


“Look not thou upon the wine...” Wine Drinking in Proverbs 23:19–35 in Light of the Book of Sirach: A Literary Motif Reflecting Ancient Israelite Society

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the motif of wine drinking in didactic biblical wisdom literature from a synchronic perspective, using an analogy between two textual units in the Book of Proverbs in light of the Book of Sirach. The complex literary and social functions of the motif of wine drinking and its significance for ancient Israelite society are examined. The first part of the article focuses on Prov 23, which presents the didactic wisdom approach to drinking wine, consisting mainly of warnings and cautions to youth regarding wine and its consequences for the community. The second part compares this didactic approach to the hybrid approach of the Book of Sirach, where didactic precepts appear beside a cultural portrayal of wine drinking as a joyful and accepted tradition. The author of this article claims that this complex attitude is rooted in using the wine-drinking motif in biblical wisdom literature to reflect the social reality in ancient Israel.

KEYWORDS: wine drinking, The Book of Proverbs, biblical wisdom literature, The Book of Sirach, biblical Israelite society

1. Literary Background

A parallel term used in biblical studies for practical wisdom is didactic wisdom, borrowed from the Mesopotamian literary genre of practical wisdom. The Books of Proverbs and Sirach are examples of biblical practical wisdom literature engaging in practical education for the well-being and success of its addressees. Both books guide youths of ancient Israelite society in proper conduct in the family and community.¹

The article was inspired by one of the chapters of the author's doctoral thesis, defended at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Part of it was presented at the International Online Conference: “Biblical Anthropology – A Message for Contemporary People” organized by the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, October 20-21, 2021.

¹ A. Rofé, *An Introduction to the Psalms and the Wisdom Literature in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Carmel 2004) 126; N. Shupak, *No Man Is Born Wise – Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature and Its Contact with Biblical Literature* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 2016) 7 [Heb].

While wisdom is attributed to God as its source (1 Kgs 3:28; Jer 51:12–15), and wisdom itself is considered to be a divine quality inherent in every human since the beginning of creation (Exod 31:6; Prov 2:6; 3:19–20), biblical wisdom literature provides practical wisdom that can be defined in terms of a mental capacity to examine the gifts of God.² It is also understood as the ability to expand one's learning and gain experience and skills. Thus, didactic wisdom includes technical and artistic skills (Exod 28:3; 1 Kgs 7:14) along with political thinking (1 Kgs 2:6; Isa 10:13). Texts that belong to the didactic wisdom literature address everyday practices, ranging from thinking and reflection to assertions and advice.³ This wisdom literature also focuses on human nature concerning daily necessities and routines.

The Book of Proverbs is a typical didactic text that is not reducible to moral preaching but establishes what is appropriate social behaviour, focusing on relations between individuals and connections inside the family (Prov 17:6; 27:11). This is evident in several passages portraying a father giving orders (Prov 13:1; 23:12) and advice (Prov 22:6) to his son, with allusions to corporal punishment (Prov 23:31–35), whereas the son obeys and respects his parents (Prov 13:1; 15:5; 23:18). In Proverbs, a respectable person protects his own name and family and has an impact on his community (Prov 15:29; 24:27), while shameful conduct involves inappropriate behaviour with women or inciting men (Prov 1:11; 16:26). As a didactic text, Proverbs acknowledges the conscience (Prov 12:52; 15:31; 17:22) and the significance of confession (Prov 31:5). Proverbs clearly implies a wealthy population, with reference to leadership and travel (Prov 27:1; 31:1); the author is sensitive to society, public opinion, and one's good name (Prov 1:9; 17:20; 21:1–29).⁴

Unlike Proverbs, focusing on practical wisdom and moral wisdom, Sirach draws its ideas from those two, but the idea of wisdom presented here is a divine gift (Sir 24:3–4). This concept of wisdom is passed on by tradition that draws upon fear of the divine and the ruler's authority. This means that it is legitimate for wise men to study and acquire the power of wisdom (Sir 24:1).⁵ Thus, Sirach, as the author, refers to desirable conduct through familiarity with the Torah and its principles but distances himself from it to a certain extent.

2 HALOT III, 3135; A. Hurowitz, *Proverbs 1–9. Mikra Le'israel Series* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved-Magness 2012) 40 [Heb]; Rofé, *An Introduction to the Psalms and the Wisdom Literature in the Bible*, 147–149; M.Z. Segal, *Introduction to the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer 1967) III–IV, 592, 612 [Heb]; Shupak, *No Man Is Born Wise*, 7; N.H. Tur-Sinai, "Wisdom, Wiseman," *Biblical Encyclopedia* (eds. M.D. Cassuto *et al.*) (Jerusalem: Biyalik Institute 1965) III, 129–130.

3 Y. Cohen, "The Scribal School at Emar," *Beit Mikra* 57/1 (2012) 65–85 [Heb]; W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1996); J.J.A. van Dijk, *La sagesse suméro-accadienne. Recherches sur les genres littéraires des textes sapientiaux, avec choix de textes* (Leiden: Brill 1953); N. Wasserman, "Weisheitsliteratur (Wisdom Literature)," *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie* (eds. A. Bramanti *et al.*) (Berlin: De Gruyter 2017) XV, 51.

4 Segal, *Introduction to the Bible*, 594; J. Stiebert, "The Inculcation of Social Behavior in Proverbs," *OTE* 17/2 (2004) 282–293; W.R. Domeris, "Shame and Honor in Proverbs: Wise Women and Foolish Men," *OTE* 8 (1995) 86–102.

5 The Book of Sirach was created in the second century BCE. It draws its ideas from the Book of Proverbs and the prophets. M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven,

Wine was an important element in biblical Israelite economy and culture. It was used both in social gatherings and for religious purposes. Despite this positive role of wine, the problem of drunkenness was not ignored, as mentioned by the prophets (for example, Amos 4:1; Hos 4:11) and in the Book of Proverbs.⁶

In biblical wisdom literature, the literary motif of wine is used as a symbol of divine retribution (Deut 32:33; Jer 25:15) and a metaphor for disaster, such as a brawl (Prov 20:1), violence (Prov 4:17), revenge (Ps 78:65), and poisoning (Ps 60:5). Some metaphorical expressions refer to the wisdom of drinking (Isa 55:1; Jer 25:15; Prov 9:5), while others condemn drinking to excess (Isa 5:22; 22:13; 28:1, 7; Prov 23:20–21) and the consequences of drunkenness (Jud 12:20–13:2) or refer to intoxication as punishment for the people of Israel (Ps 60:5) and as a symbol of anger or of God’s wrath: “the cup of His fury” (Isa 51:17).⁷

In addition, Arnold A. Wieder also finds other uses for wine in biblical wisdom literature in blessings and medicine. He compares versions of Sirach from the Cairo Genizah and Prov 23 to rabbinic literature. Weider characterizes Sirach as providing a dual view of wine, including positive statements (Sir 31:27), calling for wine to be drunk in moderation (Sir 31:29), while a completely negative attitude is also evident immediately after (Sir 31:29–31).⁸

Similarly, Nili Shupak, Avigdor Hurowitz, and Moshe Zvi Segal note that both Proverbs and Sirach recommend moderate drinking (Prov 31:6; Sir 9:13–14), both rejecting excessive wine drinking, giving examples of personal and social consequences for the habit (Prov 20:1; Sir 9:10).⁹

CT: Yale University Press 2010) 957; M. Kister, “The Wisdom Literature in Qumran,” *Qumran Scrolls. Introductions and Studies* (ed. M. Kister) (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi 1999) I, 299–300 [Heb]; G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1974) 291–295.

6 S.O. Ademiluka, “Proverbs 23:29–35 in the Light of the Role of the Church in Nigeria in Curbing Alcoholism,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41/1 (2020) 1–8; B.K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2005) 2.

7 Biblical citations in English throughout this article rely on the ESV because it is a literal translation close to Hebrew. According to Esther Agmon (*The Vineyard in v as a Reality and a Metaphor. Growing Vines in a Metaphorical Vineyard* [Diss. Bar Ilan University; Ramat Gan 2007] 99–100 [Heb]), images of vineyards are presented in prophecies and poetry as negative and positive metaphorical symbols. H. Beinart, “Yain (Wine),” *Biblical Encyclopedia* (eds. M.D. Cassuto et al.) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1965) III, 675–676; BDB, “שכר,” 1016; L.C. Field, “The Wines of the Bible,” *Methodist Review* 64 (1882) 301, 306; M.Z. Kaddari, “Wine, Liquor, Tirosh,” *Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew (Alef-Taw)* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University 2006) 424; T. Krzeszowski, “A Tract about Wine in the Bible,” *Friendly Metaphors. Essays on Linguistics, Literature and Culture in Honour of Aleksander Szwedek* (eds. E. Welnic – J. Fisiak) (Frankfurt am Main: Lang 2008) 61, 63–64, 66, 69; L. Ryken – J.C. Wilhoit – T. Longman III (eds.), “Wine; Drunkenness,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press 1998) 3024–3025, 3203–3205.

8 Sirach adapts words and phrases from Proverbs (such as “The fear of the Lord” in Prov 9:10, 23:17; Sir 1:11–16). J. Corley, “Searching for Structure and Redaction in Ben Sira. An Investigation of Beginnings and Endings,” *The Wisdom of Ben Sira. Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology* (eds. A. Passaro – G. Bellia) (Berlin: De Gruyter 2008) 23; A.A. Wieder, “Ben Sira and the Praises of Wine,” *JQR* 61/2 (1970) 155–166.

9 N. Shupak (ed.), *Book of Proverbs. Bible World Series* (Tel Aviv: Davidson-Atty 1996) 79–81, 135, 156–159, 209–210, 259 [Heb]; A. Hurowitz, *Proverbs 10–31. Mikra Le’israel Series* (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved–Magness

Wisdom literature encourages moderate drinking by noting the consequences of excessive wine drinking. On the one hand, wine symbolizes the blessing of God and is a cultural component of every meal. On the other hand, it is a curse and is considered harmful when consumed to excess. This complex attitude towards wine drinking requires a thorough study.¹⁰

2. Method

This study suggests a combined synchronic and analogical reading of Prov 23 in light of the Book of Sirach to reveal the symbols of wine drinking in biblical Israelite culture. A typical example of a didactic biblical text, the Book of Proverbs shows the moral etiquette required in biblical Israelite society. Wine drinking is examined in view of this motif in two themes: family and community.¹¹

A synchronic approach to biblical literature examines texts, observing textual allusions obtained in implied interactions between the reader, text, and author.¹² In addition, an analogical approach would consider the relationships between texts.¹³ For this study, analogy will be used to examine the motif of wine drinking in two texts in Prov 23 and compare them with Sirach.¹⁴

2012) 408, 469, 472–473, 477, 586–588 [Heb]; M.Z. Segal, *The Complete Ben-Sira Book*, 4 ed. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1997) [Heb].

- 10 Ṭal Ilan (“Trinkt eine Frau vier Becher Wein, so fordert sie einen Esel auf Der Straße auf”: Der Babylonische Talmud über Frauen und Wein,” *Wein und Judentum* [ed. A. Lehnardt] [Berlin: Neofelis 2014] 40) claims that the Bible shows an ambivalent attitude towards wine drinking, unlike the Talmud, in which wine drinking has a negative connotation in the context of women. Krzeszowski, “A Tract about Wine in the Bible,” 70–71; T. Sutzkover, “The Space and Its Meaning in the Story of Navot’s Vineyard,” *Beit Mikra* 60/1 (2015) 91–65 [Heb].
- 11 E. van Wolde, “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar,” *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible. Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (eds. A. Brenner – C. Fontaine) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1997) 430.
- 12 A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2005) 111; F. Polak, *Biblical Story. Design and Art Exams* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1994) 345 [Heb]; P.R. Noble, “Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation,” *Literature and Theology* 7/2 (1993) 132; A.G. Ramat – C. Mauri – P. Molinelli, “Synchrony and Diachrony: Introduction to a Dynamic Interface,” *Synchrony and Diachrony. A Dynamic Interface* (Amsterdam: Benjamins 2013) https://attach.matita.net/caterinamauri/GIACALONE%20er%20al_introduction.pdf [1–5]; M. Weiss, “The Work of the Story in the Bible,” *Molad* 169/170 (1963) 402 [Heb].
- 13 Perry, M. – Sternberg, M., “The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process,” *Hasifrut*, 1/2 (1986) 288. [Heb]; M. Grasiel, *The First Book of Samuel. A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Ramat Gan: Revivim 1983) 17 [Heb]. For an intertextual approach see van Wolde, “Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar,” 430.
- 14 I used three different translation books for Sirach: Segal, *The Complete Ben-Sira Book*; P.W. Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira. A New Translation with Notes* (ed. A.A. Di Lella) (AB 39; New York: Doubleday 1987); G.A. Rendsburg – J. Binstein, “The Book of Ben Sira” (Rutgers University; New Brunswick, NJ 2013) www.bensira.org, because it is based on all the manuscripts found and united together.

The study will unfold as follows:

1. Each text's outline will be determined.
2. Each text's linguistic traits, form, and content will be examined.
3. An analogical comparison between the two text units will be undertaken to demonstrate a similar functional approach to wine drinking and similar textual characteristics.
4. The meaning of wine drinking in both texts will be identified in relation to accepted social behaviour.
5. A comparison with Sirach will help to gain further insights into the significance of drinking wine in the social messages of Proverbs.
6. The meaning of wine drinking will be considered with regard to cultural elements and social messages in the texts.

In this comparative study of Proverbs and Sirach, further issues will be examined, such as the nature of the characters in the text and its addressees, the purpose and effects of drinking, relationships between wine-drinking proverbs; terms that might refer to wine drinking; differences in ideas of wine drinking in wisdom literature; and allusions to the social significance of drinking.

3. Proverbs 23:19–35

Proverbs 22–24 contain a collection of short sayings, commonly called warnings or precepts.¹⁵ This study focuses on Prov 23:19–21 and 23:24–35, which deal only with wine drinking. The motif of wine drinking appears in a similar context in both passages.

3.1. Proverbs 23:19–21

As the first step, the boundaries of Prov 23:19–21 will be defined. This proverb is part of a larger unit of chapters 22–24. The text begins "Hear, my son, and be wise," a typical beginning in the Book of Proverbs (for example, Prov 1:1; 4:4 or, in slight variation, 2:2–3; cf. 22:17; 23:15; 23:22). The direct address to the son (vv. 15, 19, 26) is a clear sign of a didactic text, such as in the prologue in chapters 1–9.¹⁶ In addition, the following text unit begins with the words "Listen to your father," which marks the beginning of a separate proverb.

Another word marking a division between the units of the text is ׀, which can be observed elsewhere in chapters 22–24 (for example, 22:23; 23:1, 21, 27; 24:6) and marks the link between segments. In other cases, it is used as a conditional conjunction with "if," opening the first clause of a complex sentence in a grammatical form frequently used in

¹⁵ Hurowitz, *Proverbs 10–31*, 452–488.

¹⁶ A similar address can be found in Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts (as in the *Instructions of Amenemopet*). It can include a positive warning, negative advice, or orders in the imperative.

laws (Prov 22:18, 23:1, 7).¹⁷ In Prov 23:21, “for” marks the second clause, functioning as a conjoining element shared by both parallelism clauses, indicating the results of drinking. The shifting theme (23:15–18) marks a further reason for defining the limits of the unit discussed. The previous text mentions righteous speaking and lack of envy; the present one speaks of wine drinking and riotous eaters; and the following (23:22–25) refers to acquiring truth and wisdom.

The choice of words in vv. 24–25 might seem related to the wine drinking of vv. 19–23. Verses 14–25 explicitly discuss acquiring wisdom. The repetition of verbs denoting joy and delight (“greatly rejoice” and “be glad”), alongside mentions of avoiding the company of foreign women, may imply an allusion to wine.

A broad textual unit is discernable in 23:19–35, with much of its vocabulary relating to wisdom (v. 19), truth and understanding (v. 23), and wisdom and righteousness (v. 24), which appear near each other in both verses but are not present in the third part. In addition, the linguistic traits of these verses could define them as a separate unit, such as the common combination of *flesh* (=meat) and *wine* or the repetition of the roots ל"לז (*zll*) and ש"ב (*sb*'), present only in vv. 20–21. These examples might be recognized as a rhetorical buildup that creates a seemingly homogenous sequence among the three units, i.e. vv. 19–21; 22–28, and 29–31. Separating the first and third units can enable a comparative discussion of wine drinking.¹⁸

At this point, the structure and content of the first unit, vv. 19–21 will be presented. The opening proverb (v. 19) presents a personal appeal, a wise father’s or teacher’s advice and warning to his son, beginning with the words “Hear, my son,” (like Prov 23:15). He warns him not to follow the path of the wicked and wine drinkers to keep him from losing his way (like Prov 23:6–11). This is confirmed in the expression “direct your heart in the way,” a metaphorical expression for walking in a groove.¹⁹ In addition, verbs in the imperative that admonish, “Hear,” “be wise,” but do not convey a negative tone. The verse is built from a synonym: “son” stands for the two sides and connects them, creating the impression of completeness relative to the next verses.

Verse 20 begins with the negation ל"א (not) and the verb תהי (be), followed by other imperatives related to hearing and attending. Verse 20 continues with the father’s or teacher’s words, imploring his son not to be an excessive winebibber or eater of flesh. The combination of the words “flesh” and “wine” is common in biblical literature (cf. Isa 22:13;

17 Cf. Lev 11:39; 13:31; 19:35; Deut 7:17; 18:21. A. Aejmelaeus, “Function and Interpretation of Khy in Biblical Hebrew,” *JBL* 105/2 (1986) 193.

18 Michael V. Fox refers to vv. 19–21 as the scattering of thought. In his opinion, these are warnings to prevent evil in a uniform structure of a long instruction (vv. 22–23, 25–35 preventing drunkenness) like Prov 9:1. Hurowitz (*Proverbs 10–31*, 469) divides the passage into small units whose idea is similar to that of the opening, a negative imperative in sentences of reason, for example, 23:19–21 (opening v. 19, negative imperative v. 20 and the reason in v. 21). Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 741.

19 The phrase means to choose the path of compliance, to follow one’s heart rather than following bad influences, and to avoid impediments such as alcohol, vanity and arrogance (for example, Deut 21:18–21). Malbim, however, points to two possible paths a person might choose: wisdom or foolishness.

Hag 2:12; Dan 10:3), unlike “gluttonous eaters of meat,” a hapax legomenon, although the root זלזל (*zl*) itself is common in Proverbs.²⁰ The root סבסב (*sb*) also occurs in Isa 1:22 and 56:12 and Hos 4:18, referring to wine and ineffective wordplay on insatiable drinking in Nah 1:10.

Verse 20 seems to correspond to Deut 21:20, which discusses the law for “a stubborn and rebellious” son. In this text, the boy’s parents bring their rebellious son to the city elders and say, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.” The son is sentenced to stoning. Though the punishment is radical, the message conveyed protects the family, community, and the body. Excessive desire causes corruption, not only in food but also in an individual’s health and conduct towards others. Proverbs relate to this text in that it encourages the norm of obeying parents to prevent adverse consequences. It might be wondered: was this instruction book written when this law was inactive? Was Proverbs a response to drunkenness incidents? Or is this a metaphorical expression denoting general obedience?²¹

Verse 20 features the archaic form למו (from singular to plural) commonly seen in ancient Hebrew poetry, a form of “to them” (here plural) in a negative context with the vine and of wine, meaning enemies and destruction. The verse features a parallelism, where both clauses share the phrases “be not” and “them” and refer to wine drinkers and meat eaters.²² The admonition concerning drunkenness is clear, and the warning probably concerning meat eaters concern feasts rather than the meat of ritual offerings. Deut 12:20, for example, shows that the desire for meat was not viewed favourably, although Exod 16:3 describes the desire for meat and the habit of eating well among the Israelites in Egypt. The reader is also told of the sons of Eli, who craved meat (1 Sam 2:11–17), although Malbim believed that this was a figurative expression: a drunkard is so intoxicated that he eats his ritual meat.²³

The warning in vv. 20–21 takes the form of cause and effect: “Be not among drunkards... For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty.” The alliteration in verse, where the consonant ל (L) is repeated, mimics the state of bafflement, emphasizing the intoxication obtained by excessive drinking and eating. The verse includes two hapax legomena, שִׁנְרָשׁ and נִימָה. Gersonides relates שִׁנְרָשׁ to a state of poverty (from שרש) caused by laziness

20 See Prov 28:7, 20, and metaphorically Jer 15:19; Lam 1:11—gluttons are like winebibbers. Hurowitz, *Proverbs 10–31*, 469.

21 Roger N. Whybray and Bruce K. Waltke interpret the verse: A glutton who drinks to oblivion will become poor because addiction drains the mind and deprives him of his ability to work. According to Hurowitz (*Proverbs 10–31*, 469), the proverb rejects revelry that involves buying wine, causing poverty and disobedience towards one’s parents. W. Kynes, *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press 2021) 32–36; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 256; R.N. Whybray, *Wealth and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT 1990) 154–160.

22 D. Altschuler, *Metzudat David* (Yavorov, Poland 1740–1780) <https://www.sefaria.org/Proverbs.1.23?lang=he&with=Metzudat%20David&lang2=he>.

23 Alshikh and Gersonides refer to excess pleasures and feasting beyond the holidays in which meat was customarily eaten. According to *m. ’Abot 2:7*, he who eats plenty of meat, whether a man of a large body or a glutton, will also abound in other kinds of misconduct (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shabbat, m. Beṣab 6:18*). Sefaria Organization, “Sefaria: The Book of Proverbs” (2022) <https://www.sefaria.org/Proverbs.23> [Heb].

or by excessive drinking. נִרְמָה is a nap (a shortened form of תְּנוּמָה), depicting drunkards and gluttons who lose the ability to stay awake.²⁴ The sinking sound brings out a sense of disorder and heaviness due to excessive eating and drinking. The middle of v. 20 is linked to the beginning of v. 21, as “drunkards” is echoed by “the drunkard,” and “gluttonous [=riotous] eaters of flesh,” are echoed by “glutton,” and “slumber,” referring to a general group of people and signifies an individual with a general pattern of behaviour. The move from group to individual emphasizes the call to avoid immoral examples such as immoderate eating, drinking, and sleeping habits of unwise and unrighteous people.²⁵

Thus, the caution or warning in Prov 23:19–21 indicates a social code opposed to wine drinking and gluttony. Similar to Prov 9:2, 5, the motifs of wine and food, specifically meat, are intertwined, signifying wealth and gluttony.

3.2. Proverbs 23:29–35

The second unit is 23:29–35. It resumes the theme of the previous proverb (23:19–21), although it is not contiguous with it. The author of this article takes vv. 29–35 as a sufficiently related unit from the motif of wine drinking.

The following section (from v. 36) speaks of envy, wisdom, and stratagems of war. Verses 22–28 may have appeared after v. 35. Their location could be an interpolation following the theme of honouring elderly parents (23:22), alluding to the fifth commandment in Exod 20:12 or a reference to the benefits of wisdom and morals that must never be sold (v. 23). These verses are a prologue to 23:29–35, which discusses wine drinking and the forgetfulness of moral conduct. However, they are thematically related to 24:1. A unit can be suggested ending at 24:18 because “joy” and “rejoice” are echoed in 24:17. Repetition seems to play a unifying role. However, the theme is not wine but rather human ploys and conspiracies. Nevertheless, this unit refers to the influence of wine on the individual, with no reference to social interactions.²⁶

24 Malbim and Rashi interpret “slumber will clothe them with rags” as likened to a person whose clothes are stripped off, and he will have a miserable end, as Hurowitz adds. Hurowitz (*Proverbs 10–31*, 469) interprets נִרְמָה (from רָמַשׁ) as a person who is dispossessed of his parents’ property. E. Ben Shlomo – M.L. Ben Yechiel Meachal (Malbim) – Rashi, *Proverbs. With the Interpretation of the Gerah, Yonatan, Rashi and Malbim* (Jerusalem: Yefe Nof 2005) 196 [Heb]; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 256–257.

25 According to the Vilna Gaon, a glutton is a person who eats, sleeps, and cannot study regularly, and a drunkard does not study at all. Hence the contrast with the father who teaches the Torah, and the mother who teaches oral tradition. Richard J. Clifford (*Proverbs. A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1999] 213) suggests a more radical interpretation of the pair of words: a son who refuses to obey his parents when he pretends to be rich, eats and drinks, is doomed to poverty and, therefore, deserves to die. Waltke interprets “glutton” as representing contempt for riches, whereas טוֹבָא as a drunkard who is addicted to wine, as those who are wasted for the sake of meat and wine. Hurowitz mentions the two-part parallelism and compares טוֹבָא to the Akkadian word *Sabû*, in the sense of getting drunk (*Sabû* = tavern keeper). The verb טָבַח is used for mixing wine and water (Isa 1:22) or cooked grape juice: when water is added, alcohol is produced. Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Meachal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 196; Hurowitz, *Proverbs 10–31*, 469; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 2, 256.

26 Clifford (*Proverbs*, 213) adds vv. 22–23 to this unit, and it has been suggested that v. 24 should follow v. 22.

Another element defining this unit is words sharing a common semantic field, such as “deep pit...a narrow well” (v. 27), “sea” (v. 34), referring to depth and liquid, and “mixed wine” (vv. 30–31). While these link units 23:22–28 and 23:29–35, the connection to the metaphors of the entire unit, such as “Those who tarry long over wine” (v. 30), “bites like a serpent” (v. 32), and “lies down in the midst of the sea,” (v. 34), allude to a flowing or twisting motion.

Wine is specifically mentioned across the entire unit of Prov 23:29–31, like 23:20–21, which specifically refers to drunkenness and drinking to oblivion (vv. 33–35). The unit ends, therefore, in v. 35, with a combined tone of hope and despair: “When shall I awake, I must have another drink?” This alludes to the drunkard’s fate, that is, the fate of sleep or death (Prov 9:18; 23:21).

3.3. Motif of Wine Drinking in Proverbs 23:29–35

The analysis of units 23:29–35 will focus on the motif of wine. Verse 29 contains a seemingly mocking rhetorical interrogation composed of six questions: “Who has woe?” “Who has sorrow?” “Who has strife?” “Who has complaining?” “Who has wounds without cause?” “Who has redness of eyes?” All six questions begin with the abbreviation of the direction word “to” (ל) and the interrogative pronoun “who,” creating a sixfold anaphora. All six questions melded into one rhetorical and ironic phrase, beginning with a vague hint and gradually becoming almost explicit, with mockery of or anger at drunkenness. These ironic questions are posed to the drunkard who fails to understand the consequences of his immoral conduct.²⁷

In the first two questions, the word אָוִי (*woe*) is a cry of grief, followed by a possessive pronoun (examples: Num 21:29; 1 Sam 4:8; Isa 5:5; 24:16; Lam 5:16) and in *m. Yoma* 86, 1:12, while the word אָבִוִי (sorrow) is a hapax legomenon. Both words allude to the mother’s (אִמָּה-אָוִי) and father’s (אָבִי-אָבִוִי) sorrow.²⁸

In the third question, מְדוֹנִים (complaints, contentions, quarrels) in *ketiv* (קְדֻיָּנִים – Midianite or litigants, in the hiphil stem) refers to many, and therefore this should be מְתַדְיָנִים (Hitpael; a similar use of the word can be seen in Prov 6:14; 18:18, 19; 21:9, 19; 26:21; 25:24; 27:15).²⁹ The allusion to a discussion or an argument between people is notable. The question here refers to arguing people: who are they?

The fourth question is, “Who is complaining?” The root שַׁיַּח (*syh talk*) also occurs in Prov 6:22 (תְּשַׁחֵךְ, will talk with you) and other biblical texts in various contexts

27 Fox and Waltke claim that these six questions mock the drunkard’s daze and object to it. Waltke thinks that vv. 29–30 function as a prologue to the following text in a question-and-answer form. Every question features a recurring sound, an interrogative word, an anaphora, and an onomatopoeia. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 741; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 262–263.

28 Rashi points out that these are cries of woe. The word אָוִי is common in later texts, such as Tisha B’Av lamentations, for example, in Elazar Kalir’s יש פליטה אהלה 24–35, line 8. Rashi – L. Fredman, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (Jerusalem: The World Union of Jewish Studies 2019) 197 [Heb].

29 Rashi, like other commentators, interprets it as a reference to conflict or crime, while Malbim interprets it as דִּינִים, i.e., transgressing laws or arguments. Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Meachal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 198.

(50 occurrences, including wisdom literature). This might be an ironic reference to symposiums, which were considered futile by the author.³⁰

The fifth question refers to “wounds,” in a biblical hapax legomenon, frequently used in *m. Šabb.* 7:2, and 17:2. However, the root פצע (פצ‘, “wound”) occurs in Gen 4:24, Exod 25:25, and Isa 1:6, meaning “bruise.” The present context is of a person injured for no reason. Ibn Ezra interprets this as the affliction people bring upon themselves by their behaviour, specifically regarding sores caused by drunkenness.

The final question, “Who hath redness of eyes?” is noted by commentators specifically in the context of wine drinking. “Redness” as a feminine noun is a biblical hapax legomenon (cf. in the masculine, Gen 49:12). The reference is clearly to כהל, a red substance used for eyelid painting. *Seder HaʿAvodah* of Yom Kippur reports that this colour is produced from grapes. Could it mean blue or red eyes due to lack of sleep or injury? The sequence of rhetorical questions depicts the drunkard who does not sleep, fights, babbles idly, and has red eyes.³¹

Verse 30 answers the question with a warning with the preposition ל (those), which occurs twice, “those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine.” The repetition emphasizes prohibition and anger towards the drinkers, but also the irony of addiction to drink.³²

A parallel continuation of the warning against drinking wine is in v. 31, using the negative word “do not” and twice using the word of reason “when” to explain the reason. The first clause indicates that drinking may cause intoxication, producing red eyes and illness (losing consciousness or dying). The second clause refers to spending money (keeping an eye on his pocket) because the drunk keeps buying wine. The correction of the pocket in *qere* to the cup preserves the double meaning when the drunk looks at the cup (putting his eye in

30 For Rashi, these words refer to futile conversation. Malbim recommends curbing any discourse that lacks limit or involves tongue slips.

31 Rashi interprets watering or red eyes as caused by excess drinking. Ibn Ezra notes the rhyming play of wine and eye. According to Malbim and Tova Forti, the rhetorical question forms a staccato, onomatopoeic sound, using phrases from the semantic field of quarrel and contention. Yair Zakovitch points out that this parable constitutes an equivocal puzzle. On the one hand, the wise man documents the consequences of drinking wine by looking at the drunkard. On the other hand, he supposedly lets the drunkard win. In other words, the wise man realizes that drinking is not necessarily bad in a complex, varying reality. T. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs* (VTSup 118; Leiden: Brill 2008) 37; Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Meachal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 198; Clifford, *Proverbs*, 213; Rashi – Fredman, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, 197; Y. Zakovitch, “Who Has Woe, Who Has Sorrow? – Proverbs 23: 29–35: Warning Wise Men against Drinking Wine?,” *A Variety of Opinions and Views in Israeli Culture* 9 (ed. D. Kerem) (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education 1999) 21–22 [Heb].

32 Moshe Zaidel and Forti note the influence of Ps 5:12, where heroes and warriors are portrayed in a feast-like scenario, drinking wine and acting like they were drunk. Rashi states that mixed wine is addicting (Lev 25:14) and regards the “searchers” as those seeking good wine or ways to pour it. Ibn Ezra refers to those seeking different-tasting wines, while Malbim sees both clauses as a whole: after drinking all night, the drinkers look for what wine tastes like and who pours it better. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 37; Rashi – Fredman, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, 197; M. Zaidel, “From the Birth of Book of Proverbs in the Mouth of Isaiah,” *Moshe Seidel, Biblical Studies* (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute 1998) 99 [Heb].

the cup) and in his pocket (in the pocket). The expression “goes down smoothly” means “go on a straight path”: the drunk believes his path is right and loses the distinction between right and wrong.³³

In v. 32, further reasons are noted for attraction to drinking, using wordplay based on the root אהר (ʾhr): אהריתו (in the end it), echoing the previous verse, למאחרים (that tarry). Those who drink until dawn are destined to horrible ends like from a serpent’s bite, i.e., death. The words “the end it,” shared by both clauses of the complementary parallelism, emphasizes the dire warning of a drunkard’s future. The same with the word “like” used twice, recalling snake venom and the drunkard’s future destruction.

Using two synonyms for snake – “serpent” is a general word, and “adder” is a specific snake. The serpent mentioned in Gen 3:1, 2, 4 is a sneaky animal. However, in Gen 49:17, the blessing of Dan, mention is made of another type of snake, “viper,” signifying Dan’s ability to ambush an enemy. References to serpents warn those who do not obey God (Num 21:6; Jer 8:17). However, in Num 21:9, a bronze serpent set on a pole is used for healing (Exod 4:3; 7:15). The root נחשׁ (nhš snake) refers to sorcery (Num 23:23; 24:1). צפנוני (ESV uses “adder”) is unique to Proverbs, but a shorter form צפנע, appears in Isa 14:29 and in the 4Q266 f 3ii, 2; 6Q15 f2,1 (*The Book of Covenant of Damascus*) and with the word “cobra” (Isa 11:8; 59:5) as a symbol for the punishment of the enemy or sinners within Israel. The verb “stings” refers to the venom excreted by a snake that penetrates the human body, just as wine or witchcraft spreads in the body. Therefore, the use of the general term “snake” and the use of a specific word is a double strike of the snake, like poison, emphasizing the prohibition against wine. Thus, both snakes signify the ultimate punishment for a drunkard: death.³⁴

Unlike the previous verse, which provides a general statement, v. 33 addresses a specific person. Synonymous parallelism appears here, referencing the eyes and heart (v. 26)

33 Ibn Ezra interprets this as a concrete warning because wine reflects the drunkard’s condition. Malbim regards this verse as a symbolic warning against the desire to drink wine: While the red colour of wine might seem a sign of health, one might become sick when one sees the colour of wine in the glass (according to *qere*), though one will imagine there is nothing bad in the path one is walking. Fox interprets: It looks like good-tasting mixed wine, but it is, in fact, poison. The word eye, in the sense of being seen, refers to the drunkard examining the wine with his eyes and seeing himself reflected in it (Eccl 1:7). Rashi holds that even as the drunk sees his glass, the wine-seller sees his pocket full of coins. For Forti, v. 31 is a sarcastic description of a drunkard mixing drinks in response to the rhetorical questions of v. 29; Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Meachal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 197; Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 38; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 741; Sefaria Organization, “Sefaria – the Book of Proverbs.”

34 Ibn Ezra and Malbim remark that אהריתו means the wine will bite you like a snake, and you will excrete poison, or bad urine, just as snakes excrete venom. Waltke finds a pun in vv. 31–32, with the words פֶּרֶשׁ, יֶשֶׁךְ, בִּזְזָה, בִּישׁ, מִמֶּסֶךְ – displaying a catalogue of wine-drinking effects, from the very first taste of wine to the point of the irreversible vortex. According to Forti, a snake’s venom represents evil people’s malicious intentions. She argues that the interpretation of snake as the ultimate enemy of man is a later concept and is therefore anachronistic. Verse 31 relates to the illusion of pleasure followed by a cruel awakening as a snake-bitten person, although the injured person does not learn his lesson. A similar picture can be seen in Isa 5:11; 7:41, and Ps 74:6; Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Meachal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 36, 124; “Sefaria – the Book of Proverbs”; Rashi – Fredman, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, 197; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 264, 266–267.

as signifying wisdom. The clause “your heart utter perverse things” refers to the opposite of normal speech caused by excess drinking. The author seems familiar with Deut 32:20, which alludes to the fate of an unreliable, rebellious generation. Furthermore, in Prov 6:14, the phrase “utter perverse things” appears in parallels to “strange things” and near “strife,” alluding to v. 29. Elsewhere in Proverbs, “utter perverse things” is used to describe a rebellious youth or acts of rebellion: 8:13; 16:28, 30.³⁵ Prov 23:32–33 are parallel in concept and theme, describing the concept of drinking, similar to a serpent’s bite and making a man talk unreasonably.

Verse 34 continues to present the image of an idle person lying in the sea. The phrase “on the top of a mast” can also be read as “hit in the head,” a hint anticipating the explicit phrase “They struck me” in the next verse. The image alludes to a drunk man, unaware of his surroundings, lazy, hit on the head, and unknowingly hurting others. This verse uses a synonymous parallelism with vv. 31, 33. The words “heart” and “your eyes” are echoed metaphorically by “in the midst of the sea” and “on the top of a mast,” thus alluding to the body parts involved in thinking: heart, eye, and head. In addition, the double use of the word “lies down/on” is echoed by legs, emphasizing the damage by drinking, like how wine impairs judgment, damages physical condition beyond repair, and leads to isolation, as emphasized by the metaphoric phrases.³⁶

The negative particle לֹא (was not) appears twice in v. 35. In other biblical texts, it is used as a warning (Isa 14:24; 26:14; 33:21), but here it is a negation: “I was **not** hurt”; “I did **not** feel it.” The negation in the first clause seems puzzling, but the second clause is reasonable in the case of wine drinking because an intoxicated person does not even notice being harassed.³⁷

While vv. 33–34 speak to a general (masculine) addressee, v. 35 is in the first person, portraying the drunkard himself using his own words, finally realizing his problem in hindsight. The drunkard does not know when he will wake up or what will happen if he resumes drinking. The question “When shall I awake?” is not rhetorical. It expresses a state of bafflement, although the speaker knows what will happen when he awakes: “I will seek it yet again.” The text speaks with the words of one who cannot discern right from wrong,

35 According to Tg. Ps-J., “eyes shall behold strange women” means that drunkenness leads to bad habits. Rashi further adds that drunkenness “burns in a man,” making him look at prostitutes. Therefore, commentators see Prov 23:22–28 as a textual unit concerned with women and wine. Fox remarks that wine causes unreasonable talk. Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Mechal – Rashi, *Proverbs* 198; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 741; Rashi – Fredman, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, 198.

36 According to Rashi, a strike on the head is caused by the ship’s mast, which is why a wise person always travels with others to avoid danger at sea. Malbim and Fox describe this as drowning in a mirage created by man’s imagination. Waltke points out that according to v. 34, quoting the father’s words to his son, he forces him to acknowledge the hallucinations of a man sleeping in the middle of the sea, with no horizon and mobility, to illustrate the consequences of drinking wine for the drunk. According to Forti, this complements the image of the drunkard, which depicts a man sleeping on a rocking vessel in the middle of nowhere on a high mast. Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Mechal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 198; Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 38; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 741; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 265.

37 According to Malbim, the negation “was not” indicates a warning. Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Mechal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 198; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 264.

unable to quit drinking. This rhetorical personal speech is used to convince the reader of the consequences of drinking.

The first-person singular here portrays the speech of a drunkard mumbling to himself and his message that anyone can find themselves in this mishap; one must be cautious about drinking. The word “have another” (add=אִינְיִן) echoes the word “among” (תּוֹסֵף) in v. 28, closing the proverb with a feeling of a man who is walking in circles, like a drunkard, contrary to the opposite phrase “goes down smoothly” (v. 31).³⁸

Thus, this proverb is a warning parents give their sons about excessive wine drinking. At first, drinking is mocked, describing people who drink (vv. 29–32). Then, the son himself is addressed (vv. 33–34), and finally, a speech from the mouth of a drunkard himself follows (v. 35). This implies that the parents desire their son to walk the straight path and avoid dire consequences of drinking. Likewise, one must obey one’s parents and avoid the temptation to drink in excess. It should be noted that it is not complete abstinence that is recommended, but merely avoiding addiction.³⁹

Prov 23:19–21 reveals the balance. A person who understands the effects of wine and refrains from excess will be considerate of his parents, while the drunkard loses his head, eyes, and sense of judgment (Prov 23:34–35).

38 Ibn Ezra sheds further light on the question, “When shall I awake?” with the following answer: I will continue my pursuit of wine. Fox follows Rashi in interpreting this verse: When a drunkard wakes up in the morning, he will not realize the reason for his mishaps and will continue drinking. Fox compares this verse to an Egyptian text, Anii 17.6–11, which forbids drinking, specifying some of the consequences of excessive drinking: confused speech, health problems, and abuse of other people (Prov 31:1–9). Both Clifford and Waltke regard vv. 31–35 as a text that mocks a drunkard, portraying him as a naive boy, unlike the sober man; Ben Shlomo – Ben Yechiel Mechal – Rashi, *Proverbs*, 198; Clifford, *Proverbs*, 213–214; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 741; Rashi – Fredman, *Rashi’s Commentary on the Book of Proverbs*, 198; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 266–267.

39 Andrew, in contrast to Whybray, believes that this is a riddle (v. 29), and the answer (v. 30) continues with the warning of the wise teacher (v. 31) about the consequences of a headache after a night of drinking (v. 32) as well as other consequences of turning directly into a drunkard (vv. 33–34). He calls the scene in v. 35 a “comic tragedy,” in which the drunk man says he was not hurt when others beat him as he is unable to realize his condition. However, Waltke and Hurowitz frame this unit as a ridiculous poem that mocks the negation of enemies and warns against drunkenness and hidden traps (Isa 4:11; Sir 19:2). On the other hand, Fox and Duane A. Garrett see vv. 29–35 as a lament for the drunkard’s terrible fate. However, Waltke identifies two modes of behaviour in Prov 23—wrong and right. The author describes the pathetic descent into a physical and emotional abyss caused by alcohol. The author advises his readers to avoid drinking but empathizes with people who drink. M.E. Andrew, “Variety of Expression in Proverbs XXIII 29–35,” *VT* 28/1 (1978) 102–103, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853378x00329>; D.A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville, TN: Broadman 2003) 157; Hurowitz, *Proverbs 10–31*, 472–478; Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 740; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 3–4, 10, 264.

4. Proverbs and Sirach

The following analogical comparison between Prov 23:19–21 and 23:29–35, parallel to Sirach, deals with the central theme of social behaviour while drinking wine. First, the comparison deals with phrases related to the motif of drinking wine, continues to present the authors' messages, and finally, discusses the social meaning of the strictures against drunkenness.

The motif of wine drinking is explicitly thematized in Proverbs and Sirach. Proverbs use verbs in the negative imperative to warn the reader of the consequences of drinking: "Do not mix ..." (Prov 23:20), "Do not despise..." (Prov 23:22). This entails a negative attitude towards wine drinking, due to its dire consequences. Sirach also uses negative imperatives, such as "And do not go around with her when you are drinking" (Sir 9:9a); "Do not abandon an old friend..." (9:10a); "Where listening is in order, do not pour out discourse, and flaunt not your wisdom at the wrong time." (32:4), depicting the consequences of wine drinking for others.⁴⁰ Sirach also uses the prohibitive לֹא "Lest you hand over" (Sir 9:9b), describing how a wine drinker might humiliate himself (cf. "Do not" [Prov 23:20]).

For both negative and positive contexts, the future tense that is used in Sirach marks the possibility of preventing or avoiding an unpleasant future event. Future-tense verbs may relate happiness and joy: "...Does one really live who lacks the wine which was created from the first for his joy?" (Sir 31:27; 40:18–22). However, a positive aspect of wine drinking is given in the present tense, for example (Sir 9:13–14); "More and more wine is a snare for the fool; it lessens his strength and multiplies his wounds" (Sir 31:30); "listening is...singing when the wine is served" (Sir 32:4–5).

In Proverbs, description of these positive aspects can be divided into verbs of action and verbs of learning, including "tarry long over" (Prov 23:30), "goes down" (23:31), and "utter things" (23:33), which place drinking in a self-learning or socializing process, which is contrasted to the passivity of the individual: "lies down (twice)...struck me...beat me...I did not feel it" (Prov 23:34–35). By contrast, the use in Proverbs of common verbs of action, such as "Hear... be wise" (v. 19–20), "will see" (23:33), and "will say" (23:35) emphasizes the biblical idea of drinking wisdom representing a link between the two texts. Sirach also employs active verbs concerning study, albeit not often, using words such as "examine" (31:26), "will carry wisdom" (32:2–3), "find a treasure" (40:18), and "his memory" (49:2), all of which may imply learning. Sirach knows the didactic means used in Proverbs, but he disagrees with their use, as seen mainly in the frequent use of the words "jealous" (9:12, 15) and "joy" (cf. 18:32; 31:27–28; 40:20), presenting a realistic attitude through education that strives for the ideal.

In Prov 23 and in Sirach, most verbs in the imperative and the future in the context of drinking refer to drinking being the cause of harm to drinkers and those around them.

⁴⁰ J. Corley, *Ben Sirā's Teaching on Friendship* (BJS 316; Providence, RI: Brown University 2002) 20–21, 84, 86, 89, 94, 96.

In contrast, verbs in the present and some in the future describe how wine can be enjoyed in a way that escapes its negative outcomes (Sir 31:31). It is, therefore, reasonable to infer that Prov 23 assigns to the parents of youths their training regarding drinking. Sirach encourages drinking as a customary social practice and is able to discern the difference between drunkenness and drinking for pleasure.

A comparison of the vocabulary used to refer to drinking in Proverbs and Sirach may shed light on the root *štb* (drink), which does not appear in Prov 23, where the expressions “They that tarry long at the wine... go to seek mixed wine” (v. 30) or “it is red... in the cup” (v. 31) are found. The verb for “drink” is largely used ironically, showing defiance of social injustice (cf. Prov 31:1). For its part, Sir 31:27b demonstrates a positive attitude towards drinking: “Gladness of heart and joy and merriment is wine [drunk in its right time]. What does the one lacking in wine live for? For the beginning it was apportioned to bring joy” (cf. Sir 9:14; Ps 104:15).⁴¹

In Proverbs, a range of expressions relating to the central semantic field are used to describe wine drinkers (cf. Prov 9:17). The word “drunk” itself does not appear in the parables given in Proverbs, but it is given conceptually, in periphrases, with references to “Those who tarry long over wine” or “those who go to try mixed wine” (Prov 23:30), “strong drink” (Prov 20:1), “drunkards” (Prov 23:20). Nevertheless, in Prov 23:20–21, 30, in addition to the description on a drunkard’s behaviour as immoral or heartless, lacking right judgement and betrayal (v. 28), he is presented as drinking and eating immoderately falling into a ditch (v. 27) and becoming involved in conflict (v. 29). Two phrases used to depict drinkers in a negative light are found in Sirach: “drink intoxicants” (Sir 9:9) and “drunkard and a glutton” (Sir 18:33). Sirach notes the relevance of contention as well, using the expression “wine drunk amid anger and strife” (Sir 31:29). Both phrases bear the stamp of the educational tone found in both Proverbs and Sirach, whereby they denounce excess drinking.

The noun “feast” (or “symposium” or “banquet”) appears several times in Sirach (Sir 31:31; 32:5–6; 49:2), as the expression “a place of wine,” in the same sense (Sir 32:1–3), and *משתה היין* (wine feast) “a company singing when wine is served” in Sir 32:5 (see Esth 7:7). A symposium is a term that denotes a ceremonial encounter for drinking and philosophical discussions or a religious encounter, and it is commonly accompanied by the presence of music and women. One should note the equal status of men and women in symposia (Prov 9:2, 5; 23:25; cf. Job 1:13). Sirach 31 gives little in the way of advice or warnings concerning proper conduct at a symposium. This may teach us something about the mindset of upper-class Jews, who attended and organized symposia (see Esth 1:4–5; 8:2; John 2:8–10). Prov 23:30–31 also hints at the phrase: “They that tarry long at the wine...” However, although the word “feast” is commonly seen in the Bible (Isa 5:12; Esth 5:6; 7:2, 7, 8; Dan 1:5, 8, 16), the authors of Proverbs omit it. This is done to prevent any connection

41 Segal, *The Complete Ben-Sira Book*, 57; Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 390.

to the era in which the book was written and to recommend that all young people avoid drinking in every generation.⁴²

The combination of meat and wine is depicted in a symposium setting in Prov 23:20 (similar to Prov 9:4, 17 but in contrast to Prov 31). When wine is present together with meat, it may connote a positive or negative feast. It is possible to present a picture of a high, noble society that is capable of holding symposia with food and drink, excluding the simple rustic crowd. Sirach's reference to wine and meat is implicit in the same phrase but with the opposite meaning from the reference in Proverbs: the "drunkard and the glutton" (Sir 18:33). Perhaps there was no meat at this symposium, or Sirach, although he knew the connection, deliberately ignored it. However, Sirach uses the combination of "bread" and "wine" (31:17, 23–25), similar to Prov 20:1; 31:4, as well as the combination of "wine and liquor" (40:18–20) and "honey" (49:1), thus referring to the same customary food common at the feast. Both sources refer to feasting, but Sirach sees it as a positive, balanced place, contrasting with the reticence of Proverbs.⁴³

Another word appearing in the semantic field of wine is *רַמְמָה*, which refers to wine mixed with another substance in a negative context (see Ps 75:9), although one would expect that such a beverage would be milder. In Prov 23:30, this word refers to gathering and drinking within the context of drunk people, contrasting with the wise woman who poured (*מִסְכָּה*) the wine in Prov 9:2. In Sirach, this word is absent, which may mean that the word was no longer used or that its meaning had changed.⁴⁴

Sirach 31:37–40 employs rhetorical devices that resemble those used in Prov 23:29. While Sirach presents an inverted message, its author betrays knowledge of Prov 23:29. Sirach asks for whom and with what purpose wine was invented, answering that it was made for joy, expressing that it should be drunk at the right time and in moderation. Both sources seek to teach young boys good manners by rhetorical questions. As in Proverbs, in Sirach, the questions are ironic: "What is life to a man who is without wine" (Sir 31:27–28). Sirach also mentions slurred speech due to drinking (Sir 32:4), providing an answer to the rhetorical question "Who hath babbling?" in Prov 23:29. The sage or teacher employs these questions to pique learners' curiosity to bring them to discuss the positive and negative

42 Patrick W. Skehan and Fox suggest that although Sirach is not comparable with Proverbs, Sirach must have been acquainted with the Hellenistic symposium (Sir 6:23–25; 32:1–13). In Ugaritic, a symposium was called Marza'u (Hebrew מִרְחָה), a meal accompanied by drinking, like the one mentioned in Amos 6:4–8, or the wise men's symposium alluded to in Prov 9:1–11. The Hellenistic symposium included philosophical or religious discussions and was a notable part of the Jewish symposium. The Letter of Aristeas describes a seven-day symposium to which wise Jewish men were invited to discuss philosophical issues (vv. 186–294); Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 305–306; Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 389–390.

43 Corley, *Ben Sira's Teaching on Friendship*, 97–98.

44 Mixed wine was normal in those days, and drinking "pure" wine would have been an exception. See the word in modern Greek for wine: not "oinos" (οἶνος), but a "krater" (κεράυνον for wine mixing bowl). Isa 65:11 uses the same phrase in a warning against drunkenness. Waltke suggests that it is the fermentation of grapes, already mentioned in Gen 9:21, where the context is the effects of wine. J.P. Brown, "The Mediterranean Vocabulary of the Vine," *VT* 19/2 (1969) 153–155, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853369x00419>; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 2.

consequences of wine drinking. The theme of young people vs. parents, where the experienced parents educate youths, is common in Proverbs (1:8; 2:1; 4:1; 13:1; 23:19; 31:1–2).⁴⁵

Sirach acknowledges Prov 23 as well, referring to it in the context of terms and rhetoric that are in common. In addition, he plays with the word “pocket,” going from an empty pocket (18:33) to one full of gold (32:4) while spending time at a wine feast, but this does not necessarily imply a glass of drink, in contrast to Prov 23:31. Sirach uses “joy” in the context of drinking also as a warning: “Do not rejoice...” (18:31), in an ironic tone as well: “From the beginning joy was created” (31:27) but also when intended for pleasure in a moderate amount, becoming “joy of the heart” (31:28), “let the heart rejoice” 40:20. The echo of the Proverb in the text of Sirach has a didactic function because he disclaims the required social norms and allows drinking, albeit in a limited and appropriate manner, he obliges the partner in dialogue with the wise teacher to face reality and endure compromise. Proverbs focus on the personal consequences of drinking instead of on its effects on the people who surround the drinker. Sirach also emphasizes the social consequences of drinking (esp. Sir 9:11–16; 31:34–46; 18:32–33; 32:4), providing clear instructions for which behaviour should be avoided in drinking. Both sources strenuously warn their readers of the dangers of drinking. These admonitions constitute socially normative advice.

Sirach and Proverbs refer to similar body parts when discussing the drinking of wine, such as the head and heart. Sirach speaks of the heart when it comes to drinking with women in this way: “lest your heart be inclined to her” (9:12; and the same idea in 19:2). He understands the heart as an organ that shows the deviation of the emotion towards evil but also in the same balanced tone that he takes in mentioning the “joy of the heart” (31:28). By contrast, Proverbs refers to the heart as the organ of thought with the ability to control actions (Prov 23:16, 19, 34). Sirach makes mention of the head in two ways as well: first implicitly as an “examiner” (Sir 31:26), and then explicitly as an organ that must be protected from pain following drinking “headache of wormwood and shame” (31:29). Proverbs refers to the head in the same way (that is, implicitly, 23:23) as well as explicitly regarding the consequences of drinking (23:35), where the head complements and emphasizes the eyes that investigate and criticize actions (23:31, 33). Sirach highlights the balanced educational approach of Proverbs, while also considering results but not losing pleasure.

In Proverbs, the drinking of wine is an important motif, becoming a social symbol. The discussion of wine begins with a warning against inappropriate behaviour (23:29–35), such as getting drunk (23:20; 31:4, 8–9), and speaks of a leader’s improper conduct (Prov 31:4–7), ending with the exploitation of the poor (Prov 31:5). However, Proverbs does not entirely prohibit wine (Prov 23:20, 30) but merely warns against its excessive use. This is emphasized and echoed in Sirach, defining situations where a person should not drink: when one is accompanied by a wife of another man (Sir 9:9), when one is unable to pay (Sir 18:33), when one is spending too much (Sir 32:4–5), when drinking “wine is a snare for the fool” (Sir 31:30), and when it causes drunkenness, loss of consciousness, forbidden

⁴⁵ Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 389.

or otherwise negative behaviour (Sir 31:26), anger (Sir 31:29, 31), an unintentional revelation of secrets (Sir 31:31–32), medical problems (Sir 9:9; 31:29–30, cf. Prov 23:30–35), or being mocked (Sir 32:5).⁴⁶

Both Proverbs and Sirach refer to the consequences of wine drinking. However, Sirach defines certain dangers of drinking in more specific times: fornication and murder (Sir 9:12), intense jealousy (Sir 9:15–16), despicable behaviour in the company of fools (Sir 31:35–36), and degradation (Sir 31:45–46). Sirach gives the impression of drawing on his knowledge and experience and using a more social tone (31:31–32).

Nevertheless, Sirach mentions some benefits of wine (Sir 32:4–5), including encouraging songs (Sir 9:14, 31:27; 32:4–5). The wine songs presented towards the end of Sirach attest to his positive inclination towards wine drinking, despite all the caveats (Sir 31:38–40; 32:4–5; 40:18–22; 49:1). Overall, a balance is struck between positive and negative statements about wine in Sirach. Sirach's message, therefore, is complex, consisting of almost contradictory approaches to wine: a serious one, providing an educational perspective, and a light, pleasure-seeking one (Sir 31:41–46; 40:18), albeit giving two warnings against wine (Sir 31; 39–40). In Sirach, although warnings are given regarding the damage that can be caused by irresponsible drinking, one might conclude that wine is foremost a source of pleasure, while Proverbs adheres strictly to a didactic orientation and a negative perspective on drinking.⁴⁷

As noted, the texts in Prov 23:19–21, 29–35, as in Sirach 18:33; 31:22–52 emphasize moderation in drinking and warn drinkers against uncontrolled drinking. The themes of drinking and abstaining from it form a keystone of morality, in light of which Proverbs outlines essential social instructions for its addressees. Prov 23:20 describes a wise person who does not drink wine and is not a riotous eater of flesh, i.e., one who refrains from excess (in contrast with Prov 9:5), and Sirach mentions bread together with wine (Sir 31:17, 23–26) for the balance of drunkenness, to reinforce the idea.⁴⁸

Sirach sheds additional light on the complexity of the educational approach to drinking wine in Proverbs. Sirach notes the positive side of wine drinking as a habit that does not need to be abandoned (Sir 9:13–14). While it calls for wine to be drunk moderately (Sir 31:27, 29; 49:1), it recommends that it be drunk with joy and wisdom (Sir 31:27–31;

46 According to Waltke, the reader should understand the irony here. The purpose of a dialogue between a sage and a pupil or between a parent and a child is to reveal the truth. Carolyn J. Sharp notes that silence, or defiance, challenges the reader to confront adverse opinions. G. Bellia, "An Historico-Anthropological Reading of the Work of Ben Sira," *The Wisdom of Ben Sira. Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology* (eds. A. Passaro – G. Bellia) (Berlin: De Gruyter 2008) 66; A.A. Di Lella, "Ben Sira's Doctrine on the Discipline of the Tongue. An Intertextual and Synchronic Analysis," *The Wisdom of Ben Sira. Studies on Tradition, Redaction, and Theology* (eds. A. Passaro – G. Bellia) (Berlin: De Gruyter 2008) 241; C.J. Sharp, "'How Long Will You Love Being Simple?' Irony in Wisdom Traditions," *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2009) 187–238; Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 390; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, 267.

47 Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 740; Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, 389.

48 Hurowitz, *Proverbs 10–31*, 266.

40:20–21), describing wine drinking with the image of finding a treasure (wisdom) (Sir 40:18–19, and cf. Prov 9:5–9). However, the educational tone of Proverbs is echoed in Sirach when it is indicated that unwise behaviour in drinking can cause social damage (Sir 9:12, 15–16; 31:30–31; 32:4). Unlike Prov 23:19–21, Sirach does not use parents as agents to warn youths. The author sees his audience as adults who are experienced in drinking and himself as someone who can guide them.

One might surmise from this that the writers of Proverbs and Sirach experienced drinking occasions (Prov 23:20, 30–31; Sir 18:33; 32:4–5; 40:19–20). Sirach presents things from a personal point of view, expressing an interest in restrained drinking. Prov 23 speaks of the social problems that arise from unrestrained drinking at a feast and refers to the serious consequences of that.

The text in Proverbs is more coherent than Sirach and tends to be more earthly, practical, socially oriented, and with implicature. Proverbs is an educational text addressed to a young person. Sirach, by contrast, refers to a dual audience: youths who are only entering adult society and need guidance on the one hand, and responsible adults on the other.

Regarding Sirach, Prov 23 presents a complex attitude towards wine drinking. On the one hand, the text presents drinking in moderate amounts as an example of wisdom. However, the text refers continually to excessive drinking and the lack of moderation, with the serious consequences entailed for people, parents, and the society in which they live. Therefore, both texts in Prov 23 discussed in this paper convey a similar message: drinking is allowed and even provides pleasure, although it requires moderation and balance. As Sirach sums it up, “Wine is very life to humans, if taken in due measure” (31:27).

Conclusions

In ancient Israelite society, wine was an integral part of any meal, and it was an important element in social and agricultural events. It is reasonable to assume that Prov 23 is addressed to members of a high social class. This context is associated with unlimited quantities of wine and food, while poverty and laziness are treated as a mishap. The author of Proverbs, therefore, puts forward a complex approach: strictly prohibiting drinking could lead to injustice and defiance. At the same time, gentle instruction and presentation of consequences in an understanding manner can lead to the cultivation of moderate drinking. Sirach takes this same approach and strengthens this position, allowing for the enjoyment of wine and, at the same time, distinguishing this and his teaching from intoxication.

Prov 23 refers to the drinking of wine as a symbol of the ideal education of a young person whose soul is highly complex. Sirach, following Proverbs, uses wine drinking as a symbol of social warning for all ages, although he is not as firm in his educational approach. This topic could be explored through the examination of additional passages from the wisdom books.

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