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Psychiatry in the Old Testament

Alcoholism in ancient Israel

George Stein

When president Yeltsin failed to get off the plane at Shannon airport on his state visit to Ireland it was generally assumed that he was drunk. However, he was certainly not the first world statesman to be drunk. Thus Noah, the saviour of all humankind and all animal species from the flood, was similarly afflicted. 'Noah a man of the soil was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk and he lay uncovered in his tent' (Gen 19: 20–21). In the northern kingdom of Israel, king Elah, the son of king Basha, who only had a very short reign from 883 to 882 B.C.E. may have lost his job because of drinking: 'When [Elah] was at Tirzah drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza . . . Zimri came and struck him down and killed him in the 27th year of the reign of King Asa of Judah and succeeded him' (I Kings 15: 9–10).

The consumption of alcohol was probably widespread in the ancient world and Proverbs 23: 29–35 has an excellent description of many of its neuropsychiatric complications:

29 'Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds with no cause? Who has redness of eyes?
30 Those who linger late over wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly.

32 And the last it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.

33 Your eye will see strange things and your mind utter perverse things.

34 You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on top of the mast. "They struck me" you will say, "but I was not hurt, they beat me but I did not feel it".

35 When shall I awake? I will seek another drink.'

This brief passage alludes to alcohol-induced depression, irritability, redness of the eyes, visual hallucinations, dizziness, change of character, and addictiveness with morning drinking. Elsewhere in Proverbs there is a reference to alcoholic violence:

'20, 17 Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,' and also

4, 17 'For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.' Alcoholism and alcoholic violence were well recognised in ancient Israel and must have been serious problems, just as they are in Britain today.

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