

Lev. 2:1

When a person presents an offering of meal to the Lord, his offering shall be of choice flour; he shall pour oil upon it, lay frankincense on it, 2 and present it to Aaron's sons, the priests. The priest shall scoop out of it a handful of its choice flour and oil, as well as all of its frankincense; and this token portion he shall turn into smoke on the altar, as an offering by fire, of pleasing odor to the Lord. 3 And the remainder of the meal offering shall be for Aaron and his sons, a most holy portion from the Lord's offerings by fire....

Lev. 2:11

No meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall be made with leaven [חֶמֶץ], for no leaven [חֶמֶץ] or honey may be turned into smoke as an offering by fire to the Lord. 12 You may bring them to the Lord as an offering of choice products [חֶמֶץ וְחֵלֶב];<sup>a</sup> but they shall not be offered up on the altar for a pleasing odor. 13 You shall season your every offering of meal with salt; you shall not omit from your meal offering the salt of your covenant with God; with all your offerings you must offer salt. <sup>a</sup> *Exact meaning of Heb. uncertain.*

חֶמֶץ: Akk. *emēsu* to be sour

חֵלֶב: etymology uncertain; probably a proper name [!!!]

**NAHMANIDES:** No meal offering that you offer to the Lord shall be made with leaven. One may not bring an offering that has leavened; and no leaven or honey may be turned into smoke, and nothing that leavens after it has been brought may be offered.... The reason may be as explained by Maimonides in *Guide* 3:46. He says that he found in idolaters' books that their custom was to bring all of their offerings leavened and to mix honey with all of their sacrifices. For this reason the Torah outlawed them as offerings to the Most High. Our Sages explained that exactly this happened in the case of the stone pillars that were so favored in the days of the Patriarchs, but which God began to detest (see Deut. 16:22) once they were established as a regular feature of idolatrous worship. With regard to salt, according to Maimonides, exactly the opposite is true. Idolaters despise it and never include it in an offering.... Or perhaps there is some mystery in all of this that escapes us.

**ABARBANEL:** No leaven or honey may be turned into smoke. They are forbidden for opposite reasons: leaven, because it might tempt the priests to delay the offering while they wait for the leavening action to take place and because it symbolizes the evil inclination; honey, because it might prompt the priests to rush an offering before its time (since honey can actually begin the digestive process) and because it weakens the intellect. Also, the priests might be tempted to lick the sanctified honey off their fingers.

Baruch Schwartz, "Leviticus," *Jewish Study Bible*

**11–12: The prohibition of leaven.** In the Hebrew v. 11a is a general prohibition of "ḥametz," leavened cakes or loaves, while v. 11b gives the details: In order to prevent fermentation, neither "se'or," the leavening agent (sourdough) nor "devash," honey, may be used in any of the Lord's food gifts (see 1:9 n.) Though both date-honey and the honey of bees are leavening

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agents, in the Bible “devash” is almost always the honey of fruits (see Gen. 43:11; Deut. 8:8; 2 Chron. 31:5; etc.). There is nothing intrinsically unacceptable about leaven and honey; they may be offered (v. 12) but not placed on the altar. Rather it is the fermentation of the grain offering specifically that is prohibited, most likely for practical reasons, so that the preparation, offering, and eating of food gifts would all take place within a short period of time and in proximity to the altar. The preparation of leavened cakes would take much longer.

Baruch Levine, *Leviticus* (JPS Torah Commentary)

When we attempt to explain the prohibitions against leaven and honey, we confront ancient attitudes that are far from clearly understood. It is not typical of either the Levitical laws or the law codes of the Torah generally to explain the basis for their requirements or prohibitions. Nevertheless, it is clear that leaven and honey were not unsuitable for all offerings, only for those burned on the altar. Only what God was intended to inhale could not contain these substances. It is logical, therefore, to seek an explanation that is tied in specifically with burnt offerings. The explanation that “leavening,” or “souring,” spoiled foodstuffs is hardly convincing because the best foods were often subjected to leavening. Conversely, *matsah* was poor man’s bread. Wine was fermented, and yet it was proper for libations poured onto the altar. As regards leaven, a connection between the prohibition stated here and the Passover laws is certainly to be assumed. And yet nowhere is the *matsah* of Passover explicitly associated with the requirements of grain offerings. The requirement to eat *matsah* and to avoid hamets on Passover is given an historical or commemorative explanation. It is obvious, in any event, that there was a general aversion to leaven in altar offerings, although, as has been noted, this attitude did not affect offerings presented in other ways.

The prohibition against honey may represent a reaction against the widespread use of honey in pagan cults, an explanation actually ventured by Maimonides.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, we possess extensive comparative evidence that honey was frequently offered to pagan gods in the ancient Near East. In the Ugaritic epic of Keret, we read that *nbt* (cognate of Heb. *nofet*, “honey from a honeycomb”) was offered to the Syro-Canaanite god El.<sup>14</sup> Cuneiform records from Mesopotamia and ancient Syria often list *dishpu*, “honey-nectar,” as an offering.<sup>15</sup> By prohibiting the use of honey on the altar, the priestly laws may have been directed at eliminating pagan practices.

There is a subtle suggestion that the aversion to nectar as a sacrificial substance may have been very ancient in biblical Israel. Whereas wine and olive oil were prized as ingredients for sacrifices, nectar was not. The parable of Jotham in Judges 9:8–13 speaks of the virtues of various trees and vines. The olive tree boasts that its rich oil “honors God and men,” and the grapevine says that its wine “gladdens God and men.” But it is significant that the fig tree, in speaking of “my sweetness, my delicious fruit,” fails to allude to their utilization as offerings to deities!

Until further evidence becomes available, it must be assumed that we do not clearly understand the attitudes reflected in these prohibitions.

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