

## Nebel\*

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The term נבל, as in נבל יין or נבל שמן, is routinely translated “jar, bottle, skin, flagon,” and with good reason. There can be no doubt that the word refers to a vessel or container used for liquids. This is apparent in passages like 1 Sam 10:3, Isa 30:14, Jer 13:12, Lam 4:2. But I suspect that נבל has another sense that is not recognized by scholars and translators, because the relevant pieces of evidence have never been brought to bear upon the question.

Occasionally, נבל refers not to the vessel, but rather to the volume of the contents of a designated vessel. Consider the English word “cup.” In most contexts, we understand this word to refer to a vessel. But when a recipe dictates “a cup of sugar,” we understand this refers to the capacity of a pre-designated cup and means nothing more or less than “eight ounces.” Thus, a text like 1 Sam 1:24, when Hannah offers יין ונבל יין begs to be understood as “an ‘epha’ of flour and a ‘nebel’ of wine,” where the parallel phraseology recommends our seeing נבל as no less a measure than איפה.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, a series of Israelite ostraca found in Samaria makes repeated mention of נבל יין and נבל שמן, where understanding נבל as a unit of measure is no less acceptable than taking the term as a reference to the vessel itself.<sup>2</sup> All this appears reasonable on the basis of the internal evidence. But there is also external evidence that has never been acknowledged. At 1 Sam 1:24 the expression יין ונבל יין is translated by the Septuagint νεβελ οἴνου. Why did the translator so render? Had he held that נבל here meant “wineskin, flagon, bottle” or the like, he had plenty of possibilities in his repertoire (e.g. at 10:3, he uses ἀσκός for נבל). But surely he believed that נבל here was a unit of measurement and so did not lend itself to translation, only to reproduction in transliterated form, just as he rendered איפה in the same verse with οἶφι.<sup>3</sup>

All this seems conclusive. But if more evidence be required, we have decisive and explicit confirmation from two fourth/fifth century Church Fathers. St Jerome, in his *Hebraica Nomina*,<sup>4</sup> explains the term “nebel” as *mensurae nomen*, “the name of a measure.” In addition, Epiphanius, in his *de Mensuris et Ponderibus* tells us that the νεβελ was a measure equivalent to 150 *xestai*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The absence of אחד is presumably a matter of stylistic *variatio*. Exactly the same variation is present at Lev 14:21. Interestingly, the Septuagint lacks any explicit “one” with איפה (οἶφι).

<sup>2</sup> See Reisner, G.A.: *Harvard Excavations at Samaria vol. 1*, Cambridge, MA, 1924, 227-51.

<sup>3</sup> See also the Septuagint at Hos 3:2, where חומר is transliterated γομορ and (a presumed) נבל is νεβελ. It is worth noting that the Ethiopic translators of the Septuagint assumed that the Septuagint’s νεβελ was a measure, not an object, for they render the text at Hos 3:2 “at the measure of a *nebal* of wine.”

<sup>4</sup> DeLagarde, P.: *Onomastica Sacra*. Göttingen 1887, sect. 36.13, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Edition of G.Dindorf, Leipzig 1862, sect. 24, 31.

**Abstract:**

The word *Nebel* not only refers to a vessel, but is also a term of measurement.

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