



LEAVEN

*ITS BIBLICAL USAGE AND
INTERPRETATION*

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Its Biblical Usage and Interpretation.
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Leaven.

*“The Kingdom of Heaven
is like unto leaven which a woman took,
and hid in three measures of meal,
till the whole was leavened.”* — Matt. xiii. 33.

IN this short parable we have an example of a word¹ which, though it has a uniform rendering throughout the Bible, is yet, in one passage, generally taken in a sense which is exactly the opposite to all the others.

This is not a question of translation, but of interpretation. It is not a question of grammar, but of consistency. It is in every passage translated “leaven”; but, while in some passages it is admittedly used in a bad sense, in others it is said to be doubtful; and in one passage, commentators, as a rule, agree in interpreting it in a good sense.

As this one passage is crucial to the interpretation of several parables, and has a most important practical bearing on the study of prophecy, it demands our careful consideration.

For, if leaven be understood here in a good sense, and the “church” substituted for the “kingdom,” then we have to look forward to the triumph of Christianity, and to its universal extension until it Christianises the whole earth.

If, on the other hand, leaven be understood in a bad sense, then, whether the Church be substituted for the Kingdom or not, we have to look forward to universal corruption and general apostasy.

¹There are practically two words, the noun and the verb; ζυμη (*zumê*) *leaven*; and ζυμοω (*zumoō*) *to leaven*.

It will be seen at once that the correct understanding of this word is vital to a true interpretation not merely of this particular parable, but of the whole prophetic teaching of the Word of God. It is fundamental also to our whole practical Christian life.

For, if we hold the former to be true, we shall plunge into missionary work, and know nothing but this as our absorbing object; while the least we can do is to give up our lives, and if need be, our life, in this great cause.

On the other hand, if we hold the latter to be true, we shall be witnesses to the Saviour whom God has provided for lost sinners (Acts i. 8); we shall “preach the Word; be instant in season and out of season” (2 Tim. iv. 2); but, we shall do this understandingly. We shall not be lifted up with false hopes and vain expectations that men are going universally to receive it; but we shall preach the Word knowingly, being assured that “the time will come when men will not endure sound doctrine; but . . . shall turn away their ears from the truth, and be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. iv. 3, 4).

So far from this being an incentive to idleness, it is revealed for the express purpose of inciting us to greater diligence; and is given as the very and only reason why we are to “preach the Word” with unceasing zeal.

It will be seen, therefore, that the true interpretation of the word “leaven” is fundamental and vital, not only to Christian doctrine, but to practical Christian service.

The truth will appear

- I. From the meaning of the word “leaven” :
- II. From its unvarying Biblical usage : and
- III. From the uniform testimony of Prophetic teaching.

I. THE MEANING OF THE WORD.

(I). As to the meaning of the word "leaven there seems to be much confusion and inexactness. Probably, few Christians would be ready, off-hand, to answer the question, What is leaven? This suggestion can be tested by asking the first Christian whom one may meet. The answer, if correct, may be so, only "in part;" and in that case it will be incomplete.

Leaven, according to the dictionary, is "sour dough." But this will not do for us. We want to know why the dough should be sour? and how it became so.

To find this out, we have to avail ourselves of the latest scientific discoveries and definitions ; using the word science in its true sense, as being *scientia, i.e., what we know*, and not what we think.

It is a matter of common knowledge, even among the most ignorant races of mankind, that many liquors under certain conditions develop a process which we call *fermentation*, by which certain gases are given off, and certain chemical changes take place.

To produce this, two things are necessary: viz., the presence of sugar, and exposure to the air. The latter is essential; for apart from this there can be no fermentation, whatever may be the sweetness of the liquor.

This tells us that the primal cause is in the air.

Observation has shown that there are two great classes of microscopic organisms in the air, which are known as "germs" and "ferments." We must not call the former animal, and the latter vegetable, though this would give a rough idea of the difference.

The differences, though microscopic, are definite; and sufficiently distinct for the various organisms to receive names. These "ferments" are microscopic cells not more than 1/100 of a millimetre in diameter, and are a species of fungi. They multiply

with incredible rapidity by sporulation, and budding; and not, as “germs” do, by fission and division. They are in the air, everywhere perhaps; but yet by no means equally distributed.

On coming in contact with a medium suitable for their propagation, they at once begin to multiply (and can thus be artificially cultivated under control). As the result of this action a scum rises to the surface of the liquor, which we call “*yeast*.”² The germs of the yeast plant abound in the atmosphere of breweries, and in vineyards, especially at the vintage season.³

A little of this “yeast,” on being put into dough, sets up fermentation in that; and changes it into a spongiform structure. This arises chiefly from the presence of carbonic acid gas.⁴

If some of this dough, while in this condition, be put into fresh dough, fermentation will be at once set up, and the “ferments” will be propagated in this way: just as plants can be propagated from cuttings or slips, as well as from the original seeds.

It is this fermented dough, put aside for future use, that is called “leaven.”

A small piece of it is sufficient to reproduce the original fermentation throughout another mass of dough; so rapid is its growth and development.

In the case of grape-juice, the result, after the process of fermentation is completed, is what we know as wine. If fermentation

²The Eng. word “yeast” is the Ang. Sax. *gist*; Germ. *gäscht* or *geist*. Hence our Eng. *gas*, and *gust* (of wind), and *ghost*. There may be a reference in this name to the working of some invisible power, like the “power of the air,” exciting internal motion, and producing the effect of *foaming* or *frothing*.

Our Eng. word *East* and *Easter* may be associated with *yeast*, from the *rising* caused by it.

³Milk also ferments, from a smaller kind of microscopic fungus than vinous ferments, called *Bacterium lactis*, which are cylindrical.

⁴In the making of bread this gas is sometimes introduced artificially, by the use of *aërated* water or other devices, independently of yeast. It is then known as “Aërated bread.”

has not taken place, it cannot rightly be called wine.⁵

In the case of dough it is different. Nothing but the heat of the oven can stop the process of fermentation. If it be not thus stopped, Bacteria would soon finish up the process and end it in putrefaction.⁶

II. ITS BIBLICAL USAGE

II. We are now in a position to understand the Biblical usage of the word "leaven."

In discovering this usage, all that is necessary for us to do is to look at every passage where it occurs; and see for ourselves, not what man says about it, but what God Himself teaches.

If there be any appropriateness in the symbols which God uses, and any connection between their nature and His lessons, then we have, already, a sufficient indication of what is likely to be His usage of the symbol of leaven.

We must not, however, allow ourselves to be biased by this, though we must give it its due weight, and be ready to receive its evidence.

⁵When it is bottled before the fermentation is complete we get "Sparkling" wine, on account of some of the carbonic acid gas remaining in it.

⁶Even so in the case of the Corruption in the kingdom and in the Church: false doctrine starts the process, and then the putrefactive Bacteria represent all the degradation that follows as a natural sequence when the leaven has done all it can. Nothing but the fires of judgement will end it. For this it waits.

If we carefully note every reference to leaven in the Bible, we find:—

1. That it is used of its natural characteristics and effects as permeating the *entire* mass into which it is introduced: never ceasing in its action until the whole has been affected by its influence. This action is referred to in Matt. xiii. 33, Luke xiii. 21, 1 Cor. v. 6, Gal. v. 9, and Hosea vii. 4.

2. Then it is used to describe the bread with which it is mixed; and we have the terms “leavened bread” and “unleavened bread.” This is referred to in Ex. xii. 15, 19, 20, 34, 39; xiii. 3, 7.

3. Next, it is used in connection with Sacrifices; and, by the Divine ordinance, leaven was never to be offered with any offering made by fire unto the Lord.⁷ This is referred to in Lev. ii. 11 ; vi. 17 ; x. 12.

4. Then we have the New Testament usage; which has reference to its moral application; from which it will be seen that the matters which are compared to the working of leaven are so likened because of its material characteristics.

(4a) Doctrine.

In Matt. xvi. 12 “the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees” is likened to leaven.

⁷“Honey” also was forbidden *with the same limitation*, because it is a cause of fermentation. These two were only types; but their antitypes abound in the Hymn-books provided for our antitypical and spiritual “sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.” The *leaven* of false doctrine, and the *honey* of human sentiment, are everywhere to be found marring and defiling our Hymnology. But “God is not mocked,” and these sacrifices are not accepted.

In the case of the Peace-offering (*not made by fire*), when offered as a “sacrifice of thanksgiving,” it was to consist of “unleavened cakes:” but, beside the cakes, the offerer shall offer for HIS offering of *leavened* bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of HIS peace offerings” (Lev. vii. 12, 13).

This is a type of the evil which is inseparable from the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving offered by human worshippers.

In Mark viii. 15 we are warned of “the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod.”

In Luke xii. 1 we have “the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”

In Gal. v. 9 we have the doctrine of being “justified by the law” instead of by Christ, compared, in its working, to the action of leaven.

All these doctrines are evil; and are condemned. There is no question about this; we have only to study these Scriptures to see why they are compared to leaven. We need not enlarge upon them, beyond noting that—

In the doctrine of the Sadducees we have Materialism:

In Phariseeism we have the doctrines of Plato, which are preserved in Traditional Psychology, and are the seeds of Spiritism.

In combination with the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy—(*i.e.*, the form without the power), we have “the leaven of Herod,” which is the same in its outward aspect; for Herod could be religious, and he “heard John gladly,” and “did many things” (Mark vi. 20); and yet, a little later, he could do one thing, for “he sent and beheaded John in the prison” (v. 27). Even so is it to-day, with those who have only the “form of godliness without the power.” They can flock to *hear* a preacher, and *do* many things; they have been leavened with “the leaven (or doctrine) of the Pharisees, and with the leaven of Herod.” (Compare Mark iv. 16, 17.)

(4b) Practice.

Our association with evil-doers is compared to the fatal working of leaven: inasmuch as the danger of the whole lump's being leavened by the presence of such is great. (Compare 1 Cor. xv. 33.) The “old leaven” is to be purged out. The whole of the context (1 Cor. v.) should be read, to understand the special instruction of verses 6—8.

5. Finally, we have the usage in three remaining passages in which the *bad* sense of the word is questioned, and a good sense is suggested, viz. :—

- (a) Lev. xxiii. 17.
- (b) Amos iv. 4, 5.
- (c) Matt. xiii. 33.

(5a) Lev. xxiii. 15-17.

(a) Lev. xxiii. 15-17. “Ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete : . . . Ye shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; *they shall be baked with leaven*; they are the first-fruits unto the LORD.”

This is all explained to us in 1 Cor. xv. 23: “Christ the first-fruits.” This is “the wave sheaf” of Lev. xxiii. 10-14.⁸

“Afterwards, they that are Christ’s at His coming.” These are the “two wave loaves” of Lev. xxiii. 15-21,⁹

“Then cometh the end.” This is the “harvest” of v. 22.

We have the antitypes of these in the Gospels and Acts. The first type, the wave sheaf, had been accomplished in the Resurrection of Christ.

Fifty days after the Resurrection began the fulfilment of the second type—in the proclamation to “Repent” (Acts ii. 38; iii. 19-26, R.V.); and in the then readiness of Christ to come. Had that command to repent been obeyed, the promise made to them and to their children must have been fulfilled. Christ’s promised coming would have been fulfilled in the sending of Jesus Christ. In this case, “the first resurrection” must then have taken place.

⁸The Septuagint has ἀρπαγή (*harpagê*), *first-fruit* (v. 10).

⁹The Septuagint has πρωτογεννημα (*prōtogennêma*), *first-begotten* (v. 17). This is a truly beautiful commentary: almost like an Inspiration.

But we know that Israel did not repent. The two houses of the “men of Judah” and the “men of Israel” had both been called by Peter: first separately (Acts ii. 14, 22) and then together (v. 36, “all the house of Israel”). But they refused that call. Hence the Kingdom, and the coming King, and the foretold “first resurrection” are all, now, in abeyance.

“All things are to be put under His feet” (1 Cor. xv. 25). But now, “we see not yet all things put under Him” (Heb. ii. 8).

The type, however, is still true, and will one day be verified in its antitype.

Now we can understand *why there was to be leaven in those “two wave loaves.”* For, though they were made of the very flour of the first fruits: though Christ partook of the same nature, and was of the same seed of Abraham, yet He was “without sin” (Heb. iv. 15); He “knew no sin” (2 Cor. v. 21); He “did no sin” (1 Peter ii. 22); “and in Him is no sin” (1 John iii. 5): yet, because the “two wave loaves” were the type of His earthly people who were all “under sin” (Rom. iii. 9), and who cannot say “we have no sin” (1 John i. 8), *leaven* is expressly ordered to be mixed, in order to make the type correspond with the antitype.

Not only is this the case, but with both the “wave sheaf” and the “two wave loaves” certain offerings were to be made.

But while, in the case of the “wave sheaf,” we have only two: “the burnt offering,” and “the meal offering with the drink offering thereof” (Lev. xxiii. 12-14), yet, in the case of the “two wave loaves” we have four offerings:— “the burnt offerings,” “the meal offering and their drink offerings,” “*the sin offering*,” and “the peace offering” (vv. 18-20).

Thus, beside the presence of sin in the people being typified by the presence of “leaven” in the “two wave loaves,” that sin was further shown to be there by *the sin offering* which is associated with *them*, though not with “the wave sheaf.”

This is conclusive as to Lev. xxiii. 17.

(5b) Amos iv. 4, 5.

(b) With regard to Amos iv. 4, 5. This is either the language of irony; or it refers to the special form of peace offering, offered as a “thanksgiving with leaven,” prescribed in Lev. vii. 14, as a type of the sin even in the thanksgiving of the offerer. (See note, above, p. 6.)

(5c) Matt. xiii. 33.

(c) There remains only Matt. xiii. 33. Can it be believed that, in this one passage, the word “leaven” is used in the very opposite sense to that in which we find it in all the other passages?

And yet every commentator of repute, without any hesitation, would not only authorise us so to interpret it, but does not hesitate to bid us so to understand it.

But we cannot do so; no one has such authority, neither have we any such liberty.

The parable is usually read according to its punctuation, which is, of course entirely human and incorrect. The parable does not say

“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE UNTO LEAVEN,”

but: **“THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE
unto leaven which a woman took,
and hid in three measures of meal,
till the whole was leavened.”**

It is not merely the substance of “leaven,” or the initial act of the woman, but it is *the whole process* even up to the final leavening of the whole to which the Kingdom of Heaven was likened.

In this the parable has its place, both in logical relationship, and in its doctrinal teaching, with the other parables with which it stands in immediate connection.

It is the last of the first four spoken to the multitude “out of the house” (v. 1), which have a common lesson, quite distinct from that of the last three, which were spoken to the disciples “in the house” (v. 34).¹⁰

In the *first* (the Sower), only one portion of the seed brought forth fruit; and there is no intimation as to the seed sown on the other three portions bringing forth any fruit.

In the *second* (the Tares), the “enemy” secretly sowed by night the seed of the tares. These are “the children of the wicked one,” and they continue in the field, which is the world (*cosmos*), corrupting and defiling it, until the time of harvest, which is the end of the age (*aiōn*).

In the *third* (the Mustard Tree), we see “the fowls of the air” (the same evil creatures as in the first parable), finding a home in its branches.

In the *fourth* (the Leaven), we see the same corrupting influence at work, invisibly, like “ferments”; in contrast with what is visible, as in the preceding parable of the Tree.

Can we doubt that we have one and the same lesson in each of these four parables?

“The wicked one” in the first, limits the reception of the good seed.

The same power, the “enemy,” in the second, mixes his own seed with the children of the Kingdom.

The same power, in the third (for the fowls mean the wicked one, compare v. 4 with v. 19,) takes up his abode in the Kingdom (compare Rev. xviii. 2).

It is therefore the same power, in the fourth, that we see in the woman and her work.

In the first, the seed is sown, not in the world, but only in four kinds of “ground” in it.

¹⁰See *The Kingdom and the Church*, by the Editor. Published by Eyre and Spottiswoode, 33 Paternoster Row. Price 3d.

In the second, the seed, though sown in the world, has tares mixed with the whole of it.

In the third, the mustard tree is not the world, for it is only rooted in it.

So likewise, in the fourth, it is not the world which is permeated by the leaven, but only the “meal” which is in it.

The Lord afterwards repeated two of these parables (the Mustard Tree and the Leaven) in Luke xiii. 18-21. The occasion which called forth the repetition, marked by the word “then” (v. 18), shows that they were used to illustrate the increasing hostility of His enemies, which was the working of the leaven.

If the Lord, in His teaching, meant us to understand that the *whole world* was to be permeated with that which is good, He would have pictured to us (in the first) the seed everywhere producing fruit, and the ground all “good.” He would have spoken (in the second) of an unmixed field, sown only with good seed; or of the tares becoming wheat. He would have shown (in the third) a tree affording no shelter for unclean and hateful birds; and (in the fourth) some type other than leaven, seeing that the Holy Spirit in the Word, and He Himself in all His subsequent teaching, used it only of that which is evil.

Those who interpret the leaven as being typical of the Gospel do violence to the whole of these four parables as well as to the whole analogy of Bible truth. For the Word is in no sense hidden, but is to be everywhere preached. The Gospel is to be everywhere proclaimed with all boldness. If the Gospel be *hidden*, it is the work of “the god of this world” (2 Cor. iv. 3, 4).

III. ITS PROPHETIC TEACHING

III. Only a few words are necessary to show how all this agrees with the unvarying testimony of Prophetic teaching.

Everywhere are we warned of judgement to come; of dark days and “perilous times” (2 Tim. iii. 1); of “evil men, and deceivers waxing worse and worse” (2 Tim. iii. 13); of “departure from the Faith” (1 Tim. iv. 1); of “scoffers walking after their own lusts” (2 Pet. iii. 3); of the coming “apostasy” and the revelation of “the man of sin” (2 Thess. ii. 3). Everywhere are we warned against the spread of doctrinal corruption, and of fleshly lusts.

Instead of being told that the world is not good enough for the coming of Christ, we are told that it is not bad enough. Instead of being told that He will not appear until the world’s conversion comes, we are told that it will not be until the apostasy shall have come (2 Thess. ii. 3).

Instead of the Church overcoming the world, we see before our very eyes that the world is fast overcoming the Church.

Truly the leaven is working in the Church as well, as it has worked, and will ere long again work, in the Kingdom. For the prophecies and the parables of the Kingdom leap over this present Church interval, and continue its history as though the Church had no existence. And the work of this leaven is only evil.

Our attitude, therefore, now, toward God and His sure word of prophecy; toward man, the Church, and the world; is entirely dominated by the sense in which we understand the Bible use of the word “leaven.” This will be a sufficient reason for our having devoted so much space to the consideration of the subject.

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