

Are Alcoholic Beverages Pure or Impure?

There is no question that drinking wine and other alcoholic beverages is forbidden in Islam. This is a matter of unanimous agreement among Muslims.

Allah says: "O ye who believe! Intoxicants, gambling, idols, and divination by arrows are but filth of Satan's handiwork. Keep away from it in order that you may succeed. Satan's plan is but to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of Allah, and from prayer: will you not then desist?" [*Sûrah al-Mâ'idah* : 90-91]

Scholars agree that this verse prohibiting intoxicants is among the last verses of the Qur'ân to be revealed. There is no possibility that this verse has been abrogated. Its ruling, therefore, is in force until the Day of Judgment.

However, does that fact that wine is unlawful also mean that it is impure?

Some scholars of the Shâfi'î school of law claim that the impurity of alcoholic beverages is a matter of juristic consensus. [al-Nawawî, *al-Majmû`* (2/563)]

This claim is untrue. The question of whether alcoholic beverages are pure or impure is a matter of scholarly dispute.

The first opinion:

The opinion of the majority of scholars is that alcoholic beverages are impure. This is the opinion of the scholars of the Hanafî, Mâlikî, and Hanbalî schools of law. It is also the position of the majority of Shâfi'î scholars. Many later scholars, like Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Shinqîfî, and Ibn Bâz, also hold this view.

The evidence for this view is as follows:

1. Allah says: "Intoxicants, gambling, idols, and divination by arrows are but filth of Satan's handiwork. Keep away from it in order that you may succeed." [*Sûrah al-Mâ'idah* : 90]

Scholars have understood that wine is impure from this verse in a number of ways. First of all, there is the fact that it has been forbidden. Secondly, it is described as "filth" and looked upon as something vile. Lastly, we are ordered to keep away from it.

With respect to deriving a ruling of impurity from this verse, al-Ghazâlî said: "It takes the ruling of being impure to emphasize its unlawfulness and to discourage it, comparable to the dog and to what the dog has lapped up." [as quoted by al-Nawawî in *al-Majmû`* (2/565)]

Nevertheless, the verse is not giving a clear indication that alcoholic beverages are impure. Allah clearly states the reason why these drinks are unlawful by saying: "Satan's plan is but to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of Allah, and from prayer..."

The fact that it has been described as "filth" in the context of this verse is not evidence for its being impure. The Arabic word being used is " *rijs* ", which according to language conveys the meaning of uncleanness in a more general sense.

Likewise, the fact that we are ordered to avoid it is no indicator of it being impure. It is clearly an

order to stay away from what is unlawful and the places and circumstances where such unlawful practices are carried out.

Allah mentions intoxicating beverages along with gambling, idols, and divination with arrows, describing all of these things as “filth”. However, there is no question that gambling accessories, idols, and divining arrows are not impure substances. It is a matter of consensus that they are indeed pure. Only Ibn Hazm went so far as say: “These things are filth and they are unlawful. If a person prays carrying any of these things, his prayer will be invalid.” [*al-Muhallâ* (1/255)] No other scholar has ever been known to hold a similar view. And Allah knows best.

The only way this verse could possibly be used to indicate the impurity of alcoholic beverages would be to interpret it as stating the impurity of all of the things it mentions, then to say that gambling accessories, idols, and divining arrows are excepted from the ruling of impurity by some other evidence – most probably the juristic consensus that those things are pure.

2. Also cited as evidence for the impurity of alcoholic beverages is the verse: “And there Lord will give them to drink a beverage pure.” [*Sûrah al-Insân* : 21] This verse describes the drink of the denizens of Paradise as being pure. This, by indication of contrast, shows that the wine of our worldly existence is impure.

This understanding is supported by the fact that Allah, elsewhere in the Qur'ân, attributes to the wine of Paradise characteristics that are nonexistent in the wine of this world, saying: : “It is free from headiness; nor will they suffer intoxication therefrom.” [*Sûrah al-Sâffât* : 47] and: “No after-ache will they receive from it, nor will they suffer intoxication” [*Sûrah al-Wâqi`ah* : 19]

It cannot go unnoticed that this argument is insufficient evidence for the impurity of alcoholic beverages. The purity of the drink of Paradise in no way implies the impurity of everything which the people of this world drink. The word “beverage” is general in meaning, including both alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks. Therefore, if we were to derive from the verse an indication by contrast, we would have to declare every drink under the Sun to be impure.

The second opinion:

The opinion that alcoholic beverages are pure has been attributed to Rabî` b. `Abd al-Rahmân – who was the teacher of Mâlik b. Anas – and to Dâwûd al-Zâhirî. They said, as quoted by al-Qâdî Abû al-Tayyib: “It is pure though it is forbidden, in the same way that poisons which are plant substances are unlawful but not impure.”

This same opinion has been passed down from al-Layth b. Sa`d, al-Shâfi`î's student al-Muzanî, and some of the later Mâlikî scholars of Qarawiyyin and Baghdad such as Sa`îd b. Haddâd al-Qarawî. Among the more contemporary scholars who held this view were al-Sahwkânî, al-San`ânî, Muhammad Rashîd Ridâ, al-Albânî, and al-`Uthaymîn.

They cite the following evidence to support their view:

1. When the prohibition of wine was revealed, the Companions poured the alcoholic drinks that they possessed out into the streets. Anas relates the following:

I was serving drinks to people in the home of Abû Talhah on the day that wine was prohibited, and they were drinking nothing but date wine. Suddenly someone called out: “Come out and see!”

So we did so and someone called out: “Verily, wine has been prohibited!”

It was flowing through the streets of Madinah. Abû Talhah said to me: “Take it

outside and pour it out.” So I did so. [*Sahîh al-Bukhârî* (3/102) and *Sahîh Muslim* (3/1568-1572)]

The Companions poured their wine out into the streets of Madinah until the roadways were actually flowing with it. If it had been impure on account of its prohibition, they would not have done so. Islamic Law strictly prohibits the contamination of public thoroughfares with impurities. It is something that even the most common of people are above committing, not to mention the Companions, who were the best and most of generations.

If they had believed that wine had become impure, they would have made sure to dispose of it in the places where impure things were discarded. This was the argument advanced by Sa'îd b. al-Haddâd al-Qarawî to demonstrate the purity of wine. Moreover, he added, the Prophet (peace be upon him) would have made it clear to them that they were not allowed to dispose of it in the manner that they did.

2. A man gave Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) a waterskin of wine as a gift. Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) said: “Do you know that Allah has prohibited this?”

He said: “No, I did not.” Then he whispered an instruction to someone.

Allah's Messenger asked: “What did you whisper to him?”

He answered: “I told him to go and sell it.”

The Prophet said: “Whatever is forbidden to drink is likewise forbidden to sell.”

So the man opened the waterskin and poured out its contents. [*Sahîh Muslim* (3/1206), *Sunan al-Bayhaqî* (6/12), *Musnad Ahmad* (1/230, 244, 323, and 358), *Sunan al-Dârimî* (2/171), and *Musnad Abû Ya`lâ* (2468)]

If the contents of the waterskin had been impure, the man would not have poured them out right in front of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Even if he were to have done so, the Prophet (peace be upon him) would have told him to pour the wine out somewhere else. He would also have instructed the man to clean out the waterskin thoroughly to remove the impurities from it.

3. Before wine was prohibited, the Companions used to keep it in their jugs and their waterskins. It would have, without a doubt, come in contact with their skin and their clothing. When the prohibition of wine was revealed, the people poured their wine into the streets, and never once has it been mentioned that anyone washed his body, his clothing, or even his dishes on account of the wine. If wine were impure, they would have most certainly all done so.

4. In Islamic Law, a substance is presumed to be pure by default. To declare that something is other than pure, evidence from the sacred texts is required. There is no clear text stating that wine is impure.

Wine and other alcoholic beverages are made from substances that are well-known and commonplace, none of which are impure. Therefore, the only way that wine can be considered impure is if it suffers a change from being a pure substance into an impure one as it ferments into an intoxication drink. Such a claim requires evidence.

There can be no doubt that something does not become impure simply because it is prohibited. There are a whole host of poisons that are prohibited for us to take, though they are definitely not impure.

It is quite plain that wine was not impure before it was prohibited. If it had been, people would have had to clean up after it. Indeed, they would not have been able to drink it on that account

alone, since it is unlawful to imbibe impure substances. Therefore, evidence is needed to demonstrate that after wine became prohibited, it became impure as well.

Conclusion:

The opinion that seems most correct – and Allah knows best – is the opinion that alcoholic beverages are pure. The evidence supporting this view is strong and free from any serious counterarguments. The evidence supporting the impurity of these beverages, on the other hand, is open to serious criticism.

And Allah knows best.