

# THE BAKER ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO EVERYDAY LIFE IN BIBLE TIMES

JOHN A. BECK



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For my soul mate, Marmy. “She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. . . . She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. . . . She is clothed with strength and dignity. . . . Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all” (Prov. 31:10–11, 18, 25, 29).

And for Judah, our first grandchild, who joined the kingdom of God during the writing of this book, in partial fulfillment of God’s clear encouragement: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut. 6:6–7).



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# PREFACE

Our days pulse with ordinary activities and experiences. We wash our clothes, download music, and stop at the store to purchase a loaf of bread. We execute our roles in life as firefighters, software technicians, and grandparents. Similar activities filled the lives of those living in Bible times. What was ordinary for them, however, may appear quite extraordinary to us. The notions of winnowing grain, removing one's footwear during a land purchase, or milking a goat were well known to those living in Bible times. But the very nature of these activities and the connotations linked to them may puzzle contemporary Bible readers. What did an armor-bearer do? What did it mean to be a Pharisee? What social disadvantages were faced by the childless widow? What was the difference between a wife and a concubine? How did people hunt? How were names given? How was someone executed by stoning? How were ancient cities fortified? What was a *lot* and how was it cast?

I trust that Abraham, Ruth, and Paul were not harmed by their ignorance of twenty-first-century culture, but modern Bible readers can be harmed by their ignorance of the biblical world. That is because the Holy Spirit often

guided the inspired authors of the Bible to include mention of practices and customs from their time in this important book. God intends for these cultural images from the past to change us. But the rhetorical impact of the imagery is often muted because of the distance in time and experience between the modern readers of the Bible and its ancient human authors.

The goal of this visual guide is to restore clarity and vitality to those portions of God's Word that speak of the activities and social stations of the past. Each article discusses the literal realities that attended the activity or role under consideration. This includes the necessary treatment of the cultural connotations linked to it. The article will then illustrate the ways in which the biblical authors used either literal or figurative reference to the idea under discussion as they sought to change and shape us as their readers. You will find these cultural practices from the past to be fascinating on their own. But more importantly, your experiences with these images from daily life will give you fresh interpretive insights that will deepen your understanding of the most important book you will ever read.





# ANOINT

Olive oil was a signature product of the Promised Land (Deut. 8:8), and it was used in many different dimensions of daily living.<sup>1</sup> Among them was application to the skin after being mixed with aromatics. This was designed to mitigate the harmful effects of a sunny, dry climate and also served to mask one's personal body odor in a place where bathing occurred infrequently due to the lack of fresh water (Ruth 3:3; 2 Sam. 12:20; Dan. 10:3). The biblical authors also knew of a unique application of oil to the body that was given a special designation: *anointing*. This was not done with ordinary oil but with oil specifically produced for this ritual. The recipe is given in Exodus 30:22–25, and it is also called “the oil of joy” (Ps. 45:7) or “holy oil” (Ps. 89:20 NASB). A stern set of guidelines accompanied with penalties to match ensured that this special oil was used only for ritual anointing (Exod. 30:37–38). At God's direction, the special oil was poured on the head of a person to mark him or her for special service whether as a member of Israel's clergy, as a political leader, or as a prophet.

Those anointed in this way had their lives change in three important ways. First, the one “anointed by the Lord” stood out from the general population as a leader. The process of

pouring oil on someone's head had no power on its own and could even be misused to designate a leader God had not intended to lead (2 Sam. 19:10). However, when it was done appropriately, anointing consecrated the life of an individual for special service in the kingdom of God (Lev. 8:30). Once marked with this act, special responsibilities and restrictions ensured that this leader would fulfill the intended role in executing God's plan on earth (Lev. 10:7; 21:11–15). Second, the anointed one was not autonomous but was always subject to the will and desires of a superior.<sup>2</sup> The “Lord's anointed” was a middle manager answering

An olive crushing press broke the tough olive skins so that the precious oil could be extracted.



to a divine CEO. Third, anointing meant special protection was extended to these special leaders—protection that was unmitigated by circumstances. For example, David considered it unthinkable to harm Saul, the Lord’s anointed, even though Saul’s failings had compromised his leadership and even though Saul was the one who stood between David and the throne of Israel (1 Sam. 24:6; 26:9; 2 Sam. 1:14). This protection was enshrined in the poetry of God’s people: “Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm” (Ps. 105:15).

As the biblical authors share divine truth with us, we find the idea

of anointing mentioned frequently in two locations. Fully one-third of the total number of instances in which anointing is mentioned are found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. As the Lord was establishing a new worship system for his Old Testament people, he put his stamp of ownership on the physical objects associated with worship and on the clergy who would lead that worship via the process of anointing (Exod. 30:26–28, 30). The repeated references to this kind of anointing join to create a refrain that reminds the reader that there was only one form of worship that God sanctioned in that period of history, and he marked the people and tools of that worship with special anointing oil.

Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles account for the next one-third of the instances where anointing is formally mentioned in the Bible, but in these cases it was not clergy but kings who were anointed. The idea of anointing a political leader was not unique to the Israelites; it appears to have been practiced by both Hittites and Egyptians as a way of protecting those leaders from harm imposed by hostile deities.<sup>3</sup> Special and repeated mention of the anointing of Saul, David, and Solomon helped to confirm the new institution of the monarchy among God’s people and prevent contested successions. It is striking that after repeated mention of anointing in connection with these three, there is a relative absence of mention in the pages that follow (limited to 2 Kings 9:3; 11:12;

Although David had the opportunity to take Saul’s life in a cave at En Gedi (left), he honored the divine protection that the Lord’s anointed enjoyed.

23:30). We cannot know for sure whether subsequent kings were anointed, but as formal mention of anointing disappeared from the later pages of the Bible, the absence of this divine sanction highlights the absence of godly leadership among the kings who took the thrones of Israel and Judah. In that light, it is also striking that Elijah was directed to anoint Elisha as a prophet (1 Kings 19:16). We may be more accustomed to hearing of kings and clergy anointed as leaders, but when both these classes failed in leadership, we find this sacred designation performed on the prophet Elisha.

Divinely anointed leaders did not always live up to their high calling. Consequently, we encounter a growing expectation regarding

one who will be anointed and serve as the ultimate leader of God's people. Though this special "Anointed One" will face grave opposition from the kings of the earth (Dan. 9:25–26; see also Ps. 2:2), his victorious kingdom will endure. The anticipation of such a leader

Worship furniture and objects used during worship were separated for special service by anointing.

becomes real when Jesus is called the Christ, the Anointed One. We may have expected him to be anointed with sacred oil, but instead he was anointed by the Holy Spirit on the day of his baptism (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). Subsequently, he accepted the title of Christ (Matt. 16:16–17; John 4:25–26 NASB) and lived the life and died the death that allow us to be anointed by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27).

Israel's clergy was ceremonially marked for lifelong service through anointing.



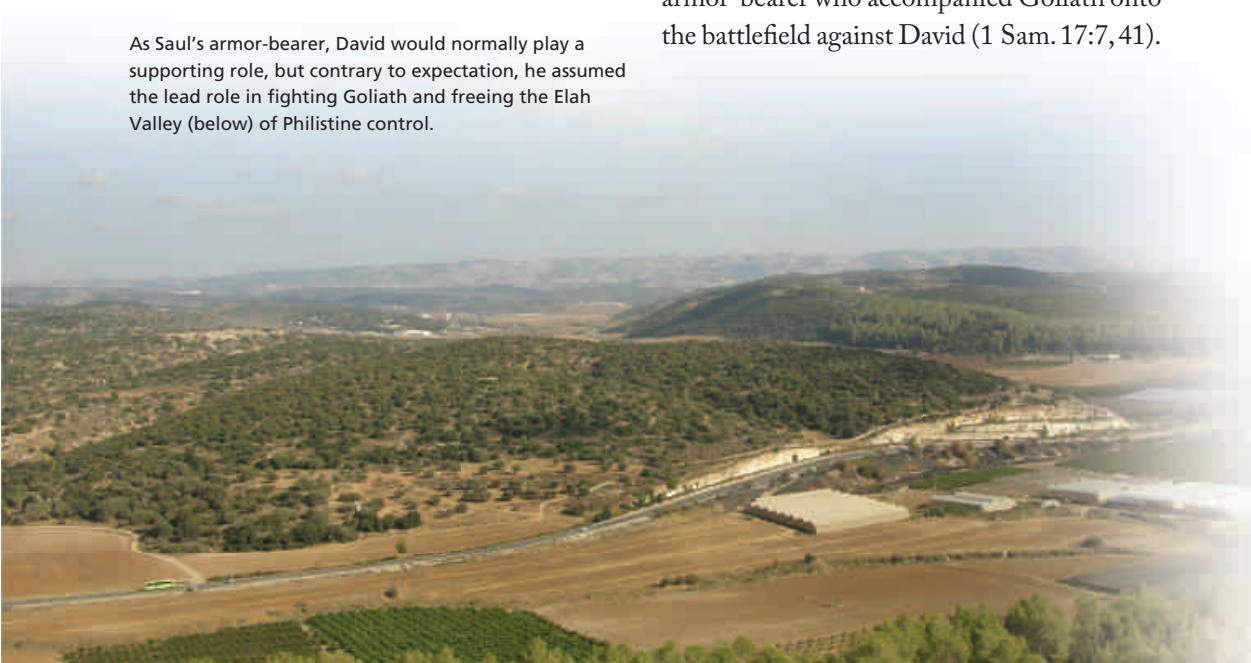


# ARMOR-BEARER

Think of someone in whom you have absolute confidence, someone into whose hands you are willing to entrust your very life, and you are on the way to understanding the armor-bearer of the ancient world. Whether named or unnamed, the armor-bearers of the Bible were always attached to people who held significant leadership positions. Kings, princes, and generals had one or more armor-bearers in their company when going into battle (Judg. 9:54; 1 Sam. 14:1; 16:21; 2 Sam. 18:15). Typically, the Bible mentions only one armor-bearer at a time, but in the case of the general Joab, we read that ten armor-bearers accompanied him (2 Sam. 18:15 NASB).

As Saul's armor-bearer, David would normally play a supporting role, but contrary to expectation, he assumed the lead role in fighting Goliath and freeing the Elah Valley (below) of Philistine control.

Three specific duties were attached to the armor-bearer. As the name suggests, the first responsibility of the armor-bearer was to carry extra weapons so he could replace a leader's weapon that was either damaged or lost in combat.<sup>4</sup> The second role of the armor-bearer was to use those weapons himself. As the leader battled against enemy soldiers, leaving a trail of wounded fighters in his wake, the armor-bearer was entrusted with the grisly task of following behind to finish them off (1 Sam. 14:13; 2 Sam. 18:14–15). The third and most important responsibility of the armor-bearer was to protect the principal from harm. This was clearly the role of the shield-bearing armor-bearer who accompanied Goliath onto the battlefield against David (1 Sam. 17:7, 41).



Because kings and generals quite literally entrusted their lives into the hands of their armor-bearer, leaders were very careful in selecting men for this vital role. They looked for the kinds of qualities we see in the armor-bearer who accompanied Jonathan in his assault on a Philistine outpost that was located at the top of the high, inaccessible ridge described in 1 Samuel 14. This man was Jonathan's sole companion during the assault (v. 6). He displayed absolute loyalty to Jonathan, responding to the invitation to participate in an exposed climb to the enemy with these words, "Do all that you have in mind. . . . Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul" (v. 7). And we observe that his courage paralleled that of Jonathan as they climbed the near-vertical cliff face toward the outpost, weapons idle because both hands and feet were required to sustain the perilous climb (v. 13).

Undoubtedly armor-bearers were present in battle scenarios much more frequently than is mentioned in the biblical accounts. Thus the reported presence of this assistant invites our consideration. Generally speaking, we can say that the presence of an armor-bearer marked an individual as a person of importance and that being an armor-bearer cast a complimentary light on the person given that honorary position. Thus when David was enlisted as an armor-bearer of King Saul, we are invited to see him as worthy of our admiration (1 Sam. 16:21)—an admiration that grows as we see



With weapons in hand, these armor-bearers stand ready to protect and assist their king.

this armor-bearer of Saul refusing to take up his weapons against the Lord's anointed (1 Samuel 24 and 26).

Armor-bearers play a more important role in three biblical narratives. In each case, the armor-bearer functions in a way that counters our expectation. First is the role of Abimelek's armor-bearer. There are many things that are disturbing about Abimelek, the first Israelite to claim the title of king (Judg. 9:6). His subjects eventually revolted against him, and in his efforts to reestablish his authority over them, Abimelek put one of the rebellious cities under siege. Mortally wounded when a woman hurled a millstone from above, cracking his skull, Abimelek asked his armor-bearer to play an unexpected role. Rather than killing enemy soldiers left in the wake of the king, the armor-bearer was asked to kill the king so no one could say that a woman had killed him (Judg. 9:54).<sup>5</sup>

The second time we see an unexpected turn in the role of armor-bearer comes in 1 Samuel 17, the well-known story of David and

Goliath. Just a few verses earlier, in 1 Samuel 16:21, King Saul was so impressed with a young man named David that he invited him to be one of his armor-bearers. This created an expectation regarding their roles that was completely reversed in what followed. When Goliath and the Philistines made their presence felt in a valley critical to Israel's national security, we would expect the king to take the lead in ridding Israel of this threat, with David's role limited to being a weapons supplier, follow-up executioner, and faithful assistant. But in a shocking role reversal, Saul offered weapons to David (1 Sam. 17:38), and David initiated the fight against the Philistine champion. This reversal in expected roles lifted David to prominence, while Saul drifted to the remote corners of the narrative.

The third time an armor-bearer plays a sustained role is in 1 Samuel 31. Many chapters earlier, the Lord had rejected Saul as king. The slow, downward spiral met the ground when Saul took his own life on Mount Gilboa after being mortally wounded by Philistine archers.

When Saul asked his armor-bearer to kill him on the heights of Mount Gilboa (below), he linked his failed rule to that of Abimelek, who had made a similar request.



An Assyrian armor-bearer.

He then asked his unnamed armor-bearer to finish him off (see v. 4). In asking his loyal assistant to play this very unexpected role, he not only signaled just how horribly wrong things had gone that day but also linked himself rhetorically to Abimelek, the failed king who also made this unusual request of his armor-bearer (Judg. 9:54). In each of these three accounts, it is the reversal in the expected role of the armor-bearer that helps mark transpiring events as so noteworthy.





# ARROW

## (TO SHOOT)

The basic tools and the techniques for hurling an arrow at its mark have evolved over the centuries, but the appearance of the bow and arrow of the past is nearly identical to the bow and arrow of the present. The arrows of Bible times consisted of a wood or reed shaft that was approximately thirty inches in length. An arrowhead made of bone, bronze, or iron was at one end of the shaft and the fletching composed of feathers was at the opposite end. The latter helped stabilize this nimble missile in flight. Ancient bows ranged from the simple convex arc to the composite bow that increased the killing range of the archer to more than two hundred yards and was already in the hands of hunters and soldiers by the time of Abraham.<sup>6</sup>

The physics behind shooting an arrow remains the same today as it was in Bible times. The potential energy housed within the muscles of the archer is transferred to the drawn bowstring and then released as kinetic energy when the bowstring recoils to its neutral position. Anyone with sufficient strength can make it work, but regular practice with bow and arrow is required to fire this weapon accurately. When Jonathan needed to deliver a message to David about the attitude of his father toward David without drawing undue attention, he engaged in an activity that was a

normal part of his weekly routine. He took his bow and arrow outdoors to practice (1 Sam. 20:19–21, 35–37). Everyone who understood the skill required to shoot an arrow accurately also knew the risk of putting a fighter into the field without sufficient practice. The inspired poet of Proverbs 26 took it a step further in this simile: “Like a maniac shooting flaming arrows of death is one who deceives a neighbor and says, ‘I was only joking!’” (Prov. 26:18–19 TNIV).

Apart from target practice, ancient artwork shows and the Bible mentions the shooting of an arrow in two settings: during the hunt and during war (Gen. 27:3; 1 Sam. 31:3; Jer. 50:14). We encounter the latter most frequently in



This bow allowed an archer to fire lethal volleys of arrows while remaining safely outside the range of most other ancient weapons.

the Bible. And when the biblical authors take special pains to mention the fact that Israelite soldiers were equipped to fire arrows, it is meant to portray an Israelite fighting unit as fully capable of effective combat, whether that be the rebel band of David or the army of King Uzziah (1 Chron. 12:1–2; 2 Chron. 26:11–15).

Two connotations are linked to shooting an arrow. First, those who fired arrows in combat did so from a relatively safe position compared with others who had to expose themselves while wielding sword, mace, or spear. When defending a city, soldiers fired arrows from above while using the city walls for protection (2 Sam. 11:20, 24), and when attacking a city from the outside, they shot arrows over the walls of the city while safely out of range of other weapons (Jer. 50:14), unseen in the “shadows” (Ps. 11:2; see also 64:4). Second, the flip side of that coin is the terror and panic that flying arrows could generate for those on the receiving end. A hail of arrows arrived unexpectedly and with lethal consequences. Only when we appreciate the terror they caused can we appreciate the peace that came

with the assurance that arrows would not be shot. When the Assyrian Sennacherib was threatening to attack Jerusalem, King Hezekiah received this reassurance: “He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here” (2 Kings 19:32; Isa. 37:33).<sup>7</sup> What a blessing to live in a setting where “you will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day” (Ps. 91:5).

In the Bible we also find instances when the arrow being shot is metaphorical rather than literal. In the first instance, the biblical authors put a metaphorical bow in the Lord’s hands and note that he is shooting people instead of arrows. In Exodus 15:4 the best of the Egyptian military is “hurled”—that is, fired like an arrow—into the Red Sea. And in Job 30:19, the unfortunate Job says that the Lord “throws” him—again, fired like an arrow—into the mud. In both instances, it is not just the forceful delivery of the bow shot but the helplessness of the arrow that is in view.

The advance of God’s kingdom on earth was and is destined to meet opposition felt by God’s people. In this second instance, that opposition can come in the form of words or actions that are likened to the assault of arrows in the inspired poetry of the psalms: “For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart” (Ps. 11:2). “They shoot from ambush at the innocent; they shoot suddenly, without fear” (Ps. 64:4).

Finally, it is the Lord who also shoots metaphorical arrows that are emblematic of the victory he

Assyrian arrowheads made of iron were fired on the besieged Israelite city of Lachish.







Arrows were used not only in support of a military operation but also when hunting big game.

will win over all opposition. Though this action cannot be commended to our readers for replication, Elisha opened the window of his bedroom and fired an arrow through it. The firing of this arrow represented the victory of God's people over Aram (2 Kings 13:17).

Arrows shot by an unseen divine hand are even more effective than literal arrows in taking out opposition to God's people and his kingdom. "But God will shoot them with his arrows; they will suddenly be struck down" (Ps. 64:7; see also 144:6 and 2 Sam. 22:15).

Arrows were fired not only at a city under siege but also from within its walls by defenders on the ramparts.



# AUTHORITY

## (TO HOLD OR TO EXERCISE)

**F**or many in the West, the notion of holding or exercising authority is linked to our democratic ideals. The person wielding authority has the right to make decisions that affect the lives of others because the leader was given that right by the people whom he or she governs. Furthermore, the authority given to the elected official is limited in scope by some form of constitution. Within the culture in biblical times, however, the right to exercise authority was often held

by the one who seized that right by force; it was might, not popular elections, that imbued a person with authority—authority that often had few, if any, limitations. A more down-to-earth image of what it meant to have authority in the biblical world is offered by the Capernaum centurion who asked Jesus for help on behalf of his ailing servant: “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (Luke 7:8).

In the Bible the idea of authority is discussed most often and directly in three categories: political, religious, and messianic. The biblical authors formally link the word *authority* with leaders of nations-turned-empires such as Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Rome (Gen. 41:35; Neh. 3:7; Esther 9:29; Dan. 4:28–31; Luke 20:20; see also John 19:10 NASB). A blend of accumulated wealth and military competence gave the empires a striking amount of authority. But the Bible goes on to note that such political authority is not fully autonomous. In fact, it is only the dominion of the Lord that is fully autonomous and enduring. As the psalmist says, “Your kingdom is an everlasting

In advance of bestowing on their students the authority to teach, rabbis were known to teach them on these steps, which were the main entry to the temple in Jerusalem.



kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations” (Ps. 145:13). Furthermore, the Lord was the one who ultimately manipulated the strings of history to allow one nation to rise and become the dominant empire of the ancient world at the expense of another. When Nebuchadnezzar failed to recognize that his authority was dependent on the authority of the Most High, this Babylonian king was temporarily removed from his throne until he got it right (Dan. 4:28–37). Shortly afterward, Daniel’s dream about the four beasts not only pointed to the succession of world empires to come but also affirmed the fact that it is the Lord who orchestrates the giving and removing of political authority (Dan. 7:1–8). It naturally follows that those who submit to the authority of God will also submit to the authority of political powers to which he has given authority to rule. “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established” (Rom. 13:1).

The notion of religious authority became a matter of importance in New Testament times because Jesus was frequently challenged by Jewish religious leaders in that regard. For example, the chief priests and elders accosted Jesus in the temple courts with these two questions: “By what authority are you doing these

things? . . . And who gave you this authority?” (Matt. 21:23). In order to understand why this was such a sticking point for them, we need to understand that there was no social principle more firmly established within first-century Judaism than this. In order for a person to teach with authority as a rabbi, it was necessary for him to have been trained and formally authorized to teach by someone already recognized to possess such authority.<sup>8</sup> Students who wished to teach with the authority of a rabbi first completed a prescribed course of study that culminated in something akin to ordination; this formally marked a man as authorized to teach.<sup>9</sup> Thus Jesus was challenged repeatedly to either provide evidence of this pedigree or quit holding himself out as an authorized teacher.

Of course Jesus was authorized to teach, because he fulfilled the messianic prophecy of Daniel 7:14.

A revolving set of empires would give way to the establishment of an eternal kingdom led by one unique figure. The Ancient of Days would give this man authority to rule an empire that would include “all the peoples, nations and men of every language,” a kingdom that “will not pass away; and . . . will not be destroyed” (NASB). Jesus did not have to attach himself to a rabbinic school to obtain authorization to teach because he was ordained, so to speak, in a very unusual ceremony on the



At Jesus’s baptism, God the Father declared that his Son had full authority to speak for him.



day of his baptism.<sup>10</sup> The declaration of none other than the heavenly Father authorized him to teach. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

The Gospel writers were careful to report that despite the reservations of certain Jewish leaders, the common people who heard Jesus teach recognized that he did so with authority. “The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. . . . The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, ‘What is this? A new teaching—and with authority!’” (Mark 1:22, 27).

While Jesus acknowledged that all authority resides in him, he shared a portion of that authority with his followers, who were charged with advancing the kingdom of God to its ultimate realization. We see this occurring in a limited, local way during Jesus’s time on earth (Luke 9:1; 10:19) and then exploding into an international effort at the time of his ascension. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18–19). It is this divinely given authority that lies behind the teaching we meet in the Epistles (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; Titus 2:15; Heb. 13:17).



A funeral mask of King Tut’s mummy. Rulers such as King Tut of Egypt often sustained their authority through the use of military power.

# BAKE BREAD

When the biblical authors formally mention the baking of bread or make strong allusion to this activity, they are directing our attention to the most ordinary of all the daily tasks in Bible times. The bread made from wheat provided the majority of carbohydrates and proteins consumed by those living at that time.<sup>1</sup> Because their bread was baked without preservatives and so would spoil more quickly than the processed bread of today, it generally was baked daily and was intended for consumption on the day it was baked.

Three different methods were used to bake this daily bread. The first did not require an oven but only a flat rock, making it the easiest method for baking bread when traveling. The baker built a fire on the upper surface of the rock, and once the fire burned down to hot embers, the coals were swept from the surface and replaced by raw bread dough. Because the rock retained the heat long after the embers were removed, its surface became the rack on which the bread baked.<sup>2</sup> The second method for baking bread used a clay oven called the *tabun*, which was shaped like a beehive with an opening on the top. A fire

built around the exterior of the *tabun* heated the interior of the oven, and the temperature was controlled by adjusting the lid that fully or partially closed the opening on top of the beehive. Stones placed on the floor of the *tabun* became the baking surface on which the dough was placed. The third method for baking bread was also in an oven. This one was called the *tannûr*, and it was also shaped like a beehive. But in the *tannûr* the fire was built inside the oven and the bread dough was slapped on the curved sides of the oven to bake.<sup>3</sup>



Bread was baked on a daily basis.

We can divide the instances in which the biblical authors formally mention the baking of bread into two categories: (1) baking that occurred in ordinary and expected settings, and (2) baking that is noteworthy because it was unusual in some way. We can safely say that no activity was more ordinary in Bible times than the baking of bread. It was done on a daily basis for one's family whether the family was lingering around the family compound or preparing for an extended journey (Exod. 12:39). It was also customary to bake and offer bread to recently arrived guests, who would naturally be hungry after walking a long distance (Gen. 14:18; 18:6; 1 Sam. 28:24). Bread was also baked and brought to the Lord as an offering, honoring the premise that there would be no grain without the blessing of the Lord. This offering could consist of raw grain, but it was more often prepared and presented before the Lord



A first-century AD bread stamp used to impress a design into the bread dough before baking.

as baked goods (Lev. 2:4; 6:17). Baked loaves of bread were also used as symbolic representatives of God's people; twelve loaves resided in the presence of the Lord within his sanctuary (Lev. 24:5–9).

In contrast to these ordinary instances involving baked goods, we find six instances in which baking or not baking receives special mention because the circumstances were unusual: (1) Moses taught the Israelites that this fundamental task was to be suspended on the Sabbath. Any baked goods eaten on the Lord's Sabbath had to be baked the day before (Exod. 16:23). (2) The normal rhythm of baking was also interrupted by Israel's demand that they be led by a king. Monarchs of Bible times had their own full-time baking staff (Gen. 40:1–2). Consequently, Samuel warned that Israel's request for a change in political structure would result in daughters being removed from their family household and put to work baking daily bread not for their own families but for their king (1 Sam. 8:10–11, 13). (3) The smell of baking bread was as pleasant an aroma in Bible times as it is today. But in at least two instances, these pleasant



An oven for baking bread was included in the plan of every home.

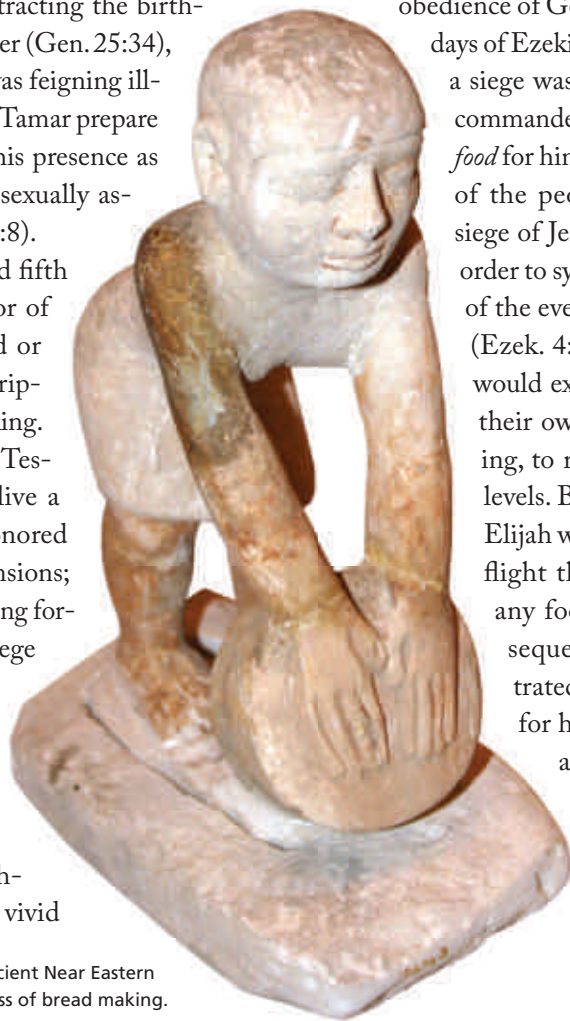


aromas were used in a nefarious way, disarming those about to be taken advantage of. Jacob presented Esau with freshly baked bread as he set the stage for extracting the birth-right from his brother (Gen. 25:34), and Amnon, who was feigning illness, requested that Tamar prepare and bake bread in his presence as part of his plan to sexually assault her (2 Sam. 3:8).

In the fourth and fifth instances the horror of a siege is amplified or illustrated by a description of unusual baking. God called his Old Testament people to live a unique life that honored him in all its dimensions; punishment, including foreign invasion and siege of the cities, would follow failure to honor their commitment. (4) In Leviticus the Lord warned of a punishment siege with this vivid

language: “When I cut off your supply of bread, ten women will be able to bake your bread in one oven” (Lev. 26:26). (5) The disobedience of God’s people during the

days of Ezekiel meant that just such a siege was imminent. The Lord commanded Ezekiel to bake *siege food* for himself and eat it in front of the people even before the siege of Jerusalem had begun in order to symbolically warn them of the events about to transpire (Ezek. 4:9–13). (6) Finally, we would expect travelers to bake their own bread while traveling, to replenish their energy levels. But the highly stressed Elijah was so exhausted by his flight that he had not made any food for himself. Consequently, the Lord illustrated his ongoing concern for his prophet by sending an angel to rouse him from sleep and offer him “bread baked over hot coals” (1 Kings 19:6).



Art pieces from many ancient Near Eastern cultures depict the process of bread making.

# BELT

## (TO WEAR OR TO TUCK)

The belt of our Western world is very different in appearance and function from the belt of the ancient world. What is more, modern Bible translations have used the word *belt* for two different articles of clothing that looked and functioned in very different ways from each other. For example, in the case of Elijah, a shift in Hebrew vocabulary signals that we are no longer talking about the true belt that was worn around the tunic. In fact, it was not a belt at all but an undergarment worn beneath the tunic. Typically made of linen and less commonly of leather (2 Kings 1:8), this garment resembled a kilt wrapped around the waist that extended to mid-thigh.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, the true belt (or sash) was a long cloth approximately six to ten inches in width that wrapped around the waist, worn over the tunic.<sup>5</sup> Ordinarily such belts were

made from wool or linen, so the one wearing “a belt of fine gold” was marked as unique (Dan. 10:5; see also Prov. 31:24). The belt’s role was intimately linked to the tunic, the primary garment worn by average men and women living in Bible times. The tunic was a rectangular, sack-like garment that reached all the way to the ankles. It was sewn so as to be open at the bottom and had openings cut in the appropriate places for the head and arms. The belt gathered the tunic around the waist during the day and was loosened or removed at night when the tunic became loose-fitting sleepwear.

This true belt functioned in a number of ways. First, it provided a place into which the owner could tuck his garment when its length interfered with walking or working. The biblical authors mention this tucking most

While staying in Caesarea Maritima (below), Paul was bound by his own belt to symbolize his coming arrest (Acts 21:11).





frequently in connection with long or urgent trips during which an untucked garment would have impeded the legs (Exod. 12:11; 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 4:29; 9:1). Second, because the ancient belt was a wider piece of cloth with folds in it, the belt also became a convenient place to put things one wanted to carry, such as a weapon or coins (2 Sam. 20:8; Matt. 10:9; Mark 6:8). Third, the type of belt worn might be used to mark one's place in society. For example, we read about a belt that marked the special accomplishment of a warrior (2 Sam. 18:11), belts worn by the clergy (Exod. 29:9; Lev. 8:7, 13; NIV "sashes"), and a special leather belt that helped mark Elijah as a divine messenger (2 Kings 1:8).

The belt and actions associated with it carry two important connotations that are exploited by the biblical authors. First, lifting the tunic and stuffing it into the belt indicates readiness for action and willingness to engage the task ahead. This connotation is clearly seen in Exodus 12:11 as the Lord calls the Israelites to leave Egypt with "your cloak tucked into your belt." But this imagery is lost for the English readers of 1 Peter 1:13. Here the inspired author urges the reader to "prepare your mind for action" (NASB). The Greek verb translated as "prepare" is the verb that

urges the tucking of one's garment into the belt. Thus Peter urges believers to do with their minds what they typically did with their tunics in order to prepare for action. Ironically, the belt that symbolizes the enabling of action was used by Agabus to depict the restrictions Paul was about to encounter. As Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, Agabus "took Paul's belt [and] tied his own hands and feet with it" before announcing that the owner of the belt would be bound by the Jews of Jerusalem and delivered into the hands of the Gentiles (Acts 21:11).

The second connotation associated with the belt is great intimacy. When David was anointed by Samuel to succeed Saul as king of Israel, it was Saul's son Jonathan who had everything to lose politically since he would have been regarded as Saul's likely successor. Our concerns over competition for the throne are removed as we observe David and Jonathan making a covenant in which Jonathan affirmed David as Saul's successor.<sup>6</sup> Jonathan gave David a variety of personal items to confirm this agreement. The list terminates with the most intimate item of all: Jonathan's belt. Intimacy



In days without elastic or Velcro, a belt held a loose-fitting garment in place around the waist.

is also in view during the enacted message of Jeremiah 13. Here the Lord urged Jeremiah to purchase a linen belt, wear it for a time, and then leave it in the crevice of a rock. After many days, the Lord sent Jeremiah to retrieve the belt. When he dug it up, the linen belt was completely ruined and useless. In this case the belt stood for the people of Israel and Judah, whom the Lord bound to himself as a belt (Jer. 13:11). But despite the intimacy of this connection, God’s people failed to listen to him and so were destined for the same ruin as Jeremiah’s belt.

Finally, we see the intimate relationship between belt and owner used in two metaphors in which the belt symbolizes a quality that is as closely linked to a person as the belt is linked to the one who wears it. Isaiah described the Messiah in this way: “Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist” (Isa. 11:5). And Paul encouraged us all



The long belts of royal officials added style and distinction to an otherwise ordinary piece of apparel.

to have our lives so intimately linked to truth that we walk with the “belt of truth buckled around [our] waist” (Eph. 6:14).



Most people wore belts made from cloth, so a belt made of bronze helped distinguish this belt’s wearer as a warrior.

# BIRTH

**A**fter God called our world into being and personally made the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden, he invited them to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen. 1:28). Thus the Lord empowered and invited husbands and wives to join sexually in order to give birth to sons and daughters who would fill his new world. That power did not cease with the fall into sin but was changed dramatically by it. The process of giving birth that had been pain free was now beset by the horrific pain associated with contractions and the compression of nerve endings (Gen. 3:16). God linked this most fundamental human experience with a reminder of sin—a link affirmed in subsequent passages of Scripture (Lev. 12:2, 5; Ps. 51:5; John 3:6).

Despite the pain associated with childbirth, people during Bible times honored God’s

command to bring children into the world. And within the culture of the biblical world, giving birth to children became an economic necessity.<sup>7</sup> Having a large number of children improved the economic well-being of a family by allowing that household to farm more acres of land, increase the number of animals under their care, and maintain the water resources needed to survive. When the senior members of the family were no longer able to contribute labor to these tasks, the children provided their parents with the fundamentals needed so that they could enjoy more comfortable years at the end of their life. But the efforts to grow a large family and its attending security came with a physical and emotional price. High infant and child mortality rates rocked the world of God’s people, where only one in two children lived to adulthood.<sup>8</sup> It was a great blessing to have a large family (Ps. 127:3–5), but the loss of children and the death of mothers in

Having children was an economic necessity that permitted growing sufficient grain to feed the family and to ensure the well-being of aging parents.



childbirth became all-too-familiar realities for families in Bible times.

Childbirth not only played a role in economic security but also paved the way for eternal security because childbirth was intimately linked to God's plan to redeem the world from sin. Adam and Eve were told that one of their children would be the key to this rescue (Gen. 3:15). This means that biblical authors were particularly attuned to the birth of children in the larger context of this promise. In Genesis that starts with attention given to the first sons of Eve (Gen. 4:1–2) and then ramps up into long genealogies that repeat the Hebrew verb for giving birth 170 times. (Unfortunately this refrain is muted by many contemporary English translations.) The intimate link between childbirth and God's plan to save the world made childbirth a target of those demonic

forces that sought to undo the plan of salvation. We meet women like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth who were at first unable to bear the children necessary to advance the divine cause (Gen. 17:17; 18:11; 25:21; 29:31; 1 Sam. 1:2; Luke 1:7). But in each case, the Lord intervened and allowed these women to give birth to the children who played a pivotal role in advancing the plan of salvation. This created an expectancy and a trajectory that led to the great miracle of the virgin birth of Jesus (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38; 2:1–20); the child promised to Adam and Eve was born of a woman and so born under the law so that he could become the Savior-substitute for all those born of a woman (Gal. 4:4–5).

The biblical authors also tapped into the imagery of childbirth metaphorically. The great intimacy created between a mother and child is the kind of intimacy we expect to see between the Lord and the people to whom he gave birth. But all too often we find just the opposite: “You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deut. 32:18). What is worse, God's people acted as though wood and stone idols gave them birth. “They say to wood, ‘You are my father,’ and to stone, ‘You gave me birth’” (Jer. 2:27).

The transition between the deep pain of childbirth and the pure joy of a child's birth also becomes a metaphor in the Bible. Jesus told his disciples that the roller coaster of pain and pleasure experienced in this world would parallel that of a woman in labor. “A woman

Adam and Eve were immediately encouraged to have children so that their world might be filled with family life.





In order to fully qualify as our Savior and substitute, Jesus had to be born as a mortal.

giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. . . . Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice” (John 16:21–22). And we read in Romans that the creation itself is struggling due to the presence of sin. It is “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:22) but waiting for the time of its restoration and the joy to follow.

The difficult process of childbirth, however, does not always result in the joy of a healthy child. This image also appears in the Bible when sinful behavior and attitudes give birth to disillusionment (Ps. 7:14), wind (Isa. 26:18),

straw (Isa. 33:11), evil (Isa. 59:4), and death (James 1:15).

In the New Testament, the trajectory of physical births listed in the Old Testament culminates in the birth of the Savior. This language is complemented by the use of birth as an image of entering into the family of God. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12–13). In his dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus spoke of this special birth as being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:6–8; see also James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3).

# BLIND

Blindness was much more common in the biblical world than in our contemporary Western setting due to the fact that people endured harsh environmental conditions and did not have access to the early medical intervention that could have spared the eyesight of newborn infants. Fortunately, today we enjoy both fewer instances of blindness and a more enlightened view of those who live with a visual disability. But being blind in Bible times carried harsh connotations regardless of whether this disability was congenital, the result of an accident, or intentional maiming (1 Sam. 11:2; 2 Kings 25:7; John 9:1–2).

The Bible alludes to these connotations without endorsing them. Generally speaking, those living in the biblical world perceived the blind as less capable and highly vulnerable.<sup>9</sup> That connotation comes through loud and clear in language like this: “At midday you will grope about like a blind person in the dark” (Deut. 28:29). This stigma is preserved in the troubling language of the Jebusites, who had this to say when they wanted David to know just how impregnable their fortress was: “Even the blind and the lame can ward you off” (2 Sam. 5:6). Reflecting the misinformed views of their contemporaries, the disciples of Jesus asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). And Jesus himself acknowledged the impoverished

social status of the visually impaired when he included the blind in a list of those who were least likely to receive an invitation to a banquet (Luke 14:13, 21).

The legal code of the Old Testament reflects some of this stigma together with a passion to protect the more vulnerable members of society. For example, a descendant of Aaron who was blind could not serve as a priest (Lev. 21:17–18). Similarly, an animal that had any defect, including blindness, could not be offered as a sacrifice to the Lord (Lev. 22:22; Deut. 15:21; Mal. 1:8). On the other hand, divine law made it clear that no one was to take advantage of those who were visually impaired (Lev. 19:14; Deut. 27:18).

Ultimately, the Bible puts the Lord in control of this matter. He is the one who gives or withholds the

Within Israel today, the visually impaired may still face challenges. This man is soliciting gifts of mercy from those who pass by.





ability to see (Exod. 4:11; Ps. 146:8). For example, he removed sight from those who threatened the advance of his kingdom (Gen. 19:11; 2 Kings 6:18; Acts 13:11). He struck the persecutor Saul with temporary blindness as part of his conversion experience (Acts 9:4–9). And he permitted a man to be born blind so that the work of God could be revealed in his life (John 9:2–3).

Blindness is also used as a figure of speech. The law in the Old Testament forbade the use of a bribe because it “blinds those who see and twists the words of the innocent” (Exod. 23:8; see also Deut. 16:19). Blindness is also used as a metaphor for the willful failure to honor God’s Word as truth. This notion of spiritual blindness occurs with some frequency, particularly in the prophetic books. “Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the LORD?” (Isa. 42:18–19; see also 56:10; Zeph. 1:17). In the New Testament, Jesus seized on this metaphor when he criticized the Jewish leaders of his day who were nothing more than “blind guides” (Matt. 15:14). In the sustained criticism Jesus leveled against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Matthew 23, repeated mention of their blindness rings like a refrain in verses 16 through 26.

Finally, the healing of both physical and spiritual blindness is linked to the work of the promised Messiah. In speaking of the Servant of the Lord, God himself said, “I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind” (Isa. 42:6–7). As we read the Gospels, it



Jesus’s miracles restoring sight to the blind also identified him as the promised Messiah.

is striking how often Jesus came into contact with those who were visually impaired and subsequently restored their sight. Whether those who were blind called out to Jesus themselves (Mark 10:46–47) or were brought to him by friends and family members (Matt. 15:30–31), time after time Jesus chose to interact with such spurned members of society and touched them with his healing power. Given the Old Testament anticipation of such acts (for example, Isaiah 42), Jesus’s repeated interaction with the blind became a strategic part of the way in which he identified himself as the Messiah. The man born blind whom Jesus healed gave voice to the popular perspective on such miracles: “Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (John 9:32–33).

In addition to the accounts that describe Jesus restoring sight, we also have two instances in which Jesus specifically referred to such healing acts as evidence that he was the Messiah. In the first, John the Baptist’s disciples inquired if Jesus was the one to expect or if they should look for another. In response, Jesus explicitly linked those acts of healing to Isaiah 42 (see Matt. 11:5). In the second, we catch up with Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth. When it was time for the Scripture reading, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read the portion from Isaiah 61 that describes the Messiah as one who provides “recovery of sight for the blind” (Luke 4:18 TNIV). With healing miracles in his wake, Jesus declared, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).



The importance of vision is suggested by the emphatic depiction of the eyes in ancient art.



The steep climb from the Kidron Valley to the ridge (left) led the Jebusites to boast that even the lame and blind could defend their city against David (2 Sam. 5:6).