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Bread for God's People

BY

D. M. PANTON.

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BREAD FOR GOD'S PEOPLE.

REMEMBERING that what is physical under the Old Testament is spiritual under the New, how deep a significance attaches to the sudden cry that went up from the Sons of the Prophets,—“O Man of God, there is death in the pot!”¹ God's faithful in a day of apostasy were gathered—such is the type—feeding; the moment was a moment of famine induced by sin—in the antitype, a spiritual dearth and a famine of the words of God; and suddenly the Church itself—the Sons of the Prophets—realizes that she is consuming poison. And who had done it? One of the Sons of the Prophets. He had gone out into the Field—“the field is the world” (Matt. xiii. 38), and gathered wild gourds—uninspired doctrines and the traditions of men. It was not murder; he had not deliberately shred poison into the pot; he was honestly, sincerely deceived; but his error all but cost the Church her life. Here is a letter written by two Japanese Christians of thirty-six years standing to a Japanese journal: “A generation ago we were taught by the early missionaries to believe the Bible to be verbally inspired from Genesis to Revelation: we now hold it to be full of errors. We reject the greater part of Paul's teaching: we no longer believe in the Virgin Birth, or Everlasting Punishment for unbelievers, nor that God can forgive us *only* through the mediation and suffering of Christ:—this, a mere Paulinism, is no longer tenable. *Many who, thirty or forty years ago, became Christians, have ceased to be Christians for these reasons, and there are more who have LEFT the Church than now belong to it.*” The death of the Church lies in the extinction of the Book; and the dying goes on though the death is denied. “There is a grave danger in the Church to-day,” a profound Bible scholar said recently, “that we shall have an unbibled pulpit.”

Before the War, an average of 688 Anglican clergy were ordained annually; since 1914 the number has not exceeded 150, and the total number has sunk from 24,000 to 18,500. Taking the Presbyterian Church as a sample of Nonconformity, in 1900 the students for the ministry

¹ 2 Kings iv, 40.

in Scotland numbered 214; in 1913, 96 (therefore, it is by no means all a consequence of the War); in 1921, 80. So great is the dearth in the United States that there are 5,000 vacant pulpits, while the fall in theological seminaries is as follows: among the Episcopalians, from 463 in 1916 to 193 in 1920; in the Presbyterian seminaries from 1,188 to 695; in Methodist seminaries from 1,226 to 976; and in Congregational institutions from 499 in 1910 to 255 in 1921; (Roman Catholic seminary enrolment has, however, increased very rapidly). Christianity is drying up at its source: the young men are too honest to preach what they have ceased to believe. That this is the explanation is made certain by the fact that where the Scriptures are still held as final and infallible—as among the Southern Baptists in the States, perhaps as faithful a body as exists in the world—candidates are “coming in like a flood”: these will soon have one thousand young ministers training, and five thousand in the colleges. As Froude the historian said half-a-century ago, the Roman equally with the Plymouth Brother rests on the trustworthiness of the Gospel narratives: if that is gone, all is gone, for all the Churches.

Now cessation of eating is the first essential when poison is in the pot: “They *could not* eat thereof.” The young men had ‘poured out’ the bitter broth: countless pulpits and journals and books are pouring out a mixture of truth and error, darkness and light, Christ and the world, so blended that the error kills the truth, and the poisonous mixture works death; but the instinct of the faithful, “senses exercised to discern,” suddenly revolts at all costs. For while multitudes of systems to-day are defended on the ground of the truth they contain, the error in them is death. A Christian man of experience once said to me:—“I heard my minister preach on Genesis: *for two weeks I was an atheist and in Hell.*” “They knew it not” never alters the nature of facts: the poison kills. A missionary said recently:—“Thirty years ago young India said, ‘Missionary, your Christianity is not true’; fifteen years ago, ‘Missionary, your Christianity is not new’; to-day young India is saying, ‘Missionary, why don’t your own people believe your Christianity—after

2,000 years?’” We do not charge that Son of the Prophets with malignant design or murderous intent, nor even with insincerity. He never dreamed what he was doing: “They *knew* them [the wild gourds] not.” The gourd that he gathered was no thorn or thistle, or obvious henbane or belladonna; it was a vine, like the True Vine: but the solemn truth is, that God’s laws do not suspend themselves because of our ignorances or negligences or mistakes; if we accidentally sweeten our coffee with arsenic, it will kill as surely as if we deliberately drank it neat. The Son of the Prophets might have been well fitted for other work for God’s people, but his blundering ignorance in attempting to feed them nearly cost them their lives. It is exactly so in the spiritual realm. Poisonous principles are as deadly when promulgated in ignorance as when prompted by malice. *The last edition of Tom Paine as an appendix proving all his infidel statements by assertions of the Higher Criticism.* In the startling words of Professor Huxley on the Higher Criticism:—“If Satan had wished to devise the best means of discrediting Revelation, he could not have done better.”

Now we arrive at God’s grand working principle for days of chaotic peril. “But he said, **THEN BRING MEAL.**” Elisha’s command proceeds on a profound principle of God. We cannot feed souls on negatives, nor can destructive criticism be met by mere destruction. Moses does not extract the gall from Marah, but plunges into it a tree—the Cross: Elisha does not distil the bitter waters, but pours in salt—grace: God does not slay a single fiery serpent—He lifts the Healing Serpent. We have the Meal—the pure Word of God; and the enormous truth to master is, that truth alone neutralizes error; that to dislodge falsehood from the mind can be accomplished, not by negations, but only by lodging the truth; that nothing but truth stultifies, paralyzes, a lie. “Ye shall know **THE TRUTH** and the truth shall make you *free*” (John viii., 32)—free from doubt, from error, from sin. A thoughtful Hindu once declared:—“If I was a missionary, I would not argue; I would give people the New Testament, and say, ‘*Read that.*’” Cardinal Wiseman has

given a curiously effective illustration of the power of the meal totally to neutralize the poison. Of converts to Rome, he says:—"I have hardly found two agree upon the grounds which induced them to embrace the Catholic religion; whereas all converts to Protestantism, without exception, give me but one argument. The history in every case is simply this—the individual became possessed of the Word of God." So pour the Word of God into the poisoned soul. For this is what God Himself is doing. Every six weeks the Word of God has spoken in a fresh language during the twentieth century: 25 per cent. of the human race can read, and within this area (that is, in 724 languages) every man can read the Gospel for himself. "And there was no harm"—not only no death now, but no harm—"in the pot." In the beautiful words of Martin Luther:—"The Holy Scriptures are to believing souls what the meadow is to the ox, what the home is to the man, what the nest is to the bird, what the stream is to the fish, and the cleft of the rock to the sea-fowl."

Elisha's final command is to be our golden example. "Give the people, that they may eat; for thus saith the Lord." Twenty loaves, priceless in famine, had been given to Elisha: he first neutralizes the poison with truth; then, with a Divine generosity, reserving nothing for himself and nothing for to-morrow, he pours his all into the lap of the children of God.

Some, as the supreme truth on which to concentrate to-day, urge the simple Gospel; others, the Cross; others, the fundamentals; others, reunion; others, foreign missions; others, holiness; others, the Second Coming; others, the Jew: so long as they press each golden truth we are utterly with them; the moment they press their special truth *alone*, we are utterly opposed. Each truth is but one loaf; scatter, like Elisha, the twenty loaves: God never gave 66 books if less than 66 books would have done. There is no truth of God for which He has not made an ear somewhere. It takes the whole Book of God to counter the whole strategy of Hell; and every error has its counter-truth in the Book. By Bible Societies, by trusted missionaries, by home colporteurs; through

print, through letters, through conversation, through prayer; without stint, holding no truth back, speaking the truth in love: pour out all the truth you know, in all the ways you know, with all the wisdom you have, all your days: and although a Gehazi, already training for leprosy, may question our competence, or our wisdom, the truth through us shall be so abundant that the Church shall eat, and leave. We present, not the wild gourds of the world, but God's True Vine, the Bread of God come down from heaven. *A poison has been known to kill in thirteen seconds: a look at Christ will heal in one.* In the words of Archbishop Leighton:—"Different men have different views in reading the Book. As in the same field the ox looks for grass, the hound for a hare, and the stork for a lizard; some, fond of critical remarks, pick up nothing but little stones and shells; others search into deep mysteries, giving themselves but very little trouble about the precepts and instructions that are clear and evident, and these plunge themselves into a bottomless abyss. But the genuine disciples of the true wisdom are those who make it their daily employment to purify their hearts by the wisdom of these fountains, and bring their whole lives to a conformity with this heavenly doctrine. They do not desire to know these things only for the sake of knowing them, or that they themselves may become known thereby; but that their souls may be healed and their steps directed, so that they may be led through the paths of righteousness to the glorious happiness which is set before them."

With eager hand that oft has sliced
At Gentile gloss or Jewish fable,
Before the crowd you lay the Christ
Upon the lecture table.

From bondage to the old beliefs
You say our rescue must begin;
But I want refuge from my griefs
And saving from my sin.

The strong, the easy, and the glad
Hang blandly listening on your word;
But I am sick, and I am sad,
And I need Thee, O Lord.—Canon Ainger.

Note on Why I Read the Bible.

1. BECAUSE IT IS THE HUGEST PHENOMENON IN THE MORAL WORLD. If a visitor from another planet were to alight on our earth, the thing which would probably bulk largest on his vision is the enormous circulation of one book. Shakespeare, the premier writer of the world, speaks in 40 versions, in annual issues of 100,000; the Bible speaks in 725 languages and dialects, with an output of more than 20,000,000 every year. A million of the Revised Version were sold within twenty-four hours of its issue. What enormous power in the unseen is behind the Book?

2. BECAUSE IT CONSISTS OF THE BASIC DOCUMENTS OF THE ONLY PURE RELIGION IN THE WORLD. The man who rejects Christianity without having carefully studied the Gospels is not acting fairly to Jesus Christ, and is not giving fair play to his own soul. "Search the Scriptures," the Lord Jesus says, "for they are they which testify of Me" (John v., 39). *The wicked man's sole hope for time and eternity rests on the falsity of the Word of God.*

3. BECAUSE IT WAS BORN IN MIRACLE AND CRADLED IN THE MIRACULOUS ORDERS OF THE CHURCH. While prophets still spoke, while apostles could say—"Thus saith the Holy Ghost" (Acts xxi., 11), while instantaneous revelations were given in the Assemblies (1 Cor. xiv., 30), while unknown tongues still abounded, the Holy Ghost uttered the Scriptures and composed the canon. "No prophecy [every book of the Bible is a prophetic utterance, written, as a matter of historical fact, by prophets] ever came by the will of man, but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. i., 21).

4. BECAUSE IT STATES THAT GOD IS ITS AUTHOR. 2,600 times the Old Testament prophets assert that their words are the words of God, and the New Testament prophets 525 times; to prove its inspiration we have merely to accept its truth. God would not have gone to the labour of inditing 66 books, if less would have done; nor could

He, without creating an immense corresponding obligation on my part to study them.

5. BECAUSE THE TEXTURE OF THE ORIGINALS IS AS MATHEMATICALLY WROUGHT AS A SNOWFLAKE. Its first sentence (to take but a single example from the work of Ivan Panin, the Russian) contains 7 words and 28 letters; the three chief words—"God," "heavens," "earth"—have 14 letters, with the numeric value 777; the only verb—"created"—consists of 29 sevens; two untranslatable little particles in the verse sum up to 58 sevens. By the law of chances, the probabilities against only *ten* of Panin's discoveries in this single verse being accidental are *one* against 396,704,526,216; and there are 38 such features in the verse. *In no other book in the world (nor in the Apocrypha) do numerics thus work; for it is God's autograph seen in the watermark when held up to the light.*¹

6. BECAUSE IT REACHES ME EVEN RICHER THAN IT LEFT THE PENS OF APOSTLES AND PROPHETS. It comes stained with the tears of a million contritions; steeped in the prayers of myriads of saints; breathing the blessings of untold souls re-created by the Holy Ghost; expounded by giant intellects, and fragrant with the faith of little children; worn by the fingers of agony and death; wet with fresh blood from the Colosseum's sands, or saints torn limb from limb:—it is a Book more steeped in the Divine even than when it left the fingers of Apostles and Prophets.

7. BECAUSE, WHILE IT HUMBLER MAN'S PRIDE IN THE DUST, CONVICTS OF SIN EVERYWHERE, AND WARNS OF A SURE AND ETERNAL HELL, IT IS THE ONE BOOK UNIVERSALLY WELCOMED. It has been said that the Bible is proved true by the sins of its saints; so also it is demonstrated divine by its acceptance by sinners. In the words of Henry Rogers:—"The Bible is such a book as man could not have written if he would, and would not have written if he could."

¹ See Ivan Panin's *Verbal Inspiration Demonstrated* (3d., Thyne).

8. BECAUSE THE ONLY LOGICAL ALTERNATIVE TO IT IS ULTIMATE APOSTASY. Professor Osgood, speaking at a Baptist Congress in Detroit, read a number of extracts, and said: "Are these a fair statement of the Higher Criticism?" When answered in the affirmative by the many Higher Critics present, he replied: "Gentlemen, I have been reading word for word from *Tom Paine's Age of Reason*." When the last unregenerate critic has been buried in the Second Death, the Scriptures will stand before the Throne as the unchanging adamant of God.

9. BECAUSE IT HAS SHOWN ME THE WORLD'S SAVIOUR AND GIVEN ME MY OWN. The Bible is a corridor between two eternities down which walks the Christ of God; His invisible steps echo through the Old Testament, but we meet Him face to face in the throne-room of the New; and it is through that Christ alone, crucified for me, that I have found forgiveness for sins and life eternal. "The Old Testament is summed up in the word 'Christ'; and the New Testament is summed up in the word 'Jesus'; and the summary of the whole Bible is that Jesus is the Christ" (Bishop Pollock). "I can never doubt," says Mr. Spurgeon, "the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration; since I so constantly see, in actual practice, how the very words that God has been pleased to use—a plural instead of a singular—are blessed to the souls of men."

10. BECAUSE IT IS THE BEDROCK ON WHICH ALL THE EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS RESTED AS FINAL AND INFALLIBLE. Chrysostom:—"Great is the precipice and deep the gulf that opens before ignorance of the Scriptures: it is this that has caused heresies; it is this that has led to profligate living." Augustine:—"Who knows not that the authority of Scripture is such that no question can be raised whether what is found therein is true and right?" Jerome:—"These things which they invent without the authority of Scripture the sword of God smites."

11. BECAUSE MY CHARACTER AS A SAVED SOUL WILL BE DWARFED AND CRIPPLED WITHOUT AN ASSIMILATION OF THE WHOLE BOOK. The Lord Jesus says that every doctrine is a seed, to produce its own peculiar fruit when dropped into the soil of an honest and good heart (Luke

viii. 11); therefore if I refuse the seed, and as I refuse each seed, *that peculiar fruit becomes impossible to my character for ever*. And as the yard measure in the Royal Exchange is the standard by which all others are measured, so my whole discipleship will be judged by the New Testament; so it is the ambition of my life to make the one conform to the other. "The word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day" (John xii. 48).

12. BECAUSE I LOVE IT WITH ALL MY HEART. "How love I Thy law!" (Ps. cxix. 97). All that I am and have that is good I owe to it. "Have you a Bible?" an old widow in London was once asked. "Have I a Bible? What should I do *without* a Bible?" she replied. "It was the guide of my youth, and it is the staff of my age; it wounded me, and it healed me; it showed me I was a sinner, and it led me to my Saviour; it has given me comfort through life, and it will give me hope in death." "What a book!" exclaimed Heine, the cynical Jew; "vast and wide as the world, rooted in the abysses of creation and towering up beyond the blue secrets of heaven; sunrise and sunset, promise and fulfilment, birth and death, the whole drama of humanity, are all in this Book." When Faraday was lying ill, his physician, Dr. Latham, found him in tears, his head resting on a table on which lay an open Bible. "I am afraid you are worse," said Dr. Latham. "It is not that," Faraday replied with a sob; "but oh, why will people go astray, when they have this blessed Book in their hands?"

Within this awful volume lies
The mystery of mysteries;
Happy they of human race
To whom God has given grace
To read, to fear, to hope, to pray,
To lift the latch and force the way;
And better had he ne'er been born
Who reads to doubt, or reads to scorn.