

BY MONA STEWART

# Bread

AND BREAD MAKING

IN THE  
ANCIENT WORLD

Bread played a major role in the lives of the Hebrew people in the Old and New Testament. Seven Hebrew words refer to bread 384 times in the Old Testament, although not always translated as bread. Three Greek words for bread appear 108 times in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>



**Bread seller on the streets of Old Jerusalem.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/MICAH KANDROS (3/5/7/2/6/5)

**Left: Using a technique that has been in use for centuries, this gentleman is separating wheat on a threshing floor; at Gadara, Jordan.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/JERRY VARDAMAN COLLECTION (2/9/11/1/3)

**B**read, “the staff of life,” is the oldest of all foods manufactured by man. It was the basic food in the ancient world, so much so that people often translated “bread” as “food.” Bread is still the staple food in most countries except those in East Asia where rice is the staple.

The first breads were made from seeds of various wild grasses. Later, wheat flour and barley meal became the choice breads. God told Ezekiel to make bread of wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and spelt (Ezek. 4:9). This combination of grains is available in some supermarkets today. People have eaten bread in its many different forms for thousands of years. For years, historians credited the Egyptians with making the first leavened breads and baking ovens. Archaeology, though, hints that these may have originated in central Asia and then spread to Mesopotamia and Egypt.<sup>2</sup> The recipe was usually ground grain, water, and perhaps leaven or yeast.

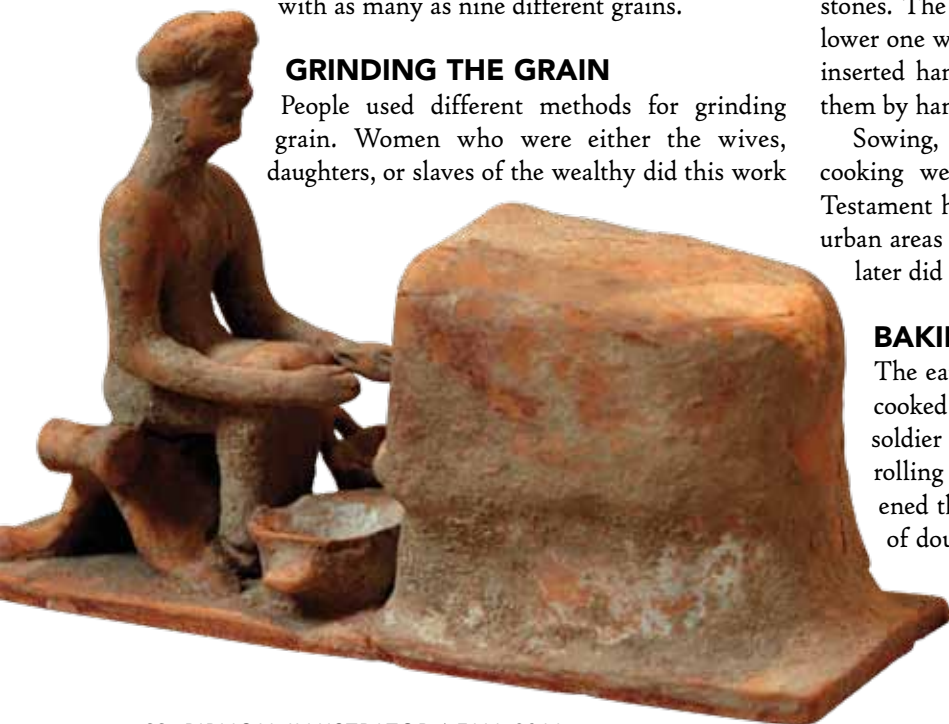
### KINDS OF BREADS

Barley meal has husks and is coarser than wheat flour.<sup>3</sup> It is also less appetizing and less expensive. It was the first grain, however, ready for harvest (Ex. 9:31,32). The poor could not afford wheat bread, so barley bread became their staple. The lad’s lunch in John 6:9 consisted of five barley loaves and two fish. The barley loaves were probably flat disks much like small tortillas. Having barley rather than wheat indicated his family’s economic condition. The rich preferred wheat bread. To have no bread was the mark of extreme poverty.

Bread is as varied as there are countries. The thick, light loaf popular in the West is unfamiliar in the East.<sup>4</sup> Multigrain breads are popular everywhere and often made with as many as nine different grains.

### GRINDING THE GRAIN

People used different methods for grinding grain. Women who were either the wives, daughters, or slaves of the wealthy did this work

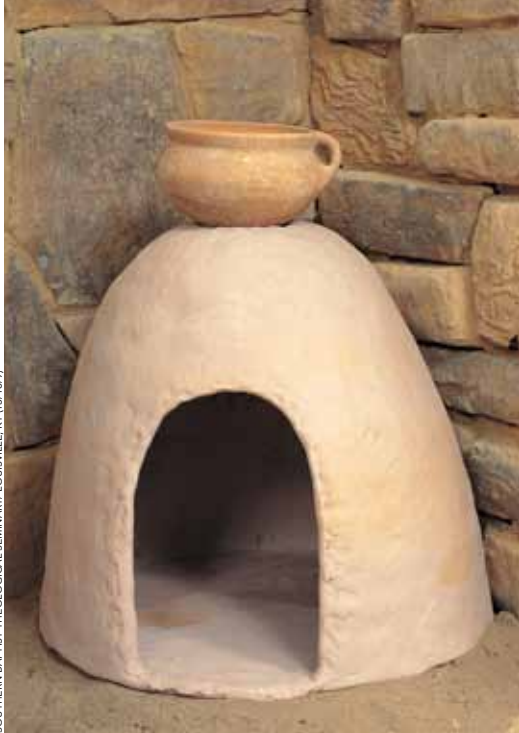


**Right: Oven similar to this would have been typical in an Old Testament Era dwelling or house. A cooking pot is on top of the oven.**

**Below: Two oxen grinding grain.**

**Lower left: Terracotta figurine of a woman seated beside an oven. She is baking bread or cakes. Boeotian, from the region north of the Gulf of Corinth; dated about 500 B.C.**

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/JOSEPH A. CALLAWAY ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM/ THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY/LOUISVILLE, KY (3/13/16/9)



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(Matt. 24:41). The poor utilized hand mills made of two stones. The upper stone was of a lighter material than the lower one which was firmly anchored in the ground. People inserted handles into holes in the upper stone and turned them by hand.<sup>5</sup> Animals turned the larger millstones.

Sowing, gathering, winnowing, grinding, kneading, and cooking were part of daily life in each Old and New Testament home. Community bakeries became available in urban areas where people took the loaves to be baked. Only later did bakeries make bread available for purchase.

### BAKING THE BREAD

The earliest breads, which were flat and circular, were cooked on heated stones. Gideon overheard a Midianite soldier relate a dream about such a cake of barley bread rolling into his camp (Judg. 7:13). Fermenting yeast leavened the dough, causing it to rise. Saving a small part of dough from the previous day also served as a sour-dough leavening. The leaven made the texture of the loaf bread much lighter than the previous hard flat cakes. The night before leaving Egypt, the Israelites ate unleavened bread at the

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE/METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/NEW YORK (6/07/518)

## BREAD AS SYMBOLIC

Both the Old and New Testaments used bread as imagery. The following are examples:

<b>Numbers 14:9</b>	Joshua and Caleb told the Israelites they could easily conquer the Canaanites “for they are bread for us” (ESV).
<b>Psalms 80:5</b>	Asaph refers to God feeding them with the “bread of tears.”
<b>Proverbs 4:17</b>	The ungodly eat the “bread of wickedness.”
<b>Proverbs 31:27</b>	The good wife does not eat the “bread of idleness.”
<b>Isaiah 30:20</b>	The Lord gives the “bread of adversity.”
<b>Isaiah 55:2</b>	“Why spend money on what is not bread?”
<b>Matthew 6:11</b>	“Give us today our daily bread.”
<b>Mark 7:27</b>	“It is not right to take the children’s bread.”
<b>John 6:35</b>	“Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life.’”
<b>John 6:50</b>	“Here is the bread that comes down from heaven.”
<b>John 6:51</b>	Jesus said, “I am the living bread.”
<b>Acts 2:42</b>	Believers broke bread together.
<b>Acts 20:7</b>	First mention of Sunday worship: “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.”



\*\*Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

first Passover (Ex. 12).<sup>6</sup> Jews thereafter ate unleavened bread each year at Passover as a memorial of that night.

One of three methods of baking the small, thin cakes was to use a heated stone rather than a permanent oven.<sup>7</sup> Another method of baking was to place the dough in a pan or on a griddle made of clay or iron. This disk-shaped bread looked much like a pancake, about one-half inch thick and up to 12 inches in diameter.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes smaller disks were perforated or carried on a stick by means of a hole in the middle. The third baking method was in an oven of clay or iron (Lev. 2:4). Those preparing the bread would form their dough into different shapes and sizes.

### BREAD USED IN WORSHIP

At the first Passover, God instructed the Israelites to eat a meal of a lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. Afterwards, Passover became the Jew’s most important annual festival. This festival ended with the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 23:15; Deut. 16:16). The purpose of Passover was to remember Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was to recall the hardships endured, and the absence of leaven symbolized their speedy departure and their dedication to God.<sup>9</sup>

A priest placed the Bread of the Presence (or showbread) on a table before the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and later the temple. The priests replaced these 12 loaves each sabbath and were then free to eat the loaves they removed. David while fleeing from Saul requested five loaves of bread

from Ahimelech the priest of Nob. The only available bread was the consecrated showbread. The priest was reluctant to give it to David, but finally relented (1 Sam. 21:1-6).

Leviticus 2:1 describes a grain offering, which was to be made of fine flour. Most of the flour was coarse and had to be sifted to meet the requirement. The priest would take a handful of this flour, mix it with oil, and burn it on the altar as a memorial. It produced an aroma pleasing to the Lord. The rest of the grain offering was reserved for Aaron and his sons.

From the house of the peasant to the house of God, bread played a vital part. Through the centuries and in various forms, it has offered sustenance and nourishment. No wonder we still today refer to it to as “the staff of life.” **B**

1. “Bread” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 209.

2. Alan Davidson et al., *The Oxford Companion to Food*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 97.

3. William H. Stephens, *The New Testament World in Pictures* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 182-85.

4. George B. Eager, “Bread” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, gen. ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 516.

5. *Ibid.*, 515; Stephens, 182-83.

6. Arthur B. Fowler, “Bread” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 132.

7. Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 20.

8. *Ibid.*; Brooks, 209.

9. Gleason Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 261.

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