



DRUNKENNESS, EXCESS, AND BACCHANALIA



EPHESIANS 5:18 SAYS, “AND DON’T GET drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit.”¹ Alcohol consumption and drunkenness were common components in Greco-Roman life, and Paul contrasted the dissipation of being under the control of wine with being filled with the Holy Spirit. Christians were called to a counter-cultural ethic of godly restraint instead of pagan moral licentiousness. This can be seen by examining worship of the pagan god Dionysus, the nature of meals in banquets in antiquity, and then contrasting these with Paul’s command in Ephesians 5:18.

Dionysus (Bacchus to the Romans) was the Greek god of wine and debauchery, ritual madness, and the theatre. According to Greek mythology, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman named Semele. “Dionysus was the deity under whose powers came the fertility of vineyards, wine and ‘every type of life-giving moisture.’”² A mystery cult dedicated to Dionysus originated at least by the fifth century BC, continued until the time of the church fathers, and was widespread throughout the Mediterranean world. People closely associated the worship of Dionysus with hope for an afterlife, and Dionysiac scenes on sarcophagi were common in the imperial period of Rome (27 BC–AD 476).³

The most famous aspect of Dionysus worship were *Bacchanalia*, festivals and sacred rites characterized by abandonment of moral restraint. Usually, these were held only

at particular times of the year and for brief periods. The most famous depiction of such events is from Livy’s (59 BC–AD 17) *History of Rome*. He described alcohol-fueled heterosexual and homosexual abandonment and orgies. Livy summarized Dionysiac worship: “To regard nothing as impious or criminal was the very sum of their religion.”⁴ While modern historians question the accuracy of Livy’s description, the Roman Senate had passed a law in 186 BC prohibiting the *Bacchanalia*. Nonetheless, the cult was hard to suppress and continued in popularity. The celebrations of Dionysus were so orgiastic and ecstatic that his followers were called *maenads*, from the Greek word *mania*, or “madness.”⁵

Expressions of Dionysiac worship differed from region to region. One scholar described the variety:

The forms of Bacchic initiation probably varied a

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imals depicted had special significance in the mystery cult of Dionysus. On the lid is the birth of Dionysus and his reception by nymphs.

Upper left: From Athens, a ceramic cup in the shape of a donkey’s head, dated to about 480 BC; lacking a foot, a cup of this type had to be emptied before it could be set down. Like the maenad painted on the rim, the donkey was associated with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine.

Left: Sarcophagus depicting the triumphal march of Bacchus. At the left, Dionysus rides in a chariot pulled by panthers. Preceding him is a procession of his followers and exotic animals, including lions, elephants, and even a giraffe. Many of the ani-



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ NAPLES ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (173/B/2376)

Above: Fresco painting from the House of the Centenary in Pompeii; dated AD 62-79. To the left, center is Dionysus, his body covered with bunches of grapes to evoke his being the god of the vine and wine. In the background, a vine-

covered mountain is probably Mount Vesuvius, before its eruption.

Right: Marble portrait of Bacchus with a grapevine headpiece; AD 1st cent; Roman. Bacchus was often depicted as having a retinue of uninhibited female

followers (known as Bacchantes) and creatures that were part human and part animal, mostly satyrs and fauns. They represented the unfettered, sometimes bawdy, conduct brought on by wine.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ BOSTON MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS (64/2703)

Above: From Carrara in north-central Italy, marble relief dated AD 50 depicts a man reclining under a tree at an

idyllic outdoor banquet, holding a garland of flowers and a wine cup (*kantharos*) in his left hand. The relief may have been a votive gift to Dionysus.

great deal from group to group, and from period to period, with the extent of these variations stretching from outdoor picnics to an existential turning-point in life, from sublime symbolism to downright orgies.⁶

Nonetheless, drunkenness and sexual immorality were common. A house at Pompeii known as the *Villa of the Mysteries* contains several frescoes depicting Dionysus worship, including impious sexual imagery.

Worship of Dionysus formed part of the broader

cultural background in Greco-Roman antiquity in which alcohol consumption and drunkenness were common. Greek dinner parties, called symposiums, were limited to men except for female entertainers. The feasts included extensive wine drinking after the meal and often singing hymns to a pagan god. Roman dinner parties were

similar, but were called a *convivium*, and allowed respectable women to be present. Though not always opportunities for sexual immorality, dinner parties sometimes turned into orgies. “Greek and Roman literature is filled with illustrations of symposia devolving into drunkenness, sexual excess, and violence.”⁷

The sexual use of dining couches...is widely portrayed on stone, pottery, and gems in museums throughout Greece. In many of these depictions food is shown on nearby dining tables, perhaps indicating that the sensual pleasures of eating and sexual intercourse may commonly have been combined.⁸

Below: Bronze mask of a maenad or female follower of Bacchus; Roman, 1st cent. AD. The piece likely adorned a piece of furniture

Right: Limestone scene of five banqueters reclining on cushions; likely

from the temple at Golgoi on Cyprus; dated to the end of the 6th cent. BC. In the center would have been a table that would have held a crater, a large bowl from which the banqueters would have drunk, using straws.



when he said such behavior is “reckless living.” The Greek word translated “reckless living” is *asotia*, which generally denotes wastefulness, and thus reckless abandon, debauchery, dissipation, or profligacy, especially as exhibited in convivial gatherings. In other words, it is wild living.¹⁰ Some sense of the destructive lifestyle implied by *asotia* is seen in that the adverbial form of the word is used in the story of the prodigal son which says the young man squandered his wealth with “loose [*asotos*] living” (Luke 15:13, NASB).

Paul called Ephesian Christians to moral purity in a vulgar culture. In the same way, modern Christians in a day and age ruled by moral autonomy should follow the non-conforming stance of Ephesians 5:18, “And don’t get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit.”

While modern readers cannot know for certain if Paul was specifically attacking either Dionysus worship or ancient dinner banquets in Ephesians 5:18, we do know that at least shadows of those practices lingered into Paul’s day. The moral atmosphere in Greco-Roman culture was one in which pagan devotion, drunkenness, and sexual immorality went hand in hand. In context, Paul had already reminded his readers, “Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their thoughts” (Eph. 4:17). The vulgar behavior associated with drunkenness is in complete contrast with Christian ethics. Klyne Snodgrass rightly says, “To write against drunkenness was a convenient way for [Paul] to call to mind the destructive and unacceptable lifestyle of so many in the culture around them.”⁹

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is the opposite of being under the control of either alcohol or a pagan god. Paul amplified the moral vulgarity of paganism

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
2. John McRay, *Archeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991), 317.
3. Trevor W. Thompson, “Dionysus,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Sebastian Fuhrmann, Gary S. Helft, and Anne-Kathrin Runte, vol. 6 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 854, and Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., “The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (July-September 1979): 250–51.
4. Livy, *The History of Rome* 39.13 in *The History of Rome*, trans. Rev. Canon Roberts, vol. 6 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1905).
5. Britt-Mari Nasstrom, “The Rites in the Mysteries of Dionysus: The Birth of the Drama,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 18 (January 1, 2003): 139, 141.
6. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), 292.
7. Richard A. Wright, “Drinking, Teaching, and Singing: Ephesians 5:18-19 and the Challenges of Moral Instruction at Greco-Roman Banquets,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* vol. 47 (Fall-Winter 2017): 87.
8. John McRay, *Archeology and the New Testament*, 317.
9. Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289.
10. “ἄσοτία” (*asotia*, wastefulness) in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 148.

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