

Muslim, Christian and Jewish Physicians on Wine

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The earliest Islamic reference to the medicinal use of wine may be found in the *Sūra of the Bees* (*Qur'ān* 16:39-69). There it mentions wine made from grapes and either coconuts or dates, but we are also introduced to a mysterious, colourful and apparently alcoholic drink which comes from the 'entrails' of bees, a drink which is a 'remedy for mankind'. Is the *Qur'ān*, then, describing honey wine as medicine? This might be a reference to honey, but that is unlikely as *sharāb*, literally a 'drink', suggests something more fluid and could mean something alcoholic.

Other passages in the *Qur'ān* are less in favour of alcohol beverages, and religious scholars have explained that the different *Qur'ānic* accounts should be read in a certain chronological order. The last and thus binding revelation is that wine (*khamr*) is the work of Satan (*Qur'ān* 5:91), thereby strictly forbidding the consumption of wine in Islam. As for its medicinal use, a ninth-century *ḥadīth* collection records that the prophet Muhammad thought drinking wine would lead to illness, not heal ailments.

What did prominent Muslim physicians think about wine and why would they use it? The most influential medieval treatise on medicinal substances was written by the physician Ibn al-Baytār (d. 1248). In his *Comprehensive Book on Simple Drugs and Foodstuffs*, he combined his own observations with the accounts he read in other books. In his section on wine,¹ Ibn Baytār first cited Dioscorides (a Greek physician of the first century) with his discourse on the different kinds and properties of grape wines. Subsequently, he discussed the ideas of the very eminent physician al-Rāzī (d. 925) who was active in the hospitals of Baghdad and Rayy. He recommends patients drink wine daily to improve

their health, as long as wine is consumed in moderation, or about three cups a day. Al-Rāzī even allows for drunkenness once or twice a month, but warns that if it occurs too often, patients may suffer headaches, liver complications, epilepsy and even death. Ibn al-Baytār then discusses these negative effects in detail and suggests several ways to counteract them.

Despite certain caveats concerning the use or abuse of wine, Ibn al-Baytār gives no references to any religious strictures. We could have expected that he would provide alternative remedies for those who were not allowed to drink wine. However, the medical heritage of the Greeks was apparently more important to Ibn al-Baytār than what religious authorities had to say on the topic. Ibn al-Baytār and al-Rāzī are not alone with their positive attitudes toward wine. The Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) wrote the most influential medical encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages, the *Canon of Medicine*, and he too did not mention any religious problems when he discussed the medicinal use of wine.

Was the attitude of Christian or Jewish physicians different from those of their Muslim counterparts? The Nestorian Christian Ibn Butlān, an eleventh-century physician who was mainly active in Syria and Egypt, devoted a section of his influential treatise, *The Almanac of Health*, to alcoholic drinks, wine, and the prevention of hang-over.² Again, no reference to alternative remedies or the religious prohibition of wine may be found. However, Maimonides (d. 1204), the great Jewish theologian who worked as a physician at the court of Salah al-Dīn in Cairo, suggested wine regimen would not be appropriate for Muslims as grape wine is prohibited according to Islamic law.³ In his letters to Muslim

nobles, Maimonides nonetheless enumerates the benefits of wine because his training as a physician make it incumbent on him to inform his reader about the most beneficial treatments, whether they are forbidden or not. Maimonides believes that physicians prior to him were aware of *Qur'ānic* censure regarding wine and provided alternative prescriptions for those who could not drink it. Yet Maimonides seems to have been the first to provide such a prescription in a medical treatise. He also differs in his views about drunkenness. In contrast to al-Rāzī or even Ibn Sīnā, he states that inebriation is always dangerous, even if it only occurs once a month.

Why did physicians like Ibn al-Baytār, al-Rāzī, and Ibn Sīnā not mention any religious dimensions when writing about wine? The poet Abū Nuwās (d. 814) seems to have been aware of religious criticism when he writes in his famous wine poem, 'Give up now, critic, stop your diatribe, your reprimand just drives me to drink more. Reproach is not the treatment to prescribe, the cure lies in the poison, so now pour!'⁴ Perhaps physicians were equally aware of such criticism, but depending on how much they viewed themselves as heirs of a purely secular art, most physicians simply ignored the religious strictures on wine.

Notes

- 1 Ibn al-Baytar, *Al-Jam' al-Mufradāt al-Adwiyah wa-l-aghdhīyah*, vol. 2 (Cairo: al-Matba'ah al-'Amirah, 1875), 69-76.
- 2 Hosam Elkhadem (ed. and trans.), *Le 'Taqwīm al-sihha' (Tacuini sanitatis) d'Ibn Butlān: Une traité médical du XIe siècle. Histoire du texte, édition critique, traduction, commentaire*, Académie royale de Belgique, Classe des lettres, Fonds René Draguet 7 (Leuven: Peeters, 1990), 100-101.
- 3 Cf. Gerrit Bos (ed. and trans.), *On Asthma* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 32-33.
- 4 Jim Colville, *Poems of wine and revelry: the khamriyyat of Abu Nuwas* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005), 3.

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