

Leviticus 24:5-9

"The Bread of the Presence on the Sabbath as a Perpetual Covenant"

"Then you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. You shall set them in two rows, six to a row, on the pure gold table before the LORD. You shall put pure frankincense on each row that it may be a memorial portion for the bread, even an offering by fire to the LORD. Every sabbath day he shall set it in order before the LORD continually; it is an everlasting covenant for the sons of Israel. It shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the LORD's offerings by fire, his portion forever."

The Torah instruction prescribing the bread of the Presence or showbread, to be placed before the Lord in the Tabernacle/Temple, details how it was to be replaced every Sabbath. Twelve loaves, presumably representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel, were to be offered before the Lord, with this being labeled as "an everlasting covenant," denoting some significant permanency. What does this mean in our theological evaluation of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*?

24:5 The instruction for the bread of the Presence (*lechem ha'panim*, לֶחֶם הַפָּנִים; Exodus 35:13) specifies, "You shall take choice flour and bake of it twelve loaves, two-tenths of a measure for each loaf" (NJPS). The Hebrew for this bread is actually *sh'teim esreih challot* (שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרֵה חֻלּוֹת), a *challah* (חֻלָּה) defined by *CHALOT* as "(ring-shaped) bread, used in offerings,"¹ and was probably piled up like the stones of remembrance (Exodus 28:9-12).² There is some issue over the exact measurements, with the CJB actually having "one gallon per loaf." A total ephah was somewhere within the range of 2.6-5.3 gallons or 10-20 liters.³ The view expressed in the *ArtScroll Chumash* is that "Each loaf was the volume of 86.4 eggs. The loaves were mixed and kneaded outside of the Courtyard, but baked as maztah inside the Courtyard, like all the loaves of meal-offerings (*Rambam, Hil. T'midin U'Mussafin* 5:6-10)."⁴

History actually attests that the bread used in the Tabernacle was unleavened. Philo states, "The setting out of twelve loaves—the same number as the tribes—on the sacred table especially guarantees the things which have been said. For they are all unleavened" (*On the Special Laws* 2.161).⁵ The historian Josephus likewise records, "Upon this table, which was placed on the north side of the temple, not far from the most holy place, were laid twelve unleavened loaves of bread, six upon each heap, one above another: they were made of two tenth deals of the purest flour" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 3.142).⁶ The Mishnah later states, "All meal offerings are brought unleavened, except for the leaven[ed cakes] of the thank offerings and the two loaves of bread [of Shabuot], which are brought leavened" (m.*Menachot* 5:1; cf. b.*Menachot* 77b).⁷

¹ *CHALOT*, pp 104-105.

² Wenham, *Leviticus*, 310.

³ Cf. John R. Spencer, "Ephah (Measure)," in *EDB*, 411.

⁴ Scherman, *Chumash*, 691.

⁵ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 583.

⁶ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 88.

⁷ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 741.

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Also observed is the thought of the *ArtScroll Chumash*, expressing the opinion, “The Table and the breads are described in *Exodus* 25:23-30. Every Friday, twelve large loaves were baked. They were placed on the Table on the Sabbath...and the old breads were divided among the Kohanim [priests] and eaten. Miraculously, the breads remained fresh all week (*Menachos* 96b).”⁸ Much more realistic is the conclusion of R. Laird Harris, “Presumably it was hard baked and would not spoil in the interim. On the other hand, the text does not strictly say that the bread would stay on the table a week. It may have been taken off at a convenient time—after the Sabbath was over—and eaten by the priests.”⁹

24:6-7 The direction continues, specifying, “Arrange them in two stacks, six in each stack, on the table of pure gold before the LORD” (v. 6, NJPS), as the bread of the Presence was to be placed on the gold table (*Exodus* 25:24; 37:11), outside of the Holy of Holies. Frankincense (*levonah*, לֵבְנָה), and notably **not** the bread, is what was to be burned: “With each row you shall place pure frankincense, which is to be a token offering for the bread, as an offering by fire to the LORD” (v. 7. NJPS). The Mishnah details how the frankincense was placed in two receptacles: “Abba Saul says, ‘There [in the open area] did they set the two dishes of frankincense of the shewbread’” (m.*Menachot* 11:5).¹⁰ Baruch A. Levine draws out how it would have been more customary for the bread as an offering to be burned, but instead the incense is burned and the bread allotted to the priests:

“The loaves themselves were a presentation to God for which no altar of burnt offerings was used. The bread was viewed by God and, by this means, accepted by Him. Subsequently, the loaves were apportioned to the priests. In an effort to adapt this widespread mode of sacrifice to the more distinctive method of burning offerings on the altar, frankincense was to be burned near the loaves of bread; just as with other offerings of grain, a small amount of flour was burned on the altar.”¹¹

24:8-9 The major statement about the placement of the showbread before the Lord in the Tabernacle, that should necessarily grab our attention, is how “Every sabbath day Aaron shall set it in order before the LORD continually on behalf of the people of Israel as a covenant for ever” (RSV). *B’yom haShabbat b’yom haShabbat* (בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת), is more literally “On the Sabbath day, on the Sabbath day” (Friedman),¹² hence most Bibles having “every Sabbath,” with the older bread being replaced every Sabbath with new bread. The placement of such bread is rightly taken to signify God’s ongoing sustenance of His people.

This is recognized to be a *b’rit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם), with variance of translation, more often being “everlasting covenant” (NASU, ATS), “a covenant forever” (CJB), “a lasting covenant” (NIV), or “a perpetual obligation” (HCSB). The employment of *olam* (עוֹלָם), “long duration, antiquity, futurity” (*BDB*),¹³ can be agreed by all to represent a wide degree of permanency. Various resources recognize that the bread of the Presence placed before God in the Tabernacle, and later the Temple (1 Chronicles 9:32; 2 Chronicles 2:4),

⁸ Scherman, *Chumash*, 691.

⁹ Harris, in *EXP*, 2:630.

¹⁰ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 757.

¹¹ Levine, 165.

¹² Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 398.

¹³ *BDB*, 761.

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are to be taken as a symbol of the perpetuity and permanence of God's faithfulness to Israel, as well as His provision for His own on the Sabbath day:

- J.H. Hertz: "This praise is applied to the Sabbath itself (Exod. xxxi, 16); and this weekly offering from the Children of Israel typified the regular renewal of the covenant between God and His people, of which the Sabbath was 'a sign.'"¹⁴
- *ArtScroll Chumash*: "The loaves are likened to the Sabbath, which is also called an *eternal covenant* (Exodus 31:16). The Sabbath covenant forbids work and ordains that one enjoy his food without worrying where his livelihood will come from, because the Sabbath brings its own store of blessing for the following week. So, too, the show-bread symbolizes that God provides prosperity for his servants (*Haamek Davar*)."¹⁵
- Samuel E. Balentine: "Lev. 24:8 suggests that the twelve loaves of tabernacle bread, which call to mind the twelve tribes of Israel, are an essential reminder of the 'everlasting covenant' that keeps both God and Israel focused on their commitments to each other."¹⁶

The priests were permitted to take the bread of the Presence or showbread, and eat from it themselves: "And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the offerings by fire to the LORD, a perpetual due" (v. 9, RSV). Eating of the showbread is actually labeled to be a *choq-olam* (חֻק־עוֹלָם), "a due for all time" (NJPS), an "eternal decree" (ATS), "his portion forever" (NASU). Obviously, with both the presentation of the showbread before the Lord in the Tabernacle/Temple, and the Levitical priests being able to eat from this bread, being labeled with *olam*—this would indicate a permanent significance that is not easily dismissed. There is no operative Tabernacle or Temple in Jerusalem today, but we can recognize the reestablishment of this system in the future Millennium, per the prophecies of Ezekiel chs. 40-44. The most any of us as students of Scripture can do, though, is make sure that we appreciate these instructions labeled as *olam*, perhaps in our Sabbath reflections by being reminded of the provision of bread for the priests.

That the showbread or bread of the Presence was not eaten only by the Levitical priests is witnessed in the record of the Tanach, which David and his companions ate (1 Samuel 21:4-6), a scene also noted by Yeshua the Messiah when His Disciples had been plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5). The showbread present before Israel's God in the Tabernacle/Temple, and being accessible to the priests for eating, had a definite subversive quality to it, in terms of how Ancient Near Eastern gods and goddesses were believed to have regularly dined in their temples. Isaiah 65:11 mockingly states, "But you who forsake the LORD, who forget My holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune, and who fill *cups* with mixed wine for Destiny." In the Apocryphal *Bel and Dragon 3*, it is witnessed, "Now the Babylonians had an idol called Bel, and every day they spent on it twelve bushels of fine flour and forty sheep and fifty

¹⁴ Hertz, 526.

¹⁵ Scherman, *Chumash*, 691.

¹⁶ Balentine, 188.

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gallons of wine.” Balentine, who does have various critical presuppositions on the composition of Leviticus, does still, overall, usefully observe,

“Perhaps the ritual is informed by the common practice in the ancient Near East of supplying bread as a food offering for the gods. Whatever distant linkage there may be to this understanding, however, it is evident that Israel’s priests have shaped this ritual in accordance with their distinctive theological perspectives.”¹⁷

The bread of the Presence or showbread, far from feeding the gods, was rather to be something that actually fed the priests. It was to be presented before the Lord, as a recognition of His provision for Israel—but then in turn could be eaten by the priests who served Him. Oswald T. Allis’ excellent conclusions on this must be recognized:

“This rite may suggest the lavish offerings of food which the Egyptians and Babylonians were accustomed to make to their gods. In Erech, *e.g.*, 243 loaves were baked daily to supply the various temples of the city. The god Anu received thirty of them; and they were served in two morning and two evening meals. The object was to feed the god as human beings were fed. The fact that they were actually used to feed the priests who offered them was a hidden mystery, as is made strikingly evident by the apocryphal story of Bel and the Dragon. The bread of the Presence in Israel was quite different. The loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel. After seven days the twelve were replaced by others and were then eaten by the priests and their families. This was required and it served to show that the rite was a symbolic one. Like the jar of manna (Ex. 16:33) which was to be kept as a perpetual memorial, the bread of the Presence was a daily confession by Israel and reminder to Israel that all her temporal blessings came from God. The idea of feeding the deity was an utterly pagan idea which was contrary to the teachings of both the Law and the Prophets, according to which it was Israel’s God who supplied all the needs of His people. *Cf., e.g.*, Ex. 16-17; Num. 11; Ho. 2:8; Ps. 50:9-14, which has its echo in Paul’s address on Mars Hill (Acts 17:25).”¹⁸

Every week on *Shabbat*, many rightfully thank God for His provision and sustenance throughout the week, something recognized during the customs of the *Erev Shabbat* dinner. Recalling the showbread being represented before the Lord in the Tabernacle and Temple, might very well help to enhance our remembrance of such provision. As Walter C. Kaiser properly observes,

“Because incense is a symbol of prayer (see Ps 141:2), there may also be the imitation that both our physical and our spiritual food are to be received and sanctified by prayer. Surely, it is God who supplies our daily bread; the weekly dedication of the twelve loaves, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, acknowledges the same truth in a most concrete, but graphic, way.”¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸ Allis, in *NBCR*, 164.

¹⁹ Kaiser, in *NIB*, 1:1164.