
FAQ

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Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees

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What is “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” that Yeshua warns about? Are the numbers twelve supposed to relate to the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and seven to relate to the seven laws of Noah? How am I supposed to approach this?

Certainly when encountering Yeshua’s word to His Disciples about “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:5), and various associated numbers, it can be very tempting for contemporary Messianic Bible teachers, or various people in the Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, to attach some sort of significance or symbolism to them representing something. Yet, the key to any proper interpretation and application of what the Messiah says, is in how He makes the point of referencing two prior events: the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44; Matthew 14:13-21) and the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-13; Matthew 15:29-35), and what they would mean in what is stated in not only context, but also in the content of the Gospels. The warning regarding the leaven of the Pharisees, and those of Herod and the Sadducees, appears in both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew:

“And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, ‘Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.’ They *began* to discuss with one another *the fact* that they had no bread. And Yeshua, aware of this, said to them, ‘Why do you discuss *the fact* that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR [Jeremiah 5:21; Ezekiel 12:2]? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?’ They said to Him, ‘Twelve.’ ‘When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?’ And they said to Him, ‘Seven.’ And He was saying to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’” (Mark 8:14-21, NASU).

“And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring *any* bread. And Yeshua said to them, ‘Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ They began to discuss *this* among themselves, saying, ‘He said that because we did not bring *any* bread.’ But Yeshua, aware of this, said, ‘You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets *full* you picked up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets *full* you picked up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matthew 16:5-12, NASU).

This scene opens with up how, in their journey on the boat, the Disciples had forgotten to take bread (Mark 8:14; Matthew 16:5). Yeshua apparently used their negligence, to issue them a warning. Mark 8:15 has, “Watch out! Guard yourselves from the *hametz* of the *P’rushim* and the *hametz* of Herod” (CJB), followed by Matthew 16:6, “Watch out! Guard yourselves against the *hametz* of the *P’rushim* and *Tz’dukim*” (CJB). The difference between these two accounts of what leaven

or “yeast” (NIV; Heb. *se’or*, שֵׂאֵר or *chameitz*, חָמֵץ; Grk. *zumē*, ζύμη) involves, is that Mark’s Gospel speaks of the Herodians or the political leaders of Judea, and Matthew’s Gospel speaks of the Sadducees or religious leaders and Temple priesthood of Judea. The Disciples concluded that Yeshua told them to beware of this leaven, for the precise reason that they did not bring sufficient bread (Mark 8:15; Matthew 16:6). It is often concluded that the Disciples thought that with the Pharisees and Sadducees both being significant components of the Judean Jewish community, that Yeshua was telling them not to purchase or acquire bread from them, as Pharisees and Sadducees were frequently hostile to Him. As is seen, this is not at all the reason why Yeshua issued a warning against Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees (Mark 8:17; Matthew 16:7).

Yeshua inquired of His Disciples, why they somehow did not understand the previous two scenes of His feeding of five thousand, followed by His feeding of four thousand. In this, the Lord does ask them to recall how many baskets of left over food they picked up (Mark 8:18-20; Matthew 16:8-10). *Surely, if there were significant left overs from the feeding of the five thousand and four thousand, than Yeshua could see that their small party was sufficiently fed.* It is at this point where He tells them that He was not speaking of leaven/yeast or bread in terms of literal bread (Matthew 16:11), but such was to be taken as representative of the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:12). Presumably, the various excesses of, and lack of justice from, the Pharisaical leaders (cf. Matthew 23), and the common Saddusaical denial of the doctrine of resurrection (Mark 12:18; Matthew 22:23; Acts 23:8), would have classified among what their leaven/yeast composed.

The conclusion for Yeshua’s Disciples to contemplate was, “Then they understood—they were to guard themselves not from yeast for bread but from the teaching of the *P’rushim* and *Tz’dukim*” (Matthew 16:12, CJB), and it is common to associate this with the common over-religiosity of the Pharisees, and the relatively liberal theology of the Sadducees.

Another useful and entirely appropriate view, is to associate “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” with both groups’ apparent pattern of often challenging Yeshua to issue a sign to prove His identity to them (i.e., Mark 8:11-13; Matthew 16:1-4), which was proof of their lack of faith. In his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David H. Stern details,

“Alfred Edersheim, a nineteenth-century Hebrew Christian scholar, suggests the disciples thought Yeshua believed they had not brought bread in order to have him do another bread-making miracle. This would have been the same sort of sign-fishing the *P’rushim* and *Tz’dukim* had been doing and would have been an indication of their having **little trust**.”¹

What Edersheim says about “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, is seen in his classic work *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*:

“When the Lord touched the other shore, His mind and heart were still full of the scene from which He had lately passed. For truly, on this demand for a sign did the future of Israel seem to hang. Perhaps it is not presumptuous to suppose, that the journey across the Lake had been made in silence on His part, so deeply were mind and heart engrossed with the fate of His own royal city. And now, when they landed, they carried ashore the empty provision-baskets; for, as, with his usual attention to details, St. Mark notes, they had only brought one loaf of bread with them. In fact, in the excitement and hurry ‘they forgot to take bread’ with them. Whether or not something connected with this arrested the attention of Christ, He at last broke the silence, speaking that which was so much on His mind. He warned them, as greatly they needed it, of the leaven with which Pharisees and Sadducees had, each in their own manner, leavened, and so corrupted, the holy bread of Scripture-truth. The disciples, aware that in their hurry and excitement they had forgotten bread, misunderstood these words of Christ—although not in the utterly unaccountable manner which commentators generally suppose: as implying ‘a caution against procuring bread from His enemies.’ It is well-nigh impossible, that the disciples could have understood the warning of Christ as meaning any such thing—even irrespective of the consideration, that a prohibition to buy bread from either the Pharisees or Sadducees would have involved an impossibility. The misunderstanding of the disciples was, if unwarrantable, at least rational. They thought the words of Christ implied, that in His view they had not *forgotten* to bring bread, but purposefully omitted to do so, in order, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, to ‘seek of Him a sign’ of His Divine Messiahship—nay, to oblige Him to show such—that of miraculous provision in their want. The mere suspicion showed what was in their minds, and pointed to their danger. This explains how, in His reply, Jesus reproved them, not for utter want of discernment, but only for ‘little faith.’ It was their lack of faith—the very leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees—which had suggested a thought. Again, if the experience of the past—their own twice-repeated question, and the practical answer which it had received the miraculous provision of not only enough, but to spare—had taught them anything, it should have been to believe, that the needful provision of their wants by Christ was not ‘a sign,’ such as the Pharisees had asked, but what faith might ever expect from Christ, when following after, or waiting upon, Him. Then understood they truly, that it was not of the leaven of bread that He had bidden them beware—that His mysterious words bore no reference to bread, nor to their supposed omission to bring it for the purpose of eliciting a sign from Him, but pointed to the far more real danger of ‘the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees,’ which had underlain the demand for a sign from heaven.

“Here, as always, Christ rather suggests than gives the interpretation of His meaning. And this the law of His teaching. Our modern Pharisees and Sadducees, also, too often ask of him a sign from heaven in evidence of His claims. And we also too often misunderstand His warning to us concerning their leaven. Seeing the scanty store in our basket, our little faith is busy with thoughts

¹ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 53.

about possible signs in multiplying the one loaf which we have, forgetful that, where Christ is, faith may ever expect all that is needful, and that our care should only be in regard to the teaching which might leaven and corrupt that on which our souls are fed.”²

Between recognizing “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” as Pharisaical religious excesses and ignoring social justice issues, and Saddusaical denial of the resurrection, *or* both the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ habit of challenging Yeshua to give them a sign—are two legitimate options from the text of the Apostolic Scriptures, for one looking for what such “leaven” would have composed. The actual numbers of the left overs from the feeding of the five thousand and four thousand, need not be interpreted via any sort of debatable symbolism, but instead should direct readers to the fact of how if Yeshua took care of such crowds with massive amounts of food remaining, then He would surely have been capable of caring for His immediate own.

² Alfred Edershem, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah: New Updated Edition, Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 522.