

R. JARED STAUDT: *The Beer Option: Brewing a Catholic Culture, Yesterday & Today*. Angelico Press, Brooklyn, NY, 2018, 264 pp., ISBN 978-1621384144 (paperback), \$17.95.

“You can’t judge a book by its cover,” so the saying goes. Nor often by its title. Who could guess the content behind titles like *Ulysses*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Sound and the Fury*, or *A Study in Scarlet*? There are exceptions, of course. Adam Smith was not hiding anything when he chose the title: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. And, *A General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* pretty much sums up what John Maynard Keynes had in mind.

However, for most books, one needs context to even guess what the title means. R. Jared Staudt’s *The Beer Option* is an example. His title is a play on words from *The Benedict Option*, the *New York Times* bestseller (Dreher, 2017). For those unfamiliar with Dreher’s book, its title is based on the monastic movement of Saint Benedict (480–547 AD). Monks in the Benedictine order withdrew from the prevailing culture, but not fully; they sought to influence and redeem the world around them. This required Benedictine monks to be in the world, but not of the world. Dreher’s “Benedict Option” is a blueprint for Christians to withdraw from the prevailing secular culture—but not too much.

*The Beer Option* does not have a separatist agenda that matches *The Benedict Option*. However, a theme that runs through Staudt’s book is that a proper appreciation of beer produces a proper appreciation of life—and that way of life stands apart from the vagaries of contemporary culture. Dreher writes, “Recognizing the toxins of modern secularism...Benedict Option Christians look to Scripture and Benedict’s *Rule* for ways to cultivate practices and communities” (p. 18). Staudt lauds homebrewing as a “practice” and brewpubs as a “community.”

Staudt divides his book into four parts. The title of each section helps unpack what may be cryptic in the book’s title: (1) A Catholic History of Beer; (2) Beer and Culture; (3) The Experience of Beer; and (4) Beer and Cultural Problems. The first three sections are the heart of the book, the first providing a historical foundation for the book’s theme; the second, a taxonomy of what the author means by culture and its nexus with malt beverages; and the third, a description of how the production and consumption of beer can enhance human flourishing. The first three sections assemble the material in a readable fashion and do so in a decidedly Roman Catholic grain (pun intended). The last section is idiosyncratic, describing the sinful side of beer (alcohol abuse) and a comparison of beer with marijuana. I found the section on “Beer versus Marijuana” out of joint with the rest of the book.

There are two links that Staudt develops between *The Beer Option* and *The Benedict Option*. The first is that the brewing of beer and the enjoyment of its consumption are agents of human flourishing. Staudt defines a “Catholic culture” as one

that “provides nourishment and comfort for humanity” (p. 67). He contends that the production of beer as well as the consumption of beer by families and small communities facilitates such a culture. Hence, the book has material on “Feasting, Fasting and Friendship” and “The Economics of Homebrewing.”

The second link is that brewing in monastic orders was, and is today, an important means of preserving and modeling a “Catholic culture.” The sections of the book on “The Rise of Monastic Brewing” and “The Renaissance of Benedictine Brewing” illustrate this connection. The Benedictines (and other monastic orders) have a centuries-old tradition of religious communities that brewed beer and continue to do so. Within Roman Catholicism, beer has an ancient sacramental nature, as expressed in this Roman Ritual:

*Bless, O Lord, this creature beer, which thou hast deigned to produce from the fat of grain: that it may be a salutary remedy to the human race, and grant, through the invocation of thy holy name, that whoever shall drink it may gain health in body and peace in soul. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. (p. 2)*

Saint Arnold of Metz was more frugal with words: “From man’s sweat and God’s love, beer came into the world” (p. 116).

As Staudt’s book makes clear, monks did not totally spiritualize beer or confine its consumption to the monastery. Beer was a means to be “in the world but not of the world.” This duality of malt beverages continues to this day. There was and there remains a commercial aspect of monastic brewing that brought the beer, if not the monks, into the marketplace. Fans of craft beer in the United States are familiar with “Trappist beer” and “Trappist ale”—even if they are unaware of the religious roots of this particular malt beverage. Staudt argues that monasteries were the first “firms” to produce beer to scale.

It would be a stretch to write a book called *The Beer Option: Brewing a Protestant Culture*. One reason is because Protestants, going back to the roots of the Reformation, place more emphasis on the Bible than Roman Catholics. And in a traditional Protestant exegesis of the Bible, beer has no place. The conventional wisdom is that the (English) Bible, when it refers to alcoholic beverages, puts its chips on wine and “strong drink.” James Strong’s *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, for example, contains hundreds of references to wine, from Genesis 9:21 to Revelations 18:13 (Strong, 2009). Strong drink shows up in places such as Proverbs 20:1 and Isaiah 28:7. However, even though Strong’s *Concordance* is “exhaustive,” there is no reference to beer.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The *New International Version* (commonly known as the *NIV*) does translate Proverbs 20:1 using the word “beer.” “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1, *NIV*).

Staudt's book contends that the Hebrew word *shekar* (שֶׁכָּר) probably means beer. This would be consistent with the history of beer, which dates back to Mesopotamia and would put beer "on the map" both historically and geographically as a beverage known in Biblical time and place.

So, what exactly is a "Catholic culture" with regard to beer? One telling response is from the writings of, arguably, the most famous Roman Catholic novelist of the 20th century: J. R. R. Tolkien. In his fictional work, commercial establishments for consuming beer were not the bars and honkytonks of country and western music. Rather, Tolkien created literary pubs like the Prancing Pony and the Green Dragon as venues of healthy and flourishing communities. In *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1965), when the hobbits returned to the Shire, the community no longer had the camaraderie that beer offered. In the fight to restore the previous culture of the Shire, the inns were reopened and the fine beer of the past was once again brewed. With all that has been written to describe the social pleasures of drinking beer, few verses match the fetching words of Frodo's song (p. 170):

There is an inn, a merry old inn  
beneath an old grey hill.  
And there they brew a beer so brown  
That the man of the moon came down  
one night to drink his fill.

Staudt sees the Renaissance of craft beer in the United States, with its brewpubs and beer festivals, as real world examples of what Tolkien admired in his world of fantasy. He applauds social events for Roman Catholics that involve beer consumption, such as "Pint with a Priest," "Prayer, Penance, and Pub Nights," and (my favorite) "Beer and Brats with the Bishop."

Contrary to common portrayal, life in the Benedictine monastery was not one of prayers and solitude. It also involved productive work. Staudt quotes John Henry Newman about the Benedictines: "their poetry was the poetry of hard work and hard fare, unselfish hearts and charitable hands" (p. 108). As Staudt depicts them, "The monks embody the Christian balance of being in the world but not of the world, a balance that models the relationship between beer and culture. Even as the monks retreat from the world, they become the best brewers in the world!" (p. 110).

I began this review by discussing the book's title: *The Beer Option*. A rowdy fraternity at an American university might glance at this title and think, "Here's a book worth reading." However, intemperate beer drinkers will find Staudt's book disappointing, particularly the section called "Drunkenness and Temperance." Indeed, *The Beer Option* is, in part, a tract for sobriety in beer consumption—although sobriety is an ancillary theme in Staudt's book. G.K. Chesterton, the creator of the Father Brown mystery novels and a notable apologist for Roman Catholicism, had this to say to consumers of beer and wine: "we should thank God for beer and burgundy by not drinking too much of them" (p. 111).

Oenologists who read the *Journal of Wine Economics* might wonder: Could Staudt's thesis about beer be applied to those monasteries whose spiritual output is prayer, but whose commercial output is wine? The answer is yes. Staudt's book sets forth a Catholic Culture and its connection to beer. A book similar to this one could be written about a Catholic Culture and wine. As Staudt writes:

Beer is a creature of both God and man. God has established in His providence everything human needs (sic) to create it.... Beer does not simply spring forth from the earth; we take the fat of the earth that God has given us, and we shape it and bring about a higher development (p. 67).

Families and monasteries that have produced wine for generations would second this. Staudt writes, "Wine may surpass beer for its subtlety, but beer certainly offers a greater variety of flavors ..." (p. 131). He adds, "Drinking beer is much more enjoyable and even healthier than simply eating barley!" (p. 67). The same is true about drinking wine rather than eating grapes.

*The Beer Option* will not be as influential as *The Benedict Option*. Nonetheless, in the burgeoning supply of books about the beer industry in the past decade, Staudt's contribution quenches a niche demand and does so like a Black Habit Ale.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth G. Elzinga  
 University of Virginia  
[elzinga@virginia.edu](mailto:elzinga@virginia.edu)  
 doi:10.1017/jwe.2019.20

## References

- Dreher, R. (2017). *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Sentinel.
- Strong, J. (2009). *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1965). *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: The Riverside Press.

GERT CRUM (Author) and JAN BARTELSMAN (Photography): *Le Domaine de la Romanée-Conti*. Lannoo Publishers, 2018, 303 pp., ISBN 978-94-014-3481-2 (hardcover), \$112.00.

When I first opened the package containing this massive volume about the fabled Domaine de la Romanée-Conti (known by oenophiles around the world as DRC),

<sup>2</sup>Brewed at the Benedictine Brewery of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon.