

FOURTH PETITION

In the fourth petition, we pray:

Give us this day our daily bread.

This petition occurs at the center of the prayer. In the middle of the eighteen Jewish daily prayers there is a petition for God's blessing on the agricultural year.⁶ Bread is the staple food for Middle Easterners, and in the Bible it symbolizes all that we eat.

But the word *daily* presents a problem. In English it is traditionally translated, "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread." The phrase *this day* is clear. We are not asking for bread for next year or for our retirement, but rather for "this day." The problem lies in the Greek word *epiousios*, which for centuries English versions have translated as "daily." The trouble is that this particular word appears nowhere else in the Greek language.⁷ Origen, a famous Greek scholar of the early third century, wrote that he did not find this word in use among the Greeks, nor was it used by private individuals. He concluded that it must have been created by the Evangelists.⁸

The only way to discover the meaning of a word in any language is to see how it is used. But if a particular word appears only once in the entire history of that language, the translator has a special problem. Children often create words whose meanings are known only to them. When very young, one of our children created the word, *tonkleach*. If I choose to use *tonkleach* in a sentence, how can any reader possibly understand its meaning? This is the problem with the word *epiousios* in the Lord's Prayer.

If in the third century Origen did not know what this word meant, what hope is there for us in the twenty-first century? Keep in mind that Origen lived in Alexandria, Egypt, which was one of the two great centers of Greek learning in the ancient world. Is the problem unsolvable?

The only open door is to examine how commentators, preachers and translators in the various early Christian communities understood this word. Perhaps some of them caught the meaning of *epiousios* before the word and its meaning evaporated out of the Greek language. The early fathers of the church had two basic solutions to the mystery of this word's meaning, and each solution contained two alternatives.

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⁶No. 9, Birkat ha-Shanim. (The petition that the year may be fruitful.)

⁷W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (New York: T & T Clark, 1988), 1:607.

⁸Origen *De Oratione* 27.7.

Solution 1—On the one side, some early Christian writers thought that this word *referred to time*. But what kind of time? Option 1a: Some interpreted *epiousios* as referring to *today*. English translations follow this understanding with the well-known reading: "Give us this day our *daily* bread." In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem and many others championed this view.

Option 1b: Other early fathers said, "Yes, *epiousios* has to do with *time*, but it refers to *tomorrow* not *today*." Their translation is, "Give us today our bread for *tomorrow*." In the early fifth century the Latin scholar Jerome claimed he had a "Gospel of the Hebrews" in Hebrew which read, "Give us our bread of tomorrow."

The bread of tomorrow reflects the manna in the wilderness and came to mean the bread that we will eat with the Messiah in a promised great banquet of all believers at the end of history.⁹ This is commonly called "the Messianic banquet of the end times." With this line of interpretation, the bread of tomorrow became the bread of the Holy Communion.

Solution 2—Other early church fathers argued that *epiousios* had nothing to do with *time*. Why should this prayer have two time references in one phrase? They understood this word to refer to an *amount of bread*. The discussion then focused on *how much* bread are we to pray for? Again, two points of view were expressed. Some claimed that the faithful should ask for *just enough to stay alive*, the bread of *subsistence*. This is the way most Arabic speaking Christians in the Middle East pray the Lord's Prayer today. Origen, having admitted that he really didn't know the meaning of *epiousios*, opted for this understanding. Chrysostom, the great fourth-century Greek preacher of Antioch, agreed with him.

The Syriac Church of the Middle East agreed that *epiousios* had to do with an *amount* of bread but that "just enough to keep us alive" was too harsh. They softened their translation of this word and opted for "the bread we need," which is gentler in tone. For my sense of well-being perhaps I need to have a full loaf of bread in the cupboard and not just one slice on the table. This alternative is found in the fourth-century translation of the Gospels into Syriac, called the Peshitta.

Now we have moved from no solution to four solutions. These can be summarized as follows:

Epiousios means:

1. the bread of today (time)
2. the bread of tomorrow (time)

⁹Davies, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 1:608.

3. just enough bread to keep us alive, and no more (amount)
4. the bread we need (amount)

Each of these options is found in the early centuries of the Christian church. On what basis can we choose between them?

One possible way out of this dilemma is to ask, Is there some concept or interpretation that could have given birth to all four of these possibilities? Did the church in those early centuries provide a theological starting point from which these four options could have developed? If so, what is it and where is it found?

I am convinced that there is such a starting point and that it appears in the Old Syriac translation, which dates to the second century.¹⁰ This translation ceased to be used because the Syriac community at a later date produced a new popular translation called the Peshitta. The Old Syriac (as it is called) faded away and disappeared until the nineteenth century, when two copies were discovered. One remains in the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai and the other made its way to the British Museum. This Old Syriac translation of the Gospels is probably the oldest and earliest translation of the Greek New Testament into any language.

Jesus, of course, spoke Aramaic, and Syriac is closely related to Aramaic. Syriac Christians, as they translated the Gospels into Syriac, were therefore taking the words of Jesus out of Greek and returning them to a language very close to his native Aramaic. Most words are the same in these two languages and the Old Syriac translation of the Lord's prayer reads: *Labmo ameno diyomo hab lan* (lit. "Amen bread today give to us").

Labmo means "bread." *Ameno* has the same root as the word *amen*, and in Syriac *ameno* is an adjective that means "lasting, never-ceasing, never-ending, or perpetual."¹¹ This Old Syriac second-century translation means, therefore, "Give us today the bread that doesn't run out." Does this provide the clue to the mysterious Greek word *epiousios*? I think it does.

One of the most basic human fears is the dread of economic privation. Will we have enough? We are managing now, but what about the future? What if I lose my job? What if the kids get sick? What if I am unable to work? How will we survive? One of the deepest and most crippling fears of the human spirit is the fear of not having enough to eat.

Perhaps in the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for release from

¹⁰F. C. Burkitt, *Evangelion Da-Mepharcehe* (The Curettonian Version of the Four Gospels, with the readings of the Sinai Palimpsest and the Early Syriac Peshitta Evidence Edited, Collected and Arranged by F. Crawford Burkitt), 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 1:30-31.

¹¹J. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p. 19.

that fear. To pray for bread without ceasing is to pray for deliverance from the existential angst that there will not be enough. This fear can destroy the human spirit. If Jesus is teaching his followers to pray "Give us today the bread that does not run out," does this include bread for today? It does. Does it also include bread for tomorrow? By all means. Will it be enough to keep us alive? It will. How about a little more than just enough to keep us alive? Does "bread without ceasing" include "the bread we need"? That meaning is also included. The idea that we ask God to give us bread without ceasing covers all four options found in the early church.

Fear of not having enough to eat can destroy a sense of well-being in the present and erode hope for the future. I am convinced that the Old Syriac is correct and that at the heart of the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches his disciples a prayer that means, "Deliver us, O Lord, from the fear of not having enough to eat. Give us bread for today and with it give us confidence that tomorrow we will have enough."

The language of this petition holds further treasures. Among them are

1. In this petition we ask for *bread*, *not cake*. Consumerism and the kingdom of *mammon* have no place among those who pray this prayer. We ask for that which sustains life, not all its extras.
2. We ask for *ours*, *not mine*. Mother Teresa of Calcutta records an occasion from her life in Calcutta. She writes,

I will never forget the night an old gentleman came to our house and said that there was a family with eight children and they had not eaten, and could we do something for them. So I took some rice and went there. The mother took the rice from my hands, then she divided it into two and went out. I could see the faces of the children shining with hunger. When she came back I asked her where she had gone. She gave me a very simple answer: "They are hungry also." And "they" were the family next door and she knew that they were hungry. I was not surprised that she gave, but I was surprised that she knew. . . . I had not the courage to ask her how long her family hadn't eaten, but I am sure it must have been a long time, and yet she knew—in her suffering. . . . In her terrible bodily suffering she knew that next door they were hungry also.¹²

This woman with eight children may not have known the Lord's Prayer, but there was only "our rice" not "my rice," even when her children were hungry. The prayer for "our bread" includes the neighbors. It is "our Father" and "our bread."

3. Bread is a *gift*. The one who prays this prayer affirms that *all bread comes as a gift*. It is not a right and we have not created it. Such gifts are in trust for the one who gives them. All material possessions are on loan from their owner; the God who created matter itself. This perspective on the material world is critical for the joyful life commended in the Gospels.

¹²Mother Teresa, *The Joy of Living*, comp. J. Chalhah and E. Le Joly (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1997), pp. 337-38.