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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

"Our Daily Bread" (Matt.6.11) in the History of Exegesis

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In studying the history of exegesis of the Lord's prayer - for which Jean Carmignac's Recherches sur le 'Notre Père' is a veritable mine of information - I have been struck by a radical shift of emphasis in the 4th and 5th centuries, and again in the 16th century, as to the meaning of the words "our daily bread" in the fourth petition.

It is well-known that the term ἔπιούσιος has been something of an exegetical conundrum from the earliest days of interpretation. According to Origen, writing in AD 233-4 in his treatise Concerning Prayer (Chapter 27), /1, this adjective - which is only doubtfully attested outside the Lord's Prayer /2 - may be derived from ἐπεινάω (in which case the phrase will mean "the bread necessary for life") or from ἐπιέναι (to give the meaning "the bread for the coming day or age"). Origen himself preferred the first interpretation. As to the meaning of the "bread" in the fourth petition, some of the early exegetes maintained that it referred to spiritual bread, the food required by our souls, while others were equally sure that it meant the ordinary bread we need for our bodies. A third and more complex interpretation - which includes both the meanings "material bread for the body" and "spiritual bread for the soul" - is found, but the circumstances surrounding the emergence of this view were very different in the Eastern and Western wings of the Church. Whereas in the East the mixed interpretation came into being rather late and as a reaction against the exclusive claims of the other two views (urged by Origen and the Antiochene school respectively), in the West the mixed interpretation is not a compromise between the proponents of the spiritual and the material senses of the petition, but is, in fact, the oldest interpretation, formulated as early as Tertullian. The Western Fathers (according to Carmignac) knew instinctively that the "bread" in the Lord's Prayer has both material value and spiritual value, though it appears the primacy was given to the latter. The view of the Western Church may well have been influenced by the fact that ἔπιούσιος was

represented by quotidianus ("daily") in the Old Latin Version /3 which was already used by Tertullian at the end of the 2nd century. In interpreting the fourth petition in his On Prayer (chapter 6) Tertullian does not exclude the bread for the body, but thinks that the allusion is specially to the Eucharist. Writing fifty years later, Cyprian makes quite precise Tertullian's double interpretation: "Each interpretation", he says, "the literal and the spiritual, is useful for salvation" (De dominica oratione, 18,19). /5

It is of interest to note that Augustine - when all his references to and exegeses of the fourth petition are taken into account - offers a threefold interpretation of the bread: (a) the bread for the body, and (b) two daily "breads" or sustenances for the spirit, the Eucharist and the Word of God (corresponding to the invisible and visible sacraments). /6 This was to stand as virtually the classic theory in the West up to, and even through, the Middle Ages,

In the East it was different, and not least because the exegetes there were directly confronted by the question of the etymology of the strange word ἐπιούσιος. Following Origen, the Greek Fathers explain the adjective in terms either of (a) ἐπί + οὐσία (substance) derived from ἐπιναί, or of (b) ἐπιεναί (to come upon) and, in particular, as reflecting the participial phrase ἡ ἐπιουσα (ἡμέρα), "the coming day". If the first etymology is followed, one ends up with the meaning either "beyond substance" (supersubstantialis) or "sufficient; required by, necessary to, life". If the second etymology is preferred, then the meaning of ἐπιούσιος becomes either "for the coming day" (without ceasing), i.e., the quotidianus of the Old Latin, or "for the coming day" (now, at present), and, depending on whether the prayer is offered in the morning or the evening, that denotes "for today" or "for tomorrow".

In the oldest detailed exposition of the Lord's Prayer that we possess Origen vigorously defended an exclusively spiritual meaning of the fourth petition on the basis of both ἐπιούσιος and ἄρτος. The bread is the superstantial bread which is, in the light of John 6.51 and 53-57, nourishment from above, the flesh of Christ: the bread is the living bread which the soul needs for its spiritual life.

Origen's authority exercised a profound influence on subsequent Greek exegesis. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 350AD) interprets the ἐπιούσιος ἄρτος as "the sacred bread which is distributed for the sustenance of the soul" (Catechism 23). /7 Marius Victorinus (c.359) first confuses ἐπιούσιος and ὁμοούσιος (and launches into an argument against the Arians!) but then picks up Origen's reference to "the living bread that comes down from heaven" and asserts that ἐπιούσιος ἄρτος means the bread of life (the Eucharistic body). Likewise Pseudo-Athanasius (c.365) claims that the fourth petition refers to the future bread of which we have a foretaste when we participate in the flesh of the Lord during the present life. /8 The strength of the spiritual interpretation (and of Origen's exegesis) is witnessed to outside the Greek tradition in the work of Ambrose of Milan (c 38-90) /9 and of Jerome who, in his writings between 390 and 415, tends to equate the "bread beyond all substances" (panis substantialis) with the Eucharistic body of Christ.

At a time when the authority of Origen was dominant it is surprising to find one who revered the great Alexandrian teacher differing from him. This is precisely what Gregory of Nyssa (d.395) does. He begins his exegesis of the fourth petition (On Prayer: Sermon 4) /10 by replacing the ambiguous ἐπιούσιος by ἡμέτερος (daily) and by insisting that the bread which is requested is ordinary bread, not spiritual nourishment. "...We have received the command to seek that which is sufficient for the conservation of our corporal existence by saying to God 'Give bread', not pleasure or riches or any such thing as will distract the spirit from its more worthy concerns..". More interesting still is the fact that Gregory now turns to the lessons which may be inculcated on the basis of this petition, and what he offers amounts to a miniature treatise on social morality. What men actually need (according to Gregory) is very little: therefore the desire and the attempt to accumulate more and more is dangerous and stupid. All things procured that are over and above what is necessary for life derive from the tares put among the grain (from which bread is made) by an enemy, the devil. Excesses of luxury and riches do not belong to the category "bread", which in any case, our nature prepares us to expect to have

to work for, to obtain as wages (ὄψωνιον). "A fair and just use of bread leads to the possession of a good conscience... God is justice (δικαιοσύνη) and therefore he who gets his bread unfairly (ἐκ πλεονεξίας) is not getting his bread from God. You are in true accord with the petition only if the well-being of others is maintained, if no one is made hungry by your being satisfied, if no one groans by reason of your being filled." And towards the end of the exposition Gregory advises: "Watch your conscience then as you bring the request for bread to God, for there is no fellowship between Christ and Belial." In short, bread given by God can only be the honest gain that results from one's own labour. Asking God to give us today our daily bread means examining our conscience to see if that bread comes to us from work that does no injustice to our neighbour.

This "social-gospel" reading of the fourth petition of the Lord's prayer continues into the 5th century with John Chrysostom. In Homily 19 on St. Matthew /11 he observes: "Christ does not command us to ask riches or pleasures or fine clothes, or anything like that, but simply bread, and for daily bread, so that we are without anxiety about tomorrow.....And not content with that he adds, 'Give us today' in order to exclude from our spirits concern with the following day."

Two observations are in order at this point. First, in pursuing the correct interpretation of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer Origen and Gregory come to radically different conclusions on the meaning of "bread": for the former it is spiritual nourishment, and for the latter material bread. In the second place, we should note that Gregory took a remarkable hermeneutical step: he went on to ask what bread meant for his own contemporaries; and, since that bread was gained by work accomplished according to God's will and order, the exegesis of the petition became a study on the work ethic. One can only surmise that Gregory's interpretation reflects a more direct concern on the part of the ecclesiastical authority and leadership, in some quarters, with the issue of labour and its just rewards, with, what we would call, "social problems". There is no need to discuss the impact on morality when "the daily bread" is understood as something wholly, or primarily, spiritual. Once it is understood as ordinary bread, the way is open for

responsible exposition to deal with matters of social justice.

The Shift in 16th century exegesis

The Middle Ages, as has been said, generally followed the tradition of the Latin Fathers, and especially Augustine, who taught that we should look to God both for the material bread we need for our bodies: this spiritual food - the more important food - consists of the Word of God and the Eucharist. A view very similar to this finds expression in the early works of Luther. In a sermon (dated to 1519) under the title "Explanation of the Lord's Prayer in popular language, for the use of simple lay-people" /12 he says that: "We are not principally asking for the ordinary bread that the Gentiles eat and which God, without anyone asking for it, gives to all men: rather, we are asking for....a celestial bread which is appropriate and necessary for us as heavenly children. We are asking God to give us supernatural bread, our special bread." After observing that in Scripture the holy Word of God is also called bread, Luther continues in this vein: "Christ our bread is given externally by Word and Sacrament, and internally by the teaching of God himself." In "A short formula for understanding and praying the Lord's Prayer, for children in the Christian faith" /13 there is no mention of material bread at all: "the bread is our Lord Jesus Christ who nourishes and rejoices the soul", received in the Sacrament and indwelling the Christian. This interpretation is found in works dated to 1520, "A short model of the Commandments, of the faith, and of the Lord's Prayer" /14 and in the Booklet on Prayer /15 (including the Lord's Prayer) dated to 1522.

Two sermons from March 9-10, 1523 /16 show Luther's thought evolving: up to this point he had given priority to the spiritual interpretation. Now he accords equal importance to the material bread. "There is a corporal bread and there is a spiritual bread, because one can ask for all blessings from him who nourishes not only the soul but also the body." Three years later, in a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer contained in the German Mass /17

Luther interprets the fourth petition as follows: "that God may want to give us our daily bread, to keep us from desire and from care about nourishment, and to give us the confidence in him that he will provide for all our needs." A sermon on May 27, 1528 /18 admits the spiritual interpretation of "daily bread" but effectively concentrates on the material sense. In a sermon on September 22, 1528 /19 Luther develops only the material interpretation, and thereafter makes no allusion to the spiritual bread when he is explaining the Lord's Prayer. Thus the Luther of the Large and Small Catechisms /20 can include in "daily bread" our bodily needs in general. "What does 'daily bread' mean? Response: All that forms part of the nourishment and support of the body, something to eat and drink, clothes, shoes, a house, money and goods...."

Why does Luther abandon the traditional exegesis he had inherited? Gerhard Ebeling /21 thinks that it demonstrates Luther's general dislike of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Two criticisms may be made of this explanation. In the first place, Luther shows his disapproval of allegorical interpretations of scripture passages before he departed from it in the case of Matt 6.11. And, secondly, when he does depart from it in the case of "daily bread" he extends the literal meaning of bread quite considerably, to the point where it becomes virtually symbolic (allegorical?), as in the Catechisms. Ingemar Furberg /22 tries to explain the change by suggesting that, on analogy with the second table of the Decalogue, Luther wanted to place the second half of the Lord's Prayer within the social context of love for the neighbour. But for this hypothesis there is no support whatever in what Luther actually says. It should be recalled that as early as his 1519 "Explanation of the Lord's Prayer" Luther shows that he is aware of the material interpretation but did not then think it the principal meaning: this is the position he comes to in 1528. In his famous work The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism /23 Max Weber has demonstrated that during this same period Luther's thought was undergoing a significant evolution in respect of the importance of vocation or profession (Beruf). Earlier Luther had considered work under the rubric of adiaphora

(things indifferent), but, as the Reformation became involved in current events, the ethical value of work gained importance. If the growth of a socio-ethical evaluation of work parallels the shift in Luther's exegesis of "daily bread", may it not even be said to have, at least in part, influenced it?

The spiritual interpretation of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer appealed only to Zwingli among the Reformers. In his Enarrationes on the Four Gospels (1536) Martin Bucer holds only to the material interpretation. "Certain people", he says (alluding to Erasmus), "understand by daily bread the nourishment of the soul because they think it unworthy that in a prayer so heavenly we should be asking for the bread which even the heathen receive." "But", he goes on, "since Christ added 'today', in order to prevent anxiety about nourishment, I prefer to understand, with Chrysostom, by this daily bread, nourishment and all the other things the body needs. Indeed, if we were asking for the spiritual nourishment for the soul, we would have to add "for ever" rather than "today".

In the first edition (1536) of his Institutes of the Christian Religion Calvin follows Bucer's position, and in his French Catechism (1537) reveals his indebtedness to Luther's Smaller Catechism: "We are asking for all those things that belong to the needs of our body, ..., not only food and clothing, but all that God knows is expedient for us in order that we may eat our bread in peace." The 1539 edition of the Institutes - which rejects Lefèvre d'Étaples (1522) rendering "pain supersubstantiel", the celestial bread come down from heaven to feed us - has a lengthy discussion of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer. /24 Familiar are the comments that the petition helps to bridge cupidity by focussing our attention on what is necessary and encouraging us to ask for it with confidence, but very intriguing (and very similar to what we found in Gregory of Nyssa) is Calvin's statement regarding "our bread", viz., that he does not disagree with those who think that our daily bread means "the bread that we gain through our just labour, without harm to another and without any fraud, for whatever is acquired wickedly is never ours." To whom this alludes is not

clear, but the observation shows Calyin's willingness to treat "daily bread" in the wider context of work and justice.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer today it seldom occurs to us that the daily bread for which we ask means anything else or more than regular nourishment for the body. For that emphasis we are indebted to Calvin and the later work of Luther. It is of considerable hermeneutical importance that the interpretation runs counter to centuries of tradition in which the stress lay only or primarily on a spiritual interpretation. At the end of the fourth century in the case of Gregory of Nyssa it was not merely a matter of the literalness of the Antiochene school of exegesis prevailing over the allegorizing tendencies of Origen and Alexandria. Something more is involved: once the exegete has decided that the correct interpretation of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer is in terms of material bread, he finds that the interpretation "bread" adequately entails expansion of his concerns to matters of justice and the work-ethic. Again in the sixteenth century the rediscovery of the ethical aspects of work (when the structures of human activity are considered as the expression of the divine will) was to influence Luther's exegesis of the petition away from the tradition which understood it in terms of spiritual nourishment to a more socially-oriented physical sense. It would be hard to deny that twice in the history of exegesis of the Lord's Prayer a radical shift in the interpretation of "our daily bread" accompanied, or was accompanied by, a more socially-aware valuation of bread.

Notes

1. Migne, PG, Vol 11, col. 509-517
2. Cf. "How many times does ἐπιούσιος occur outside the Lord's Prayer?" ET 69 (1957-58), pp.52-54; Historical and Literary Studies (1968), pp 64-66.
3. Undoubtedly the same sense is intended by the Old Syriac version (Sinaiticus and Cureton) when they use 'amîno' which roughly means "continual".
4. Migne, PL, Vol 1, Col. 1160-61

Notes (Continued)

5. Migne, PL, Vol IV, Col. 535-62
6. Cf. especially de Sermone Domini in monte, Book 2, chapter 7 (Migne, PL, Vol XXXIV, col.1280-81) and Sermons 57 and 59 (Migne, PL, Vol XXXVIII, Col.389 and 401)
7. Migne, PG, Vol XXXIII, Col.1120
8. Migne, PG, Vol XXVI, col.1012
9. On the Sacraments, Book 5, chapter 4 (Migne, PL, Vol XVI, col.450-54)
10. Migne. PG, Vol XLIV, col.1168-76
11. Migne, PG, Vol LVII, col. 280
12. Werke, II, pp74-128
13. ibid, VI, pp9-19
14. ibid,VII, pp220-29
15. ibid,X, pp395-407
16. ibid, XI, pp55-57,57-59
17. ibid, XIX, pp95-96
18. ibid, XXX, Part 1, p14
19. ibid, XXX, Part 1, pp46-50
20. ibid, XXX, Part 1, pp195-211 (Large Catechism) and pp 298-309 (Smaller Catechism)
21. G. Ebeling, An Introduction to Luther's Thought (ET, Collins 1970) pp101f and 107f
22. L. Furberg, Die Paternoster in der Mass (Lund, Gleerup 1968)
23. M. Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (ET, Scribner's, New York 1958), chapter 3
24. L'Institution Chrétienne (Labor et Fides: Genève 1957) Book 3, pp378-81.