

The biblical festivals are special times for the people of God. They lay out the plan by which God intends to bring His people into the Promised Land. In addition, they tell us a little about ourselves. Paul, in his admonition to the believers in Colosse, said that in regards to the festivals, they are –

... a shadow of the coming things, and the body ¹ of the Christ ... (^{YLT} **Colossians 2:17**)

In other words, the festivals are an image of what is going to happen, but they also picture the body of the Messiah – that is ‘us’, and as any Bible student knows, God reveals both the good things and the bad things about His people. So as we study the festivals, we’re going to get a better understanding of God’s plan – both what has happened and what will happen. In addition, we’re going to learn a little more about our forefathers, and sometimes we’re going to see things that we’re not too proud of.

This, I believe is the case with the ancient Israelites – at least some of them. As I study the spring festival season - Passover and Hag haMatza – I perceive something about the Hebrew people that is not very flattering — and it all has to do with ‘leavening’.

What is the meaning behind ‘leavening’ in the scripture? For many years I believed it pictured ‘sin’ and that to ‘get the leavening out’ meant that we should get sin out of our lives, but that changed as I began to ‘really’ study the festivals in the late 1990’s. It was then that I came to see that instead of ‘sin’, the very Hebrew concept of ‘redemption’ is the prominent Passover theme. That posed a question; “do we want to get ‘redemption’ out of our lives for seven days? Certainly not! Redemption is what we all need and long for. So for years I wondered “what is leaven all about, and why should we put it out of our lives?”

After years of contemplating this question, I decided that this year I would devote some time researching the exodus scriptures, meditating on those scriptures, and praying for insight into God’s thinking when He instructed Moses to say and write the things he did. As a result, **I have come to believe that leavening pictures the willingness of the Hebrew people to OPPRESS each other. I also believe that the reason YHVH used leavening as the symbol of that oppression is because once oppression begins, it can quickly spread throughout the camp.**

In the remainder of this study, I hope to show how I came to this conclusion. To make my case, I’m going to show that:

- oppression was alive and well among the Hebrew people even during their slavery in Egypt
- oppression among the Hebrews continued after they crossed the Red Sea
- oppression was prevalent among the Jewish people in the 1st century

Oppression in Egypt

Let’s begin by defining ‘oppression’. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines ‘oppression’ as –

“unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power”

In other words, it is when someone is given authority over another and begins to use that authority beyond its original intent. In many cases, the reason for this abuse of power is for financial gain, but it could also be used just to show “who is the boss”. This does not mean that having authority over others is inherently wrong, after all, we need people with authority in our culture. For instance, in our country we give policemen a certain amount of authority in order to keep the peace. We also give politicians a certain amount of authority so as to govern our nation. Though the majority of policemen and politicians stay within the confines of that authority, we occasionally find those who exceed that authority.

¹ in the YLT the “is” is shown to be added.



This abuse of authority appears to be the case with the Hebrews in Egypt, and to be able to see that abuse, we have to find the answer to a very important question – “why did the Hebrews fail to bake bread on the evening of Passover”? To answer that question, let’s rehearse Moses’ instructions pertaining to Passover – specifically those instructions pertaining to unleavened bread.

^{KJV} **Exodus 12:15** Seven days shall ye eat **unleavened bread** (matstsah); even the first day ye shall put away **leaven** (se’or) out of your houses: for whosoever eateth **leavened bread** (chamets) from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶ And in the first day *there shall be* an holy convocation, and in the seventh day there shall be an holy convocation to you; no manner of work shall be done in them, save *that* which every man must eat, that only may be done of you. ¹⁷ And ye shall observe *the feast of* **unleavened bread** (matstsah); for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever. ¹⁸ In the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month at even, ye shall eat **unleavened bread** (matstsah), until the one and twentieth day of the month at even. ¹⁹ Seven days shall there be no **leaven** (se’or) found in your houses: for whosoever eateth that which is **leavened bread** (chamets), even that soul shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he be a stranger, or born in the land. ²⁰ Ye shall eat nothing **leavened** (chamets); in all your habitations shall ye eat **unleavened bread** (matstsah).

In this passage, we find a number of instructions:

- we are to eat unleavened bread for 7 days
- we are to cease from having leavening agents in our homes beginning that first day
- eating any leavened product from that day till the end of the 7th day would cause one to be put out of the camp
- the first day and the 7th day there is to be a called meeting and no work should be done those days except for food preparation
- you shall protect (Heb. – ‘shamar’) the eating of unleavened bread

You also probably noticed that Moses used two different words for ‘leaven’. Continuing on, we see why God established these days -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:33-34, 39** And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said, *We be* all dead *men*. ³⁴ And the people took their dough before it was **leavened** (chamets), their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders ... ³⁹ And they baked **unleavened** (matstsah) cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not **leavened** (chamets); because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any victual.

Later, God confirmed this by saying –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 13:6-8** ⁶ "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread (matstsah), and on the seventh day *there shall be* a feast to the LORD. ⁷ "Unleavened bread shall (matstsah) be eaten seven days. And no leavened bread (chamets) shall be seen among you, nor shall leaven (se’or) be seen among you in all your quarters. ⁸ "And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, '*This is done* because of what the LORD did for me when I came up from Egypt.'

Apparently God established these ‘days of unleavened bread’ because the Israelites had not prepared to leave that night. They had not baked bread earlier in the day in anticipation of having something to eat as they were leaving Egypt that night. Instead, it appears that after their Passover dinner, they mixed up a batch of bread believing they could bake it in their ovens the next morning.



Again the question – “Why is it they had not prepared any food to take on the journey?” After all these years of slavery, why were they not “chomping at the bit” to get out of Egypt? Why does it appear that they had assumed that tomorrow would be just another day and that life would just continue as normal?

There is one possible explanation, that being that in Exodus 12:22, the text shows that Moses had told the elders of Israel to instruct the people that they were to stay in their homes until morning. If the people had taken that literally – that is, they believed they should stay in their homes until the break of day - maybe they planned to mix their dough after that evening’s meal with the intent of dividing it into loaves after its first rising later that night. Because they were not leaving until morning, they would go to bed that night and get before daylight the next morning – sometime after the loaves had risen again, and bake them into bread.

The problem with that scenario is that at midnight, when they were summoned out of their homes, the dough was still in the kneading bowls and had not yet been fashioned into loaves. In other words, it was nowhere near to being able to be baked.

Another problem with that scenario is that a literal interpretation of that “stay in your house until morning” instruction would have cast doubt on the reasoning behind eating their meal in haste, with their belt on their waist, their staff in their hand, and their sandals on their feet, as the elders² had instructed them to do.

When you take into account all of Moses’ instructions, it is clear that God intended for them to leave shortly after the destroyer passed over that evening. Not knowing exactly when he would pass over, they should have been ready to leave at a moment’s notice, but apparently they were not.

Why were they not ready to leave? Was their bondage not as severe as we’ve been lead to believe? Were they willing to endure the bondage in order to have the good food that they later craved? Had their leaders mislead them in regards to leaving Egypt? Did they fear that their bondage would simply follow them wherever they went?

After contemplating this question for a number of years, I’ve come to believe that their reason for not being ready to leave was probably two-fold. 1) They were probably never told to be ready to leave that at midnight, and/or 2) If they had been told to be ready to leave, their oppressors would probably leave as well. Why? Because their oppressors were their Hebrew taskmasters.

Hebrew Taskmasters?

When you search the (KJV) scriptures, you never find the phrase “Egyptian taskmasters” or anything close to it. Yes – the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, but there is nothing to indicate that their taskmasters were “Egyptians”.

There are two Hebrew words that are translated “taskmaster”. The first is ‘maciym’ (מַצִּיִּים – 4522) which is a plural word that actually means “a body of forced laborers”. It is first used in Jacob’s end-time prophecy regarding the descendants of his son Issachar who it says would become a ‘band of slaves’. The next place it is used is in Exodus where Pharaoh says –

^{NKJ} **Exodus 1:10-11** "come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and it happen, in the event of war, that they also join our enemies and fight against us, and so go up out of the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set **taskmasters** over them to afflict them with their burdens... .

This is the only place that ‘maciym’ is translated taskmaster and it is probably used here because of its root meaning which is “to dissolve, to waste away”, which of course, is what Pharaoh hoped would happen to the Hebrew population.

² Ex. 12:21, 28



The other word translated “taskmaster” is ‘nagas’ (נָגַל – 5065) and it means “to press, drive, oppress”. In regards to the Hebrews, that oppression was forced physical labor, but the Bible records other types of oppression including charging interest to the poor (Deut. 15:2), hunger (1 Sam. 14:24), and taxation (2 Kings 23:35).

In the exodus story ‘nagas’ is translated ‘taskmaster’ five times. One of those times is Exodus 5:14 – the first time Moses first went to Pharaoh to secure the release of the Hebrews. You will remember that Pharaoh refused to let them go and instead increased their burden by making them gather their own straw. In this passage we find that those in charge of the Hebrew slaves were divided into two classes – the taskmasters and the officers.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 5:14** Also the officers of the children of Israel, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten *and* were asked, "Why have you not fulfilled your task in making brick both yesterday and today, as before?"

This scripture reveals that though the taskmasters may have been Egyptians, there was a class of taskmasters who were Hebrews. What's more, though the Hebrew officers were beaten when they did not fulfill their quota, it appears that at other times their job was simply to make sure their Hebrew slave brothers did make quota.

The passage goes on to say -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 5:15** Then the officers of the children of Israel came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, "Why are you dealing thus with your servants?"

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew officers had access to both Pharaoh and Moses because after meeting with Pharaoh, they approached Moses and indicted him saying -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 5:21** ... "Let the LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us abhorrent in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us."

Now if they looked ‘abhorrent’ because they could not keep up with the quota after Moses began to intervene, they probably looked pretty good to Pharaoh beforehand when they were meeting their quota.

And how did they meet their quota? By oppressing their Hebrew brothers.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 3:7** And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who *are* in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows ...⁹ "Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

I'm sure some are surprised to see that the Hebrews abused their own brothers, but that understanding is prevalent in Jewish writings. In a recent on-line article entitled “Pitting Jew vs. Jew” posted by “My Jewish Learning Center”³, it says -

“Toward the end of the (current Torah) portion, in Exodus 5:6, Pharaoh issues a new decree. Until this point, the Egyptians had provided the Jewish slaves with straw in order to assemble the bricks necessary for their work. Now, in retaliation for Moses asking that the people be set free, Pharaoh orders that the Jews themselves shall be responsible for collecting the straw, yet they will be held accountable to maintain the same output of bricks as before.

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/seeing-the-broader-picture/>; see also <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/23266>



This decree was delivered to the taskmasters and officers (*nogsim* and *shotrim*).

According to an interpretation by Rashi, the well-known 11th century commentator, the taskmasters were Egyptian, while the officers were Jewish. The taskmasters oversaw the officers, who in turn were responsible for directly supervising the slaves, their own brothers. Thus, the Egyptians pitted Jew against Jew, threatening the officers with severe punishment if they didn't spur their brothers to produce enough."

Keeping in mind that many Jews incorrectly believe all the Hebrews were Jews, we know that the Hebrew officers could have been from any of the twelve tribes, not just from the tribe of Judah. The point to be made is that there was a subset of the Hebrews who profited from the plight of the other Hebrews. For simplicities sake, let's call that subset the "ruling class". Maybe the "ruling class" got paid based on however much work was completed. Maybe they had better housing. Maybe they were given more freedom than the other Hebrews. Whatever the case, those in the ruling class were in a position to "lord it over" their Hebrew brothers.

But the 'officers' may not have been the only ones in the 'ruling class'. There may have been others who shared in the oppression.

The Elders of Israel

At the burning bush, one of Moses' greatest concerns was that the elders of Israel would not believe that God had sent him, and without the backing of the elders, it would be hard to convince the people that they should listen to him. So Moses questioned God saying –

"But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you.' "

God's answer was that He would give Moses the ability to perform signs that would convince the elders and the people that YHVH, the God of the Hebrews, had indeed sent him. After Moses and Aaron arrived in Egypt and showed the elders and the people the signs, the text says that the 'people believed', but there is no indication that the elders believed.⁴

Though we cannot necessarily make a case out of silence, it is also interesting to note that God also told Moses to gather the elders of Israel and have them accompany him as he approached Pharaoh in regards to the release of the Hebrews.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 3:16-18** "Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, 'The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared to me ...' ¹⁸ "Then they will heed your voice; and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him'

But when Moses and Aaron had their first encounter with Pharaoh, the elders apparently did not go.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 5:1** Afterward Moses and Aaron went in and told Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.' "

Did the elders go? Did Moses make a typographical omission? We don't know, but it is quite possible that they did not want to get involved in any plot to free the Hebrew slaves nor did they want to get Pharaoh upset. Maybe getting Pharaoh upset would upset their "apple cart" so to speak.

To summarize my theory - the elders of Israel probably DID believe that Moses was sent by God, but because of their position, they chose not to make that known. Maybe they were also part of the "ruling class" and were also profiting off the plight of the Hebrews. If that were the case, they would have surely

⁴ Exodus 4:31



resisted the idea of the Hebrews leaving Egypt. So when we get to God giving instructions to Israel regarding the Passover, you will notice that Moses passed those instructions on to the elders, who we would assume would pass the instructions on to the Hebrew people.

Exodus 12:21 Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover *lamb* ...".

The question is whether or not the elders passed on to the people all the information they were given by Moses. Did they impress on the people the urgency of what was going to happen, or did they give them just enough information to protect their firstborn? It appears that the later might be the case.

Leaven = Oppression

Obviously, I've presented a lot of speculation, but how does that tie into Unleavened Bread? Quite simply - leavened bread pictures oppression. To see why, let's again read about the night the Hebrews left Egypt.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:33-34** And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said, *We be all dead men.* ³⁴ And the people took their dough before it was **leavened** (chamets), their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders ...

There are two Hebrew words that are translated "leaven", "leavened", or "leavened bread" in the exodus story. They are 'seor' (שֵׂאֵר – 7603) and the other is 'chamets' (חָמֵץ – 2557). 'Seor' is a cognate of the unused Hebrew root 'ciyr' (סִיר) which means to 'boil up' and is used five places in the Torah to depict leavened bread.

The other word - 'chamets' is the word that is used today to describe any food that cannot be consumed during the days of unleavened bread. It gains its meaning of 'leavening' by way of its root word 'chamates' through the idea of being something with a sour taste. 'Chamets' has an alternative meaning of 'that which is gained by violence'.⁵

The root word 'chamates' (חָמַץ – 2556) means 'to be cruel', 'to oppress', 'to be ruthless' and other words along the line of 'beating your brother down'. A couple of examples of how 'chamates' and other words derived from the same root are used are:

^{NKJ} **Psalms 71:4** Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, Out of the hand of the unrighteous and **cruel** (chamates) man.

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 1:17** Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the **oppressor** (chamowts); Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.

A cognate of 'chamates' is 'chamas' (חָמָס – 2555) which primarily means 'violence' but is also translated 'cruelty' and 'oppressor' as in this proverb -

^{NKJ} **Proverbs 3:31** Do not envy the oppressor, And choose none of his ways

So when you consider that 'chamets' not only signifies leavening, but also oppression, we can begin to see that during the seven days of unleavened bread, God intends for us to put aside any thoughts of oppression - being our desire to position ourselves above another person or to profit from another's hardship. And that is what happened with the Hebrews.

⁵ Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament; H.W.F. Gesenius; Baker Books; Grand Rapids, MI; 1979; pg. 288b



the Mixed Multitude

As we now know, prior to the Passover there were two classes of Hebrews – the ‘ruling class’ taskmasters, and the slaves. Whether or not the ‘ruling class’ included the elders of Israel is debatable.

Late on the night of the Passover, cries began to be heard throughout the towns and villages as the Egyptians began to discover the cold, lifeless bodies of their firstborn. Soon thereafter, the Hebrews began to hear commotion outside as the Egyptians stormed into the Hebrew’s homes and began to force them out. It did not matter if you were a taskmaster or a slave - if you wanted to leave or if you wanted to stay – if you were a Hebrew, you were being forced out.

As they made their way to the place where they would all meet, taskmasters and slaves would find themselves walking together, maybe even helping each other hitch up a cart, carry another’s child, or herd another’s flock. For the next seven days, the distinction between taskmaster and slave vanished. Without the Egyptians, the taskmaster had no authority over the slave, and the slave no longer had to heed the word of the taskmaster. As the scripture points out, they were a “mixed multitude” of former taskmasters and slaves.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:38** A mixed multitude went up with them also, and flocks and herds -- a great deal of livestock.

The phrase “mixed multitude” comes from the two Hebrew words ‘erev rav’ (עֶרֶב רַב – 6154 + 7227) and is used only once in the entire Bible. The Hebrew word “erev” implies a mixture, somewhat like a fabric that is interwoven using two or more types of thread or various colors of thread. The word ‘rav’ means ‘great’ or ‘large’, therefore, the phrase literally means ‘a great mixture’.

I believe the mixed multitude was composed of Hebrews with two different mind sets – those who wanted to flee Egypt and those who wanted to stay in Egypt. Obviously, those who would have wanted to stay would be those who were profiting off of the others.

Though we know that the Israelites were cast out of Egypt on the night of the 15th of Nisan (the first day of unleavened bread), we also assume that they crossed the Red Sea seven days later on the 21st day of Nisan. I find it interesting that there were no apparent problems among the people until the end of those seven days. We see no rebellion when they headed south instead of continuing east toward Canaan; no problem turning back to the north after retrieving the bones of Joseph; and no one appears to question Moses as they began to funnel between the mountains as they head east toward sea. There is no evidence of any problem until the afternoon of the last day, the 21st of Nisan, when they came to see that they had been followed by Pharaoh and his army, and it was on that afternoon that people began to rebel. Apparently setting aside all the great wonders YHVH they had performed before their eyes those previous weeks and months, they began to fear and accuse Moses saying -

^{NKJ} **Exodus 14:11-12** "Because *there were* no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? ¹² "Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness."

Previous to this time, the only person’s who had told Moses to leave them alone were the Hebrew taskmasters.⁶ They wanted Moses to stop intervening because they somehow feared Pharaoh might retaliate against them. Could it be that those same people used the approaching army as an opportunity to whip up the understandable apprehension of the people in general so as to create a state of outright fear? Did they stir the pot hoping the people might believe they were about to die at the hand of the Egyptian army. Did they hope that this would cause Moses to surrender to the Egyptians so that the

⁶ Exodus 5:20-21



Hebrews could be taken back into slavery and they could return to their positions of authority over their brothers?

We don't know the answer to those questions, but it is apparent from the account of the next 40 years that there were those who clearly wanted to leave Egypt behind and those who wanted to 'return' to Egypt. Unfortunately, those who wanted to return could oftentimes stir things up enough to get many of the others to want to return to Egypt as well.

Fighting Oppression in the Hebrew Community

Knowing the mindset of the Hebrew people, God began almost immediately to address the proclivity of the Hebrew people to oppress their Hebrew brothers.

On Mount Sinai, after giving the Ten Commandments and after a short discussion on how the people are to approach Him, God jumps right in to addressing the types of oppression the Hebrews were engaged in while in Egypt.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 21:1** "Now these *are* the judgments which you shall set before them: ² "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing ..."

God put a stop to Hebrews ruling over Hebrews indefinitely, and He went on to limit the reasons a Hebrew could even compel another Hebrew to serve him. He also addressed the type of labor that could be exacted upon a Hebrew servant -

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 25:39** ' And if *one of your brethren who dwells by you* becomes poor, and sells himself to you, you shall not compel him to serve as a slave ... ⁴² 'For they *are* My servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. ⁴³ 'You shall not rule over him with rigor, but you shall fear your God.

But Hebrew on Hebrew oppression did not stop in Israel. Like brothers fighting in a family, the Israelites fought among themselves and from time to time enslaved each other. One example of Hebrew on Hebrew oppression was in the latter years of Solomon's kingdom after he had turned from serving God and his fortune had begun to dry up.

The infrastructure in and around Jerusalem and the City of David was in disrepair, and it appears that Solomon enslaved some from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh to do the repairs.

1 Kings 11:26-28 Then Solomon's servant, Jeroboam the son of Nebat, an Ephraimite ... also rebelled against the king. ²⁷ And this *is* what caused him to rebel against the king: Solomon had built the Millo *and* repaired the damages to the City of David his father. ²⁸ The man Jeroboam *was* a mighty man of valor; and Solomon, seeing that the young man was industrious, made him the officer over all the labor force of the house of Joseph.

That would be the northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh.

Apparently unwilling to participate in the slavery of his own countrymen, Jeroboam fled to Egypt and Solomon appointed Adoram⁷, a Levite to take his place. It just so happens that Adoram had formally been in charge of the Canaanite slaves who worked on the Temple, and now – some 30 years later, he did the work of repairing the city using Hebrew slaves.

After Solomon's died and the kingdom split, his son Rehoboam became king over Judah. Rehoboam sent Adoram to Jeroboam who was now the king of the northern tribes, to get him to surrender the northern tribes back to Rehoboam, but those from the northern tribes killed Adoram instead.

⁷ 1 Kings 4:6; 9:22



^{NKJ} **1 Kings 12:18** Then King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was in charge of the revenue⁸; but all Israel stoned him with stones, and he died. Therefore King Rehoboam mounted his chariot in haste to flee to Jerusalem.

Enslavement of Hebrews by Hebrews continued throughout Israel's history. During the days of King Ahaz of Judah, Pekah, the king of Israel overthrew Ahaz and carried away two hundred thousand men, women, and children of Judah with the intent of making them slaves, but later relented and returned the captives.⁹

Later, Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, along with many of his countrymen, took some of their Jewish countrymen as slaves. When confronted by the prophet Jeremiah, they freed the slaves, but later took them back. This became one of the reasons God brought on the Babylonian captivity.¹⁰

Roughly a century later, after returning to the Land of Judah, the Jewish people again began enslaving their own people. During a famine, the wealthy began to charge interest to their impoverished Jewish brothers and then took some of them as slaves.¹¹ Nehemiah, the governor, put an end to it.

Leaven of the Pharisees

Like was mentioned at the beginning, biblical oppression can take a number of forms including slavery, charging interest to the poor, hunger, and taxation. Basically, anytime you profit or gain status at another's expense, you have oppressed your neighbor. The gospel accounts of Yeshua's life and ministry point out that Hebrew on Hebrew oppression was alive and well in first century Israel, and the leading oppressors were the Pharisees.

The Pharisees had a reason for oppressing the people, and they were quite honest about it — at least to each other. As Yeshua's ministry was drawing to a close and His signs were becoming greater and more frequent, the Pharisees set out to kill him saying –

^{NKJ} **John 11:47-48** ... "What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. ⁴⁸ "If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."

Under Roman rule, the Pharisees had a certain amount of authority over the people. Through their oral traditions, they were able to oppress the people and sometimes 'line their pockets' with burdens that were not part of God's written law. Yeshua's message of the restoration of the Kingdom was a message of freedom that would release the people from the bondage of the Romans and the burdens of their first-century taskmasters – the Pharisees. This, of course, was not what the Pharisees wanted.

It's interesting to note that – like the elders of Israel in Moses' day, the Pharisees saw the same miracles as the rest of the people, and according to Nicodemus – they believed.

^{NKJ} **John 3:1** There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Even though they knew that Yeshua, like Moses, was a messenger of freedom, they resisted Him at every turn and took every opportunity to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. Thus Yeshua labeled them as 'hypocrites' saying -

^{NKJ} **Luke 12:1** ... "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy . . ."

⁸ Heb. 'mac' – מַעַל – Strong's 4522 – 'forced laborers'

⁹ 1 Chron. 28:1-15

¹⁰ Jeremiah 34:8-22

¹¹ Nehemiah 5:1-19



And the source of their hypocrisy was their teaching -

^{NKJ} **Matthew 16:12** Then they (the disciples) understood that He did not tell *them* to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Their doctrine (Gr. 'didache' – teaching) was basically that Yeshua was not the promised Messiah, and therefore the people should follow them and their heavy burden of oral laws and traditions. So He told His disciples -

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:4** "... they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.

They taught that those laws would preserve the Jewish culture and give them right standing before God, even though they knew that was not true. So Yeshua railed against them saying –

^{NKJ} **Luke 11:52** "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered."

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:13** "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees - hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in *yourselves*, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

According to Yeshua, the Pharisees knew the truth — they know the way to freedom, but they kept it to themselves. They were very content with the people being enslaved to their own doctrine. In the process, they profited from the plight of the people –

^{NKJ} **Matthew 23:25** "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion¹² and self-indulgence.

The doctrine of the Pharisees was a false doctrine. They knew that Yeshua was the Messiah, but they did not want the people to know, for to do so would destroy their position of authority over the people and would diminish their profit. It was oppression – denying the people their freedom for the sake of personal gain — and like leaven, it spread throughout the land so that even the rulers of the people would not acknowledge the one who came to secure their freedom -

^{NKJ} **John 12:42** Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess *Him*, lest they should be put out of the synagogue;

The Pharisees – in their desire to lord it over the people – were the epitome of leaven.

So what is leavening? It is a grievous sin that splits God's people into classes and pits Hebrew against Hebrew. Why do we abstain from it during this 7-day festival? Because we've all been redeemed - both taskmaster and slave – by the blood of the Lamb, Messiah Yeshua – and therefore we are all equals.

Yeshua's made the following statement to His disciples just a couple of days before His crucifixion, and it is a statement I try to always remind myself of in my marriage, my work and all my endeavors. He said –

"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers."

^{ESV} **Matthew 23:8**

Shalom Alecheim

¹² 'extortion' = 'harpagē' (724) – 'the act of plundering, robbery'