

LETTER TO THE EDITOR ΓΡΑΜΜΑ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΝ ΕΚΔΟΤΗ

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Alcohol consumption and human fertility in the Holy Bible

The association between prenatal alcohol consumption and multiple reproductive risks, including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), increased risk of fetal loss, and decreased likelihood of live birth, is well documented in the medical bibliography.^{1–5} The association between alcohol consumption and male and female reproductive function (fertility) is less well understood.^{4,6–9} With this letter, I would like to present two stories from the Old Testament of the Holy Bible related to such associations, which are indicative of the perceptions of that time.

The first story concerns Lot's incestuous relations with his two daughters described in the Book of *Genesis* (19:30–38) of the Old Testament. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot dwelt with his two daughters in a mountain cave. Lot's daughters decide that their father must impregnate them to continue the human race. Assuming that their father would not knowingly participate in such an act, they get him drunk and sleep with him on two successive nights. Both daughters conceive and eventually give birth to two sons, Moab and Ben-Ammi, the eponymous ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites. Various biblical scholars have described this story of incest as an etiological myth, which was created to explain the origin

of the Moabites and Ammonites and to justify their hostile relations with the Israelites. From a modern medical point of view, this story raises the question of male reproductive capabilities under acute alcohol intoxication. Although data on the relationship between alcohol consumption and semen quality are conflicting,^{4,6–8} acute alcohol intoxication in men is reported to affect not only the semen quality, but also the sexual function, causing problems with sexual arousal and desire as well as erectile and ejaculatory dysfunction, all of which could lead to difficulties in conception, since men are unable to have effective intercourse when drunk.^{4,8} The possibility of Lot's daughters becoming pregnant under the circumstances described in the Bible was, therefore, minimal.

The second story regards the announcement of Samson's forthcoming birth by the angel of the Lord described in the Book of *Judges* (13:1–13) of the Old Testament. The angel of the Lord appeared before Manoah's wife, who was barren, and told her that the couple would soon have a son and therefore she should abstain from wine or strong drinks and eat nothing unclean (*Judges* 13:3–5). The angel told her that her son would be a Nazirite (*Judges* 13:5), i.e., a person who vows part of his life or his entire life to God. According to the biblical text, Samson, the son of Manoah, would be consecrated to God all his life "from the womb of his mother" (*Judges* 13:5). As a Nazirite, Samson could not touch a dead body, shave the hair of his head, drink wine, nor touch grapes (*Numbers* 6:1–8). Based on the above, we can conclude that abstinence from alcohol was considered in Biblical times to be a prerequisite for conception. In other words, alcohol consumption was associated with female infertility. Abstinence from alcohol was also considered to be a prerequisite for the birth of a healthy child that would be devoted to God for a lifetime. In addition, Samson's story indirectly reveals that a woman's abstention from alcohol during pregnancy is a prerequisite for the child's abstention from alcohol during its life. Just as the angel of the Lord told Manoah's barren wife to abstain from wine or strong drinks, so should health professionals advise women who are attempting to conceive, who are pregnant, or who may be at risk for unintended pregnancy, to abstain completely from alcohol consumption, consider-

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ing the sequelae of prenatal alcohol consumption on the fetus. No “safe dose” of alcohol has been identified, and preventive measures related to untoward effects to the fetus may begin as early as immediately after implantation, or even before.⁴ Physicians should promote the following

message to women: “If you’re pregnant, don’t drink. If you drink, don’t get pregnant”.¹⁰

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η περιγραφόμενη στην Αγία Γραφή επίδραση του οινοπνεύματος στη γονιμότητα

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Η επίδραση του οινοπνεύματος στη γονιμότητα αποτελεί ακόμη και σήμερα αμφιλεγόμενο ιατρικό θέμα. Στην παρούσα μελέτη παρουσιάζονται δύο σχετικές ιστορίες από την Παλαιά Διαθήκη, οι οποίες αντανακλούν τις απόψεις της εποχής εκείνης.

Λέξεις ευρητηρίου: Αγία Γραφή, Αναπαραγωγή, Γονιμότητα, Λωτ, Οινόπνευμα, Παλαιά Διαθήκη, Σαμψών

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