



Do grapes produce blood?

A problematic metaphor in biblical texts

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Abstract

This article focuses on a metaphor often misunderstood and mistranslated in biblical texts. Relevant texts in the Old Testament/Jewish Bible and the Deuterocanonicals are surveyed first, and fresh translations and interpretations of these are then offered. Several texts utilizing this same metaphor in the New Testament are then discussed. The article proposes that Jesus and John understood the metaphorical use of blood as wine/juice from Jewish literature and thus used it effectively in their verbal and written discourse. The failure to understand this metaphor has produced an overly literal interpretation both in the Gospels and in Revelation. The failure to understand the metaphor in the harvest imagery of Revelation, particularly in 14:20, has contributed to the perception that the Apocalypse endorses extreme violence. The article proposes a different translation of the verse based on the conclusion that grapes do not produce blood.¹

Keywords: Metaphor, blood, wine, winepress, Revelation

Introduction

“An exquisite corpse.’ Rachel Savernake took a sip from her glass. ‘Vintage burgundy, the colour of blood.’” With this comment the Diamond Dagger-awarded crime writer Martin Edwards begins chapter 6 of his detective novel *Gallows Court* (2018:57). This observation strikes to the essence of this article: the relationship between wine and the colour of blood. It will explore an oft misunderstood metaphor found both in the Jewish Bible and later in the New Testament. Its development will be tracked through its use in various texts.

The noted linguist Jonathan Charteris-Black has investigated the extensive use of metaphor in biblical texts. In his research sample he discovered that a metaphor is used every 77 words in the Jewish Bible/Old Testament, while in the New Testament a metaphor is used every 324 words (2004:181). He suggests that the reason the Old Testament uses metaphor four times as much as the New Testament is that the books of Job and Psalms, the latter poetic, are copious in figurative language. Two lexical fields particularly rich in metaphor are plants and food/drink. These account for over 10 percent and 8 percent respectively in the sample examined by Charteris-Black (2004:190, 199). Metaphors involving plants and food/drink are particularly effective because humans are very familiar with the processes and cycles of the

¹ I thank the organizers of the program unit, Nature imagery and conceptions of nature in the Bible, for the opportunity to present a draft of this article in the session “Tree images (in the wild and in agriculture): Themes and functions” at the 2021 annual meeting of the Society of Bible Literature in San Antonio, Texas.



natural world. Charteris-Black (2004:176) highlights a very important point with implications for our discussion of metaphor in biblical texts: “Metaphor does not exist independently in words but is an aspect of the interpretation of their use in specific contexts.”

“Blood” in the Jewish Bible/Old Testament

Brown (1969:146) makes this observation regarding the classical and Near Eastern literatures of the Mediterranean region: “Nowhere is there a thicker cluster of shared vocabulary than around the vine.” Among biblical texts with such a shared vocabulary, one problematic metaphor concerns grapes and blood and how to translate it. The vivid juxtaposition of the two is first introduced in Genesis 49:11: “he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes” (NRSV). In both the Hebrew text and the LXX synonymous parallelism clearly exists between wine (יַיִן; οἶνος) and the blood of grapes (דַּם־עֵצִי; αἷματι σταφυλῆς). Sasson (1994:401) notes that “poets compared the wine they knew only with objects that are of dark hue: (royal) garment or purplish dyes in Gen 49:11–12; human blood in Isa 63:1–6.” Walsh and Zorn (1998:155) observe, “In Gen 49.11 a colour approximating that of blood stains Judah as he washes his garment in *dam ‘anavim*, ‘the blood of grapes’.” Blood becomes a metaphor for the juice of grapes because of its dark-red colour. The lexicon of Brown, Driver & Briggs (1906: s.v.) ambiguously mentions that here it is “fig. of wine,” while the lexicon of Holladay (1971: s.v.) states regarding this verse that it is “metaph. blood of grapes”. The Lust, Eynikel, and Hauspie lexicon of the Septuagint (2008: s.v.) describes it as “anything like blood, wine.”

This text has been interpreted to be an exaggerated image describing how Judah will so abound in wine that its people will wash their garments in it rather than water. Sherman (2021), however, writes: “More likely, it carries a sense similar to the modern use of the term ‘awash’ to refer to being ‘full of or abounding in’ something. Judah will be awash with wine, such that the flood of it will stain the people’s garments red.” Sarna (1989:308) offers a third interpretation – wine here refers to dye or that wine was used in dye rather than being a poetic image.

Such figurative language has a background in other Semitic languages. For example, Watson and Wyatt (1999:186) state that in Ugaritic verse “[m]any *metaphorical expressions* are used such as *dm ‘šm* ‘blood of trees’, for grape juice....” And in Akkadian *dam errini* means cedar resin. Nevertheless, Brenner (1988:77) argues that the idiom “blood of the grape” is not necessarily derived because of its red colour: “rather, the wine is seen as the essence in liquid form, the ‘life’ of the grape, and as such is comparable to the blood.” While acknowledging that the colour association does exist, Brenner sees it as “either secondary or at least equal in importance to the ‘essence’ notion.”²

In their note for translators of Genesis, Reyburn and Fry (1998:1087) suggest: “**Blood of grapes** (authors’ emphasis) is a poetic image for wine used in such passages as Deuteronomy 32:14 and Isaiah 63:2–3.” They acknowledge that both lines of Gen 49:11 say the same thing in different words and suggest the translation: “Since wine will flow like water, he [you] can wash his [your] clothes in it, wash his [your] finest clothing in the red juice of the grapes.” Unfortunately, their suggestion has not been adopted by any English translations, which thereby fail to capture the context of the metaphor here. Even the translation in the *New English translation of the Septuagint* (hereafter NETS) continues to give a literal reading: “He shall wash his robe in wine and his garments in the blood of a bunch of grapes.”

Deuteronomy 32:14 records one of the Lord’s blessings for Israel: “you drank fine wine from the blood of grapes” (NRSV), again a literal reading of the Hebrew text דַּם־עֵצִי and the LXX

² Proverbs 23:31 emphasizes the red color of wine in its admonition. However, the LXX gives a different reading: μὴ μεθύσκεσθε οἴνω. This injunction is repeated in Ephesians 5:18 and in *Testament of Judah* 14.1.



αἶμα σταφυλῆς. Similarly, the NETS translation reads “blood of grapes” rather than translating the metaphor. However, the NLT and NET translations do in fact capture the idiom by translating as “juice of the grapes.” Citing this verse, Sasson (1994:401) writes, “The juice from grapes is only recalled through the metaphor ‘blood’ as in ‘blood of the grapes.’” Strangely though, Sasson (1994:416) does not include blood among the metaphors for wine listed in his Table 1.D.

The comparison of trampling grapes in a winepress to God’s judgment is found in Isaiah 63:2: “Why are your robes red, and your garments like theirs who tread the wine press?” (NRSV). Walsh and Zorn (1998:155) comment that the splattering and staining that results from treading grapes “indicates both an occupational inconvenience of the vintners and that the wine is dark.” Isaiah 63:3 continues, “I have trodden the wine press alone...; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their juice spattered on my garments, and stained all my robes.” Here and in verse 6 the NRSV at last translates נַחַל as “juice,” unlike the NIV, ESV, and NLT which still read “blood” here.³ Brown, Driver & Briggs (1906: s.v.) suggests a reading “juice of grapes, fig. of blood,” while the lexicon of Holladay (1971: s.v.) suggests “juice=blood.” Regarding these verses Brenner (1982:68) writes, “The twin thread of ‘grape juice’ and ‘blood’ imagery is present throughout the passage.” She rightly points out that a mixed metaphor is suggested because God’s garments are covered with blood, not grape juice. This prophetic hyperbole, according to Ibn Ezra (*Commentary on Isaiah* 63:2), is based on the fact that blood is similar in colour to wine.

The metaphor also appears in several Deuterocanonical texts. Sirach 39:26 describes various necessities of life. Among them are the αἶμα σταφυλῆς. The NRSV and the NETS continue to translate literally without capturing the idiom. As Bullard and Hatton (2008:803) note in their translation handbook, “**Blood of the grape** (authors’ emphasis) is a Hebrew idiom for wine.” This is among the verses that the Thayer lexicon cites for this observation: “It is used of those things which by their redness resemble blood: αἶμα σταφυλῆς the juice of the grape.” The lexicon of Liddell, Scott, and Jones (1968: 38) similarly suggests “anything like blood” and cites Sirach 39:26. Kedar-Kopfstein (1978:239) call the use here “a weak metaphor at a later stage of the language” and hypothesise that “the phrase is based on a magical concept of analogy in early religion...” While juice may have been regarded as the blood of a plant, the phrase seems to have had no magical connotations in Jewish literature.

In a battle narrative found in 1 Maccabees 6:34 the KJV translated αἶμα σταφυλῆς literally as the “blood of grapes.” Interestingly, both the NRSV and NETS at last offer an idiomatic translation: “juice of grapes and mulberries” are offered the elephants by the king and his forces to arouse them for battle.⁴ Because a literal translation makes no sense here, the translators were forced to translate the metaphor.

A final example is found in Odes 2:14: καὶ αἶμα σταφυλῆς ἔπιον οἶνον. Here “blood of grapes” is in apposition to “wine,” suggesting that the author viewed them similarly. Therefore, the preferred translation would be metaphorical: “they drank wine, the juice of grapes.”

Walsh (2007:107) notes that since blood is a metonym for grapes in a number of Jewish texts, by extension “blood becomes itself the source of intoxication in prophetic judgment.” Of the verses that she cites, Isaiah 49:26 is most relevant: “and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine” (NRSV). In both the MT and the LXX the comparison is a simile: οἶνον

³ Later in verse 6 נַחַל is used figuratively for blood. The text of the LXX, slightly different than the MT, is αἶμα in both verses, and the NETS translation reads “blood” in both as well.

⁴ The Seleucids apparently learned this method of inciting elephants with alcohol from the Indians (Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals* 13.8 drawing from Megasthenes, *Indica* Frg. 52). Instead of rice wine, the Seleucids gave the elephants grape and mulberry wine. Ogata (2017:94) writes: “Alcoholic drinks seem to have been given to elephants, either to tame them or to let them fight.”



(Isaiah. 49:26 WTT)/ ὡς οἶνον νέον. The summary of Walsh (2007:107) is most relevant to this study: “It is the red color of wine that makes this metaphor and its prophetic realization forcibly apt.”

Lastly, in her volume on wine Kreglinger (2016:124) notes that, while the close association between blood and wine goes back to antiquity, “It is difficult to reconstruct why exactly blood and wine came to be so closely associated with one another.” She suggests several reasons including deep-red colour, its benefit to blood-forming organs, and its similarity in substance and texture. While noting that “blood of the grape” is a potent metaphor, Kreglinger (2016:56, 74) nevertheless translates Genesis 49:11-12 literally without suggesting that “juice” is preferred contextually. As has been demonstrated, the metaphorical sense is the preferred translation here and in other usages.

“Blood” in New Testament texts

It is noteworthy that among three notable Greek lexicons of the New Testament –Newman (1971), Bauer et al. (2000), and Friberg et al. (2005) – none suggest a metaphorical meaning for αἷμα. Only the Louw and Nida lexicon (1989: 861) allows that αἷμα may have a nonliteral meaning: “the reference may not be to blood as a substance but to the blood-like color of the objects in question.” However, Louw and Nida suggest only two possible texts – Revelation 8:8 and 11:6. Yet might there be other examples of the metaphorical use of αἷμα in Revelation as well as in the Gospels?

“Blood” in the Gospels

Amidst the seven “I Am” sayings in the Gospel of John, including “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5), the narrator tells readers that with his Jewish audience Jesus used a figure of speech (παροιμίαν; John 10:6). Regarding this narrative aside, Charteris-Black (2004:173) notes: “The words attributed to Jesus demonstrate that metaphor is central to religious thought and a normal way of expressing spiritual notions.” Jesus well understood the metaphor of blood for juice and exploited it in his teaching. At the Last Supper the Synoptic authors all record Jesus taking the cup, giving thanks, and saying that he will not drink again “from the fruit of the vine” (ἀπὸ τοῦ γενήματος τῆς ἀμπέλου)⁵ until the kingdom of God has come (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). Hagner (1995:774) perceptively notes that the metonymy used here – fruit of the vine – is “an alternate, Semitic way of referring to wine....”⁶ Jesus then took the cup and declared that the wine in this cup⁷ which they would drink represented the new covenant in his blood poured out for them. The fruit/wine of the vine serves then as a metaphor in the Synoptics for the blood which Jesus will shed at the cross.

The Gospel of John, likewise cognizant of the rich scriptural background for the blood/wine metaphor, incorporates it too. Jesus plays on this ambiguity when he declares to his Jewish audience: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood (αἷμα), you have no life in you” (John 6:53). The conjunction of “drink” and “blood” is repeated in each of the following three verses. Even some in the audience, taking Jesus’ teaching too literally, found this to be a hard saying and as a result stopped following him because of its offensive nature (John 6:60, 66). But other disciples apparently understood that by drinking the blood of the

⁵ The construction is found in the Old Testament only in Deuteronomy 22:9 and Isaiah 32:12. It is distinguished from the grapes themselves, which are also called the fruit of the vineyard (ἀπὸ τοῦ καρποῦ τοῦ ἀμπελώου; cf. Luke 20:10).

⁶ Newman and Stine (1992:805) note that the Phillips New Testament translation of ἀπὸ τοῦ γενήματος τῆς ἀμπέλου in the Synoptics reads: “I will drink no more wine.” Thus it “effectively rendered the idiomatic expression *fruit of the vine* as ‘*wine*.’”

⁷ Charteris-Black (2004:200) observes that an implement like a cup can also serve as a metonym for drinking wine.



grape they were metaphorically drinking the true and eternal life-giving blood of Jesus. Double entendre is evident here with the manna/matzo and the wine of the Passover seder serving as a backdrop from Jewish salvation history. Since Jews were forbidden to drink blood, to understand drinking the blood of the grape as drinking literal blood would make Jesus an advocate for the breaking of the law of Moses (cf. Leviticus. 17:10-14; Deuteronomy. 12:23-25). Critics of Christianity in the second and third centuries pointed to the drinking of blood as one of the lurid aspects of the bizarre rituals practiced at their love feasts (cf. Wilken 1984:18).⁸ The point here is not to enter into the various theological interpretations of Jesus' words, but rather to point out how Jesus utilized the rich lexical background of the blood/wine metaphor to present spiritual truth to his audience.

“Blood” in Revelation

As mentioned above, the Louw and Nida lexicon (1989: s.v.) cites Revelation 8:8 and 11:6 as examples where the metaphorical use of blood is used. Both texts present the judgments of the second trumpet and the two witnesses related to turning the sea into blood. These actions in turn are intertextually derived from the first Egyptian plague in which the water of the Nile River was turned to blood through the actions of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:17–24). That the fish died, the river reeked, and the water became undrinkable suggests that the effects of this plague were more than metaphorical. As Durham (1987:97) demurs, “ $\delta\mu$ ‘blood’ refers only to blood in the OT, whether of men or of animals, and vv 17, 19, and 20 do not say that the Nile waters were turned into something as red as blood, or even into a liquid that looked like blood, but quite directly and without qualification, into blood.” As this article has argued, Durham's first comment about blood is overstated; however, his observation about the literalness of blood in judgment in the Exodus account is accurate. Therefore, these two texts in Revelation should not be understood as metaphorical but rather interpreted as literal blood.

The latter half of Revelation abounds in plant and drink imagery related to grapes, winepresses, and wine/juice. John, the revelator and prophet, presents in chapter 14 two images of final judgment – a grain harvest and a grape harvest. These two harvests have been interpreted either as the harvests of the righteous and the unrighteous⁹ or as a double harvest of the unrighteous.¹⁰ The grape harvest, or vintage, is introduced in verse 17 when an angel emerges from the heavenly temple with a sharp grape knife/shear.¹¹ Another angel commands the first to use the grape knife to cut the clusters from the earth's vine because the grapes are ripe. After the angel harvests the grapes, he throws them into the great winepress symbolizing God's wrath. Regarding this, Behm (1976:177) notes that “the wine harvest is also an eschatological picture” in Scripture. Verse 20a then reads: “The winepress ($\lambda\eta\nu\omicron\varsigma$) was trodden outside of the city.” Winepresses were typically located outside of cities near vineyards so that the distance to transport grapes for pressing was minimized.¹² This descriptive element therefore bespeaks verisimilitude to the viticultural background of the eastern Mediterranean.¹³

⁸ The Jews before them were similarly charged with the practice of cannibalism (Josephus *Apion* 2.91–96; cf. van der Horst, 2014:177–82).

⁹ For example, Bauckham (1993:94–98).

¹⁰ For example, Beale (1999:504) who believes that the two metaphors of harvest and vintage “connote the thoroughgoing and definitive judgment of sinners by God.” See his excursus on pp. 776–78 for further discussion on the two harvests.

¹¹ The noun $\delta\rho\epsilon\pi\alpha\nu\omicron\nu$, usually translated as “sickle,” is the tool used to harvest the grain mentioned in verses 14–16. However, the means and method of harvesting grain and grapes are very different, despite the Greek word being a general term for a harvesting tool (cf. Isa 18:5). In American English usage, the curved tool used by vintners to harvest grapes is called a “grape knife”; in South Africa it is called a “grape shear.” All translations in Revelation are the author's unless noted.

¹² For an introduction to the subject, see Ayalon, Frankel, and Kloner (2009).

¹³ Contrarily, deSilva (2009:299) sees a symbolic meaning for this description drawn from the Pentateuchal phrase “outside the camp.” Thus, it is “most often an unclean place where sin offerings



What follows in 14:20b is a very macabre image, translated into English usually as: “and blood flowed from the wine press (ἐξῆλθεν αἷμα ἐκ τῆς ληνοῦ), as high as a horse’s bridle” (NRSV).¹⁴ Stevens (2014:447) calls this grisly image “perhaps the most gruesome in all of Revelation.” But is such a translation required here? The parallelism seen in the biblical texts reviewed previously is evident here. Therefore, “juice” is a more viable, realistic translation for αἷμα: “and juice ran from the winepress as high as the bridles of horses and as far as 1,600 stadia.” Chapter 14 has two earlier references to wine. Babylon will fall because “all the nations have drunk from the wine (οἴνου) of her passion for fornication” (14:8; cf. 18:3). Then in verse 10, those who worship the beast and his statue or take his mark on their forehead or hand are said to “drink from the wine (οἴνου) of God’s wrath prepared without mixing with water (ἀκράτου) in the cup of his wrath” (14:10). Because the earth’s unrepentant inhabitants chose to drink Babylon’s wine, now God will give them a full dose of his unmixed wine. The cup of unmixed wine functions as a metaphor for the complete and final judgment which God will bring upon the unrepentant on earth.¹⁵ The fruit of the vine, whether fermented or unfermented, thus plays an important metaphorical role in the imagery of chapter 14.

Two nineteenth-century commentators on Revelation showed a sensitivity to the imagery here. John Gill (1811, s.v.) noted John’s use of a mixed metaphor in 14:20 and its dependence on Old Testament usage: “and blood came out of the winepress; alluding to the juice squeezed out of grapes, called the blood of grapes, Genesis 49:11.” Johannes Bengel (1886, s.v.) made a similar connection: “*the blood* of clusters of grapes, red wine, that is, the blood of the wicked” and identifies the figure as metalepsis.¹⁶ This figure of speech functions like a metonymy or metaphor.

In his commentary on Revelation Aune (1998:847) observes that there is a “widespread ancient association between blood and wine, for the juice of grapes is frequently referred to as the αἷμα σταφυλῆς, the ‘blood of the grape’.” He cites some of the Old Testament and Deuterocanonical texts discussed above along with Achilles Tatius (2.2.5; αἷμα βότρυος) and Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.* 2.19.3; 2.29.1; *Strom.* 5.8, 48.8), noting it is obvious “because the juice of red grapes resembled blood (Stephanus, *TGL* 1:972).” Despite making this association, Aune fails to suggest an alternative translation of 14:20. Beale (1999:781) sees the image of blood rising to the horses’ bridles as “figurative battle language and functions hyperbolically to emphasize the severe and unqualified nature of the judgment.” He quotes 1 Enoch 100:3 to illustrate a parallel that he believes is relevant: “And the horse will walk up to the breast in the blood of the sinners.”¹⁷ Yet by mingling the vintage metaphor with a warfare one, Beale produces another mixed metaphor.

In their book about wine in the Bible, Heskett and Butler (2012:120) observe: “The angelic being ... uses the grapes, winepress, and juice flowing out of it to depict the judgment of shedding of blood.” They then quote Revelation 14:18–20 but fail to follow through with their incisive observation about the winemaking process as it relates to a possible alternate

are burned..., all things leprous and polluted are cast..., and most poignantly here, sinners are executed.”

¹⁴ This is seen in a review of sixty English translations displayed online. Retrieved from: <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Revelation%2014:20>.

¹⁵ The spilling of blood in judgement is similarly linked to the drinking of wine in Isaiah 49:26: “and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine” (NRSV). The vision has a background in several prophetic texts including Joel 3:13.

¹⁶ Metalepsis is defined as “an advanced form of figurative speech in which one thing refers to another thing that is only slightly related to it. There are two ways to make this association. One is through showing causal relationship to seemingly unrelated things. The other is through indirect intermediate replacement of terms”; quote from <https://literarydevices.net/metalepsis/>.

¹⁷ Behm (1976:176) cites two rabbinic texts with similar apocalyptic language that, like Enoch, fail to use metaphor but make explicit the excess of human blood in judgment.



translation of “blood” in verse 20. Caird (1966:193) also points out: “A winepress may be a symbol for punishment, but it is also the place where grapes are made into wine.” However, he too fails to offer an alternative translation. Regarding the connection between the cup and divine wrath, Charteris-Black (2004:200) notes that “there is a reversal of the normal expectation that the consumption of food and drink provides satisfaction as instead it proves to be the cause of damage and even destruction.”¹⁸

Regarding 14:20, Koester (2015:630) writes, “The river of blood, which flows as high as a horse’s bridle, shows the magnitude of the violence that has been done on earth.” Koester mixes the metaphor by introducing another – river of blood. There is no river, just the final judgment of the unrighteous compared to a grape harvest. The abundance of juice processed in a rural winepress symbolizes the extent of the annihilation of God’s enemies. This reference is also proleptic, for it refers to the great city Babylon whose demise is initially announced in 16:19. There God gives Babylon a cup of wine, not to imbibe for pleasure but rather to drink of his furious wrath of judgment.

Koester (2015:630–31) comments further on 14:20: “As Christ tramples the grapes, the amount of blood that is squeezed out shows how full of brutality the world has become.” However, that Christ is the one treading the grapes is not made explicit until 19:15 where he is said to “tread the winepress of the furious wrath of God the Almighty.” Because Christ is here described as being “dressed in a cloak immersed in blood” (19:13), Smalley (2005:491) observes that the “picture is that of a triumphant warrior, rather than a sacrificial victim.” However, if the rider on the white horse portrays a bloodthirsty military conqueror, why does the account of his triumph over the beasts and their armies fail to mention any bloodletting? The description in 19:18, 21, is only of the flesh of the defeated being offered to the carnivorous birds. The stain on the rider’s cloak may instead be understood as the “blood of the grape,” an intertextual allusion to two verses previously discussed – Genesis 49:11 and Isaiah 63:2.

For the metaphor to work in 14:20, it is not blood that is squeezed out the grapes but rather its juice. Revelation thus provides a stark contrast between the great multitude in heaven who have washed their robes metaphorically in the blood of the Lamb (7:14) and the unrepentant inhabitants of the earth whose destiny is drenched with the metaphorical blood of the grape in the winepress of divine wrath. Laubach (1975:224) summarizes: “The blood of grapes, in the OT a metaphorical expression for wine (Genesis. 49: 11; Deut. 32: 14), becomes a picture of the great judgment on the nations (Revelation 14: 19 f.; cf. Isa. 63: 20), when God will destroy all powers opposed to Christ at the end of history.” Grapes do not produce blood in the divine winepress but rather juice – so voluminous that its extent is compared to a height of a horse’s bridle. However, to equate the metaphor with literal reality is to misinterpret this vivid image.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed a number of biblical texts that share the figurative language that compares blood to wine or juice. This metaphor has gone unrecognized by many interpreters and therefore translated inadequately in the Jewish Bible and Deuterocanonicals. Jesus and John both understood this vivid metaphor and used it effectively in their discourse and writing. Since the figurative language in these other biblical texts is largely unrecognized, it is unremarkable that translations of Revelation 14:20 have also overlooked the metaphor of blood as juice.¹⁹ This verse has been discussed at length because of its significance related to the book’s presumed violent imagery.

¹⁸ The context of Charteris-Black’s comment is Psalm 75:8 where similar wine and cup imagery is used.

¹⁹ In a previously published translation (Wilson 2014:130), this author too failed to recognize the metaphor and translated simply as “blood.”



Moyise (2012:31) observes: “Perhaps the most obvious feature of the book of Revelation is the sheer quantity of violent language that it contains.” To illustrate this point, he (2012:34) singles out 14:20 with its “vision of the harvesting of the earth that results in a quantity of blood...” Moyise’s literalism is in stark contrast with the view of the volume’s editors Hays and Alkier (2012:6) who write: “Revelation’s visions are to be read as poetic symbolism rather than literal description or prediction; literalistic interpretation can lead to disastrous misinterpretation.” One such disastrous misinterpretation is to think that blood spilled at the battle of Armageddon, purported to occur in Israel’s Jezreel valley, will rise as high as a horse’s bridle and flow for 200 miles around Jerusalem (cf. Lindsay 1970:165–66). Hays and Altier (2012:6) further observe that “the book’s symbolism must be understood through understanding its intertextual relation to Israel’s scripture.” This intertextual relationship is what this article has attempted to do. Thus, the extreme imagery of a literal translation has been mitigated, and one fewer text purporting to show inordinate violence in Revelation has been removed.

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