A searchlight on daily bread (Matthew 6:11)

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Professor Derrett continues to react to problems in the New Testament. His last article in the Evangelical Quarterly was ‘Preaching to the Coast (Mark 4:1)’ (EQ 73 [2001], 195 – 205).


Introduction

The New Testament has so many problems, and some are thought to be insoluble. A seventeenth century author described the arena in which grammarians and theologians were debating the meaning of epiousion¹ in Matt. 6.11, Luke 11:3 and Didache 8:2 as a torture chamber. Alas, research along conventional lines will not supply an answer. But we are not exonerated from a duty to try. If the grammarians seem to have won battles they have not won the campaign. A common defence of the dominant opinion² is charming, but one hesitates. A prejudice in favour of the Gospel of the Hebrews³ which suggested to Jerome that the Aramaic word mahar (tomorrow) lay behind epiousios is weak in that it could be a retro-translation from the Greek by scholars no better briefed than ourselves. To pray now for the bread of the future is suitable for gluttons and incompatible with Matt. 6:8 which precedes the Lord’s Prayer itself. The root of our problem may be that polysemic words can seldom be translated at all.

The word epiousios itself, as is well known, is not found in classical Greek outside the Lord’s Prayer, so that Origen conjectured⁴ that it was a word made up by the evangelists – and he was right. The ambiguous word is said to mean ‘daily’, whether implying the current day, the morrow, or an indefinite period.⁵

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⁴ *De oratione* 27.7.
One should not pray for anything beyond the daily ration – so say partisans of the 'bread that we actually need' version. Epiousios will then be taken to mean 'that which is following (viz. tomorrow)'.

Now other petitions in the Prayer are for the future, though hardly postponed to the Last Day, which would render them useless. No doubt they expect a revelation, but they are anchored in time. The hallowing of the Name, the coming of the Kingdom, total obedience to the Will, forgiveness of sin, and protection from temptation – all of these operate prospectively and the petitions are to be repeated as if they were aspirations. So what are we to make of a petition for something today? Imminent benefit is expected. To want one’s bread today, unlike the other, much more comprehensive desires is curious. But only if the ‘bread’ is literal. What if it is metaphorical? The aliment of the soul, however soon it commences, implies a process of some length not unlike a medical remedy. Günther Schwarz’s elimination of the word epiousion itself risks a banal result: ‘Give us our bread!’

Prayer for such feeding savours of Ps. 111:5, and is puerile. Life is more important than food (Matt. 6:25; Luke 12:23). It is an absurdity to pray for food, neglecting instruction how to be a denizen of that Kingdom and a candidate for eternal life. Asking for food was tempting God (Ps. 78:18, 29-32). He reacted with the quails and with the manna, which Christ treated symbolically (John 6:32).

Many will agree that it is intolerable that in a prayer intended for frequent use by persons of any race and level of education a word should be prescribed requiring special exegesis. A scholar once suggested that artos (‘bread’) could be both alimentary and spiritual. This showed that the common opinion was lame. True, attempts have been made to evade the conflict between Matt. 6:11 and 6:25, ‘Do not be preoccupied with what you shall eat or what you shall wear...’, and with the precept not to be concerned for the morrow, since it will have problems of its own (Matt. 6:31-34; Prov. 27:1), a platitude. But neither is confined to artos (‘bread’) and epiousios remains obscure.

Paul Billerbeck reported early Jewish learning in the supposed area. The community should pray for food for individual needs (Babylonian Talmud, Ber.

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7 Arndt-Gingrich (see n. 1 above).
10 By Hugo Grotius amongst many others.
29b) relating to the current day, not for the indefinite future. Lachs\textsuperscript{12} approved this, now a commonplace. These experts in Jewish literature have in fact followed the common understanding of Matt. 6:11. They are not conclusive.

Let us allow ourselves a moment’s digression, and see Gen. 28:13-22. God patronised Jacob. The latter could choose his patron deity from amongst many. He set out his terms. Jacob’s vow was valuable: he will owe 10% of his income. God was to be ‘with’ him and keep him in the way he should go morally (so the Palestinian Targum) and feed and clothe him (cf. Ecclus 29:21; 1 Tim. 6:8), and so provide that he should return to his paternal home in ‘peace’. These conditions relate to the everyday oven, basket, loom and footwear. It is a bargain in keeping with the Old Testament. The Lord’s Prayer does not suggest any such stipulations by the believer.

Altogether our grammarians have concentrated on the mysterious word \textit{epiousios} instead of on \textit{artos}, whence they could profitably have begun.

\section*{The meanings of the word \textit{artos}\textsuperscript{13}}

\textit{Artos} primarily means ‘bread’, whether leavened or unleavened. It is an aliment; as a synecdoche it means ‘food’.\textsuperscript{14} It illustrates ‘needs’ (Matt. 6:8). At least as important is \textit{artos’} metaphorical meaning, Law, the Torah (see below). This latter in Christians’ eyes is superseded by Jesus’s Word (John 1:1, 6:45, 17:6, 14, 17; Acts 4:29). \textit{Artos} appears frequently in the sense ‘Word’. At Job 23:12b God’s words (Deut. 8:3) are treasured more than daily bread. One can eat them,\textsuperscript{15} and in spite of some tart contents they are sweet to taste (Ps. 34:8).\textsuperscript{16} Philo, contemporary of the Apostles, shows how the manna itself, invariably tasty, was the divine Word (the Logos).\textsuperscript{17} The angels’ bread (cf. Ps. 77:25 LXX) was not material, since they have no alimentary canal. According to Philo ‘heavenly food’ was an allegory for words and teachings.\textsuperscript{18} To the rabbis also manna itself signified the

\begin{thebibliography}{18}
\item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{New Bible Dictionary} (n. 2 above), 147-8.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Jer. 15:16; Ezek. 2:8-3:2; John 6:51; Rev. 10:9-10.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Philo, \textit{quis heres} 79, 191; \textit{de fuga} 137 (‘nourishment of the soul’); \textit{quad deterius} 18; \textit{leg. alleg.} 2.86. Bernard, \textit{John} (1928), vol. 1, 196; Behm, \textit{TWNT} 1.476, para. 3, lines 24-25. R. Bultmann, \textit{Das Evangelium des Johannes}, 17th edn. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 169 n. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{De opificio mundi}, 157, 158.
\end{thebibliography}
Law.\textsuperscript{19} ‘Water’ and ‘bread’ (two necessities) refer to the Torah.\textsuperscript{20} The words of the Law were to be drunk with thirst: so the Mishnah.\textsuperscript{21}

Mark already expects his audience to know the equation between bread and teaching. Notice Mark 6:34-42; 7:2,5 (\textit{artous}, \textit{arton}) – 13 (Word); Mark 7:27 (the children’s bread is Christ’s doctrine). Crumbs and remnants (8:8) hint at seeds (cf. 4:14) of wisdom. Pagan leaven makes pagan teaching (8:15-21 want of understanding).

When John provided (as it seems) a commentary on Matt. 6:11 or Luke 11:3 in his sixth chapter he claimed that that bread was universally needed: ‘Lord, everyone give us this bread (6:34).’ In sum, the bread we are concerned with is not literal but metaphorical. It seems a simile has moved over, in prehistoric times, into a metaphor. Yet there is more.

**Deuteronomy 8:3 and its implications**

The root of our study is Deut. 8:3, and, since in the time of Christ two versions existed, we need to handle it warily. The Masoretic text, about which there is no doubt, can be translated as follows: ‘For not by bread alone does man live, since by all that issues from the mouth of God does man live.’ The KJV prints ‘but by every \textit{word} that proceedeth out of the mouth…’ The translators did not consider ‘\textit{words}’ for there was no reason to do so, and, as they show by their italics ‘word’ itself does not exist there. They followed the Septuagint, the Vulgate and more especially Matt. 4:4, where that word (singular) is supplied. The verb is rendered by some ‘issues’, by others ‘proceeds’ while Young rendered it by a noun, ‘produce’. The passage is alluded to at Isa. 38:15-16 where that produce becomes the creative word. The Hebrew of Ecclus. 39:17d is content with ‘produce’. Recent Jewish translators write ‘decrees’, but this constricts the vagueness of the Masoretic text.

It may be urged that these are distinctions without a difference. Many mod-

\textsuperscript{19} Prov 9:5 cited at Exodus Rabbah 25 (Billerbeck 2.483(c)).
\textsuperscript{21} Mishnah, \textit{Avót} 1, 4.
ern translations of Deut. 8:3 introduce that word ‘word’. 22 But there is a much-damaged Qumran scroll justifying the reading: ‘Moses spoke... Today God, our God, has caused these words to issue from his mouth, all his precepts and... (here the fragment breaks off) 23 The virtue of the plural, ‘words’, is this: a scholar like Philo 24 may identify the Decalogue as that ‘issue’, but others 25 require the plural to embrace not merely the Decalogue but also rabbinical midrashim (commentaries) thereupon, the ‘oral law’ (tôrah she be ‘al peh) and legends (cf. Exod. 24:3,18; 33:11; Deut. 4:36; John 9:28). Moses notoriously was instructed in all! The importance of all this is the implication that God has promised the bread of life by a variety of utterances. This brings us to the famous word mêmra’.

The Aramaic versions of Deut. 8:3 uniformly make the mêmra the author of the words of life. Mêmra’ has two meanings: 26 normally it means ‘Word’; but it is constantly found as a euphemism for God himself. The Word and God, therefore tend to be confused. We shall return to this. Meanwhile Deut. 8:3 plainly promises life other than that Satan envisaged at Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4. It is the same promise we find at Isa. 55:3. 27

**Isaiah 55:1-4 and the disciples’ function.** 28

Christians regarded Isa. 55:1-4 as messianic (Acts 13:34). Considering various models one may translate it as follows:

Ho, all that are thirsty (cf. John 4:13), come for water, even if you have no money; come buy food and eat; buy wine and milk (Cant. 5:1) without money. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, your earnings 29

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22 The NIV, NEB, NJB, NRSB. But the Bibbia Concordata (1971) has (in Italian) rightly ‘everything that issues from the mouth’. Similarly the Biblia Sagrada (1984). We need not go into the variant readings of Luke 4:4.
24 Legum allegoria 3.173, 174, 176. Every part of the Word is important. Flavius Josephus is content with the Words, meaning the Decalogue (Antiquities 3. 101).
26 M. Jastrow, Dictionary of the Targumium, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature (New York: Pardes, 1950), vol. 2, 775, col. 2.
28 The thorough study by Georg Richter, ‘Die alttestamentlichen Zitate in der Rede vom Himmelsbrot Joh 6,26-31a’ appeared as an article in 1971 and is reprinted in his Studien zur Johannevangelium (BU 13; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977). He makes careful use of rabbinic material but I see no reference to Isa. 55:1.
29 Cf. Eccl. 1:3; John 6:27.
for what does not satisfy?30 Give heed to me, and you shall eat choice food and enjoy the richest meals (cf. Ps. 63:5). Incline your ear and come31 to me (says Yahweh); hearken and you shall be revived.32 And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, the enduring relationship promised to David.33

The relevance of Isa. 55:2-3 to John 6 was observed by Hugo Grotius at the latest.34 True, when he discusses Matt. 6:11 his comments are chiefly conventional. One should not pray for superfluities. But when he comes to John that artos has become entirely symbolic35 as it may well be if Jesus’ recommendations are a revelation.36 On John 6:35 Grotius reminds us that metaphors cannot be avoided, and therefore the metaphors ‘I am the bread of life’ and ‘He who comes to me’ are to be unwound. There can hardly be an excuse for ignoring Grotius, whose comment is copied verbatim by our own Matthew Poole.37 Unless one declines to see John 6:34, ‘Lord, evermore give us this bread’, as an illustration of Matt. 6:11 Grotius’s aid is invaluable. His words may be paraphrased: ‘Similes and metaphors are often mixed. The idea put simply is this: he who has eaten me will never hunger and whoever has drunk me will never thirst (cf. 4:4). ‘Eating and drinking’ means believing. Coming and believing are alternative expressions. For it is the same thing to come to Christ as to devote oneself to him and believe, as verse 44 shows. All these ideas look back to Isaiah 55:1-2 (my emphasis).’

One may interject that, granted we may make a connection between Matt. 6:11; John 4:14, and John 6:33,51 those who ‘come’ and ‘believe’, receiving this bread are themselves competent to pass on the gift without money to those who honour God and his son (John 5:23, 36d; 6:29 and 8:49).

The hint as to Isaiah was taken up in the Assembly’s Annotations (1657).


32 Literally, ‘Your soul shall live.’

33 2 Sam. 7:8-16; Ps. 89:98; Isa. 9:6(7). Hesed is the effect of a reciprocal relationship. The renderings ‘compassion’, ‘mercy’, ‘kindness’ obscure this.

34 H. Grotius, Annotationes in libros evangeliorum (Amsterdam, 1641).

35 See below.

36 Bultmann’s views appear where cited at 132 n. 4, 168 n. 4.

37 Matthaeus Polus, Synopsis criticorum (London, 1669), vol. 4.

**Ousia (‘Essence’)**

It is with some distaste that we take up once again the question what epiousios means in Matt. 6:11. We must not expect too much of any answer: it is the word artos that matters; epiousion is, after all, only an adjective, showing an accident of the principal idea. Behind epiousios must lie ousia, essence, substance, reality. Even ‘stable being’. Consistent with this is truth (John 6:55), that on which one may rely. We already know that the Word is permanent. To convey all this in one word would be a feat. Epiousios is an invented adjective, itself seemingly formed from another adjective. The bread is serviceable or even necessary for the support of spiritual life, which is everlasting. Isa. 55:3a and John 6:54-58 agree: ‘and your souls shall live’.

The original author of epiousios was not required to translate with one word what the Aramaic original may have conveyed by several, nor was he constrained by rules of grammar familiar to the nineteenth century West. To fail to elide the iota of epi would offend the latter but a first century Greek could write epiergos for epergos, and who minded? At any rate he must avoid epousios which means ‘non-essential’, ‘adventitious’. To Aramaic possibilities we must return.

Meanwhile that epiousios derived from ousia as asserted above is happily confirmed by Theodoret. He says in his commentary on Ps. 101.6 LXX, ‘Just as attribute-less bread nourishes the body, so the Logos from heaven nourishes the ousia (essence) of the soul.’ The argument was a cliché (by his time (fifth century). Origen (third century) on Ps. 77:30-37 and especially Cyril of Jerusalem in his catecheses mystagogicae 23:15 anticipated him. Cyril worked in the fourth century. Our epiousios was no stumbling-block for any of them: they had no need to hunt for an Aramaic original.

**Conclusion**

Translations based on the idea that artos was literal and tangible are wrong. ‘Allotted portion’ will not do, for if the allowance is allotted no need for prayer arises. Artos to the Jewish preacher means the Torah. Jesus’s teaching (tôrah: Ps.

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39 Dodd (cited at n. 19 above), 83; Bultmann (n. 17 above), 40.
40 Ps. 117:2; Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35; 1 Pet. 1:25.
3:1, etc.) is as flexible as Moses’s. Problems arise constantly. Principles must often be brought to mind. Scrupulous avoidance of sin favours membership of the Kingdom and conformity to the Will. To early Christians the Bread was pneumatic (1 Cor. 10:3); it was wisdom (Ecclus. 15:3 Syr.) and understanding (15:3 LXX). Literal bread ends in the sewer or the drain (Matt. 15:17; Ecclus. 14:9 LXX). The aliment of the soul satisfies, tending to life here and hereafter.

Of what help is Aramaic to us? The total vocabulary is unknown. No answer will serve us that is not in harmony with Deut. 8:3 and Isa. 55:1-4. Some words suggest themselves: *mamas*, ‘real’, and *qûshta*, the truth. Yet the Word is more than that. Portmanteau expressions are not unusual in this literature. *Epiousios* is certainly opposed to *periousios* (‘superfluous’), but that is hardly helpful. The prefix *épi* can be merely an intensive, as it often is. If ‘substantial’ is a right use of *epiousios* by patristic writers it is conceivable that what we are looking for is a paraphrase for *artos* in its guise as Word, a paraphrase impossible to convey conveniently to a non-Jewish church. There is a candidate.

What about *mêmra’*? We know it means both Word and the Author of that Word, God himself. If the Word can be tasted (so above), so can the deity (Ps. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:2-3). The Logos was already flesh (John 1:14).

The *mêmra’* has a respectable pedigree (see Dan. 4:14; Ezra 6:9). Aramaic versions of the Law, the Prophet, and the Writings (e.g. Ps. 119:48) use *mêmra* for God or Wisdom. So *lihmâna de-mêmra* may serve.

The prayer for forgiveness is appropriately placed (see Ps. 119:58) since without the Word in all its richness one can hardly be sincere in the other petitions.

Abstract

Translations of Matt. 6:11 presuppose, erroneously, that the prayer was for material bread. The distinction between literal and metaphorical bread prevents this petition from being banal, out of keeping with the remainder of the prayer. Biblical texts which restore the true meaning include Deut. 8:3 and Isa. 55:1-4.

Current Jewish imagery identified *lehem/artos* as (1) the Law and so (2) a fine comestible. John 6:32-54 relies on this. The basic idea having been recovered, the problem of *epiousios* remains. Aramaic idiom lies behind it, unintelligible to non-Jews. One thinks of *mêmra’* which means both the Word and its Author. A paraphrase, not a translation is called for. Metaphorical ‘bread’ would ensure life, membership of the Kingdom and obedience to the Will. Could a Greek neologism manage this? *Epiousios* could have meant ‘essential’.


42 G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), s.vv. *epiousios* 2a and *ousia* IB1 ‘essence’; D ‘special character’. Thus a word made up out of *ousia* would be sufficiently vague and also sufficiently suggestive, without attempting a literal translation of any Aramaic word or phrase.