

On the Last Supper Menu: Was It Leavened or Unleavened Bread?

Did Jesus and his disciples eat leavened or unleavened bread at the Last Supper?

by **Michael P. Germano**

Some churches use leavened bread for communion; others employ unleavened bread. Does it make any difference? The answer to that question takes one to denominational doctrine. If you examine the arguments for and against either practice you will find that the dispute generally comes down to whether or not Jesus of Nazareth broke leavened or unleavened bread at the last Supper. As he then commanded his disciples to continue the practice as an important theological metaphor churches seek to follow the example he set. The scholarly literature shows that specialists are of a split opinion. Some believe the last Supper was a Passover Seder with unleavened bread others do not.

Artos is the Greek word for bread. In Greek *azumos* refers specifically to unleavened bread. *Zume* is leaven. Can *artos* be either leavened or unleavened bread? At the occasion of the Last Supper Jesus took *artos* and "broke it and gave it to them" ([Luke 22:19](#)). He then passed it out to his disciples and they ate it. He took some *artos*, a morsel or piece, which he dipped and gave to Judas ([John 13:21-26](#)).

William Dankenbring points out that the Greek word for the bread consumed at the Last Supper was *artos*. He argues:

...that evening we read that Jesus broke "bread" - *artos* in the Greek language - and they ate of it (Luke 22:19); He took a piece of this bread, and "dipped it," and gave it to Judas, who was to betray Him (John 13:21-26). The word *artos* is the Greek word for all kinds of bread, and normally means regular, leavened BREAD. The word used for *unleavened bread* is *azumos*, which means "unleavened." Therefore we are faced with the fact that at this meal – whatever it was – they were eating LEAVENED bread, which is contrary to God's Law, if it were the Passover! Also, the fact that this "bread" was dipped in a gravy or sauce, again indicates it was regular leavened bread, the kind that you "dip" to sop up gravy or sauce from a bowl or plate. ([Dankenbring 2003a:56.](#))

In an article entitled "Keep the Passover *Right*—or Perish!" Dankenbring summarizes his contention as follows:

The Argument

The Greek word for "leaven" is *zume*

The Greek for what we read as "unleavened bread" is *azumos* which is translated more properly as "unleavened" with out the word "bread."

When an author wishes to be specific about the type of "bread" in any incident, he uses *azumos*. That is, the emphasis is on "unleavened", and not on bread, e.g., I Corinthians 5:8.

The "bread" used at the Last Supper is the more generic Greek *artos* Hebrew *lechem*. In fact, Psalm 41:9 which describes a normal meal is used as a prophecy of this supper.

The conclusion drawn from these scriptures is that the last Supper was just that, a normal meal served with leavened bread.

At this supper they ate regular "bread," because the Feast had not yet begun (John 13:1). The Greek word for "bread" used for this evening's bread is *artos* and normally refers to leavened bread unless qualified otherwise with a modifier. The Greek word for *unleavened bread* is *AZUMOS*. The bread Jesus and his disciples ate this evening was the kind that one would "dip" into a gravy, or sauce, as a "sop." Jesus told John, when I have *dipped* it (John 13:26). "And having *dipped the bread*, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. Now *after the piece of bread*, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, What you do, do quickly" (verse 27). ([Dankenbring 2004a:45.](#))

In his argument about *artos* Dankenbring set forth two lines of contention:

1. The point that *artos* was dipped in a gravy or sauce indicates it was regular leavened bread.
2. The Greek word *artos* unless otherwise qualified with a modifier always refers to leavened bread.

Can we falsify these two hypotheses?

Hypothesis 1 Dipping the Sop

Adrianus van Selms, in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* entry "Bread" wrote:

The thin, brittle forms of bread, especially the *massot*, were broken; the softer and thicker varieties were torn apart. Sometimes oil was poured on the bread; we have no information of the use of butter in connection with bread. Bread was usually carried in a basket (Gen. 40:16f.; Ex. 29:3; Mt. 14:20; 15:37; etc.); when traveling one carried bread in a sack (1 S. 9:7, etc.). When bread was eaten by a group, the head of the household or the master of the community broke it or tore it and gave a portion to everybody present. If meat, fish, or other food was offered together with the bread, it was often handed out from the common cooking pot with the help of piece of bread. The bread was folded into a kind of spoon and used to dip in the common dish without touching the broth or whatever with the fingers. So Mt. 26:23 is to be understood (cf. Jn 13:26). ([van Selms 1989:543.](#))

Concerning [John 13:26](#) Merrill C. Tenney wrote in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

...the offender would be the one to whom he would give the special morsel he had dipped into the dish. "Bread" in this context does not mean the modern spongy loaf used in most Western nations. It was probably a piece of flat bread, somewhat leathery in consistency, which could be used to scoop bits of meat taken from the pot in which they were cooked. For the host to select such a tidbit from the main dish and give it to a guest would be a mark of courtesy and esteem. The disciples, seeing this, would conclude only that Jesus regarded Judas as a fiend he had confidence in. ([Tenney 1981:140.](#))

The sense is that anciently Jews would normally tear bread and customarily dip it into pots containing a sauce, stew, or cooked pieces of meat or vegetables. Today people are used to unleavened bread as large matzo crackers for that is the form of the unleavened bread one can buy at a super market. Nevertheless, fresh unleavened bread can be quite soft and must be torn. It can be dipped in a gravy or sauce" quit easily. Moreover, old leavened bread can be quite hard and must be broken. For example, while at sea the apostle Paul took *artos* made at least 14 days earlier and "broke it and began to eat" ([Acts 27:35](#)).

What then is the context of [John 13:26](#)?

[John 13:2-5](#) describes the event as an evening meal, supper, as follows:

During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. ([John 13:2-5 NASB](#).)



Unleavened bread in its cracker form. The three forms of unleavened bread are crackers, soft flat bread, and pancakes. The soft flat form may be used to dip in gravy or sauce.

[John 13:18-30 NASB](#) reveals only that Jesus dipped a morsel into a container. The text, which does not say into what kind of a container (a pot or a dish or bowl) nor what the contents of the container were, reads:

"I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'HE WHO EATS MY BREAD HAS LIFTED UP HIS HEEL AGAINST ME.' "From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me." When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me." The disciples began looking at one another, at a loss to know of which one He was speaking. There was reclining on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. So Simon Peter gestured to him, and said to him, "Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking." He, leaning back thus on Jesus' bosom, said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus then answered, "That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him." So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, "What you do, do quickly." Now no one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him. For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, "Buy the things we

have need of for R889 the feast"; or else, that he should give something to the poor. So after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night. ([John 13:18-30 NASB](#))

There is nothing in this context suggesting or inferring that Jesus did not dip a piece of unleavened bread into a sauce prepared for the Passover. This section of John, in and by itself, does not rule out either unleavened or leavened bread. However, in context of the event itself Matthew, Mark, and Luke add that when the meal concluded Jesus took *artos*, broke it, and distributed it to his disciples unmistakably distinguishing it as unleavened bread in a cracker form. Such unleavened bread was broken not ripped nor torn.

According to Baptist John Gill, who held this sop to be ordinary leavened bread and clearly avoided the issue, the Passover sop "was dipped into a sauce made of various things, called by the Jews (*towrx*)" (Gill). He held that the sop at [John 13:26](#) was a piece of bread which Jesus dipped "into some sort of broth, or any other liquid," or it was "only a piece of dry bread, which Christ dipped his hand into the dish for" (Gill). The problem is that Gill erred as he did not possess any more knowledge in this context than we for we cannot rule out that it was a Passover sop "dipped into a sauce made of various things" based on the evidence at hand. In Gill's theology the Last Supper was not a Passover Seder and accordingly he simply saw the sop as a piece of leavened bread. He understood, however, that at a Passover Seder Jews did indeed dip pieces of unleavened bread into a sauce.

Interestingly, Easton's Bible Dictionary under the entry sop reads: "Our Lord took a piece of unleavened bread, and dipping it into the broth of bitter herbs at the Paschal meal, gave it to Judas ([Easton 1897](#)).

Compare this with [Ruth 2:14](#) which reads "At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar.' So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left."

Hypothesis 2 The Meaning of *artos*

The shewbread

The shewbread, or bread of the presence, consisted of twelve loaves of bread prepared and presented hot on the golden table every Sabbath. These were square or oblong, and represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The priests removed the old loaves every Sabbath. These were to be eaten only by the priests in the court of the sanctuary. Josephus said that these loaves of bread were unleavened ([Josephus Antiquities 3.6.6](#)) although this is not specifically stated in Scripture. The instruction in Leviticus is that "you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake" ([Leviticus 24:5](#)). The simplest form of unleavened bread is simply the mixture of flower and olive oil.

Archibald R. S. Kennedy wrote in *A Dictionary of the Bible* that:

According to the express testimony of Josephus *Ant.* III. vi. 6 the Mishna, and later Jewish writers, the shewbread was unleavened. Nor does there seem to be any valid ground for the assertion, frequently made by recent writers, that it was otherwise in more primitive times. The absence of leaven best suits the undoubted antiquity of the rite, and, moreover, is confirmed by the Babylonian practice of offering 'sweet' (*i.e.* unleavened" bread on the tables of the gods... ([Kennedy 1988:496.](#))

Josephus full statement reads:

Upon this table, which was placed on the north side of the temple, not far from the most holy place, were laid twelve unleavened loaves of bread, six upon each heap, one above another: they were made of two tenth-deals of the purest flour, which tenth-deal [an omer] is a measure of the Hebrews, containing seven Athenian *cotyloe*; and above those loaves were put two vials full of frankincense. Now after seven days other loaves were brought in their stead, on the day which is by us called the *Sabbath*; for we call the seventh day the *Sabbath*. But for the occasion of this intention of placing loaves here, we will speak to it in another place. ([Josephus Ant. 3.6.6](#).)

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in his reference guide entitled *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition* holds that the shewbread was unleavened ([Steinsaltz 1989:208, 270](#)). He wrote:

The Torah (Leviticus 24:5-9) describes the offering of the twelve shewbreads that were placed on the sacred table...in the Sanctuary...each Sabbath. The bread of the previous week was divided among the priests and eaten by them. The shewbread was unleavened and placed on the table in two arrangements of six loaves each. Two bowls...of frankincense...were placed between them (or on top of them, according to other opinions). ([Steinsaltz 1989:208](#)).

In the first century CE the Septuagint translation of the [Hebrew Scriptures](#) into Greek, normally referred to as the LXX, enjoyed wide use by Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Hellenistic world. The LXX came to be utilized extensively in the Greek-speaking congregations of the [Church of God](#). Most of the quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian Scriptures, that is, in the [New Testament](#), are from the LXX. In the Septuagint at [Exodus 25:30](#) the word referring to the shewbread is *artos*, at [Leviticus 24:5-6](#) it is again *artos*. In [I Samuel 21:3-6](#) it is *artoi* (loaves) ([Brenton 2003:103, 161-162, 385](#)). This shows that the ancient Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek knew that *artos* could, without a modifier, could consist entirely of unleavened bread.

At [Matt. 12:4](#) Jesus refers to the shewbread. There he asked the Pharisees "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?" ([Matthew 12:3-4](#)). The Greek word translated bread here is *artos* ([Marshall 1986:33](#)).

The shewbread was unleavened and the Septuagint ([Exodus 25:30](#), [Leviticus 24:5-6](#), [I Samuel 21:3-6](#), the New Testament ([Matthew 12:3-4](#)), and Josephus ([Josephus Ant. 3.6.6](#)) demonstrate so. Nevertheless, one should also consider The Law of the Grain Offering and The Thanks-Offering.

The Grain Offering

[John 13:18](#) contains a quotation from [Psalms 41:9](#). The latter reads: "Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, Who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me." Here the Hebrew word for bread is *lechem*. In [John 13:18](#) the word for bread is *artos*. Is *lechem* restricted to leavened bread only? or can it also refer to unleavened bread? [Exodus 12:15](#) refers to unleavened bread (*lechem*) and leavened bread (*lechem*).

[Leviticus 6:16](#) refers to unleavened bread (*lechem*) and [Leviticus 7:13](#) to leavened bread (*lechem*). Specificity in the Hebrew requires an adjective—either leavened or unleavened. For that reason *lechem* can be either leavened or unleavened bread. One will have to look to the context. For example, at Moses was to take a basket of unleavened bread ([Leviticus 8:2](#)), from

which "he took one unleavened cake and one cake of bread mixed with oil" ([Leviticus 8:26](#)), and "the remainder of the flesh and bread" ([Leviticus 8:32](#)) he was to burn with fire. The sense is that all the bread, *lechem*, in the basket was unleavened but some was baked with oil. There was no leavened bread involved in this context so *lechem* taken alone can sometimes refer to unleavened bread.

Nevertheless, the metaphor "who ate my bread" at [John 13:18](#) is in the sense of "who ate at my table" reflecting an intimate, personal relationship. This verse in and by itself does not in all fairness show that *artos* can sometimes refer to unleavened bread. However, in clarifying this matter the Septuagint is helpful. The Septuagint employs *artos* for the leftover unleavened bread at [Leviticus 8:32](#) ([Brenton 2003:136](#)). So we have another specific example of where *artos* without a modifier can consist of unleavened bread alone.

The Thanks-offering

Consider now the Thanks-offering. Steinsaltz describes it as follows:

A type of peace-offering...brought by a person in appreciation of God's beneficence (see Leviticus 7:12-15). In particular, the following persons are required to bring a...offering: (1) A person who completed a journey at sea. (2) A person who crossed a desert. (3) A person who was freed from prison. (4) A sick person who recovered from his illness. This sacrifice is of lesser holiness..., and resembles a peace-offering. But it may only be eaten on the day on which it was offered and the following night, in contrast to the peace-offering, which may be eaten on the subsequent day as well. In addition to the animal...sacrifice, forty loaves of bread are brought as a meal-offering. Ten are leavened and thirty are equally divided into three types of unleavened bread.... The priest is given four loaves, one from each category. Because of the meal-offering of leavened bread, the thanks-offering may not be brought from Passover Eve until the conclusion of the Festival. ([Steinsaltz 1989:271.](#))

[Leviticus 7:12-15 NASB](#) reads:

'If he offers it by way of thanksgiving, then along with the sacrifice of thanksgiving he shall offer unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes *of well* stirred fine flour mixed with oil. 'With the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving, he shall present his offering with cakes of leavened bread. 'Of this he shall present one of every offering as a contribution to the LORD; it shall belong to the priest who sprinkles the blood of the peace offerings. Now *as for* the flesh of the sacrifice of his thanksgiving peace offerings, it shall be eaten on the day of his offering; he shall not leave any of it over until morning. ([Leviticus 7:12-15 NASB.](#))

Here that there were three types of unleavened bread. Compare these with the unleavened bread placed in the basket in the context of the Grain-offering and the Shewbread as they are in the Septuagint as shown below. At Leviticus 7:2 [Our [7:12](#)] the Septuagint reads: "loaves of fine flower made up with oil, and unleavened cakes anointed with oil, and fine flower kneaded with oil" (Leviticus 7:2 [Our [7:12](#)]). Again *artos* is the Greek used for loaves without a modifier.

The Septuagint

Leviticus 7:2 [Our 7:12] The Thanks-offering

Leviticus 8:25 [Our 8:26] The Grain-offering

Leviticus 24:5] The Shewbread

loaves of fine flower made up with oil one loaf made with oil

unleavened cakes anointed with oil one cake

fine flour kneaded with oil one unleavened cake take fine flour and make of it twelve loaves

The Tanakh reads "unleavened cakes with oil mixed in, unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes of choice flower with oil mixed in, well soaked ([Jewish Publication Society 2000:219](#)). The Complete Jewish Bible by Stern reads: "...unleavened cakes mixed with olive oil, *matzah* spread with olive oil, and cakes made of fine flour mixed with olive oil and fried" ([Stern 1998:115](#)).

The main point here is that the translators of the Hebrew Scriptures occasionally used *artos* (loaf) and *artoi* (loaves) for unleavened bread without a modifier. In these cases the reader must discern in context whether or not the bread is leavened or unleavened. Secondly, there are three types of unleavened bread: (1) thin loaves made by mixing fine flower with olive oil and baked, (2) a baked cracker with olive oil spread on it, and (3) a thin pancake consisting of a mixture fine flower and olive oil that has been fried. In this context the unleavened bread can be either soft requiring it to be ripped or torn or hard necessitating it to be broken.

On the Way to Emmaus

There is an overlooked passage in Luke which helps clarify the type of bread taken at the Last Supper. The portrayed event, which occurred on the Sunday afternoon of the day the disciples found the tomb empty, is the return home of two disciples of Jesus. This account is found at [Luke 24:13-35](#) wherein Jesus broke *artos* and gave it to them whereon they recognized him ([Luke 24:30-31](#)).

How could these two people, obviously not of the twelve, presumably connect with the symbolism of the "breaking of the bread" ([Luke 24:35](#)) unless they had been present at the Last Supper? Why would the risen Lord pick these two people returning home from Passover, wholly despondent, spend several hours walking with them, and only reveal himself at the moment he broke the bread and gave it to them?²¹ They must have been two very special people. We find them returning to Jerusalem immediately and joining the eleven apostles and those with them. There they corroborate that Simon Peter really had encountered the risen Jesus with the words "The Lord has really risen, and has appeared to Simon".

Consider now the context of this passage. The Days of Unleavened Bread had commenced at the end of Nisan 14 as the evening began and would not end until the completion of Nisan 21.

During this period the Torah declares that no leaven shall be found in Israelite homes. The penalty was severe—expulsion from the community ([Exodus 12:15](#), [12:19](#)).

In context, during the Days of Unleavened Bread, two Torah compliant Jews, Cleopas and presumably his wife, returned to their home in Emmaus.² This was a small village about 6 miles from Jerusalem. As Torah-compliant Jews the only bread they would have possessed during that period would have been unleavened bread. But the Greek word here for the bread they served the resurrected Jesus was *artos*. They, up to that point, thought he was simply another traveling Torah compliant Jew and served him the bread Jews ate during the feast. They gave him unleavened bread which he broke. He did not tear it. In this context the *artos* here could not be anything but unleavened bread in the form of a cracker.

This means that *artos* without a modifier can be either leavened bread or unleavened bread just as the English word bread can refer to either leavened or unleavened. So we are not faced with the situation that the bread served during the Last Supper was leavened.

At this point I would like to suggest you perform a small experiment. Acquire from a grocery store a box of Matzo crackers (the kind only made of flower and water) and a small package of fresh pita bread. The matzos are unleavened. The pita bread, which is quite similar to the bread eaten in Jesus' day, is leavened. Now first try to tear a matzo. Then try to break the pita bread. Notice that you can brake the matzos and tear the pita bread but not visa versa.

William Dankenbring sees this passage quite differently. He wrote:

Since the word *artos* is a generic word and can refer to any kind of bread, in this passage it could refer to "bread in general," and since these were still the Days of Unleavened Bread, the bread in this case could well have been unleavened. The point is, for the purpose of the account, in Luke's mind, the salient fact is that Jesus broke "bread," in a similar fashion to what He did on the night of the "Last Supper." Luke isn't stressing what kind of bread was being broken - just that the Messiah broke "bread."

On the other hand, this bread could have been regular leavened bread, being served in the inn where the two men planned to spend the night. It was dinner time. Regular bread may have been served for the meal, as not everybody in Judea at that time was an observant Jew and keeping the Feast of Unleavened Bread. If so, then Jesus picked up the loaf, and blessed it, *just as He had done on the evening of the Lord's Supper, before His crucifixion!* This would have been a "sign" to them, and when He did it, their eyes suddenly popped open, as it were, and they remembered the act, and realized that this person was the Messiah Himself! In this case, He never intended for them to eat the bread, but was merely drawing their attention to who He really was. Notice, too, the account does not say that they ate the bread, only that Yeshua picked it up and blessed it - to refresh their minds to what He had done at the Last Supper. ([Dankenbring 2004b:54](#).)

In his analysis Dankenbring stated "since these were still the Days of Unleavened Bread, the bread in this case could well have been unleavened" ([Dankenbring 2004b:54](#)). That acknowledgment does great damage to his contention that *artos* "normally refers to leavened bread unless qualified otherwise with a modifier" ([Dankenbring 2004a:45](#)). The passage does not indicate the travelers were staying at an inn nor that they were two men. As the two travelers were obviously disciples of Jesus and thereby observant Jews it is inconsistent for them to allow leavened bread to be served to them during the days of unleavened bread. As Jews they could not have in their possession or eat any leaven during the days of unleavened bread.

This meal was no replay of the Last Supper. Rather, Jesus sat down to a simple, common meal with his two hosts. They had just returned home after a long walk from Jerusalem. They invited him to dine with them. She put together an unleavened bread meal for the three of them. Jesus

reclined at table with them. "He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them" ([Luke 24:30](#)). In context it should be quite obvious they expected to eat it. For his hosts that was a defining moment. Their "eyes were opened and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight" ([Luke 24:31](#)). Jesus breaking the unleavened bread apparently prompted their recognition of him. Why? They were probably present at the Last Supper and saw Jesus break the unleavened bread and pass it out to his companions. His then disappearing into thin air certainly removed all doubt. They left immediately for Jerusalem!

Conclusion

We must reject both hypotheses on the basis of the evidence. Jesus dipping *artos* into a gravy or sauce does not require that it be regular leavened bread. It could just as well have been unleavened bread. Moreover, the Scriptures demonstrate that *artos* does not need to be qualified with a modifier to refer to unleavened bread. The Greek word *artos* can refer to either leavened or unleavened bread without a modifier. When one considers the word *artos* alone the bread at the Last Supper could have been leavened or unleavened. At the Last Supper Jesus broke the *artos* necessitating in context for it to have been unleavened bread.

^{F1}The implication is that physically the resurrected Jesus did not look like the man Jesus they had known.

^{F2}A small village about 5 miles from Jerusalem.

<http://www.bibarch.com/Perspectives/7.2B.htm>