

Leviticus, the Bread of Presence, and the Priesthood of All Believers

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In many and various ways, God spoke to his people of old by the prophets (Heb 1:1). Daniel dreamed dreams. Isaiah received visions (Isa 1:1). Ezekiel saw the wheel (Ezek 1:15–21). But God’s revelation to Moses was of a higher order: “With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD” (Num 12:8).¹ Long before Jesus called his disciples friends (John 15:15), the Lord spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod 33:11; cf. Deut 34:10).

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the Pentateuch’s third book, which begins in a stunning way: “The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them . . .’” (Lev 1:1–2). This common refrain is found throughout the book (Lev 5:14, 6:1, 8:1, 12:1, 14:1, 14:33, 15:1, 16:1, 17:1, 18:1, 19:1, 20:1, 21:1, 22:17, and more). Prior to the incarnation, no revelation was ever so direct. And indeed, Leviticus is the very heart of the Pentateuch, which is the foundation of the Old Testament. Like the New Testament book of Hebrews, Leviticus takes us behind the curtain, and into the most sacred proceedings.

The priestly book of Leviticus, however, is tough sledding, understandably neglected. Its rules and regulations may seem arcane and antiquated, at times fussy, at times drastic. The Apostle Peter acknowledged this difficulty, calling Levitical law a yoke that “neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). And yet, as the priesthood of all believers, we would do well to learn what Leviticus has to teach. Ceremonial externals have been abrogated, but the core remains, as does the ultimate purpose.

Levitical law reflects the values and character of our Lord. Rules come and go, but the law eternal remains an expression of God’s unchanging will. As Jay Sklar puts it, Levitical laws “give us a window into God’s heart.”² Because our God is the Lord of life, those who sacrifice children to Molech face stoning (Lev 20:2). Because the family matters, cursing father and mother is a grave offense (Lev 20:9). Since sexual transgressions cause great harm, they are dealt with accordingly (Lev 20:10);

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the ESV.

² Jay Sklar, *Leviticus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 17.

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warnings against the practices of the rainbow revolution remain intact (Lev 18:22, 20:13). Leprosy and bodily impurities are signs of our fallen condition, and signal the need for deeper cleansing. Draconian penalties underline the depth of our disorder. Precise instructions remind us that God is holy, that worship can never be casual or informal. Leviticus teaches that sin brings death, that our trespasses cause a great separation between God and man. Iniquity is more than drawing outside the lines; it cannot be reduced to creativity or curiosity. Adam and Eve were onto something when they tried to hide from God's presence. "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Ps 130:3). With God all things are possible, but even so, forgiveness and reconciliation come at a steep price.

Exodus gives us a picture of redemption, of a lamb whose blood wards off death's angel. The exodus was a singular event brought to living memory by the annual Passover. In that same vein, Levitical practice offered God's people an ongoing application of grace, a sacramental course of medication to be taken until Golgotha's redemption, whose fruits are delivered in the washing of rebirth (Titus 3:5) and what Ignatius of Antioch called the medicine of immortality.³ Levitical worship became outdated but never obsolete. Leviticus is fulfilled by Christ and finds its home in the life of the church; it gives us a picture of the two great poles of worship: salvation and communion, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Communion in the Beginning

Man was created in God's image: male and female, with children processing. Genesis offers a tantalizing picture of what was and what might have been. God says, "Let there be light," and there was light (Gen 1:3). God speaks fish, birds, and mammals into existence. But with man it is different, a relationship that begins with intimacy. God breathes his own life into the nostrils of Adam (Gen 2:7), lovingly forms Eve from Adam's rib (Gen 2:21–22). The Lord ordains Adam to care for a garden in which he himself walked (Gen 3:8). With man, God speaks and invites conversation. Adam was created to eat from the tree of life, and to do so in the Lord's presence. If the Lord was pleased to walk in Eden's garden, is it too much to ask whether he would ever join Adam's family in a meal of complete communion?

But such daydreams turn into nightmares. As sin enters the world, Adam and Eve turn against each other and against God. Brotherly love turns into fratricide. The first couple is driven from the garden, and Eden becomes paradise lost. Cherubim are placed as sentries at Eden's gate. Reentry is forbidden. Would the door to paradise ever be opened again? Would the angels ever put down their flaming swords? Leviticus gives us hope.

³ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 20.2; Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 199.

The Theme of Leviticus

Leviticus offers limited but significant access into the divine presence, a glimpse of what was yet to come. First with the tabernacle, and then with the temple, the Lord makes his home among his people. Levitical regulations tell the story of atonement made possible by the sacrifice. L. Michael Morales puts it this way: “The primary theme and theology of Leviticus (and of the Pentateuch as a whole) is YHWH’s *opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence*.”⁴ Central to the possibility of reunion was the shedding of blood. Accordingly, bulls, sheep, goats, doves, and pigeons paid the price. As Morales puts it, “The first half deals primarily with the approach to God through blood, while the second half is taken up with life in God’s presence through increasing holiness, the overall goal being fellowship and union with God.”⁵ In other words, redemption leads to communion. The Day of Atonement leads to a place where bread is shared, and God’s priestly people eat at the Lord’s table and in his presence.

Levitical Rituals Leading Up to the Day of Atonement

There can be no communion apart from cleansing and forgiveness. Accordingly, Leviticus prescribes burnt offerings (Lev 1:3–17), grain offerings (Lev 2:1–16), and peace offerings (Lev 3:1–16). There are offerings for sins intentional and unintentional (Lev 4–6). As the book unfolds, we are introduced to rituals that deal with holiness and purity, and with various regulations concerning childbirth, leprosy, and various bodily discharges. Sin is multivalent, as are its effects in a fallen world. Who would enter a wedding banquet with a stained shirt or a face smudged with spaghetti sauce? How then shall a spiritually polluted and defiled people stand in the presence of a holy God? How can a holy God make his dwelling among sinners?

The book of Leviticus is like a map that leads us to God’s holy dwelling. As John Kleinig puts it, “The legislation of Leviticus revolves around the mystery of the Lord’s presence with his people.”⁶ Levitical rituals, sacrifices, and offerings culminate in the Day of Atonement, which stands at the center of Leviticus, the lifeblood of our relationship with God. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest offers a bull as a sin offering, reminding us that the Lord’s forgiveness comes at a cost (Lev 16:6). A cloud of incense signals that such sacrifice is pleasing to the Lord (Lev 16:12). One goat is killed, foreshadowing the One who would take upon himself sin’s death penalty (Lev 16:15). Another becomes the scapegoat that bears the people’s

⁴ L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 23. Emphasis original.

⁵ Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 30.

⁶ John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 3.

transgressions out into the wilderness, so that their sin may be as far from them as is the East from the West. Such rituals serve as a kind of down payment, a promissory note and picture of a sacrifice still to come.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden in which the Lord himself walked, and cherubim blocked their way into paradise. In the Holy Place, cherubim reappear, their wings spreading over the mercy seat (Exod 25:20). God's presence remains lethal to a sinful people. The Lord warns Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat" (Lev 16:2). But now God's mighty fortress lets down a drawbridge, and the curtain of separation has an opening made possible by ceremonial washing, a linen garb, a bull, and a ram (Lev 16:3–4). The way to the Lord remains narrow but is no longer sealed tight. As Morales puts it, "After the expulsion from the garden of Eden, this entrance into the tabernacle holy of holies presents the nearest approach to God's presence."⁷ The sons and daughters of Adam are given a way into "life with God in the house of God," our Lord's eternal intention.⁸ A foretaste of this communion may be seen in the rituals of the Bread of Presence, in which God's priestly people eat bread in God's presence and await, perchance, the day when the Lord himself will join them at the table.

Manna and the Bread of Presence: Two Kinds of Bread

Throughout the Old Testament, there are pictures and stories that prepare us for Communion, the breaking of bread and prayers (Acts 2:42). The garden of Eden offered fruit that was ripe for the picking, with the tree of life at its center (Gen 2:9). Eden's story anticipates a new tree of life bearing twelve kinds of fruit and given for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:2). But in the winter of sin, the sleds would run uphill. Food would no longer be fast or free. The ground was cursed, Adam's farms would be filled with tares, every acre riddled with thorns and thistles (Gen 3:18). Easy-picking fruit would be replaced by bread that would come only by the sweat of the brow (Gen 3:19).

But in the fullness and fermentation of time, the Lord would offer up a new invitation: "come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa 55:1). To his wilderness people, the Lord had offered up manna, a meal of pure gift, a bread that rained down from the Lord, who watched over his people with mercy and grace. As the Israelites journeyed toward the land of milk and honey, they ate a heavenly bread that was "like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (Exod 16:31). This bread was offered as

⁷ Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 167.

⁸ This phrase and an exposition of it may be found in Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 17.

a daily provision, not to be saved for the next day, but with a Sabbath exception that pointed to a new creation (Exod 16:29). God's wilderness people no doubt prayed, "Give us this day our daily bread." And the Lord provided as they rested and were satisfied.

Manna, though, was not the ultimate bread, not yet the bread of life eternal. Those who ate that bread did not enter the promised land. As our Lord reminded his fellow countrymen, "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died" (John 6:49). And yet manna served as a sign of a bread still greater. The man from Nazareth would stunningly proclaim, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51). Salvation would come from an atoning tree and lead to communion: "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:56). The faithful cannot turn to another, for our Lord had the words of eternal life: "This is my body. This is my blood."

According to our Lord's command, and hinting at more to come, manna remained sacred to God's people. The book of Hebrews tells us that within the Ark of the Covenant there was a "golden urn holding the manna" (Heb 9:4). Moses proclaimed, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, so that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt'" (Exod 16:32). Accordingly, "Moses said to Aaron, 'Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the LORD to be kept throughout your generations'" (Exod 16:33). Manna was for a time, but its message was for the ages. This temple manna was God's way of saying, "Do this in remembrance of me." The past became present and prelude.

Thus the desert manna served a ceremonial function in the temple, a reminder that the Lord was both redeemer and provider. Manna became a symbol of a bread more hopeful. Accordingly, St. Paul refers to manna in sacramental terms: "For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:1-4). Christ was the true living bread from heaven, and he came as manna's fulfillment.

The Bread of Presence and Its Rituals

But Leviticus also tells of another bread, often overlooked, overshadowed. While manna speaks of heavenly bread, the Bread of Presence has a decidedly earthly dimension. This bread is called "shewbread," literally "bread of the face," for it is set before the face of God, placed in his presence (Exod 25:30, 35:13). It is also known as the Regular Bread, for it is to be set before the Lord "regularly" (Exod

25:30). Every Sabbath day, the priests would place fresh bread upon the altar, and they would take the older bread to eat (1 Sam 21:6). As Roy Gane notes, “The Sabbath is the common denominator between the ‘bread of presence’ and creation.”⁹ This Sabbath bread points to a meal where God’s people are at rest with a God who rests among them. The Sabbath was to be the time of fellowship.

Ordinary bread is made by human hands and is a matter of daily sustenance (Prov 6:8). The element of bread is more about peace and harmony than it is about feasting: “Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife” (Prov 17:1). Yet the Bread of Presence rituals remind us that even ordinary bread is a gift from God, who continues to provide for his fallen people. The fact that the Bread of Presence was part of a Sabbath-day ritual has more to teach us. The Sabbath was created for man that he might devote himself to God and bask in God’s goodness. As Morales puts it, “Just as the cosmos was created for humanity’s Sabbath communion with and fellowship with God, so too the cult was established for Israel’s Sabbath communion and fellowship with God.”¹⁰ With the Bread of Presence, ordinary bread becomes an opportunity to experience rest and fellowship in God’s presence.

The Liturgy of the Bread of Presence

The mechanics surrounding the Bread of Presence are both strange and familiar. The ritual was to take place in the Holy Place, just outside the Holy of Holies. Only the priests were granted access. This outer room became the place where the Lord did business, the meeting space for the Lord and his priestly people. Kleinig describes it thusly: “While the inner room was his private quarters, the outer room of the tent was his office, the place where he transacted business each morning and evening with his servants, like a king with his courtiers or a general with his staff officers.”¹¹ But even more than a conference room, the Holy Place was set up for dining, even as a family table is set for a Thanksgiving meal. This was neither a picnic nor fast food. Outside the veil that cordons off the Holy of Holies, there was to be a table made of acacia wood and covered with pure gold (Exod 25:23–24; 2 Chr 13:11). This was no card table or TV tray. The setting of the table was to be overseen by Aaron and the priests, especially the Kohathites who served as the altar guild (1 Chr 9:32). Upon construction of the temple, “Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of God: the golden altar, the tables for the bread of the Presence” (2 Chr 4:19). It is as if the napkins are to be folded just so, and the silverware arranged with care.

⁹ Roy Gane, “‘Bread of the Presence’ and Creator-in-Residence,” *Vetus Testamentum* 42, no. 2 (1992): 202.

¹⁰ Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 190.

¹¹ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 515.

The golden altar was adorned by lamps placed on lampstands of “pure gold” (Lev 24:6). Precious food is adorned with precious metal. Samuel Balentine aptly notes, “Given the tabernacle’s extension of creation imagery, it is reasonable to suppose that the perpetually burning light sustains the memory of God’s abiding promise to create light out of darkness.”¹² The lamps remind us of the God who created the sun, the moon, and the stars. Such light is also associated with the Scriptures: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). Even more, the lamps proclaim the God who is the “Father of lights” (Jas 1:17), and God’s Son, who is the light of the world (John 8:12). This finds ultimate fulfillment in a new world, which has no need of sun or moon, where the glory of God gives light and its lamp is the lamb (Rev 21:23).

Though priests were to take the lead, the whole people of God was involved in the table’s preparation. The meal was made possible by the labor of the people, a food offering to the Lord who provides all good things: “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly’” (Lev 24:1–2). This bread was eucharistic, an expression of thanks to God for all his benefits. Only the best flour and finest oil would do. As Sklar puts it, “By using only the finest ingredients—*clear oil of pressed olives, the finest flour, pure frankincense*—they honored the Lord as their king.”¹³ Indeed, such fine gifts anticipate the coming of the magi with gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt 2:11), as well as Mary of Bethany, who anointed our Lord’s feet with “a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard” (John 12:3). The lampstands on the table find their counterparts still today, in that fine dining is done by candlelight, and our altars are adorned by candles and attended to by acolytes.¹⁴ These lights were sacred flames, fueled by the finest oil, a practice that finds its counterpart in the story of the ten virgins tasked with keeping oil for their lamps (Matt 25:1–13) as well as the lampstands of the Apocalypse (Rev 1:12).

The tabernacle table would serve as both an altar to God and a table for God’s people. Moses was to lead a process in which fine flour would be baked into “twelve round loaves,” in two stacks of six. The loaves were very large indeed, each consisting of two tenths of an ephah, approximately three and a half pounds of flour.¹⁵ The sheer abundance of bread appears to be a partial fulfillment of Deuteronomy’s hope of the promised land of fig trees and pomegranates, “a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity” (Deut 8:9).

¹² Samuel E. Balentine, *Leviticus*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 187.

¹³ Sklar, *Leviticus*, 290. Emphasis original.

¹⁴ See Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 519.

¹⁵ This estimate comes from Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 310.

The twelve loaves point to the participation of all God's people. As Gordon Wenham puts it, "It seems likely that the two piles of six loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel, in the same way as the two onyx stones engraved with six names served as 'stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel'" (Exod 28:9–12).¹⁶ The twelve loaves likewise point forward to the church, to the apostolic number, as well as our Lord's feeding of the five thousand, in which twelve baskets of *klasmata*, "broken pieces," remain (Matt 14:20; Mark 6:43). This Levitical bread was to be covenant obligation to the Lord, and in remembrance of him: "it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever" (Lev 24:8).

As with all Old Testament rituals, there is a sense of now and not yet, the character of a shadow and foretaste. Even as the rituals of atonement pointed to the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ, so also the Bread of Presence awaits a greater fulfillment when Jesus himself would take, bless, and break bread with his disciples (Matt 26:26–28). For the time being, the bread would be "for Aaron and his sons" to be eaten "in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due" (Lev 24:9). For now, the priests alone were invited to the Lord's table. But the Lord had promised a greater day yet to come: "you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). In the New Testament, this hope came to fruition. Peter proclaims, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2:9). All the children of Israel ate the heavenly manna, and one day all the nations would be invited to feast on the Lord's holy mountain (Isa 25:6). And the King says, "Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find" (Matt 22:9).

Why Is It Called the Bread of Presence?

First and foremost, the Bread of Presence gets its name because it is set before the face of God (Exod 25:30). It is also known as the Regular Bread, as it involved no outward miracle but was a weekly ritual (Num 4:7). As Sklar so well puts it, "By setting out this bread regularly before the Lord, the Israelites were acknowledging his continual presence, and their willingness to serve him."¹⁷ So it is the priests prepared food for the Creator who had made his home among them. All that we give to the Lord has already been given to us. And so we sing, "We give Thee but Thine own."¹⁸

But there is another aspect to the proceedings. As Gary Anderson notes, the gilded table upon which the Bread of Presence was placed was thought to convey

¹⁶ Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 311.

¹⁷ Sklar, *Leviticus*, 288.

¹⁸ William W. How, "We Give Thee But Thine Own," in *Lutheran Service Book*, ed. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 781.

God's presence.¹⁹ It is as if the Lord's holiness was radioactive, the Lord's presence permeating the bread that rested in his presence. Indeed, as Anderson notes, it became customary for the priests "to bring the table out of the Temple into the courtyard and display it to pilgrims."²⁰ Such a thought is in keeping with words of our Lord: "which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?" (Matt 23:17). That is to say, earthly elements are elevated and made holy by God's presence.²¹ The earthly bread that is placed in God's presence takes on a kind of heavenly dimension. Indeed, eating the holy bread contributed to the holiness of those who ate it. As Kleinig puts it, "Since the bread was most holy, the priests shared in God's holiness by eating them."²² It was a holy bread for the edification of God's holy priesthood: "They [the priests] shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the LORD's food offerings, the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy" (Lev 21:6).

We may then call temple worship a Divine Service, which involves both give and take. Every good and perfect gift comes from above (Jas 1:17), but the Bread of Presence begins as ordinary bread prepared by the people. In that sense, the Bread of Presence is a type of tithing, an offering of thanksgiving. We give to the Lord from what he has given to us. But what we give is then given back to us with blessings still greater. This bread is holy according to the Lord's command and presence, but so also does that bread impart holiness to those who eat it. The Bread of Presence becomes a holy bread for a holy people.

Who Eats the Bread of Presence? Priestly Food, Fit for the King

The Bread of Presence is a bread made by priestly hands, and it is eaten by a priestly people. As Leviticus plainly says concerning the bread, "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 LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due" (Lev 24:9). In a sense, the whole people of Israel is involved in this meal, and yet it is the priests who function as representatives of both the people and the Lord, who makes his dwelling among them.

But there is a striking Old Testament incident that alerts us to a widening of the circle, to a more open invitation to the Lord's table. So it happened that David and his men were on the run, hiding from King Saul. And they were hungry. So David asked Ahimelech, "Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here. And the priest

¹⁹ Gary A. Anderson, "To See Where God Dwells: The Tabernacle, the Temple, and the Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition," *Letter and Spirit* 4 (2008): 13–45.

²⁰ Anderson, "To See Where God Dwells," 13–45.

²¹ Gane notes that it became customary for priests "to bring the table out of the Temple into the courtyard and to display it to the Pilgrims." Gane, "Bread of the Presence," 202.

²² Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 518.

answered David, ‘I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread’” (1 Sam 21:3–4). One might expect the conversation to end right there. Rules are rules. This food was for the priests alone. But David and his men were told that they could indeed eat of that bread under the stipulation that they were Levitically clean. In this case, purity was predicated on whether the soldiers had kept themselves from relationships with women, a nod to the Sixth Commandment. This stipulation was quite specific, but the message was clear and could well be applied to our altars today. This bread was holy, and it was not to be eaten in an unworthy manner. Paul said that the body of each Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). David likewise spoke of his men as vessels, saying, “The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?” (1 Sam 21:5). Bread that was meant for the priests alone was now given to David and those with him: “So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away” (1 Sam 21:6).

Indeed, the story may appear as a kind of one-off. The reader might have expected David and his men to be turned away, or to incur the wrath of God, perhaps in a manner similar to the fate of Uzzah, who touched the ark of the covenant and was struck dead by God, who was angry (2 Sam 6:6–8). But instead, David, the future king, ate the holy bread, as did those men with him. In such a way, this story hints at a time when David’s greater Son would inaugurate a kingdom of priests, and would distribute a bread still more holy to all who were with him.

Bread Fit for the King of Kings?

While we are told that the priests eat the bread, there is also within the ritual another seeming intention that does not come to fruition. We are told that the shewbread was offered up as a “food offering to the LORD” (Lev 24:7). The Lord did not eat this bread, but it was given to him as a sacrificial gift. Was then this bread fit for the King of kings? Or was this shewbread just for show? Manna is heavenly bread, but it is not Communion. God remains at a distance, looking down upon his people below. But David’s story is remarkable because he eats with his people. A table is meant to be shared. As such, the Bread of Presence rituals may express hope that God would indeed one day eat with his people.

Indeed, there has always been a tension in understanding God’s dwelling place within the temple. Our Lord dwells in a temple that cannot contain him. The Holy of Holies is the Lord’s dwelling place, but prayers that rise as incense remind God’s people that the Lord dwells in highest heaven. Addressing this tension, Solomon himself would ask, “will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kgs 8:27). As the early church moved beyond Jerusalem, Stephen offered further

commentary: "But it was Solomon who built a house for him. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?'" (Acts 7:47–49). Stephen's sermon points to a new reality, one in which the temple bread would fade and find fulfillment in the breaking of bread and prayers (Acts 2:42). In this new reality, the Emmaus Lord would offer himself to be invited as a guest, and then become the host of a meal to which his whole church was invited (Luke 24:13–35).

The temple would not be the Lord's permanent dwelling, but it offered a pre-view of the incarnation. The Lord did indeed make his home in the temple. He was, as Gane puts it, the "Creator-in-Residence."²³ Concerning the temple, the Lord promised, "My name shall be there" (1 Kgs 8:29). The Lord remains upon his heavenly throne and yet dwells among his people. Accordingly, on each pile of bread there was to be placed "pure frankincense" (Lev 24:7). Incense gives the sacrifice a vertical dimension, as if God enjoys the scent but not the eating of the food. The priests could well sing the psalm of David, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Ps 141:2).

But is there also a horizontal dimension to this meal? Our Lord did indeed sit upon the mercy seat, from which he spoke to his servant Moses (Exod 25:22). Was this bread fit for the King of kings? Did the Lord have either the need or the desire to eat this bread with his priestly people? The first answer appears to be a clear no. The book of Numbers tells us that the table for the Bread of Presence included "flagons for the drink offering" (Num 4:7). Yet Leviticus makes no mention of libation. Why is the Levitical story truncated? Gane surmises that the absence of a drink offering may have served to avoid a "gross anthropomorphism."²⁴ The Israelites were not to think of God as being somehow a larger version of themselves, as if God could be wanting or lacking. The true God cannot be placated or manipulated. The Bread of Presence rituals proclaim that the Lord, though he dwells in the Holy of Holies, needs no food or drink. As the Lord scoffs, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" (Ps 50:12–13). Of course not.

As such, the Bread of Presence rituals were meant to differentiate Yahweh from the pagan gods of the Egyptians, Hittites, and Babylonians. As Gane notes, this downplaying of the drink offering made it clear that the God of Israel is to be differentiated from "the wining and dining of non-Israelite deities inside their temples."²⁵ Egyptian cult practice included idols who were painted and dressed up like dolls to

²³ Gane, "Bread of the Presence," 179.

²⁴ Gane, "Bread of the Presence," 189.

²⁵ Gane, "Bread of the Presence," 191.

be waited upon.²⁶ Jacob Milgrom describes the rituals of the Mesopotamians: “Food was placed in front of the image, which was apparently assumed to consume it by merely looking at it, and the beverages were poured out for the same purpose.”²⁷ In other words, the pagan liturgies taught and assumed an anthropomorphic version of God, as if he were a human being writ large. Such practices persist today at Hindu shrines, the kind you might see at Indian restaurants, where flowers, fruit, rice, and water are offered up to the gods. Not so with the God of Israel. As Kleinig puts it, the bread “is not envisaged as a daily meal for God,” but is instead “a weekly food for his priests.”²⁸ Likewise, the pagan rituals teach a kind of quid pro quo, in which human beings would feed the gods, who would in turn provide for the people. Gane describes this as a kind of “symbiotic relationship,” in which “deities were viewed as needing that which human beings provided,” and “human beings were at the same time dependent upon the gods.”²⁹

In sum, the Bread of Presence is eaten in the dwelling place of God. Home is the natural place for the breaking of bread. The true and only God differs from the so-called gods of the pagans in that the priests eat the bread, but the God of Israel does not. Thus the Bread of Presence rituals confess that “Israel’s resident Creator-Provider who, unlike other ancient Near-Eastern deities, acknowledges no dependence on human food.”³⁰ But is that the end of the story? The final lesson of the Bread of Presence?

To put the question simply, why prepare a meal for someone who will never eat it? The Old Testament hints at a new kind of meal, one in which the Lord himself takes part. Had not Abraham offered up to the Angel of the Lord a bread made of fine flour (Gen 18:8)? Does the one who enjoys the aroma of the sacrifice never move past olfaction? The Bread of Presence may point to a time when the Creator-in-Residence makes himself fully at home with his people and reclines at the table with those who are with him.

For the King of kings to eat bread with his people, two things would have to happen. First, God would have to become a man that he might sit at table and eat bread. And second, the veil of the temple curtain would have to be torn in two.

The New Testament Fulfillment of Leviticus: Atonement and Communion

The lessons of the Bread of Presence find fulfillment in the Gospels. The evangelists speak of bread ordinary and extraordinary, and of a meal made possible by

²⁶ Gane, “Bread of the Presence,” 190.

²⁷ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 216.

²⁸ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 517.

²⁹ Gane, “Bread of the Presence,” 191.

³⁰ Gane, “Bread of the Presence,” 179.

the atonement. Within the Gospel, we find a new David, God's Son who walks among us, not only as a provider and host but also as a guest, as one who both eats and feeds. And we find the complete communion hoped for in the garden and hinted at in the Bread of Presence rituals.

While the book of Leviticus speaks through types, shadows, and prophecy, the Gospels bring fulfillment. Morales puts it this way: "If we were to reduce to a single question the New Testament's development of the theology of Leviticus, it would be this: *How does the Son make possible our entrance into the heavenly abode of God?*"³¹ In some ways, the fulfillment is clear. Jesus is both victim and high priest, who "offered himself without blemish to God" (Heb 9:14). Likewise, Jesus is the temple who provides access to God. As the Lord said, "something greater than the temple is here" (Matt 12:6).

The Lord who made his dwelling in the Holy of Holies came to save his people from their sin (Matt 1:21). This salvation is made possible by Christ's sacrificial death, and by the blood of a new covenant. This Jesus would be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). But not only are we to be saved from sin, death, and the devil, we also are redeemed that we might live in God's presence. So also is the Lord to be called "Immanuel," for he is God with us (Matt 1:23). Because of the atonement, we may dwell with God, and God with us. Forgiveness and atonement lead to Communion, a meal of God's presence. In Leviticus, ceremonial washing led to a holy meal, even as Baptism leads to the Lord's Supper.

Bread Ordinary and Extraordinary

The rituals of the Bread of Presence served as a reminder that God is the giver of daily bread. The bread that we make with our hands is also a gift from God. In harmony with this teaching, the Gospel writers emphasize that God is the source of all bread, earthly and spiritual. The hungry he fills with good things (Luke 1:53). The Lord feeds the birds of the air, and will surely care for us as well (Matt 6:25–34).

But the Gospels also teach us that earthly bread is not enough, is not ultimate. Our Lord fasts (Matt 4:1–11) and teaches his disciples to do likewise (Matt 6:16–18). The Lord of Deuteronomy reminds us, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). Earthly food matters, but as our Lord says, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matt 6:25). Adam would work for bread by the sweat of his brow (Gen 3:19). By the sweat of his own brow, our Lord would work for a bread still greater: "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (John 4:32). This bread would not rain down from heaven but would be won by a Savior whose sweat would fall "like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). The Lord himself hungers for

³¹ Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?*, 259. Emphasis original.

righteousness and for our salvation: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). So it is the Lord is in distress until his work of salvation is accomplished (Luke 12:50).

The Bread of Presence in the Gospels

While John and Paul speak of Jesus as the fulfillment of the manna bread (John 6; 1 Cor 10), Matthew, Mark, and Luke each refer directly to the Bread of Presence (Matt 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5). So it happened that when the disciples were hungry, “they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat” (Matt 12:1). The Pharisees take the opportunity to pounce: “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (Matt 12:2). Our Lord counterpunches: “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?” (Matt 12:3–4). To this, Jesus adds, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Matt 12:6). Luke and Mark add that the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:5; Mark 2:28).

This little vignette clarifies the Bread of Presence rituals. In one story, Jesus proclaims himself to be the new temple, the Lord of the Sabbath, and the new David. The first temple served as the house of the Lord in which the Creator made his residence. Christ, as the Lord of the Sabbath, is the one who distributes all bread. Born in Bethlehem (that is, the “House of Bread”), and the city of David, the Lord likewise comes as the new king to eat and give bread to all who are with him.

In the incarnation, the Lord came not only to feed but also to eat. In Psalm 50:12, the Lord says, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you.” But now in the flesh, the Lord experiences hunger. He went into the wilderness, and “he was hungry” (Matt 4:2). As our Lord entered Jerusalem, the crowds cried out, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matt 21:15), but the next morning, he became hungry while returning to the city (Matt 21:18; Mark 11:12). Indeed, the incarnation was a game changer. The same Lord who had no need for neither the Bread of Presence nor flagons of libations now calls himself the Son of Man who came eating and drinking (Matt 11:18). And his meals are not solitary. He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:30).

The first King David was hungry, as our Lord notes: “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence[?]” (Matt 12:3–4). Mark goes further, stating that not only did the king eat that bread, but he also “gave it to those who were with him” (Mark 2:26). The message is clear enough. As the first David ate and gave food to those who were with him, so also did the second David. The Bread of Presence from the very beginning involved the whole people of Israel. Only the

priests ate the bread, but they functioned on behalf of all the nation. Likewise, all the people were involved in the preparation of the bread, offering up flour and oil. When David and his men eat the Bread of Presence, the circle is widened, anticipating a still greater eating of the holy bread. When the Messiah comes, he will give the true bread, and he will give it to his people, and he will eat with them.

One might think of this incident as a one-off, as an anomaly. Yet, as the Gospels unfold, it becomes clear that David's eating of the bread points to something more. The Son of David (Matt 1:1) was born to sit on "the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32). Jesus was David's greater son (Matt 22:41–45). As David slew Goliath, so also would our Lord stand triumphant over the strong man (Matt 12:29; Mark 3:27). Luke describes the Lord as one who shares his bounty with his people: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil" (Luke 11:21–22). Our Lord has come to win for us the meal of salvation, a meal of which he will partake and share with his people. As his mother, Mary, sang, "he has filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:53).

And it should be noted that the third Gospel offers a special twist on David's story. Jesus talks about "how he [David] entered the house of God and *took* and *ate* the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also *gave* it to those with him" (Luke 6:4, emphasis added). As Arthur Just notes, "Indeed, Luke is the only Gospel to have the *three* words 'taking, he ate, and he gave,'" which is the language of both the feeding of the five thousand (Luke 9:16) and the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19). Just becomes explicit:

What David did with the bread of Presence in the tabernacle, Christ now does with grain that is not yet bread on the Sabbath. And as the Lord of the Sabbath, he will institute a Meal in which he gives his body and blood together with bread and wine. This new Meal will be celebrated not on the Sabbath, but on Sunday (Acts 20:7), the eighth day, the time of the new creation. In the new Sabbath era, the Lord of the Sabbath will give the bread of God's presence to his disciples to eat.³²

The Lord Who Breaks Bread with His Disciples

The Old Testament Bread of Presence rituals testify to the God who cannot be wined and dined into bestowing favors. So also in the New Testament. Unlike the false shepherds', his blessings cannot be traded for "the place of honor at feasts" (Matt 23:6). A certain Pharisee invites Jesus to eat with him, but his prideful hospitality misses the mark (Luke 7:36–50). Another Pharisee asks Jesus to dine with him,

³² Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 257–258.

but receives not blessing but rebuke (Luke 11:37–54). And again, a ruler among the Pharisees invites Jesus to dine, but rejects Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath day and receives a lesson: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). The truth of the Bread of Presence rituals remains: the Lord God of Israel cannot be won over by manipulation or favors.

But that does not mean that the Lord God would never dine with his people. Quite the opposite. Levitical rituals do avoid the gross anthropomorphism of the pagans. As Gane puts it, "As Creator, YHWH admits no dependence on human beings."³³ And yet the incarnation is a game changer. Our Lord's favor cannot be bought. But now the Lord is open to our invitation. Indeed, our Lord invites the invitation of Zaccheus, and the people grumble, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). Jesus appears again as an invited guest at a wedding, where he becomes the provider (John 2:1–11). With the disciples on the Emmaus road, we are invited to pray, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent" (Luke 24:29). Now that our Lord has come among us, we are invited to offer an invitation: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." And the Lord abides.

The Bread of Presence and the Feeding of the Five Thousand

Tellingly, the feedings of the five thousand and of the four thousand recall the manna miracles, but they differ in a significant way that points to the Bread of Presence. They involve a desert setting, thus hearkening back to the Exodus wilderness. The feeding of the five thousand begins with the disciples who present five loaves and two fish (Matt 14:17; Mark 6:38; Luke 9:13), and the feeding of the four thousand begins with seven loaves (Matt 15:36; Mark 8:6). This is not a seemingly *ex nihilo* or *ex machina* miracle like raining bread, but it involves the participation of the people. This notion that the bread comes first from the people is especially highlighted by John, who records, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" (John 6:9). Indeed, this is congruent with the way the Bread of Presence was offered up by the people and was returned to them as a blessing greater still. Likewise, such a practice anticipates the eucharistic miracle, which begins with man-made bread that is then blessed by the Lord and given back in much greater blessing.

The Lord God of Israel Eats and Drinks with His People

Christ speaks of heaven as a banquet. He says, "many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Matt 8:11). Matthew speaks of heaven as a wedding feast that a king has for his son (Matt 22:1–14). Luke

³³ Gane, "Bread of the Presence," 202.

speaks in terms of a great banquet (Luke 14:15–24). These banquet settings move us beyond mere sustenance to a feast. The libation, not mentioned in Leviticus, now comes into play.

Having called Matthew, Jesus reclines at table, and he eats with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10–11). Luke adds mention of libation, and the scandal is heightened, as the Pharisees grumble, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). In the garden of Eden, the Lord gave trees, on which hung fruit for his creatures to eat. But now, with the incarnation and the atonement, the Lord goes further and actually breaks bread with his people. In the temple, the priests were blessed to eat the holy bread, the Bread of Presence. Our Lord now says, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15).

The Lord God of Israel Takes Pleasure in Eating with His People

Again, the trajectory of the Bread of Presence rituals suggests that our Lord would indeed recline at table with his priestly people, and that he would find joy in that fellowship. We were given a brief glimpse, a preview of this, in Genesis 18, when Abraham entertained the preincarnate Lord, saying, “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves” (Gen 18:4–5). Bread, curds, milk, and meat were prepared for the Lord, who came as his guest. Exodus 24:11 likewise speaks of Moses and the seventy elders who “beheld God, and ate and drank.”

Consider Luke’s telling of the story of the last supper, in which the Lord says, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). It is not enough for the Lord to feed his people. He wishes to recline at table and have fellowship with them. This is the same Lord who reveled in eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. It is, according to Luke, our Lord’s passionate desire.

Jesus, Yahweh in the flesh, has come out from behind the curtain, and he blesses the food the people provide. Luke writes, “So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and prepare the Passover *for us*, that *we* may eat it’” (Luke 22:8, emphasis mine). With the death of Christ, the temple curtain “was torn in two, from top to bottom,” never to be stitched back again (Matt 27:51).

The veil having been torn, the resurrected Lord continues to eat with his disciples. On the road to Emmaus, he is invited as a guest, and then he becomes the host. Our Lord teaches his disciples along the road, and the disciples invite the Lord to their home: “So he went in to stay with them” (Luke 24:29). Our Lord comes to the disciples’ home as one who is invited, and then he switches roles: “When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30).

This is the same Lord who later appears to his disciples saying, “Have you anything here to eat?” and eats with them a piece of fish (Luke 24:41–43). In his exalted

state, the Lord does not hunger, but he still hungers to be in the presence of his beloved. He still desires to eat with his people. The God who was the Creator-in-Residence now makes his residence among us wherever the word is preached and his Supper is celebrated.

Would the Lord of creation make himself at one with his people? Would he fulfill the Genesis hope? In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene rightly supposes the risen Lord to be the gardener (John 20:15). The Gospel that begins “In the beginning” now finds its consummation in the very Lord who walked in Eden’s garden during the cool of the day (Gen 3:8). The cherubim set a guard on the door of Eden. But now the Lord proclaims, “Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (Rev 3:8). The repentant are invited into the Lord’s presence, even as the Lord invites us to invite him into our presence with his presence: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20). And Jesus, our Alpha and Omega, becomes for us the Bread of Presence eternal.