



THEOLOGY: TASTE TEST & SUBSTANCE ABUSE

By Wilfred Hahn



It is everywhere. It is a substance that finds its way into many food products. No matter what you might eat, it may be laced with a high amount of this condiment. If a restaurant meal tastes good, it is likely that it will have been generously infused with it. High amounts of this substance lurk in fast-food hamburgers to spaghetti sauce and ketchup. Even dog food is sure to be a bigger seller with this ingredient.

The subject is sugar.

Humans are vulnerable to its temptations—even to the point of near addiction and destruction of health.

It is a topic of great scope ... a bittersweet geopolitical subject. Firstly, consider that the global proliferation of sugar is a relatively recent phenomenon. In fact, some historians will even claim that the popularization of sugar had a greater political impact upon the world than even petroleum.

Nations have fallen because of it. Wars have been fought over its control and production. During medieval times, when Arabs traded sugar (eventually bringing it to Europe), it is claimed that as a society consuming too much of it, they had become corrupt and therefore vulnerable to overthrow. In more recent times, the expansion of sugar production contributed to enormous migrations of peoples, most sadly and prominently through the slave trade.

The Sugary Past

Sugar didn’t exist commercially as a global commodity until some 300 years ago or so. Historians point to India as being the first producer of sugar, as early as 900 BC. It was a rare and unaffordable substance for thousands of years, used mostly for medical application. As such, the word “sugar” is not even found in the Bible. One of the few links to Bible history—an extra-biblical one—is through Emperor Darius of Persia. (The Bible mentions him 26 times, his reign beginning late in the lifetime of the Prophet Daniel.) It is reported that when Darius invaded India (510 BC), he first encountered sugar cane, which he called “the reed which gives honey without bees.”

Let’s fast-forward to more recent times. By the 17th and 18th century, with the establishment of sugar plantations in the West Indies and the Americas, sugar became a massive, profit-generating industry worldwide. This was the first time that sugar was available to the common people, who previ-

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ously had to rely on honey and fruits to sweeten foods. In the UK, sugar consumption among poorer classes even exceeded that of the wealthy during this time. By the late 19th century, sugar production in the world was the equivalent of 90 pounds per person per year. A soaring increase in the production of prepared foods (i.e. jams, drinks ... etc.) paralleled the growth of sugar production.

Today, the legacies of this industry can still be seen everywhere—mixed populations; the dominance of the Christian-Roman nations in the New World; and a negative health impact upon people today.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that the average person in the world consumes about 24 kilograms (53 lb) of sugar each year (1999). This is equivalent to over 260 food calories per day. Sugar has been linked to obesity, and suspected of, or fully implicated as a cause in the occurrence of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, dementia, macular degeneration, and tooth decay. The scientific community continues to debate the health impacts of sugar.

The problems caused by high sugar consumption are not only found in the rich developed nations. Consider that Egyptians today consume so much sugar that nearly a fifth of their population has diabetes. Viewing the vast sweep of history with respect to sugar, we see that what began as a medicine and a luxury good that only the rich could afford, in time became a poison for the entire world due its high over-consumption.

A Sugarless Bible

Sugar is not mentioned in the Bible, as already stated. Natural sugars in the form of honey and

fruits were certainly enjoyed in ancient times. Honey was the popular symbol for sweetness. A reference to “honey” is found 62 times in the Bible, providing an indication of its importance.

However, Scripture treats the subject of honey cautiously. What’s more, we find that salt is exalted over honey. Why?

Salt plays more important and foundational roles. For example, the Hebrews were mandated to have salt as part of a grain sacrifice. “Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings” (Leviticus 2:13). Salt also served an important symbolic role, as the Bible mentions a “covenant of salt” (cf. 2 Chronicles 13:5; Numbers 18:19).

Leaving no doubt, the Bible expressly says that salt is good. However, it must be preserved to remain good. Says the Bible: “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness [...] it is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out” (Luke 14:34-35). Sugar, by contrast, will not lose its sweetness and tempting properties, no matter what form it may take. It may turn to sticky goo. Put enough of it into a fuel tank, and you will be sure to seize up your car motor.

Of course, sweetness itself is not something to completely reject and not enjoy. After all, God did create the human palate to enjoy sweetness ... to enjoy honey. However, sweetness is a taste that needs governing, as it beckons with temptation. It lures ... it is loved by creatures far and wide. It then can lead to excess, and also to harm. The Proverbs writer warns: “If you find honey, eat just enough—too much of it, and you will vomit” (Proverbs 25:16).



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As such, honey is treated as potentially corrupting in the Bible. Along with yeast, it was not allowed to be presented as a sacrifice or food offering. The Hebrews were instructed: “Every grain offering you bring to the LORD must be made without yeast, for you are not to burn any yeast or honey in a food offering presented to the LORD” (Leviticus 2:11).

Points to Ponder

Sugar has caused atrocious problems and distortions in the world and in human health.

This is also the case in a spiritual sense. How so?

To recall, the Bible favors salt. We are expressly commanded to be the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). That is clear.

Just as clear is that Christians are not to be the “sugar of the world.” We should not preach a “fly-paper” message of God being a “Sugar-Daddy.” In so doing we greatly distort the Bible.

No, we are to “tell it like it is,” speaking the truths of Scripture without any calculated sugar-coating. So many Christians today are apologetic about Scripture. They think that they will make the gospel and the Bible’s truths more palatable by sweetening them up. The salty parts of the gospel are thought to be unpopular ...too mouth-puckering ... too bitter to swallow. Instead, these are smothered with treacly syrup and perpetual grins and smiles. That can lead to spiritual unhealthiness.

Jesus said: “Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other” (Mark 9:50). His

statement can be interpreted to mean that having sugary discourse will not promote peace among the saints. That seems to be an affliction that is evident today in the Church. Too much sugar.

Apostle Paul instructs: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). He indicates that if we try to season our words with honey, we will lose our ability to provide balanced and truthful Biblical responses. “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20).

Our Savior, Jesus Christ, never sugar-coated His admonitions. He taught with salt. He didn’t slather His indictments against the elites of the Jews with honey. He knew that the stomach can be a master (see Philippians 3:19).

Yet, the Word itself is shown to be sweet, in the sense that it is the most filling and satisfying of all possible things. On at least two occasions, the prophecies and truths of God are shown to be attractively sweet. Both Apostle John and Ezekiel were instructed to eat a scroll.

John says: “I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth [...]” (Revelation 10:10; cf. Ezekiel 3:3).

Why is the Word likened with sweetness?

“[...] The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb” (Psalm 19:9-10).

Finally, we are all invited to “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing” (Psalm 34:8-9). 