

Of Sponges And Spears

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So much wonderful symbolism infuses the accounts of Jesus' final hours, along with many details that we may read each year before and during the Passover service. We are so familiar with many of these details that we tend to read right over them without questioning their deep meanings and their rich symbolism.

For example, most of us fail to realize how many times "the cup" is mentioned in relation to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament alone, the authors make at least twenty-one references to this cup. Medieval readers noticed the recurrence of this theme, and the spurious legends of the Holy Grail grew out of their speculations. Although there are many aspects of the biblical cup of Christ that we should consider from time to time, we can touch on only a few of them in this short article.

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

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

Relative to the subject of Jesus' cup and the pouring out of His blood, it is interesting to note that He told His disciples at His last Passover service: "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (verse 29).

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

Vinegar and Gall

It may be significant then that, just before His crucifixion, once He realized what He was being given, He refused the sour wine and gall mixture that was offered to Him: "They gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted, He would not drink" (Matthew 27:34; see also Mark 15:23; Luke 23:36).

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

The Greek verb for "taste" in Matthew 27:34 is *geuomai*, which can mean "to perceive the flavor of," suggesting that perhaps Jesus did not actually taste the mixture at all. In the haze of His agony, He

may not have been aware of what the Roman soldier was holding up to Him until it reached His lips, and in that split-second, He recognized it for sour wine. In any case, a taste cannot be considered a drink.

Later, as His human life moved into its final moments, He was offered sour wine a second time: "Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink" (Matthew 27:48; see also Mark 15:36; John 19:29-30).

These "drink offerings" of sour wine and gall perfectly fulfilled David's prophecy of Psalm 69:21: "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."

But what was this "sour wine"? *Easton's Bible Dictionary* describes this drink in its article, "Gall":

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

Other commentators opine that the gall—being a poison as well as a desensitizing drug—was meant to speed the death of the victim before the grisly effects of the crucifixion did. But surely it was not offered as, Easton suggests, for the comfort of the condemned! Rather, it was given for the soldiers' own ease and perhaps for the benefit of the pitiless Jewish leaders who wanted the three victims dead and disposed of before the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31-33).

Luke's account implies that the soldiers' offers of sour wine to Jesus were part of their mockery of Him: "The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine" (Luke 23:36). It is not logical that these soldiers would mock Jesus, beat Him, spit on Him, jam a crown of thorns on His head, flog Him terribly, and then give a pain-relieving drink to Him as a "merciful custom"! Later, to speed their deaths, the soldiers would break the legs of the two men who were crucified on either side of Jesus and would cruelly stab Him with a spear. They would have broken Jesus' legs too, but they were prevented from doing so for the prophecies to be accurately fulfilled. Not much evidence of mercy here!

Sour Wine, Act Two

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

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

Like this rendition from the New King James version, most Bible translations read that Jesus "received" the sour wine, but this is not to say that He actually drank it. *Strong's Greek Lexicon* states that *lambano*, the Greek verb translated "received," can imply "to have offered to one." In the overall

context, this is a more logical meaning. Also, if Jesus refused to drink the first offering, why would He accept the second? Knowing that only moments—perhaps even seconds—remained before He would die, why would He seek any temporary comfort from the effects of this drink?

Understanding these things, three probable reasons why Jesus turned down the mixture of sour wine and gall immediately come to mind:

- » First, because its taste was so disgusting;
- » Second, because He knew that the offerings were part of the soldiers' mockery of Him; and
- » Third, because, as Easton wrote, He could not allow anything to desensitize His mind and body to the pain He was enduring.

These were all parts of the terrifying "cup" that God the Father had given Jesus to drink from (see Matthew 26:39-42; Mark 10:38-39; 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 18:11).

However, Jesus' vow regarding wine in Matthew 26:29 adds a fourth interesting reason. If He would have accepted and drunk either of these offerings of sour wine, would He not then have broken His promise?

At the time He made it, during His last Passover service, the wine and His blood, which it symbolized, were both physically pure—the wine relatively so and Jesus' blood perfectly so. The symbolism of the offerings in Numbers 15:7-10 suggests that the wine may have been of a sweet variety, perhaps similar to today's Jewish Concord grape wines (see also Amos 9:13 and Micah 6:15). As we have seen, Jesus promised to drink *new* wine with His disciples in His Father's Kingdom.

But later that Passover evening, His Father laid the sins of the world on Jesus' head in Gethsemane. Those sins permeated His mind and body, thoroughly polluting Him—all of Him, including His blood, which became tainted and besmirched—like the sour wine mixed with gall that was offered to Him before His crucifixion and again some hours later as He hung on the stake. Jeremiah writes prophetically of this: "He has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drink wormwood. . . . Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall" (Lamentations 3:15, 19).

Putting all the relevant scriptures together, it appears that yet a fifth reason for Jesus' refusal of the sour wine is because His blood—the antitype of the formally pure wine—had already been "soured" by His Father's injection of the sins of the world into it.

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

The Thrust of a Spear

We should examine the subject of this awful wound—this piercing—in some more detail. To further comprehend the suffering that our Savior went through for us, we will briefly study John 19:34 and 37: "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. . . . And again another Scripture says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced.'"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here is an excerpt from Albert Barnes' commentary on John 19:34:

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

- (1) The Saviour was elevated but a little from the ground, so as to be easily reached by the spear of a soldier.
- (2) The wound must have been transversely upward, so as to have penetrated into the body, as he could not have stood directly under Him.

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

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

(5) The wound was comparatively a large wound. It was so large as to admit the hand (John 20:27); but for a lance thus tapering to have made a wound so wide as to admit the hand, it must have been at least four or five inches in depth, and must have been such as to have made death certain. If it be remembered that this blow was probably in the left side, the conclusion is inevitable that death would have been the consequence of such a blow. . . .

It is clear that the spear pierced to the region of the heart. . . .

Such a flowing of blood and water makes it probable that the spear reached the heart, and if Jesus had not before been dead, this would have closed His life. . . .

He [John] shows that those who were sent to hasten His death believed that He had expired; that then a soldier inflicted a wound which would have terminated life if He had not been already dead; and that the infliction of this wound was followed by the fullest proof that He had truly expired.

Further research informs us that some Roman spears had larger blades attached to their "business end" for the purpose of inflicting larger wounds. However, if Barnes is correct that the point of this spear tapered gently to a point, the soldier must have viciously twisted it in order to create a five-inch gash. In fact, such a twisting motion, virtually guaranteeing a mortal wound, would have been second-nature to a veteran soldier.

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

The members of God's true church constitute the beloved Bride of Christ. Our tiny congregations have the wonderful privilege of being part of that church. As we have seen, Jesus calls on us to remember His affliction, including the piercing, the cup, the sour wine, and the gall. No matter how many years we have rehearsed these events, let us remember once again what our Savior went through bodily for us. As He said to His disciples, "This is My body which is given for you" (Luke 22:19).