

COURSE 3

THE JEWISH IDIOM OF BREAKING BREAD AMONG THE EARLY BELIEVERS

This Course will focus on proving two main points:

1. The New Testament scriptures that speak of *breaking bread* among early Messianic Jews did *not* mean the supposed Communion ritual, as many commentators have believed since Rome.
2. The idiom of breaking bread has a long Jewish history, originating with the twelve breads that were *broken* and shared each Sabbath in the Temple. We will then see how Messianic Jews understood that the Messiah and his teaching fulfilled this idiom as the *true bread*, the *bread of life*. This is what the New Covenant scriptures on breaking bread refer to, and this was the idiom where the phrase “breaking bread” originated.

Since these scriptures were originally written from a first-century Jewish perspective but later misunderstood by Rome to indicate a ritual, we’ll focus first on how breaking bread developed in the Jewish tradition. Then we’ll turn to how New Covenant Jewish believers—using their *natural-to-spiritual* idiom—built on the existing Jewish idiom of breaking bread in the Temple and in Jewish homes, and went forth “breaking bread” spiritually.



The twelve breads that were broken each Sabbath in the Tabernacle were first mentioned in the scripture when God gave the law to Moses. This service continued in the Temple under David and Solomon, with the priests “breaking bread” there as well. They were *broken* rather than cut with a knife, for this occurred on the Sabbath when the use of such instruments was forbidden.⁸⁰ Here are two English translations with two different names for the bread:

^{NAS} Exodus 25:30 And you shall set the **bread of the Presence** on the table before Me at all times.

80 Except when absolutely necessary, such as for the animal sacrifices in the Temple.

^{KJV} Exodus 25:30 And thou shalt set upon the table **shewbread** before me alway.

Calling them “bread of the Presence” indicates that the breads were to continually be in God’s presence in the Temple. Although translating them as “Showbread” is common in our day, it can actually be quite misleading since these twelve breads were never called that by Moses, David, Jesus, or Paul, or any other Jews—either before or during the time of Christ. In the original Greek and Hebrew scriptures, they are simply called “bread.” It was not until around 1530 AD that Protestant reformer and translator William Tyndale coined the word “Shewbread” (see KJV above) while translating the Greek New Testament into English. Later it became “Showbread.”

This change of names from “bread” to “Showbread” may not seem significant, but it is in fact important. In certain scriptures, the words “bread” or “breaking bread” are *historically connected* to the twelve breads broken in the Temple each Sabbath, but because the English translation does not show Jesus or his disciples using the term “Showbread,” this connection may be obscured or lost.

To illustrate this, consider the example of Jews breaking bread in their homes on the Sabbath. There is seemingly no spiritual connection between this and Showbread, since Jews do not use the expression “breaking Showbread,” and since the Talmud and other Jewish writings never spoke of breaking Showbread—*because the word “Showbread” itself did not yet exist*. However, if it’s phrased that the priests “break bread” in the Temple on the Sabbath and the Jewish families “break bread” in their homes, then it’s easier to draw a spiritual connection between these two events that otherwise may seem unrelated.

Similarly, when the Messiah miraculously broke and multiplied the twelve breads to feed the multitudes (five then seven), there is seemingly no connection since it does not say he broke Showbread (a nonexistent word in his day). Yet if we consider that God commanded Moses to bring forth *twelve breads* in this Temple service, and the Messiah brought forth *twelve breads* for the Israelites in these miracles, then one is more likely to see a possible historical, spiritual, or typological connection. Additionally, when we see the Jewish disciples speaking of breaking bread in the scriptures and consider their natural-to-spiritual idiom, it becomes clear that they are applying this phrase spiritually. Throughout this Course, we will often refer to the Showbread as the “twelve breads” to maintain this historical connection.

Talmudic writers often spoke of breaking bread as well, and certainly not in the context of a “Blessed Eucharist” ritual. So first we will set the stage for understanding how breaking bread originated within the Jewish idiom.

Washing of the Hands before Eating Bread

During Christ's time, the service of the twelve breads in the Temple was already about 1,500 years old and considered a hallowed event. Only the higher order of priests from Aaron's lineage could partake of these breads, and even they were required to bathe for ritual purification before entering the Temple and breaking and eating these breads. They would also wash their hands at the laver before sharing them, which is probably why the Pharisees in Christ's time washed their hands to the wrist before eating bread (more on this shortly).

In the Jewish tradition, the service of these twelve breads in the Temple was highly revered, and this filtered into other aspects of Jewish home life. While Temple priests were breaking bread on the Sabbath, so were many Jews in their homes breaking bread. And just as the priests washed before eating the bread, so a tradition arose among the Jews in their homes to do the same. This focus on washing the hands before bread is illustrated by the following quote from *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (under "Ablution"):

The passage, Ps. xxvi. 6, "I will wash mine hands in innocency: **so will I compass thine altar, O Lord,**" also warrants the inference that Ablution of the hands is requisite **before performing any holy act**. This particular form of Ablution is the one which has survived most completely and is most practised by Jews. Before any meal **of which bread forms a part, the hands must be solemnly washed** and the appropriate benediction recited.⁸¹

First-century Jewish historian Josephus tells of a bread ritual adopted by the Essenes—one of the three Jewish factions he mentions (the others are the Sadducees and Pharisees). Clearly their bread service, with its washing for purification, emulated and was derived from the eating of the twelve Temple breads:

They work until about 11 A.M. when they put on ritual loincloths and **bathe for purification**. Then they enter a communal hall, where no one else is allowed, and eat only one bowlful of food for each man, together with their **loaves of bread**. They eat in silence. Afterwards they lay aside their sacred garment and go back to work until the evening.⁸²

Where would the Essenes have come up with such a ritual of bathing before partaking of bread? No likely answer exists other than the longstanding hallowed service in the Temple with the twelve breads, and the communal meals in the Temple.

81 *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, p. 68, s.v. "Ablution."

82 Josephus, "Wars," 2.8.5, <http://essene.com/History/AncientHistoriansAndEssenes.html>.

The Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran also mention a revered service in which Jews gathered to eat bread after bathing for ritual purification (for more on this, see Course 6).

The fact that various Jewish groups kept services in which they first bathed and then ate bread connects back spiritually to those priests gathering each Sabbath in the Temple to break the twelve breads.

The dining table in the family home was revered and seen as more than just a piece of furniture because of its spiritual connection to the Showbread table and its religious uses in the Temple. This partially explains why Jews have a longstanding tradition of washing hands before eating bread and why certain prayers are prescribed before breaking bread in the home.

The following is from *Gateway to Judaism*:

The table for the Jewish people, with its unique ceremonies, is an essential part of the Jewish religion. It is around the table that the ideals of Israel's home life find concrete expression. For the Jewish people the table is more than a piece of furniture upon which the daily meals are served. **It is a symbolic altar of God.**

The religious **uses of tables in the Temple lend significance to the table in the Jewish home. The Table of Shew-bread** (Leviticus 24:6), the table for the lights (2 Chronicles 4:8), and the table for the sacrifices (Ezekiel 40:39), have a **symbolic counterpart in the home.**⁸³

So we see that the Showbread table in the Temple lends significance to the table in the Jewish home in much the same way as breaking bread in the Temple lends significance to breaking bread in the Jewish home. The Jewish family dinner table became **an altar** of sorts, as each family meal was seen as an extension of God's provision in the Temple.

Twelve Sacred Breads Carried Forward in Jewish Daily Life

The Pharisees observed the tradition of washing their hands before eating bread long before the Messiah lived. This tradition was not a law that came from God, but most likely was a Pharisaic injunction that arose as an extension of the laws concerning eating the twelve breads in the Temple.

Mark 7:6–9 points out that the Pharisees were upset at Christ's disciples for not washing before eating bread; however, the Pharisees were following their own

83 Shulman, *Gateway to Judaism*, vol. 1, p. 441, s.v. "The table an altar."

traditions rather than God’s law or God’s heart on this matter. Here the scribes and Pharisees question Jesus concerning this:

^{NAS} Matthew 15:2 “Why do Your disciples transgress **the tradition of the elders**? For they **do not wash their hands** when they eat **bread**.”

^{KJV} Mark 7:2 And when they saw some of his disciples **eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands**, they found fault.

^{YLT} Mark 7:3 for the Pharisees, and all the Jews, if they do not **wash the hands to the wrist**, do not eat, holding the tradition of the elders.

The Pharisees forced this tradition so that all Israelites were to wash their hands before a meal *with bread*, a tradition that has been carried down to this day to some extent, as seen in the earlier quote from *The Jewish Encyclopedia*.

Breaking Bread on Different Occasions

Not only would the highest order of priests break bread in the Temple, but non-priestly Jews would also break bread at various times. It wasn’t only on high holy occasions that bread was broken, as Isaiah and Jeremiah show:

^{LXE} Isaiah 58:7 **Break thy bread** to the hungry, and lead the unsheltered poor to thy house: if thou seest one naked, clothe *him*, and thou shalt not disregard the relations of thine own seed.

^{JPS} Jeremiah 16:7 neither shall men **break bread** for them in mourning, to comfort them for the dead; neither shall men give them the cup of consolation to drink for their father or for their mother.

The twelve Temple breads were considered a communal meal. Jewish tradition shows that meals that involved bread were set off as significant by the inclusion of special prayers, as explained in the following quotes from *Encyclopedia Judaica*:

Grace after meals, a central feature of the liturgical service in the Jewish home.... Grace after meals consists of four blessings and is recited only after a meal at which **bread** has been eaten.⁸⁴

84 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, p. 838, s.v. “Grace After Meals.”

The rabbis ordained that whenever three or more have eaten **bread** together, one of them must summon the others to say Grace with him (Ber. 7:1–5).⁸⁵

The rabbis required a blessing before partaking of food since they considered it sacrilegious to “enjoy of this world without the proper benediction” (Ber. 35a). They instituted separate blessings for the various species of food, of which those over **bread and wine are considered the most important.**⁸⁶

The custom of **communal** grace, originally used only when the participants numbered at least ten, can be traced back to the custom of *havurah* (“community”) meals, **held especially on the Sabbaths.**⁸⁷

Even today for some who follow these traditions, different prayers are said when bread is *not* part of the Jewish communal meals:

When bread is not eaten there are two other forms of grace (known as *Berakhah Aharonah*—“final benediction”) to be recited, depending on the nature of the food consumed.⁸⁸

When Talmudic scholars wrote of “breaking bread,” as they often did, you can be sure they were not taking this reference from the Blessed Eucharist or copying a Roman ritual in any way. They were simply following an ancient Jewish tradition that originated with the breaking of the twelve “breads of the presence” every Sabbath—the same tradition that was handed down in Jewish homes, as seen on the Sabbath and at other times.

Soncino Talmud Shabbath:

R. Abba said: On the Sabbath it is one’s duty to **break bread** over two loaves, for it is written, twice as much bread. R. Ashi said: I saw that R. Kahana held two [loaves] but **broke bread** over one, observing, ‘they gathered’ is written, R. Zera broke enough bread for the whole meal.⁸⁹

85 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, p. 839, s.v. “Grace After Meals.”

86 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, p. 841, s.v. “Grace Before Meals.”

87 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, p. 840, s.v. “Grace After Meals.”

88 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, p. 841, s.v. “Grace After Meals.”

89 The Soncino Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbath, Folio 117b, http://www.come-and-hear.com/shabbath/shabbath_117.html.

Berakoth soncino Talmud: Folio 46a:

Does not your honour accept the dictum of R. Johanan that **the host should break bread**? So he [R. Abbahu] **broke the bread** for them. When the time came for saying grace he said to him [R. Zera], Will your honour please say grace for us, He replied: Does your honour not accept the ruling of R. Huna from Babylon, who said that the one who **breaks bread** says grace? Whose view then did R. Abbahu accept? — That expressed by R. Johanan in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: **The host breaks bread** and the guest says grace. The host **breaks bread** so that he should do so generously, and the guest says grace so that he should bless the host.⁹⁰

All of these quotes on breaking bread demonstrate that this long Jewish history of eating bread with a meal—to be considered a special occurrence—came from the hallowed Temple service with its table holding the twelve breads. Historical evidence certainly supports this, and examining this in more detail will lead us to understand that breaking bread also represented a *spiritual communion* to the Jewish Messianic believers.

Breaking Bread Spiritually

In “Setting the Table 4,” we saw a long list of natural (literal) items in the Temple and Tabernacle that were applied spiritually by first-century Messianic Jews. They would frequently speak or write of a natural element or event in the Temple, but its real meaning would be the New Covenant spiritual truth that is pointed to.

Another example we could add to that long list: The *natural* breaking bread and the sharing of it that occurred in the Temple prefigured the *spiritual* breaking bread, the bread of life that was shared among New Covenant believers.

As we’ve seen before, the natural-to-spiritual idiom was very common among these first-century Jewish believers. Therefore, it should not be a stretch to understand that when Jews who had accepted the Messiah went out breaking bread, they were doing so spiritually; they were not performing a natural ritual that Jesus and his Jewish disciples neither wanted nor taught.

When the priests gathered in the Holy Place with the Showbread to break bread, this also pointed forward to the spiritual bread that *we break*:

^{YLT} 1 Corinthians 10:16b the bread that **we break**—is it not the fellowship of the body of the Christ?

90 The Soncino Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakoth, Folio 46a, http://www.come-and-hear.com/berakoth/berakoth_46.html.

^{NAS} 1 Corinthians 10:17 Since there is **one bread, we who are many are one body**; for we all partake of the one bread.

The priests who fellowshiped and broke the twelve breads in the Temple pointed to the New Covenant believers and the *true bread* that we break and share, just as the manna—the “bread” of heaven—pointed to the true bread of which we spiritually partake:

^{NAS} John 6:32 Jesus therefore said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you **the true bread** out of heaven.

Jesus here speaks of himself as the “true bread,” the true spiritual bread from God. This is what his disciples would later go out “breaking” and sharing—his words, teachings, and God’s presence by His spirit that was dwelling in their midst. This pattern of things in the Tabernacle that God gave to Moses (including the “bread of the presence” or Showbread) reveals spiritual truths that are to be understood in the New Covenant:

^{NAS} Hebrews 8:4–5 Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve **a copy and shadow** of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned *by God* when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, “See,” He says, “that you make all things **according to the pattern** which was shown you on the mountain.”

We know that Christ is the true pattern that we are to be formed into, and as we partake of the spiritual bread of life, we—as one spiritual body—are growing up into him:

^{NAS} Ephesians 4:15–16 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together **by that which every joint supplies**, according to **the proper working of each individual part**, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Returning to Paul’s analogy taken directly from the Last Supper teaching of Jesus, “**we who are many are one body**” and “we all partake of the one bread”:

^{NAS} 1 Corinthians 10:17 Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

This is the bread that **we** break; it is the spiritual fellowship in the spiritual body. As we partake of Christ in and through one another as members of his spiritual body, we are becoming the pattern that God wants for us.

The twelve breads that came from the people's wheat offerings represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and the priests would partake of these twelve breads and receive nourishment from them. So in the same sense, we—as the pieces of the *one* bread that make up the *one* spiritual body of Christ—partake of spiritual food in and through one another and receive spiritual nourishment “by that which every joint supplies.” This causes the growth of the body “for the building up of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:16 above).

The “bread that we break”—and share and partake of—is the true “bread of the presence,” the true altar of which “we” the believers may partake:

^{NAS} Hebrews 13:10 **We** have an altar, from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.

Paul is not speaking of a literal altar or of literal eating; he is speaking figuratively of partaking *spiritually* from a spiritual altar. Earlier we saw Albert Shulman's quote from *Gateway to Judaism*, in which he spoke of the Showbread table in the Temple having a symbolic counterpart in the Jewish home. As we will see shortly from the Book of Acts, early Messianic Jews understood that the spiritual bread they were breaking was the spiritual counterpart to the breaking of the Temple Showbread. Thus, all believers can feed spiritually on the bread of life at the Lord's table:

^{NAS} 1 Corinthians 10:21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of **the table of the Lord** and the table of demons.

We partake of the table of the Lord spiritually, and we drink the spiritual cup of the New Covenant that the Lord provides. As Paul says above, we are not to partake of what demons may offer us (also meant spiritually) at their table.

In speaking of the “table of the Lord” just a few verses after mentioning the “bread that **we** break” (verse 16), Paul again connects the Corinthians' spiritual partaking with the Showbread table in the Temple. Clearly, this breaking of bread among early Messianic followers was built upon the long history of breaking bread every Sabbath in the Temple, as they applied it spiritually in the New Covenant, to sharing the true bread of life.

Did “Breaking Bread” Mean Either Common Meals or a Ritual of Communion?

By not considering the existing first-century Jewish idioms, many Bible commentators remain unsure as to precisely what “breaking bread” in Acts 2 and elsewhere means. They erroneously believe it refers to sharing common meals or to celebrating the ritual of Communion (also called the “Lord’s Supper” or “Eucharist”).

^{KJV} Acts 2:42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in **breaking of bread**, and in prayers.

^{KJV} Acts 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and **breaking bread from house to house**, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

Below are the views of various commentators as to what occurred in Acts 2.

Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*:

They frequently joined in **the ordinance** of the Lord’s supper. They continued *in the breaking of bread*, in celebrating that memorial of their Master’s death They broke bread from house to house; *κατ’ οικον*—*house by house*; **they did not think it fit to celebrate the eucharist in the temple**, for that was **peculiar to the Christian institutes**, and therefore they administered that ordinance in private houses⁹¹

Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*:

And in breaking of bread—Whether this means the holy eucharist, or their common meals, it is difficult to say.⁹²

Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*:

It cannot, however, be determined whether this refers to their partaking of their ordinary food together, or to feasts of charity, or to the Lord’s Supper.⁹³

91 Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 28.

92 Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 700.

93 Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes*, p. 392.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments*:

... it seems pretty certain that partaking of the Lord's Supper is what is here meant. But just as when the Lord's Supper was first instituted it was preceded by the full paschal meal, so a frugal repast seems for a considerable time to have preceded the Eucharistic feast.⁹⁴

J. P. Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*

—Breaking bread from house to house—They naturally observe their peculiar holy rite, the Sacrament of the new covenant, apart from the public.⁹⁵

Notice above that Lange, an excellent commentator, realizes the difficulties of conducting such a peculiar ritual in first-century Jerusalem by saying that they observe this rite “apart from the public.”

Many otherwise scrupulous commentators, who were good men of God but were nevertheless influenced by some 1,500 years of Roman tradition surrounding the Communion ritual, view these first-century Jews as going around Jerusalem or the Temple celebrating a Roman ritual of the Eucharist. Does this seriously sound right for first-century Jews in Jerusalem? Does this align with the previous Jewish idiom of breaking bread that we've seen?

The answer is no; these interpretations miss the truth. The following English translation gives a closer sense of what the believers were doing in the second chapter of Acts:

^{DBY} Acts 2:42–43 And they persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, **in breaking of bread** and prayers. And fear was upon every soul, and many wonders and signs took place through the apostles' means.

^{DBY} Acts 2:46 And every day, **being constantly in the temple** with one accord, and **breaking bread in *the* house**, they received their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,

94 Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 15.

95 Lange, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 4, p. 59.

Notice that Darby translates this verse *not* as breaking bread “at every house” or “from house to house,” as most English translations do, but as breaking bread “in *the* house.”

Just as the twelve breads were broken in the “house”—often short for the house of God⁹⁶—so are the New Covenant believers gathering to break spiritual bread in the house of God. The spiritual bread is the bread that we break, the true bread, the bread of life.

Additionally, the same Greek word *kat*, when used with “house,” is translated as “in” several times in other scriptures (Romans 16:5, Philippians 1:2, etc.). Below, fourth-century theologian John Chrysostom agrees with this aspect of Darby’s translation in his Homily 7, on Acts 2:46:

And this honor too passed over to the place; **the eating in the house.** In what house? **In the Temple.**

We will return to Acts 2:46 shortly. But first, when trying to understand what the Jewish believers were doing here at the Temple and possibly elsewhere in Acts, we have to place ourselves in the first-century Jewish idiom *of the Temple* and view these scriptures through these believers’ eyes. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* sets out the framework for the Temple service:

The Daily Service

The essential element of the daily Temple service was the offering of the *tamid*⁹⁷ sacrifice of two lambs, one in the morning, with which the service began, and one in the afternoon, with which it concluded....

In the second Temple, prayers, blessing and **Pentateuchal readings** were added to the Temple service. **After the offering of the incense**, the priests gathered together on the steps of the entrance hall and blessed the assembled people with the Priestly blessing (Tam. 7:2)....

During the offering of the incense the people used to gather in the azarah for prayer. The libation of wine at the conclusion of every tamid sacrifice was accompanied by levitical singing. After the

96 See the Greek in Luke 11:51; also see Psalm 127:1; 1 Kings 6:3, 14, 15.

97 “Tamid” means the “continual” daily lamb offering.

service the members of the division of Israelites deputed to accompany the daily Temple services **gathered for Scripture reading and prayer**.⁹⁸

Notice the main aspects of this Temple service:

- The people assembled together.
- An offering of incense was made (which was symbolic of *the prayers* of the Israelites).
- And they gathered for *sharing the word of God and prayer*.

The New Covenant Jewish believers also assembled in the Temple during the morning and evening sacrifices and for the incense offerings and prayers that followed, but they were also sharing the scriptures and the Messiah's teachings. They referred to this sharing as "breaking bread," which was meant in a spiritual sense.



Although it is somewhat difficult to interpret and know the exact idiom, another instance in the Talmud clearly connects "breaking bread" to the **reading** of the law in the Temple and Synagogue. It starts by relating that Moses gave the law to the priests:

GEMARA. [A PRIEST IS CALLED UP FIRST TO **READ THE LAW**]. What is the warrant for this? — R. Mattenah said: Because Scripture says, And Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi.

As it continues, it refers to the one who "breaks bread," and the rabbi who comments on this connects it to **the reading** in the Synagogue:

The one who **breaks bread** helps himself to the dish first, but if he wishes to pay respect to his teacher or to a superior he may do so. **Commenting on this**, the Master said: This applies only to **the table**, but not to the synagogue, since there such deference might lead to quarrelling. R. Mattenah said: What you have said about the synagogue is true only on Sabbaths and Festivals, when there is a large congregation, but not on Mondays and Thursdays. Is that so? Did not R. Huna **read** as kohen even on Sabbaths and Festivals? —

98 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 15, p. 974, s.v. "Temple/The Daily Service."

R. Huna was different, since even R. Ammi and R. Assi who were the most distinguished kohanim of Eretz Israel paid deference to him. Abaye said: We assume the rule to be that if there is no kohen there, the arrangement no longer holds. Abaye further said: We have it on tradition that if there is no Levite there, a kohen **reads** in his place. Is that so? Has not R. Johanan said that one kohen should not **read** after another, because this might cast a suspicion on the first, and one Levite should not **read** after another because this might cast a suspicion on both? — What we meant was that the same kohen [should **read** in the place of the Levite].⁹⁹

In the mention of the **table** quoted above, clearly an understanding exists, gleaned from the service with the table (of Showbread) in the Temple, that points spiritually to the sharing of the scriptures in the Synagogue.



Jesus often taught in the Temple, as it was common for people to gather and discuss the word of God there:

^{DBY} Acts 2:42 And they persevered in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in **breaking of bread and prayers**.

By backing up His word with miracles, God was powerfully anointing the apostles with His spirit as they shared with all who were willing to hear:

^{YLT} Acts 2:43 And fear came on every soul, **many wonders also and signs were being done through the apostles**,

^{DBY} Acts 2:46 And **every day, being constantly in the temple with one accord, and breaking bread in *the* house**, they received their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,

So if Darby's translation conveys the true meaning here in Acts, this would be another proof that it was spiritual bread the apostles were breaking (i.e., sharing the word of God and the bread of life), since they were not allowed to bring their daily meals to the Temple. (For those who have noticed the phrase "they received their food" in

99 The Soncino Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin, Folio 59b, http://www.come-and-hear.com/gittin/gittin_59.html.

the scripture above, the Greek word for “food” often refers to spiritual nourishment; we will return to this aspect shortly.)

The different occasions when the people would gather in the Temple were accompanied by the sharing of God’s word, as we see in Nehemiah:

^{NIV} Nehemiah 8:18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra **read from the Book of the Law of God**. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Below in Acts, we see that Peter and John were often going up to the Temple *at the ninth hour*, which was the time that Israelites would be gathered for the evening Temple sacrifice and the prayers and scripture reading that followed:

^{YLT} Acts 3:1 And Peter and John were going up at the same time **to the temple**, at the hour of **the prayer, the ninth¹⁰⁰ hour**,

The Greek imperfect tense here (“were going up”) shows this was their habitual custom. Peter and John were going up to the Temple at this time because all the people had gathered there for the daily evening sacrifice and the incense offering that floated heavenward, representing the prayers of the saints being accepted by God. This gave the disciples a chance to teach truth from the Messiah and to share God’s word, *spiritually* breaking bread.

As mentioned before, the Temple was often called the *house* (short for “house of God”), with the word of God as the spiritual “food” (Hebrews 5:12, 14; 1 Corinthians 3:2; 10:3) that they were partaking of in Acts 2:46. We see that Jeremiah figuratively ate the word of God:

^{NAS} Jeremiah 15:16 **Thy words were found and I ate them**, And Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Thy name, O LORD God of hosts.

And Ezekiel ate the word of God:

^{NAS} Ezekiel 3:1–3 Then He said to me, “Son of man, eat what you find; **eat this scroll**, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. And He said to me,

100 Josephus also confirms this time for the evening daily sacrifice, saying it was “about the ninth hour” (Whiston, *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, Antiquities, 14.4.3, p. 459).

“Son of man, feed your stomach, and **fill your body with this scroll** which I am giving you.” Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.

We see another instance of the people gathering for prayer when the priest (who was the father of John the Baptist but prior to John’s birth) offers the incense in the Temple:

^{NAS} Luke 1:8–10 Now it came about, while he was performing his priestly service before God in the *appointed* order of his division, according to the custom of the priestly office, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. **And the whole multitude of the people were in prayer outside at the hour of the incense offering.**

King David and the more spiritual Jews knew that this incense offering represented God accepting their prayers, having come after the sacrifice:

^{NAS} Psalm 141:2 May **my prayer** be counted **as incense before Thee**; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering.

Most scholars agree that the Book of Acts was written around 30 years after the Crucifixion and the pouring out of God’s spirit at Pentecost. By this time, this spiritual idiom of breaking bread was commonly understood by the believers.

They Weren’t Just Sharing Common “Meals”

We’ve seen that many commentaries concerning the breaking of bread in the book of Acts suggest that this meant either eating regular meals—akin to church picnics—or celebrating the Communion ritual, also referred to as the “Eucharist” or “Lord’s Supper.” They interpret the breaking of bread naturally (literally) as a new Lord’s Supper ritual, not *spiritually* or within the existing Jewish idiom.

Neither of these natural options—a regular meal or a ritual celebration—was what the first-century spiritual followers of the Messiah had in mind as they entered the New Covenant, were filled with God’s spirit, and then witnessed the powerful miracles being done among them. So, let’s cover the reasons why these natural options are incorrect, starting with refuting the belief that they were just sharing common “meals.”

^{YLT} Acts 2:42–43 and they were continuing stedfastly in the teaching of the apostles, and the fellowship, and the breaking of the bread,

and the prayers. **And fear came on every soul, many wonders also and signs were being done** through the apostles,

^{YLT} Acts 2:46 Daily also continuing with one accord in the temple, **breaking also at every house bread**, they were partaking of food in gladness and simplicity of heart,

As we saw already, the Darby translation for this verse reads, “breaking bread *in the house*” (short for the *house of God—the Temple*). This is one viable way to translate it:

^{DBY} Acts 2:46 And every day, **being constantly in the temple with one accord, and breaking bread in the house**, they received their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,

In the Darby translation, the English word “and” has been *added* just before “breaking bread,” but it does not appear in the Greek. This small addition in some translations changes the meaning to “meeting in the Temple *and* breaking bread at their houses”:

^{KJV} Acts 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord **in the temple, and** breaking bread **from house to house**, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

Without the added “and” and when translating the rest of the verse correctly, the meaning could be “constantly in the temple with one accord, breaking bread in the house.” My point here is that without the additional “and,” the reader more properly connects the house as *being* the temple instead of potentially interpreting “the temple” and “the house” as two different locations. Most commentators connect this breaking bread to the *supposed* ritual, understanding this could not occur in the Temple but that it must have been in private homes, and therefore translate it according to their belief.

Another possible translation from the Greek is “breaking bread *just as* the house,” “*corresponding to* the house,” or “*according to* the house.” The Greek preposition *kat* is translated as “every” (i.e., every house) in many English translations, but the *UBS Greek-English Dictionary* gives the following definition:

according to, corresponding to, with reference to, just as ...¹⁰¹

101 *UBS Greek-English Dictionary*, p. 92, s.v. “κατά.”

Kat is used often with *oikous* (houses) in the Septuagint, where it is often translated as “according to the houses,” as below:

^{LXE} Numbers 1:2 Take the sum of all the congregation of Israel according to their kindreds, **according to the houses** of their fathers’ families, according to their number by their names, according to their heads: every male

^{LXT} Numbers 1:2 λάβετε ἀρχὴν πάσης συναγωγῆς υἱῶν Ἰσραηλ κατὰ συγγενείας αὐτῶν **κατ’ οἴκους** πατριῶν αὐτῶν κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἐξ ὀνόματος αὐτῶν κατὰ κεφαλὴν αὐτῶν πᾶς ἄρσην

As the *UBS* points out, *kat* is often translated as “according to” in the New Testament as well:

^{NAS} Colossians 3:10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge **according to** the image of the One who created him

^{GNT} Colossians 3:10 καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν **κατ’** εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν,

Returning now to Acts 2:46 with this definition of *kat* in mind, the scripture could then mean that the apostles were spiritually fulfilling the “breaking bread” *according to* the house (i.e., Showbread in God’s house).

In other words, since the disciples were constantly in the Temple, it’s a distinct possibility that Acts 2:46 is not portraying that the disciples are teaching or breaking bread at *every house*, but rather that they are teaching and breaking bread “according to” or “corresponding to” the breaking of the twelve breads that took place in the house of God. This option would show their understanding that the spiritual bread they were breaking corresponded to the natural bread that was broken and shared in God’s house. At the very least, we know they understood that the Messiah was the bread of life, and their breaking bread would have included sharing the word of God that had come through him.

Whether or not the apostles were breaking bread “according to the house,” “corresponding to the house,” “in the house,” or (as many English translations say) at “every house,” their focus was not on *natural* bread. At this momentously historical time—when they were now filled with God’s spirit—they were breaking and sharing the true bread, the bread of life.



We know that the following historical points are true, so therefore let us consider whether, after taking these facts into account, sharing meals “at every house” is what these first-century Jews were really concerned with and were writing about in Acts 2:

- These Jews had waited hundreds upon hundreds of years for their promised Messiah, who then came and was then crucified.
- The believers thought it was all somehow a mistake (Luke 24:14–27), for they were not expecting the Messiah to die, even though he had told them that he would be crucified.
- They then realized that God had raised the Messiah from the dead, and Jesus walked among them for 40 days, showing forth powerful signs and teaching them before ascending to heaven right in their midst (Acts 1:1–11).
- Just before he ascended, the believers were told by Jesus to tarry in Jerusalem, waiting for the “promise of the Father.” This came down on the day of Pentecost when they were all filled with the Holy Spirit of God (with powerful signs and miracles following), fulfilling the promise of God through Joel that He would pour out his spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28). Whereas previously only the high priest could enter the holiest place where God’s presence dwelt—and only once a year at that—now these common fishermen and other Messianic followers had God’s holy presence infill and engulf them daily.
- Then, as Acts 2:43 shows, great fear was falling upon every soul, for God Himself was now right in their midst (see also Acts 5:12–16), and “many wonders and also signs were being done among the Apostles.”
- According to Acts 2:46, the believers were partaking of meals (or “nourishment” in the Greek, meaning spiritual nourishment here) in “gladness” and simplicity of heart. The same Greek word translated as “meals” in the *NAS* also denotes spiritual food in Hebrews 5:12. However, the Greek word translated into English as “gladness” (*NAS*) is more correctly translated along the lines of “a piercing exclamation, exultation . . . full of exultation, joy” (*BDAG Lexicon*) or as “a state of intensive joy and gladness, often implying verbal expression and body

movement (for example, jumping, leaping, dancing)—‘to be extremely joyful, to rejoice greatly, extreme gladness.’”¹⁰²

After all this history, we are then told by commentators to picture these spiritual Jews meeting for the purpose of breaking bread in a ritual, or for a regular natural meal.

To further illustrate this common-meal view held by some commentators, here is a hypothetical conversation:

James, the Lord’s brother: Wow, isn’t this “food” great!

Peter: Yes, these meals sure are great! Could you pass me three more breads to break? This is great stuff; I’m really glad to have such nice meals. Isn’t this fun? I feel extremely joyful! Could you pass me the butter?

Stephen: Yes, and wasn’t it great being filled with God’s spirit at the Temple? Excuse me, John, could you hand me another bread and a leg of lamb? This is incredible food, and I feel glad, too.

James: Growing up with Jesus as my brother, I knew he was very special, but I never considered in those days that he was really the Messiah. Could you pass me a few more breads, some dip, and another lamb shank? This is food is tremendous; I sure feel glad.

Peter: Hey, let’s keep going from house to house breaking bread. I’m just really enjoying this. Whose house are we going to break bread at next?

Stephen: I don’t know whose house we’ll visit next, but I am going to start having to watch my waistline! These breads are just too good . . . Could you pass me a few more lamb shanks, and another “cup of blessing?” (1 Corinthians 10:16)

Peter: Anyone want to “break bread” and split this last one? This is causing me to feel incredible joy!

102 Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, p. 303, s.v. “ἀγαλλίασις.”

We should not believe for a minute that this is what the Book of Acts is conveying when it speaks of breaking bread. The idea that these Jews who had walked with the Messiah continually “devoted themselves” (Acts 2:46, NAB) to common meals does not fit with reality.

These spiritual followers of the Messiah were breaking *spiritual* bread in a state of “extreme joy and gladness” and, as the *Lexicon* above showed, it may have involved “jumping, leaping, and dancing” before the Lord at times. They were awestruck that God Himself was right in their midst, showing forth signs and powerful miracles through the apostles. They were acting just like David did when the Ark came back into Jerusalem:

^{NAS} 2 Samuel 6:14–15 And David **was dancing before the LORD with all *his* might**, and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and **all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouting** and the sound of the trumpet.

The breaking of bread in Acts 2 (and also Acts 20:7–11, see Course 4) is spiritual bread, the bread from heaven, and the true bread (John 6:32). The Messiah’s followers shared this bread of life in the Temple, where they often met at Solomon’s portico (Acts 2:46; 5:12):

^{NIV} John 6:32 Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

^{NAS} John 6:35 Jesus said to them, “**I am the bread of life**; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.

They did not have any New Covenant scriptures yet; instead, they were sharing the words of Christ—“the true bread”—and the many things he said and did, and who he was. They were also sharing great joy that God’s presence was among them, after seeing the many Old Covenant scriptures that spoke of Christ and were fulfilled by him. And their experience was nothing less than what the Jews experienced under Solomon, when God’s presence came down at the Temple:

^{NAS} 1 Kings 8:10 And it came about when the priests came from the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD,

^{LXE} 1 Kings 8:11 And **the priests could not stand to minister** because of the cloud, because the glory of the Lord filled **the house**.

These priests encountered a powerful glory at Solomon's Temple and the first-century Israelites also experienced things that were exceedingly profound. Although they were filled with great joy, fear was also close at hand, for to have God's spirit so closely in their midst was overwhelming and humbling.

The focus was not on fun meals and church picnics, but on the powerful moving of God's spirit and feeding on the Messiah's spiritual nourishment, the word of God, and all that the Last Supper parables pointed to.

They Weren't Partaking in a New Roman Catholic/Christian/Protestant Ritual

So far we've shown that the commentators' theory—that breaking bread (as seen in Acts 2) meant sharing a natural meal—falls short of the reality. Now let's turn to the reasons why these first-century, spirit-filled disciples of the Messiah were not celebrating the Roman ritual of Communion when these believers mentioned breaking bread.

Transport yourself for a few minutes to first-century Israel, with its strict laws and Jewish history, and discern if the following reenactment bears witness to how this might have gone:

Knock, knock, knock! The Jewish followers of the Messiah knock on the door of a Jewish home in Jerusalem and exclaim, "Shalom, we are the apostles! We're here to celebrate a new ritual, the Blessed Eucharist! Here, have a piece of bread: This is the body of Jesus who was recently crucified. And here, have a sip from this cup: This is his blood."

Later that same evening Habib, the eldest son, speaks up: "Why is it, Father, that they kept calling it the Lord's Supper, but all we got was that one morsel of bread? That was barely even a snack. Also, Father, if the morsel and the sip of juice was really what they say it was, will that not render us unclean according to the Jewish kosher food laws that Moses gave us, and therefore prevent us from entering the Temple tomorrow for the services?"

Father responds, "Son, you ask many questions. Your uncle Ze-dekiah is the highest-ranking Pharisee on the Sanhedrin. He's stopping by on his way to the evening Temple service tomorrow, and surely he will have answers for this new ritual."

Although many people since the days of Rome have thought this is what these scriptures really *meant*, it is clear that this Catholic breaking-bread scenario could not have taken place in first-century Jerusalem. The Jews had been commanded by God to avoid ingesting any manner of blood lest they be cut off from the nation, since the life was in the blood, which was given at the altar to provide atonement. Because of this, Jewish society has always had a great aversion to blood (Leviticus 7:27; 17:10–11, 14).

Consider this quote we saw earlier in Course 1: Even the high priest was to be whipped (stripes applied) if he should ever ingest blood, just as if he had eaten a reptile or consumed leaven during the Passover:

MISHNA *I*: To the following stripes apply:

... **A high-priest** who was unclean and partook of things belonging to the sanctuary or entered the sanctuary while unclean; **and he who consumed** illegal fat, **blood**, or meat left overnight from the sacrifice ...; **he who ate leaven on Passover** ...; who ate carcasses or animals preyed by beasts, or reptiles—**to all of them stripes apply**.¹⁰³

However, the Gentiles had not walked under God's commandments concerning the ingesting of blood. So when the Gentiles started coming to God, Jewish believers in the New Covenant had to warn them to *avoid blood* (Acts 15:19–20, 29; 21:25). And the scriptures did not say to abstain from blood “except during the new ritual”; they simply said to abstain from blood, because no such ritual was kept by the Jewish believers to begin with.

The truth of the matter is that no such ritual¹⁰⁴ ever existed in Israel in the first century. It was a later invention created mostly by the Roman Catholic Church as a result of having misunderstood the Jewish idioms concerning breaking bread, communion, and what the Messiah really meant at the Last Supper. Its prevalence would come about only when the Church deliberately forsook traditional Jewish idioms and understandings.



As we have seen, some Gentiles did not share the same Jewish aversion to ingesting blood. Therefore, they misunderstood the Jewish scriptures (John 6 and 1 Corinthians 10 and 11) and eventually ended up believing in the ritual of Communion still held

103 Babylonian Talmud, Book 9, Tract Maccoth, ch. 3, p. 35, <http://sacred-texts.com/jud/t09/mac08.htm>.

104 As seen in the chapter “The Ritual—Why Didn’t the Jewish Disciples Teach It?”

today, in which priests are believed to actually change bread and wine into Christ's flesh and blood. Below, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* speaks of the "Mass," a piece of bread that, to Catholics, is the flesh of Christ as a current sacrifice. The following quote shows that they believe this is what is meant by the "breaking of bread" in Acts:

1. Precepts for the Promotion of the Dignity of the Sacrifice

(a) One of the most important requisites for the worthy celebration of the Mass is that the place in which the all-holy Mystery is to be celebrated should be a suitable one. Since, in the days of the Apostolic Church, there were no churches or chapels, private houses with suitable accommodation were appointed for the solemnization of "**the breaking of bread**" (cf. Acts 2:46; 20:7 sg.; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2).¹⁰⁵

This is from *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, under "Holy Communion":

That Holy Communion may be received not only validly, but also fruitfully, certain dispositions both of body and of soul are required. For the former, a person must be fasting from the previous midnight from everything in the nature of food or drink.¹⁰⁶

Since the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine changes into Christ's flesh and blood during their ritual, they would not want it to mix with common food in the stomach; hence the requirement to abstain from other food before the ritual.



By now, it should be easy to discern if this talk of the Communion ritual sounds first-century Jewish or of Roman origin.

So far, we have seen the following progression:

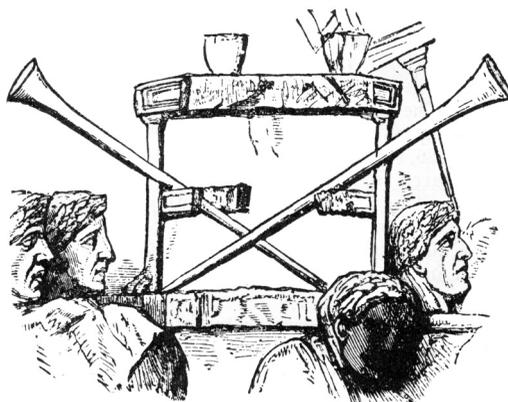
1. God gave the service of the twelve breads in the temple to Moses, and after the priests washed, these breads were broken and shared on the Sabbath.
2. The Jewish Essenes held a sacred service that involved ritual bathing before eating breads.

105 Herbermann et al, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, p. 20, s.v. "Mass."

106 Herbermann et al, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, p. 402, s.v. "Holy Communion."

3. The Therapeutae, another Jewish group in Egypt, held a similar service that required ritual bathing before eating breads, and Philo specifically stated that it emulated the Temple breads. (This will be covered in Course 6, pages 194–195.)
4. The Jewish Pharisees washed their hands to the wrist before eating bread.
5. Talmudic writers, who in a sense were spiritual descendants of the Pharisees, often spoke of breaking bread and of special prayers that were to be said before eating any bread.
6. Jewish Messianic followers, with their clear natural-to-spiritual idiom, went forth breaking bread, but we see that they often meant this in the spiritual sense of partaking of the true bread—the bread of life.
7. In Rome, people were instructed to have nothing in common with the Jews (as per Constantine’s edict; see “Setting the Table 1”). The Roman Church held its own ritualistic service of breaking bread (the Blessed Eucharist) in the belief that this Communion ritual was what the New Testament scriptures referred to.

In Rome, the sacking of Jerusalem by Roman emperor Titus is commemorated in the Arch of Titus. It depicts the Roman troops carrying off, among other items, the golden table of Showbread to Rome. Not only was this table for the twelve breads taken to Rome, but so were the many truths on breaking bread in the Jewish idiom—gone to Rome and not seen since.



However, with many Jews now coming back into a covenant relationship with God and His spirit moving upon all people who are willing, God is restoring many truths that became obscured (including those surrounding the breaking of bread), so that we may understand their true meaning.

We need to be sure that we are not continuing to view these scriptures through Roman or even Protestant glasses, but understanding them through the original spiritual idiom of first-century Jewish believers. Otherwise we will perpetuate something the Messiah never intended. After all, God is not looking for ritual communion with literal bread, but true spiritual communion with and among His people.