

Agriculture and Growing Up:

Milk and Wine in *Genesis* and the *Odyssey*

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In the book of *Genesis*, the patriarch Jacob prophesizes that his son Judah will one day become a great leader and that “the scepter shall not depart from Judah / nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet” (*Genesis*, 49.10). Most interesting, however, is the way in which Jacob predicts that Judah will earn “the obedience of the peoples” (*Genesis*, 49.10):

Binding his foal to the vine
and his ass’s colt to the choice vine,
...
his eyes shall be red with wine
and his teeth white with milk. (*Genesis*, 49.11-12)

This allusion to milk and wine is not alone in ancient Western literature and is highly symbolic. From the Greek epics to the Old Testament, milk is associated with herders, and wine is associated with farmers. Normally, these words--milk and wine, herder and farmer--are set in opposition, but in Judah, they are combined. In the *Odyssey*, however, a different story emerges: Odysseus, who represents of a largely agricultural Greek society, encounters Polyphemus and the Kyklopês, a group of barbaric herders who live without a law to bless them. Here the two come into conflict, with Odysseus ultimately outwitting Polyphemus thanks to his wine-skin and his agricultural technology. These two literary figures represent two different moments in the history of human society. Judah is a transitory figure, reflecting a historical transition from hunting and gathering to an agricultural community, still tied to his past but looking forward towards his future. Odysseus, on the other hand, is a sort of

agricultural imperialist, aggressively asserting his dominance over an older way of life that he considers to be primitive.

The associations between milk and herding and wine and agriculture are complex, and do not always form a simple dichotomy. Milk is associated with herding because, as an animal product, it is an important source of food for animal keepers. For instance, Polyphemus the Kyklops, a shepherd, “drank [whey] for supper” (*Odyssey*, 9.271) and lives almost exclusively on milk and other dairy products. The role of animals as a food source is made explicit by Polyphemus’s daily routine:

Next he took to his seat
and milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
he made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,
sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets. (*Odyssey*, 9.265-270)

Every last item in Polyphemus’s pantry is produced from the milk of his ewes: in the Kyklops’s cave, Odysseus and his men find “a drying rack that sagged with cheeses... and vessels full of whey” (*Odyssey*, 9.235-240). Similarly, Abraham, who is a herder like Polyphemus, feeds his guests “curds, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared” (*Genesis*, 18.8). Milk--and the animals that provide it--is the sustenance of Polyphemus and biblical herders.

Milk is also associated with immaturity, because babies drink their mothers’ milk. Thus, Polyphemus is almost infant-like in his excessive milk drinking. Homer even goes so far as to build a physical association between the Kyklops and a baby: after dinner, Polyphemus “reeled and tumbled backward, / his great head lolling to one side: and sleep / took him like any creature. Drunk, hiccupping, / he dribbled streams of liquor and bits of men” (*Odyssey*, 9.402-405). Setting aside his enormous size, his brutish appearance, and the grisly nature of his

slobber, Polyphemus is described just like a tired baby falling asleep after a good meal! Strange as it may seem, this likening of the monstrous Polyphemus to an infant is sensible. To a landowner like Odysseus, the *Kyklopês* are “louts” who, ignorant of agriculture, “neither plow / nor sow by hand, nor till the ground” (*Odyssey*, 9.114-117). Herding thus represents a brutish but immature form of existence that, with time, will develop into a mature agricultural society.

Another sign of immaturity among herders and milk-drinkers is that they have to depend on providence for their survival. Just as a ewe provides for her suckling or a mother provides for her child, the flock provides for Polyphemus. A similar relationship between man and nature is described in the Eden story of *Genesis*: God “made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” (*Genesis*, 2.9) and says to Adam, “You may eat freely of every tree of the garden” (*Genesis*, 2.16). Adam and Eve, like the herder Polyphemus, are hunter-gatherers: the Garden produces all the food and drink they could desire. Here, God provides for man in the place of nature. Adam and Eve do not have to work hard to feed themselves, like babies who do not have to work at all for their mothers’ milk. Before tasting the fruit of knowledge, Adam and Eve are like infants, helpless to feed themselves and without agency or independence. Similarly, herders depend on the fruits of the earth for their survival and have difficulty providing for themselves in times of scarcity. If they are unable to store supplies, once the milk dries up, they are likely to starve.

Because they are provided for either by nature or by God, herders and hunter-gatherers can sometimes be immoderate in their consumption of food. For instance, Polyphemus shows no restraint as he devours Odysseus’s men, but rather “went on filling up his belly / with manflesh and great gulps of whey” (*Odyssey*, 9.321-322). Likewise, Adam and Eve are

permitted to eat from every tree in the garden but one, and yet when Eve “saw that the [forbidden] tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes . . . she took of its fruit and ate” (*Genesis*, 3.6). Because herders live by nature’s bounty, they must more or less take and eat everything that comes their way. Farmers, on the other hand, must show moderation: farm output is limited from year to year, and grain stores must last through the winter. A good example of moderation among farmers is the story of Joseph, who persuades Pharaoh to set aside a fifth of the produce grown in times of plenty so that there may be grain left through the seven years of famine (*Genesis*, 41.34-36); many herders would not even think about the future in such a way. Again, this lack of foresight is a sign of immaturity: babies drink their mothers’ milk until they can drink no more and do not think about planning for the future.

Of course, this negative image of hunters and gatherers as primitive, brutish, and uncivilized comes from an agricultural perspective. Herders and hunter-gatherer societies are, in fact, quite complex, as demonstrated by Polyphemus, who methodically sorts his flocks in “pens crowded with lambs and kids, each in its class: / firstlings apart from midlings, and the ‘dewdrops,’ / or newborn lambkins, penned apart from both” (*Odyssey*, 9.235-238). Likewise, even Adam must till and keep the Garden (*Genesis*, 2.15). Furthermore, the lives of herders are very precarious because they are vulnerable to weather disasters and all kinds of accidents, so they have to be careful with their food consumption; their livelihood is dependent on the cycles of nature, so they need to be extremely observant of natural phenomena and to develop great foresight as a result of their observational skills. Not surprisingly, people in agricultural societies distort the facts about hunter-gatherers to distance themselves and to downplay this alternative, older way of life.

If milk is the drink of infants, then wine is the drink of men. For wine is a mature beverage: taste for wine is acquired with age, and aging is an important part of the wine production process. Furthermore, the production of wine requires the development of an agricultural society, and vineyards are a reoccurring symbol of agricultural prosperity. Wine, maturity, and agriculture are linked through the figure of Odysseus's father, Laërtês, who is an old vineyard keeper. Odysseus finds him "spading the earth around a young fruit tree" (*Odyssey*, 24.252). This pastoral imagery establishes a strong connection between wine (or the vine) and agriculture. Laërtês's biblical counterpart is Noah: "Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine" (*Genesis*, 9.20-21). This passage makes explicit the connection between wine and human industry: wine is produced from grapes, grown in fertile soil, tilled and watered by the hands of men. Wine cannot be produced without an agricultural lifestyle, and is thus an apt symbol of farming and settled agriculture.

Wine and agriculture are also associated with age and maturity. For instance, the vineyard keeper Laërtês is "wasted by years, racked, bowed under grief" (*Odyssey*, 24.258). This painful aging resembles the suffering foretold during Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden: God says to Adam, "cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field" (*Genesis*, 3.17-18). Once Adam and Eve leave Eden, they must work hard at farming and grow old and die. Aging, like the transition to agriculture, brings suffering but also wisdom. When Adam and Eve taste the fruit of knowledge, they fall from grace but know good and evil and "become like [gods]" (*Genesis*, 3.22). Farming is difficult, but it is more advanced than herding and allows for the development of more complex societies.

This progression from a simple hunter-gatherer existence to a more complex agricultural society is reflected by the different levels of refinement attached to milk and wine. While Polyphemus's milk is served in "bowls of earthenware and pails" (*Odyssey*, 9.240), the Greeks serve wine in "solid silver winebowl[s]" (*Odyssey*, 9.217), a description that points to increased ceremony and sophistication. The wine that Odysseus brings with him to the Kylopês's island is a gift, in accordance with the laws of hospitality (*Odyssey*, 9.211-218). This custom contrasts sharply with the existence of the Kylopês, who live "without a law to bless them" (*Odyssey*, 9.114) and who show an utter disregard for their responsibilities as hosts, going as far as to devour their guests. Societies that practice agriculture and drink wine are more complex than the isolated, nomadic way of life of the herdsmen. Similarly, in *Genesis* Egypt's transition to agriculture results in the empowerment of the Pharaoh and the creation of a code of laws. In exchange for grain during the famine, the people of Egypt give up their flocks (and thus their herding existence) and sell their servitude and land to the Pharaoh, establishing the Pharaoh as a ruler over his land and people (*Genesis*, 47.17-21). Then Joseph "made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth [of the grain]" (*Genesis*, 47.26). Agriculture calls for the development of laws and a government; thus, agriculture and wine represent a sort of societal maturity.

Finally, wine, like agriculture, is associated with fertility. In *Genesis*, the daughters of Lot decide to "make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring through our father" (*Genesis*, 19.32). The plan works, and both daughters find themselves pregnant by their father. Wine makes reproduction possible in an otherwise impossible situation. This relationship between agriculture and fertility is an important theme throughout

all of *Genesis*. For example, after the Fall, Adam is sentenced to labor in the fields, while Eve is sentenced to labor in childbirth (*Genesis*, 3.16-18); similarly, Jacob impregnates his wife Leah after seven years of agricultural labor (*Genesis*, 29.15-32). Thus, wine and agriculture are a source of reproductive maturity. Wine is also associated with plenty: when Isaac blesses his son Jacob, he asks that God may grant him “the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine” (*Genesis*, 27.28).

Interestingly, in the face of such abundance, wine-drinkers can be as immoderate as Polyphemus. Noah, for example, “drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent” (*Genesis*, 9.21). Perhaps this tale is cautionary, warning farmers not to relapse into the immature and uninhibited attitudes of the herder. There is a similar lack of restraint among wine-drinkers in *The Odyssey*: the suitors spend their days “killing [Odysseus’s] cattle and sheep and fatted goats, / carousing, soaking up our good dark wine, / not caring what they do” (*Odyssey*, 2.60-62). In both cases, drunkenness is frowned upon and seems barbaric among civilized peoples: there is no place for excess in an agricultural society. Wine, as an alcoholic beverage, necessitates moderation: unlike milk, there is a hard limit to the amount of wine that can be consumed in a single sitting. To go over this limit can lead to illness, madness, or even death.

In conclusion, milk and wine fall along a natural continuum of maturity. Babies drink milk, grow up, become men, and then drink wine. Similarly, herders live a simple nomadic life before learning how to farm and settling into an advanced agricultural society. Herding is a natural stepping-stone to an agricultural existence. Although herders are not inferior in any way, among these particular peoples, the Israelites and the ancient Greeks, farming ultimately

prevailed. Odysseus blinds Polyphemus the herdsman with a stake carved out of fire-hardened wood (*Odyssey*, 9.351-356), like early ploughs and farm tools. He even buries the stake in a pile of manure (*Odyssey*, 9.358), recalling the fertilizer used by farmers. Thus, the stake can be interpreted as a symbol of agriculture triumphing over herding. Similarly, Israel and his sons settle in agricultural Egypt (*Genesis*, 46.6-7) and leave behind their herding lifestyle because “every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians” (*Genesis*, 46.34). In both *Genesis* and *The Odyssey*, farming is seen as an advance and ends up replacing herding as the status quo.

This period of transition and conflict may seem historically remote from us today, but the story of Judah suggests otherwise: his eyes may be red with wine, but his teeth are white with milk. Regardless of his status as a farmer, Judah manages to hold on to his heritage, and his herding past remains integral in his life. There is lesson to be learned: although agriculture has become the basis for more recent social developments in our modern world, it is important remember the not-so-distant past. Human beings have been on this earth for two hundred thousand years, during which time, the era of agriculture is but the blink of an eye. As a species, we must remember our past, since it only because of a long history of hunting and gathering that we have become who we are today.

Works Cited

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