

GISELA H. KREGLINGER: *The Spirituality of Wine*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2016, 300 pp., ISBN: 978-0-802-86789-6 (paperback), \$24.00.

Of all the books that aim to “pair” wine with food, or with geography, or with prices, or with taste, or with history, or with any other variable, Gisela Kreglinger’s new book on wine is a statistical outlier: the author pairs wine with spirituality. *The Spirituality of Wine* is a book about wine and the Christian faith, as the author describes it: “The Christian spirituality I espouse in the pages of this book is rooted in Christian Scripture and nourished by the wisdom of the rich Christian tradition of our ancestors, those who have gone before us in the faith” (p. 1). Kreglinger has the theological chops *and* the family experience to write such a book: she holds a Ph.D. in historical theology from the University of St. Andrews, *and* she grew up in a family whose business has produced and sold wine for generations.¹

If a reader comes to this book knowing nothing about the Christian faith, or about wine, those deficiencies will be remedied. Indeed, a thesis of the book is that the Christian faith cannot be understood and appreciated without knowing its nexus with wine. The connection Kreglinger makes between Christianity and wine is not only historical, such as Jesus’s first miracle being the changing of water into wine. The deeper connection is theological: the very divinity of Christ and the nature of salvation itself is tied to the blood of Christ, which the Christian faith connects to wine. Thus, *The Spirituality of Wine* can be read as a primer on the tenets of the Christian faith. But the book also can be read as a primer on how wine is made, in what manner wine is to be consumed, and the reason wine is the most special of all beverages.

Kreglinger divides her book into two parts: Sustenance and Sustainability. The first tilts toward theology; the second tilts toward the production and consumption of wine. What is especially satisfying about the book is the way the author weaves the narrative of the Christian faith with the narrative of wine making and wine consumption. The word “informative” comes to mind—but so does the word “inspirational.”

Many sermons have been given about Jesus’s turning water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana (John 2). Kreglinger goes beyond this familiar story to explain how wine appears in the Christian scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. Noah is the first vintner (Genesis 9:1), producing a beverage the Bible describes as bringing gladness to the human heart and comfort during times of distress (Psalm 104:15; Proverbs 31:6–7). Noah also is the first person in the Bible to become drunk, and Kreglinger describes not only the joy that wine consumption can bring but the tragic consequences that overconsumption can cause. Other Old Testament figures

¹ As a baby, Kreglinger was placed in a playpen in the vineyard because her mother was working there. As a little girl, her job was to crawl into the wine vats and scrub them clean from the inside. The Kreglinger family vineyard is neither a hobby nor a tax dodge.

whose lives connect with wine include Abraham (Genesis 14:18) and Isaac, who gives his son the eloquent blessing, “May God give you the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine” (Genesis 27:28, 37). When Moses sends out scouts to survey the promised land, they report seeing a “valley of grape clusters,” which signals the goodness of the promised land (Numbers 13:21–27). At the time of Israel’s rule under Solomon, the scriptures record that the people of Israel lived “each under his own vine and fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25). This was a time of peace and flourishing—and wine helped make it so.

Indeed, so fundamental is wine in the Bible that the nation of Israel is often compared to a vine or a vineyard. In Psalm 80, Israel is described as a vine brought out of Egypt to be transplanted in the fertile soil of the Promised Land. As Kreglinger outlines the connection between God’s chosen people and wine, important parallels include “the need to stay rooted in God’s garden; their dependence on God the vintner for pruning, watering, and protection; and their calling to become a fruitful nation and a blessing to others” (p. 26). The parallel between Israel and viticulture continues when the prophets, bemoaning times of Israel’s wickedness, describe Israel as a “wild vine” (Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:2). The Bible verse displayed at the United Nations plaza is drawn from Israel’s connection to wine: “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2:4). The pruning hook is the most fundamental tool of the vintner.

In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly makes references to wine—and assumes his audience is familiar with viticulture. Jesus enjoys wine—indeed, one of the charges leveled against him by the Pharisees is being a “glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 15:19–20). Jesus regularly illustrates his parables with references to viticulture and wine. In the “I am” statements by Jesus, he says of himself: “I am the true vine; God the father is the vine-grower; and his disciples are the branches” (John 15:1–6). So fundamental is viticulture to the Christian gospel that the apostle John maintains that followers of Jesus are to “abide” in Christ—in the same way that a branch must “abide” in (or be connected to) the vine to bear fruit.

According to Kreglinger, the relationship between wine and the Christian faith culminates in what Christians call “the last supper,” where Jesus takes a cup of wine and compares it to his blood, which will be shed for the sins of the world. From this mysterious mingling of blood and wine is derived the sacrament where Christians consume wine—following the same instructions that Jesus gives to his followers at their Passover meal: “this do in remembrance of me.” No six words have done more to increase the consumption of wine than these six words of instruction from Jesus to his disciples.

For generations, millions of people have consumed wine each Sunday in accord with this teaching. Roman Catholics believe that the wine they consume at Mass actually is the blood of Christ. Protestants believe that the wine they consume at communion represents the blood of Christ. In each case, wine provides the vehicle

for “communing” with Christ in recognition of what Christians (of all stripes) believe to be the atoning death of the Son of God.² If the sacrament of the Lord’s supper were not enough to establish the crucial connection between the Christian faith and wine, Jesus tells his followers that when they are with him in heaven, there will be a feast—and on that day, Jesus will drink wine “new with you in my Father’s Kingdom” (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 21:18).

Of particular interest to readers of this journal will be Kreglinger’s account of the role of Christian monasteries in the production of wine. Monasteries in England, Ireland, and as far north as Denmark have produced wine, some of them becoming highly skilled in viticulture. Monks in the Cistercian Order cleared the land and planted the vines that produced the highly regarded Clos de Vougeot of Burgundy. Kreglinger’s favorite movie, referenced several times in the book, is *Babette’s Feast*, a film that celebrates the spirituality and gladness of consuming superb food and wine. The wine served in this cinematic feast? Clos de Vougeot.³ Dom Pérignon is the name of the Benedictine monk whose oenological genius led him to produce the now famous champagne of that name. Years later, Franciscan friars would see the potential of viticulture in what is now northern California, a geographic focal point of the wine industry.

In an enlightening portion of the book that discusses wine and the Reformation, Kreglinger makes a persuasive case that the Reformers never counseled abstinence even as they contended that being drunk from wine was a sin. Kreglinger quotes Calvin: “By wine the hearts of men are gladdened, their strength recruited, and the whole man strengthened, so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls” (p. 57). The Reformers were united on the doctrine of *sola scriptura*—the Bible was central to their faith. Zwingli compares the Bible to “a good strong wine.”

Joy, Kreglinger maintains, is to be part of the Christian experience. Her chapter “Wine and Communal Feasting” is a biblically based ode to the joy of wine consumption. The chapter also is a theological brief for wine as God’s gift to gladden human hearts and enhance family and communal pleasure by consuming the fruit of the vine. Christians who believe in abstinence will find little ammunition in this chapter. According to Kreglinger, “Christian feasting becomes a place where we embrace and cultivate this posture of gratitude and joyful celebration.” And wine is to be part of the feast. Blending precepts from the Bible with the narrative of

²This is how Kreglinger describes the sacrament and its connection to blood, wine, and a supper: “The Lord’s supper becomes a place where we cease to strive and we learn to receive the person of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and eternal life. . . . This is something that Christ does and will continue to work within us until the end of days. We eat Christ’s body and drink his blood. As we take into ourselves his living presence [through the wine and the bread], he mysteriously forms and grows his very own life in us personally and communally” (p. 72).

³Kreglinger quotes the wine writer Hugh Johnson, who accords this encomium to the Cistercian monks: they made Clos de Vougeot “the laboratory of their pursuit of perfection” (p. 50).

Babette's Feast, Kreglinger explains that wine, properly used, “allows us to experience God as the lavish giver” (p. 88). It is not just a sip of wine that is being prescribed here; Kreglinger uses the term “gentle intoxication” to describe the heart-gladdening that wine is to foster.⁴

In Part I of her book, Kreglinger contends that the practice of viticulture once was a spiritual exercise as well as an agricultural endeavor. She argues this should still be the case: “If the vintner participates in crafting wine that is both God’s gift and the work of human hands, his or her vocation has profound spiritual meaning” (p. 121).

Kreglinger interviews several vintners as to whether they have a sense of “calling” to their work. Some affirm a spiritual dimension—a cooperating with God the creator—in crafting a good wine. The stories of Father Hufsky, a Catholic priest who tends a personal vineyard, and Sister Thekla, the vintner at the Abbey of St. Hildegard, illustrate the kind of connection Kreglinger longs to see in a human partnership with the Lord of the vineyard. Kreglinger is saddened by the vintners of today who do not understand or acknowledge this connection, and she laments those who have commoditized wine and produce only for the sake of profit. Yet she leaves room for the promise of an inherent spirituality, even for secular vintners.

Part II of *The Spirituality of Wine* delves further into the wine-making process itself, exploring the connection between God’s place (or what some would call nature’s place) and the role of humans in contemporary wine production. Informed by her discussions with vintners around the world, Kreglinger contends that wine loses its distinctive value and becomes “degraded into becoming just another generic drink” when producers seek profit over quality and variety (p. 147). The author worries that modern technologies enable shortcuts that disconnect vintners from the spiritual nature of crafting wine. For Kreglinger, technology separates wine—that mysterious fruit of the vine—from the vineyard itself.

In a well-researched (if somewhat disjointed) chapter on the health benefits of wine, Kreglinger draws from Christian and non-Christian sources. Even before modern medicine, the apostle Paul instructs Timothy to treat an upset stomach with wine (1 Timothy 5:23). Hippocrates used wine as a potent antiseptic. But to my mind, the author devotes too much space to modern medicine. She plainly believes that wine’s physical benefits complement the spiritual, but Kreglinger’s strong suit is that she grew up in a vineyard and studied theology—she did not grow up in a vineyard and study medicine.

⁴Her words are worth repeating: “The intoxicating effect of wine is often seen as purely negative. But *Babette's Feast* is a moving example of how gentle intoxication can enhance our festive play before God and allow us to let go of our defenses and embrace a life of greater vulnerability and transparency with God and with each other” (p. 99).

Proverbs 20:1 states: “[W]ine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” Kreglinger would agree. She gives unvarnished attention to the potential for alcohol abuse in a chapter subtitled “Rescuing Wine from the Gluttons for the Contemplatives.” Here, Kreglinger repeats her position that wine is not meant to be consumed mindlessly; it is a good gift, but, as with every gift, it has an intended use. The Bible also describes wine as a reward: “Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine” (Proverbs 3:9–10). Thoughtfully addressing the complexities of substance abuse, Kreglinger does not shy away from the fallen nature of the human relationship with alcohol, but she is adamant that wine “was meant to draw us nearer to God and each other rather than alienate us even further from his loving and healing presence. In the words of the German proverb, ‘To drink is to pray, to binge-drink is to sin’” (p. 198).

Weaving insights from today’s vintners with New Testament metaphors, Kreglinger concludes by challenging modern notions of identity and community. In drawing the strands of the book together, she writes: “Christ invites us to see one another ... as branches held together and nourished by Christ, the vine, and tended by a caring vintner, God the Father” (p. 202). Although Kreglinger sometimes strays into secondary concerns, such as consumerism and virtual media, that distract from the book’s theme, she successfully explains—through the palatable prism of wine—that “[t]he Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1).

Kenneth G. Elzinga
University of Virginia
elzinga@virginia.edu
doi:10.1017/jwe.2017.6