broad geographical distribution of these cognates indicates that the lexical root connected with wine was already deeply established within Proto-Semitic or early Northwest Semitic linguistic traditions.

Particularly important is the semantic consistency of these cognates. In the overwhelming majority of attested cases, the relevant terms refer to fermented wine rather than fresh grape juice. This semantic stability significantly strengthens the argument that the Hebrew noun yayin likewise primarily denoted wine in the ordinary fermented sense.

Within Ugaritic literature, wine occupies an important place in ritual banquets, royal feasting, and sacrificial contexts.⁵¹ The use of the cognate form yn within such settings closely parallels biblical usage, especially in passages connecting wine with festivity, abundance, and cultic practice. Such parallels demonstrate not only linguistic continuity, but also broader cultural continuity across Northwest Semitic societies.

The Akkadian evidence is equally significant. The term īnu appears in economic texts, legal materials, and ritual documents throughout Mesopotamian history.⁵² Wine formed an important commercial and ceremonial commodity within Mesopotamian civilization, although beer often occupied a more central role in daily consumption. Nevertheless, the semantic value of the cognate term remained stable and clearly associated with fermented grape wine.

These comparative data possess considerable methodological importance because they reduce the probability that Biblical Hebrew used the noun yayin in a radically different semantic sense from its Semitic cognates. While semantic shifts are certainly possible within language history, the evidence in this case strongly suggests continuity rather than divergence.

An especially important aspect of the comparative evidence concerns the relationship between language and agriculture. Viticulture constituted a highly specialized economic activity requiring cultivation, harvesting, pressing, storage, and fermentation.⁵³ The existence of stable lexical terminology across multiple Semitic cultures indicates that wine production itself represented a long-established and socially significant institution throughout the ancient Near East.

At the same time, comparative analysis also demonstrates the existence of differentiated terminology for grape-based products. Biblical Hebrew distinguishes among *yayin*, *tîrôš*, and *šĕkār*, while related cultures similarly maintained lexical distinctions among wine, must, beer, and stronger intoxicating beverages.⁵⁴ Such differentiation reflects a relatively sophisticated semantic system rather than a vague or generalized vocabulary.

The broader Semitic context also illuminates the symbolic and religious significance of wine. In many Near Eastern societies, wine functioned not merely as an agricultural product, but as a marker of prestige, abundance, hospitality, ritual celebration, and royal authority.⁵⁵ This symbolic dimension is fully reflected within biblical literature, where vineyards and wine frequently signify prosperity, peace, covenantal blessing, and eschatological abundance.

At the same time, Semitic literature also preserves warnings concerning intoxication and excess. This duality — positive valuation combined with moral caution — appears consistently throughout the region. The Hebrew Bible therefore participates in a much wider Near Eastern cultural discourse regarding wine and human behavior.

An additional important issue concerns etymology. Several scholars have attempted to reconstruct the Proto-Semitic origin of the root underlying *yayin*.⁵⁶ Although complete certainty remains impossible, the widespread distribution of cognate forms strongly suggests considerable antiquity. Some researchers have even proposed possible connections with broader Mediterranean viticultural terminology, reflecting ancient trade networks and cultural exchange.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, caution remains necessary in comparative philology. Similarity of form alone does not automatically prove identical meaning in every context. Each language develops within its own historical and literary environment. For this reason, comparative evidence must always be integrated with contextual analysis rather than treated as independent proof.

In the case of *yayin*, however, the convergence of comparative and contextual evidence is unusually strong. The Hebrew usage aligns closely with the meanings attested in related Semitic languages, ancient translations, and broader Mediterranean wine culture. Such convergence considerably strengthens the reliability of lexical conclusions.

Particularly noteworthy is the role of wine within ritual contexts across Semitic traditions. Libations, sacrificial offerings, covenantal meals, and royal banquets frequently incorporated wine as a ceremonial element.⁵⁸ The cultic use of wine in Biblical Hebrew therefore does not represent an isolated phenomenon, but part of a much broader regional pattern.

At the same time, differences among cultures also existed. Certain Mesopotamian societies emphasized beer more heavily than wine, while Levantine and Mediterranean regions developed more extensive viticultural traditions due to climatic conditions favorable for grape cultivation.⁵⁹ Such regional variation influenced patterns of consumption and symbolism, yet did not fundamentally alter the semantic core of the relevant lexical terms.

Comparative Semitic analysis additionally highlights the importance of fermentation itself in the ancient world. In societies lacking modern preservation technologies, fermentation constituted the normal and expected transformation of grape juice into wine.⁶⁰ Consequently, lexical terms associated

with wine naturally developed around fermented products rather than around temporarily preserved fresh juice.

This historical reality further explains why Semitic cognates consistently refer to wine in the ordinary fermented sense. Fresh grape juice certainly existed seasonally, yet it did not occupy the same economic, ritual, or lexical stability as wine. The linguistic evidence therefore reflects broader patterns of material culture.

An especially significant observation concerns the symbolic flexibility of wine terminology. Throughout Semitic literature, wine could simultaneously represent blessing, joy, abundance, hospitality, covenantal celebration, intoxication, moral danger, and divine judgment. Such semantic richness is fully preserved within Biblical Hebrew and corresponds closely to the polyvalent cultural role of wine throughout the ancient Near East.

Certain modern debates concerning biblical wine have occasionally attempted to isolate Hebrew usage from its broader Semitic environment.⁶¹ Yet such isolation proves methodologically problematic because languages do not develop independently of cultural context. Comparative philology demonstrates that Biblical Hebrew participated actively within a larger Northwest Semitic linguistic world characterized by substantial lexical continuity.

The comparative evidence therefore supports several important conclusions. First, the noun *yayin* belongs to an ancient and stable Semitic lexical tradition. Second, its cognates overwhelmingly denote fermented wine rather than unfermented grape juice. Third, the Hebrew usage corresponds closely with broader regional patterns of viticulture, ritual practice, and social symbolism. Finally, the semantic complexity of the term reflects the multifaceted role of wine within ancient Near Eastern civilization.

Consequently, comparative Semitic analysis strongly reinforces the conclusion already suggested by contextual and translational evidence: the dominant and historically normative meaning of the noun יַיִן (*yayin*) in the Hebrew Bible is fermented wine.

Footnotes

49. Cyrus H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965.

50. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD)*, vol. I/J, Chicago: Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

51. Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, Leiden: Brill, 1994.

52. Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

53. Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

54. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, vol. XV, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

55. Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel*, Leiden: Brill, 1996.

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58. Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel*, Leiden: Brill, 1974.
59. Jean Bottéro, *Textes culinaires mésopotamiens*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995.
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61. Robert P. Teachout, *The Use of “Wine” in the Old Testament*, Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979.

6. Theological and Ideological Interpretations of the Term יַיִן(Yayin)

One of the most complex aspects of the interpretation of the noun יַיִן(yayin) concerns the influence of later theological and ideological traditions upon its semantic understanding. Although the philological, contextual, comparative, and translational evidence strongly indicates that the dominant meaning of the term in the Hebrew Bible is fermented wine, numerous later interpretative traditions have attempted to redefine or narrow this meaning in accordance with particular religious, ethical, or doctrinal positions. For this reason, it is methodologically necessary to distinguish carefully between the original semantic value of the lexeme within the biblical text and subsequent theological reinterpretations.

Within ancient Israel itself, the biblical corpus demonstrates no uniform prohibition against wine consumption. On the contrary, wine appears repeatedly within positive contexts associated with blessing, festivity, sacrifice, hospitality, and covenantal abundance. At the same time, however, the Hebrew Bible consistently condemns drunkenness, loss of self-control, and moral irresponsibility associated with excessive consumption. This balanced and nuanced position remained highly influential throughout later Jewish and Christian traditions.

In postbiblical Judaism, wine continued to occupy an important liturgical and symbolic role. Rabbinic literature preserves the use of wine in Sabbath rituals, festivals, marriage ceremonies, and covenantal celebrations.⁶² The Kiddush blessing over wine became one of the central ritual elements of Jewish religious life. Such continuity demonstrates that the Jewish interpretative tradition did not generally understand biblical references to yayin as referring merely to unfermented grape juice.

At the same time, rabbinic texts also contain extensive ethical discussions concerning moderation, sobriety, and the dangers of excess. This dual approach corresponds closely to the perspective already visible within the Hebrew Bible itself. Wine is neither absolutely rejected nor uncritically celebrated; rather, its moral significance depends upon the manner and context of its use.

Within early Christianity, wine likewise possessed both liturgical and symbolic importance. The New Testament preserves numerous references to wine in ordinary social settings, festive meals, and ritual contexts.⁶³ Particularly significant is the Eucharistic tradition, in which wine becomes a central sacramental element. The continuity between Jewish and early Christian ritual usage strongly suggests that wine retained its ordinary ancient meaning within these communities.

Nevertheless, theological debates concerning alcohol intensified considerably during later periods, especially within certain reformist and pietistic movements. Beginning particularly in the nineteenth century, several Protestant traditions influenced by temperance movements attempted to reinterpret biblical references to wine so that they referred primarily or exclusively to unfermented grape juice.⁶⁴ Such reinterpretations were often motivated not by philological evidence, but by ethical concern regarding alcohol abuse in modern society.

From a historical perspective, these reinterpretations emerged within specific social circumstances characterized by widespread alcoholism, industrial alcohol production, and moral reform movements in Europe and North America.⁶⁵ The desire to reconcile biblical authority with contemporary abstinence ethics led certain interpreters to propose that the biblical authors distinguished more sharply between “good” unfermented wine and “bad” intoxicating beverages.

However, serious philological scholarship has generally approached such claims with considerable skepticism. The primary difficulty lies in the fact that the Hebrew Bible itself does not consistently support such a distinction at the lexical level. The noun *yayin* appears in both positive and negative contexts, including passages involving intoxication. Attempts to redefine all positive references as “grape juice” while preserving alcoholic meaning only in negative passages create significant semantic inconsistency.

A particularly important methodological issue concerns the relationship between lexicography and theology. Lexical meaning must be determined primarily through linguistic evidence rather than doctrinal preference.⁶⁶ When contextual usage, comparative Semitic data, ancient translations, and historical-cultural evidence all converge upon a consistent semantic conclusion, later ideological reinterpretation cannot easily overturn that evidence.

This does not imply that theological reflection lacks legitimacy. Religious traditions naturally reinterpret ancient texts in light of new ethical and social realities. The problem arises only when later doctrinal concerns are projected retroactively onto the ancient linguistic system itself.

An especially important example concerns the interpretation of priestly and Nazirite prohibitions regarding wine. Certain modern interpreters have argued that these restrictions demonstrate that all alcohol consumption was fundamentally problematic within biblical religion. Yet the biblical texts themselves do not support such a conclusion. Priestly abstention was limited to specific ritual contexts, while the Nazirite vow represented a special form of temporary consecration.⁶⁷ These practices derive their significance precisely from the fact that ordinary wine consumption otherwise remained socially acceptable.

The wisdom literature provides additional evidence for this balanced perspective. Proverbs repeatedly condemns drunkenness, recklessness, and addiction, yet nowhere demands universal abstinence from wine itself.⁶⁸ Instead, the emphasis falls upon wisdom, moderation, and self-control.

The ideological reinterpretation of *yayin* also raises broader hermeneutical questions concerning the relationship between ancient texts and modern moral frameworks. Contemporary readers frequently approach biblical literature through assumptions shaped by modern medical knowledge,

denominational identity, or social ethics. While such concerns are understandable, they may unintentionally obscure the historical realities of the ancient world.

Within the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern environment, fermented beverages constituted a normal and often unavoidable component of agricultural and daily life.⁶⁹ Wine possessed nutritional, economic, medicinal, ritual, and social functions. Consequently, ancient discussions concerning wine focused primarily upon moderation and proper conduct rather than upon categorical prohibition.

An additional issue concerns translation philosophy. Certain modern Bible translations influenced by abstinence-oriented traditions occasionally attempt to soften or reinterpret references to wine.⁷⁰ Such translational choices demonstrate how theological assumptions may shape lexical interpretation even within contemporary scholarship.

At the same time, many modern scholars emphasize that recognition of the alcoholic nature of biblical wine does not require endorsement of excessive consumption.⁷¹ Philological description and moral evaluation represent distinct categories. The task of linguistic analysis is to determine meaning as accurately as possible within historical context, regardless of later ethical positions.

This distinction is especially important because debates concerning biblical wine have frequently become polarized between apologetic extremes. On one side stand interpreters who seek to eliminate all alcoholic meaning from biblical terminology; on the other stand those who romanticize wine consumption without sufficient attention to the strong biblical warnings against intoxication. The Hebrew Bible itself avoids both extremes.

From the standpoint of semantic analysis, the theological debates surrounding *yayin* ultimately reinforce the importance of methodological rigor. The cumulative evidence from contextual usage, comparative Semitic linguistics, ancient translations, and historical viticulture consistently supports the conclusion that *yayin* primarily denotes fermented wine. Theological reinterpretations may remain meaningful within later religious discourse, but they should not be confused with the original lexical meaning of the term.

At the same time, the persistence of these debates demonstrates the extraordinary cultural and symbolic importance of wine within Jewish and Christian civilization. Few biblical terms have generated such enduring theological reflection concerning ethics, ritual, embodiment, and social order.

Consequently, the study of *yayin* extends beyond purely lexical questions. It also illuminates the broader relationship among language, religion, interpretation, and historical memory. The history of the interpretation of the term reveals how ancient vocabulary may become the focus of continuing ideological and theological negotiation across centuries.

Footnotes

62. Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991.

63. Matthew 26:27–29; John 2:1–11.

64. Ernest Gordon, *Christ, the Apostles and Wine*, New York: Challenge Press, 1947.

65. Ian Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979.
66. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.
67. Numbers 6:1–4; Leviticus 10:9.
68. Proverbs 20:1; 23:29–35.
69. Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
70. Robert P. Teachout, *The Use of “Wine” in the Old Testament*, Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979.
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Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that the noun יַיִן (yayin) occupies a central and semantically stable position within the lexical system of the Hebrew Bible. Through lexical-semantic analysis, contextual exegesis, comparative Semitic investigation, and examination of ancient translations, the research has shown that the dominant and historically normative meaning of the term is fermented wine rather than unfermented grape juice.

The contextual evidence of the Old Testament constitutes one of the strongest arguments supporting this conclusion. Numerous passages explicitly associate yayin with intoxication, impaired judgment, moral vulnerability, and social disorder. Narratives concerning Noah and Lot, warnings within wisdom literature, and prophetic critiques of drunkenness all presuppose the intoxicating properties of the beverage designated by the noun. Especially significant are passages employing the verb שָׁכַר (šākar), “to become drunk,” in direct relation to yayin, thereby considerably narrowing the semantic range of the term.

At the same time, the Hebrew Bible also contains many positive and neutral references to wine. Yayin appears as a symbol of joy, blessing, covenantal abundance, hospitality, festivity, and cultic worship. Psalms, prophetic texts, patriarchal narratives, and sacrificial legislation all attest to the important and legitimate role of wine within the religious and social life of ancient Israel. This dual perspective demonstrates that the biblical worldview does not condemn wine itself, but rather excess, lack of wisdom, and irresponsible behavior.

The comparative Semitic evidence further strengthens these conclusions. Cognate forms attested in Ugaritic, Akkadian, and other Northwest Semitic languages consistently refer to fermented wine within ritual, economic, and social contexts. Such semantic continuity strongly suggests that the Hebrew noun yayin participated in a broader and highly stable Semitic lexical tradition associated with viticulture and wine production throughout the ancient Near East.

Especially significant is the testimony of the ancient translations. The Septuagint consistently renders yayin as οἶνος (oinos), while the Vulgate employs the Latin vinum. Both terms clearly denote

fermented wine within their respective linguistic and cultural environments. The remarkable consistency among Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Aramaic traditions demonstrates that ancient interpreters overwhelmingly understood the term in the ordinary sense of wine rather than unfermented grape juice.

The study has also shown that later theological and ideological reinterpretations frequently emerged from concerns external to the original linguistic and historical context of the biblical text. Although such reinterpretations may possess importance within subsequent religious discourse, they do not substantially alter the philological evidence concerning the primary meaning of the noun. Methodologically, lexical meaning must be established through contextual usage, comparative linguistics, historical-cultural analysis, and ancient translation traditions rather than through later doctrinal assumptions.

An especially important conclusion concerns the sophistication of the Hebrew lexical system itself. Biblical Hebrew clearly distinguishes among yayin, תִּירוֹשׁ (tîrôš), and שְׁכָר (šēkār), thereby demonstrating the existence of differentiated terminology for various grape-based and intoxicating beverages. Such lexical precision significantly weakens attempts to interpret yayin merely as a generic term for all forms of grape juice.

At a broader level, the study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between language, religion, and material culture in the ancient Near East. The semantic history of yayin reflects not only linguistic continuity, but also the economic, ritual, agricultural, and symbolic importance of wine within Mediterranean and Semitic civilization. Wine functioned simultaneously as nourishment, agricultural wealth, social marker, ritual offering, symbol of blessing, and potential source of moral danger.

The cumulative evidence examined throughout the present research therefore supports the conclusion that the noun יַיִן (yayin) in the Hebrew Bible primarily and normatively denotes fermented wine. While certain contexts may involve different stages of production, dilution, or ritual usage, the broader semantic and historical evidence overwhelmingly favors this interpretation.

Consequently, the attempt to reinterpret the dominant biblical meaning of yayin as nonalcoholic grape juice encounters substantial philological, contextual, comparative, and historical difficulties. The evidence instead demonstrates that ancient Israelite culture, like the broader Semitic and Mediterranean world of which it formed a part, understood wine as a fermented beverage possessing both positive and potentially dangerous dimensions depending upon the context of its use.

Ultimately, the study of yayin illustrates the importance of rigorous philological methodology in biblical interpretation. Only through careful integration of linguistic evidence, contextual analysis, ancient translations, comparative Semitic data, and historical-cultural background can the semantic complexity of biblical vocabulary be understood with sufficient scholarly precision.

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