

Olive pressing in the New Testament

Olive oil production in ancient Israel was a major commercial industry. It was not a primitive backyard operation, but a standardized process consisting of three distinct pressings:

1. **The First Press** (*The Purest Oil*): Olives were crushed using a massive rolling stone turned by a donkey. The very first runoff of oil was the highest quality, used for Temple rituals and royal anointings.
2. **The Second Press** (*Food and Medicine*): The crushed olive paste was placed into woven baskets and pressed down with heavy wooden beams. This extracted standard-grade oil used for daily cooking, flavorings, and medicinal balms.
3. **The Third Press** (*Lamp Fuel and Soap*): The remaining paste was pressed a final time under maximum weight, often with hot water added. This yielded a cheaper, lower-quality oil *was the* universal fuel for domestic light.

Olive pressing in the Old Testament

While Psalm 51 does not explicitly mention olives, but the Hebrew words King David chose are a direct, intentional linguistic reference to the industrial language of the agricultural olive press.

When David writes Psalm 51:17 *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a **contrite** heart..."* he is pulling his terminology straight out of the physical world of ancient Judean agriculture.

The Hebrew root words David uses paint a precise picture:

1. "Broken" (*Shabar*)

The Hebrew word for broken here is **shabar**. It literally means to burst, splinter, or shatter into pieces.

- This is the exact word used for smashing something solid until its structural integrity is completely gone. It perfectly mirrors the **crushing phase** in the olive basin, where the smooth, hard skin of the olive is shattered to pieces by the rolling stone.

2. "Contrite" (*Dakah*)

The word translated as "contrite" in the KJV and modern Bibles is the Hebrew word **dakah** (or *daka*). In ancient Hebrew, this was not an abstract emotional word. It meant **to crumble, to beat down, to reduce to powder, or to heavily press**.

- *Dakah* is the linguistic equivalent of the **pressing phase** under the heavy wooden beam. It describes a substance being subjected to immense, crushing weight until it crumbles and yields its inner liquid.

The Context of David's Prayer

When David penned Psalm 51, he had just been confronted by the prophet Nathan over his hidden sins with Bathsheba. David had built a hard, protective shell of pride, deception, and self-reliance to cover it up.

When his sin was exposed, David didn't just feel "sorry." He felt completely **shattered (shabar) and heavily pressed (dakah)** under the weight of God's conviction.

David looks at his shattered ego and essentially says to God: *"I have no religious rituals or animal sacrifices that can fix this. All I have to bring to your altar is this messy, crushed paste of a heart. But I know you won't throw it away."*

Just like a crushed olive paste looks like a ruined mess to an outsider, the Master Pressman looks at a *dakah* (contrite) heart and knows that the pure oil is finally about to flow.

Separation of Pit and Flesh

In standard, heavy commercial processing, the cracked pits and the crushed flesh were *not* separated - they stayed mixed together as a paste. However, for the "beaten oil" (*katit*) of Exodus 27:20, the separation happened because they skipped the heavy press, letting the pure oil gently drip away from the unbroken seed core entirely.

Let's look at the difference between the two methods to see how the separation worked in practice and in scripture:



1. The Standard Commercial Method (Mixed Together)

In the large industrial olive presses (like those at Gethsemane or the village mills), efficiency was the goal.

The Process: Whole olives - flesh, skin, and pits - were dumped into the large stone basin and crushed together by the massive rolling donkey-wheel into a uniform, thick black paste.

The Pressing: This whole mixture (flesh and cracked pits together) was scooped into the woven wicker baskets and put under the heavy beam.

The Separation: The wicker baskets acted as the filter. When the heavy beam pressed down, the solid plant fibers and the fragments of the cracked pits stayed trapped inside the baskets. Only the liquid (oil and water) squeezed through the weave and dripped down into the collection vats below. So, the separation happened at the basket stage, but the pit fragments were still subjected to that intense pressure alongside the flesh.



2. The Exodus 27 Method (Leaving the Pit Behind)

This is the specific method you recalled from our chat about the Tabernacle's "pure oil olive beaten".

The Process: For this holy oil, they explicitly avoided the massive stone rolling wheel and the heavy beam press. Instead, they placed the olives into a smaller stone mortar and gently struck them by hand with a pestle.

The Goal: The goal was to split the soft, oily green flesh open without smashing the hard pit inside.

The Natural Drip: Once the skins were broken, they placed these lightly bruised olives into a loosely woven basket and simply let them sit. No heavy stone weights or wooden beams were lowered onto them. By using only the natural weight of the fruit itself, the premium oil stored in the flesh naturally seeped out, dripped through the basket, and collected in a jar below.

Because the hard, woody pits were never shattered or forced under the beam, none of the bitter compounds from the seed core ever touched the oil. The seed pulp was left completely behind in the basket, untouched by violence.



The Ultimate Spiritual Parallel

This mechanical difference creates a beautiful concluding picture:

The commercial oil (which represents standard endurance through the heavy delays of life) requires the flesh and the pit to be pressed together in the basket until the solids are filtered out by the pressure.

The holy Tabernacle oil (which represents pure worship and communion in God's immediate presence) comes from a gentle breaking where the hard, resistant pit is completely bypassed. The flesh yields its treasure naturally to the Master, leaving the stubborn "stony core" behind without a fight

The Bitter Water

The "bitter water" is actually the final, critical step of the entire press, and it carries one of the most powerful spiritual applications yet.

In the ancient world, when the liquid was squeezed out of those wicker baskets, it wasn't pure gold. It was a murky, messy mixture of two things: one-third olive oil and two-thirds bitter, dark wastewater (the Romans called it *amurca*).

Because olives are a fruit, the flesh contains a massive amount of natural fruit water alongside the oil. This water is incredibly bitter, highly acidic, and foul-smelling. If you leave it mixed with the oil, it will cause the oil to spoil, ferment, and turn completely rancid within days.

So, how did the ancient pressmen separate them? They used a simple law of nature that God built into creation: the law of gravity and density.



The Settling Vats

The murky mixture flowed down stone channels into deep collection vats carved right into the bedrock. Then, the pressman simply had to wait.

The Separation: Because oil is lighter and less dense than water, it naturally began to separate. The heavy, bitter, dark wastewater sank to the very bottom of the vat. The pure, golden olive oil floated gracefully to the top.

The Skimming: Once the separation was complete, the pressman would carefully skim the pure oil off the top with clay ladles or shells and pour it into the clean "vessels" (the jars) we started our conversation with. The bitter water at the bottom was drained out and thrown away.



The Spiritual Link: Pure Oil vs. Bitter Offense

This natural separation is the perfect picture of sanctification in our walk of faith.

When you and I go through the "crushing and pressing" seasons of life - whether it's a long delay, a painful trial, or a humbling circumstance - the pressure forces everything out of our hearts at once. It forces out the good, but it also forces out the junk.

The bitter water represents our natural human reactions to pressure: offense, resentment, anger, fear, and bitterness.

The pure oil represents the fruit of the Holy Spirit: patience, trust, humility, and grace.

When we are under pressure, our lives look messy and murky at first. But God places us in the "settling vat" of His presence and His word.

He says, "Let the weight settle. Let the bitterness sink to the bottom where it belongs, so I can drain it away. Focus on what rises to the top."

If we hold onto the bitterness of the trial, it will ruin our vessel and make our faith rancid. But if we allow God to separate the bitter water from the pure oil, we end up with a clean, golden reserve that can fuel our lamps for a lifetime.

It is exactly why Hebrews 12:15 warns us to watch out "*lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you.*" In the olive press of life, the bitterness must sink so the oil can shine!

Difference between olive oil and grape/wine pressing

It is easy to think of "pressing" as just squeezing fruit, but the physical difference between an olive press and a wine press is like night and day.

In the ancient world, olives required high-intensity mechanical violence (shattering stone mills and massive weighted beams) because they are hard stone fruits. Grapes, being soft and juicy, required low-intensity human touch (treading lightly with bare feet in a stone vat) to avoid breaking the bitter seeds inside.

The Mechanical Differences

Feature	Olive Pressing 	Grape/Wine Pressing 
The Target	Hard stone fruit with a tough pit.	Soft, delicate berry with fragile seeds.
The Method	Crushed by rolling stones , then squeezed under a massive, heavily weighted wooden beam.	Trodden gently by human feet in an open stone winepress (<i>gat</i>).
Why the Difference?	You <i>must</i> break the flesh and pit entirely to force the oil out of the plant cells.	You must <i>never</i> crush the seeds or stems, or their harsh tannins will ruin the wine.

The Spiritual Contrast: Oil vs. Wine

Because the natural processes were so different, the Bible uses oil and wine to represent two very distinct stages of our faith walk:

1. Olive Oil = The Private Process of Anointing and Endurance

As we discussed, olive oil requires cold, heavy, mechanical weight. There is no music, no singing, and no group project. It is a picture of **solitary endurance**.

The Application: This is the private "vessel" preparation. When you are being pressed like an olive, you feel alone under a heavy weight, but God is extracting the oil of personal character, intimacy, and the Holy Spirit that keeps your individual lamp burning through the night.

2. Grape Wine = The Communal Process of Joy and Celebration

Ancient winepresses were completely different social spaces. Treading grapes was a loud, communal celebration. A group of people would hold onto ropes suspended from the ceiling, jump up and down on the grapes together, and laugh, dance, and sing harvest songs. The red juice would splash all over their clothes (which is why Isaiah 63 uses it as a picture of garments stained red).

The Application: Wine in scripture almost always represents communal joy, celebration, and the ultimate victory of God (like the wedding at Cana or the New Wine of the Kingdom).

The Big Takeaway

You cannot get the wine without the joy of community, but you cannot get the oil without the endurance of the press.

God uses *both* processes in our lives. There are seasons where we are in the winepress - dancing, rejoicing, and serving out loud with the community of faith. But there are also seasons where He takes us to the olive press - where the weight is heavy, the setting is quiet, and He is doing a deep, hidden work to fill our personal flasks for the long haul.