“BREAD OF THE PRESENCE” AND CREATOR-IN-RESIDENCE

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Introduction

Analysis of the Israelite “bread of the presence” and its ritual demonstrates the theological importance of ritual detail. Seemingly minor differences to non-Israelite cultic bread-laying combine to convey a fundamentally different theological statement.

The aspects of the “bread of the presence” and its ritual which are unique within the Israelite cult reveal the special significance of this bread. Uniqueness is found in the designations (hap)pañim, “of the presence,” and b’rit ʿolām, “eternal covenant”, and the arrangement of the bread iāmid, “regularly,” once a week on the Sabbath. While (hap)pañim b’rit ʿolām and iāmid emphasize that the deity resides continually with his people, the limitations inherent in the ritual, by contrast with non-Israelite cultic bread-laying, mitigate the anthropomorphism of the theological statement. Furthermore, there is in the “bread of the presence” ritual (Lev. xxiv 5-9) a positive redefinition of bread-laying by linking the bread to the Sabbath, and thus to creation. It is suggested, therefore, that the bread represents the concept that YHWH is Israel’s resident Creator-Provider who, unlike other ancient Near-Eastern deities, acknowledges no dependence upon human food.

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I. (hap)pánim, **"of the presence"**, and no prescription for an accompanying libation ritual

The bread presented inside the sanctuary and the table on which it is placed are the only Israelite cultic objects referred to as of (hap)pánim, **"of the presence"**. This correlates with the fact that the bread is the only human food offered inside the tent. The absence of a prescription in Lev. xxiv 5-9 for the performance of an accompanying libation is significant, especially so in the light of non-Israelite practice.

(1) pánim usually refers to the face of an animate being or to the front part of an object as perceived in the line of vision, but it may also signify the **"presence"** or **"person"** of a human being (2 Sam. xvii 11: Absalom) or of God (Exod. xxxiii 14, 15; Deut. iv 37; cf. Isa. lxiii 9: **"the angel of his presence"**). The simplest interpretation of (hap)pánim as used with the bread is that it refers to a location with respect to the divine presence residing above the ark behind the páróket-veil. The following evidence supports this as the correct view.

(a) The fact that the table as well as the bread is of happánim (Num. iv 7) suggests that the term has to do with location rather than with a physical characteristic of the loaves, such as their appearance.

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3 lehem pánim: Exod. xxv 30; lehem happánim: Exod. xxxv 13, xxxix 36; 1 Sam. xxi 7; 1 Kgs vii 48; 2 Chron. iv 19. Elsewhere, the bread is referred to by its other attributes: **"holy"** (1 Sam. xxi 5), **"regular"** (Num. iv 7) and combinations using the terms ma’árekéket, **"ordering"** (Neh. x 34; 1 Chron. ix 32; 2 Chron. ii 3, etc.) or céréket, **"order"** (Exod. x 4, 23). In Lev. xxiv 7, the bread is called simply lehem. The table is described as of happánim in Num. iv 7.

4 But see the LXX of Isa. lxiii 9: **"Not a messenger or an angel—his presence (pánaw) saved them."**


6 If (hap)pánim with reference to the table were due simply to its association with the bread, we would expect šulhan lehem happánim, **"the table of the bread of the presence"**, in Num. iv 7 rather than šulhan happánim, **"the table of the presence"**. It could be argued, of course, that šulhan happánim is an abbreviation for šulhan lehem happánim. In support of this idea is the fact that the lamp and altar of incense are not described as happánim in spite of their proximity to the ark. Therefore, the use of happánim with the table would be derived from its association with the bread. If this is correct, Num. iv 7 is invalidated as specific evidence for the meaning of (hap)pánim.