

CONCERNING THE BREATH OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION

With this small booklet we would like to undertake a vitally important task which needs to be accomplished among our people. This neglected but crucial task is to refresh our people's minds that the Breath of God—the Bible—is God's marvelous gift to mankind; that our forefathers knew its contents well; and that we benefited so much from it.

The second part of this task is to point out the disturbing neglect of God's Word in our communities along with its eternal consequences, and to encourage our people once again to find hope and purpose in life through the guidance of God's Holy Word.

The Bible, God's written revelation to mankind is light in a darkened world and a refreshing life-giving oasis in a parched desert. To the hungry soul, it is Bread from heaven, and to the lost person in the raging water, it is a life saving compass.

THE NEED

In the year 387 A.D., Armenia was divided by two rival nations. Persia had control of Eastern Armenia and ruled through the Arshagooni Dynasty, with Persian authorities doing their utmost to enforce upon the Armenian people the Mazteism (fireworship) religion. In addition, Syrian bishops were encouraged by the Persians to infiltrate and control the Armenian Church. This was done in order to weaken the Armenian Apostolic Church. As a result, these Syrian bishops rose to high rank in our early church and conducted the Armenian schools and church services in the Syrian language which our people did not understand.

On the other hand, Western Armenia was under the dominion of the Byzantine nation. Greek bishops forced the Greek language upon the churches and schools and their intention was to take over the leadership of the Armenian Church

Thus, in both parts of divided Armenia the same danger existed. Because of the use of foreign clergy and languages (Greek and Syrian), the Armenian Christian and national creativity was suppressed and remained impotent.

THE MAN OF GOD

It is said that "necessity is the mother of all inventions." Mesrob was the name of one who lived in the above mentioned period. In his heart he felt the need of the nation. By trusting and believing the Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit, Mesrob accomplished a unique task. Through his efforts the people of Armenia became, in a sense, a free people, a civilized people living in the center of the civilized world. He added something beautiful to Armenian culture and bestowed upon us unlimited treasure—spiritual, cultural, national and humanitarian—in every area of human values and Christianity.

Born in the village of Hatsegats (in 353 A.D.) in the Armenian Province of Taron, Mesrob was the son of a man called Vartan. His early education was taken from the famous clergyman Nersess the Great, and later he furthered his higher education in the

Greek schools.

Because of his brilliant education and most interesting personality, he was selected as the royal secretary of the Armenian king. Many honors were bestowed upon him for his great service.

While in this pleasant and most promising position, Mesrob, through his personal study of the Bible, heard God's call in his heart. He accepted the call and obeyed it all the way.

To the great surprise of his acquaintances he resigned from his royal position and took the humble rank of a monk. After gathering a few disciples around him he began to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the cities and villages of our beloved motherland, Armenia.

He preached in the streets with a Bible in his hand which was written in Syriac or Greek from which he verbally translated the Word of God. It was in this apostolic evangelizing mission that Mesrob saw the greatest need of our nation. This great need was for the Armenian version of the Holy Bible, the highway of salvation. Through it, all the spiritual and national needs of the Armenians would be met.

Without the Armenian alphabet, there was no way to have the Armenian Bible. Mesrob was convinced that spiritual darkness of the Armenian Soul would be purged through the living Word of God. He used to repeat so often the Apostle's words (Romans 9:2,3), "That I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race."

Through his own experiences Mesrob found out that without the study of the Holy Bible, our people would never completely separate from the pagan customs and beliefs which they had renounced one hundred years before. At that time Christianity was officially the national religion and two hundred years before that historic date, Thaddeus, Bartholomew, Princess Santoukht, and many others had suffered martyrdom for their faith.

Mesrob did not give up because of raging problems. He tried to use alphabet letters borrowed from a Syrian bishop named Daniel, but those letters were insufficient to form all the syllables of the Armenian language. More investigations were made by Mesrob and his scholarly assistants in order to find a suitable alphabet. They studied and researched at famous learning centers of the world, but to no avail.

Mesrob was wholly dependant on God and did not lose hope. In a vision, God gave him the Armenian alphabet. With the help of a Hellenic Scribe named Ropanos, he designed all the newly found letters. Once the alphabet was established, the very first thing Mesrob did was to translate the Holy Bible. The unfathomable joy which he felt was also shared by the whole nation.

By God's providence, the Armenian Church was enjoying the leadership of Catholicos Sahag, another well learned and graceful servant of God. With the help of the faithful Armenian king Vromshabouh's financial help, Catholicos Sahag and Mesrob, along with other scholars undertook the translation of the Bible from the original languages. What resulted was a translation so beautiful and accurate that non-Armenian scholars called it "The Queen of all translations." The translation of the Bible ushered into Armenia . . . The Armenian Golden Age of Literature.

So beloved was the Word by the translators and our people, they named the Bible

"Asdvadzashounch" which means the "Breath of God." For them the Bible was alive and full of the power of God.

Once Armenians began to learn God's Word in their own language, the birth of the most graceful and civilized sons and daughters in our nation's history took place. Vartan the Brave and many others willingly died for this gift.

"And thus the fathers passed their time, day and night with the reading of books, and thus served as good examples to their studious assistants, especially in keeping with the commandments of God. . ."

GURIOON

The result? The Holy Bible played a very great and important role in the life of the Armenian people. Here are some quotations from our fathers.

"Many of them, moreover, had studied the Holy Scriptures since childhood, with the knowledge of which they consoled themselves and encouraged their companions, openly performing and increasing their worship."

YEGHISHEH (Historian)

"Psalms were their whispering songs and the reading of the Holy Scriptures their absolute joy. Every man was a church in himself and a priest as well."

YEGHISHEH

"Holding the Holy Book in hand he [Vartan the Brave] read aloud for everyone to hear about the valiant character of the Maccabus, and with eloquent words he explained to them the nature of their struggle and the valor with which they had fought for their God-given laws. . ."

YEGHISHEH

"What else can I recite before Your Excellencies, since you are more learned and more acquainted with the Holy Testaments than I am?"

VARTAN THE BRAVE

"Again and again he [Vartan] repeated the recorded deeds of valor of all brave men, naming each war in order, as he was well versed in the Holy Scriptures."

YEGHISHEH

(about Vartan before the battle of Vartanantz)

THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

The Holy Bible has been put on the altar of the Armenian Apostolic Church as the Holiest Textbook of the Church. Every Sunday we read from it as the lesson of the day. The sermon is based upon that lesson and in its authority we share and instruct.

Any book used in the Armenian Church is the fruit of the Holy Bible. The readings,

the hymns, and the rituals are taken from the Bible or based on the Bible. Our prayers are formed in the spirit and the style of the Bible. The Divine Liturgy, as the promise of the Old Testament and the fulfillment of the New, presents the glorification, the sacrifice and the sharing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Psalms in our worship are like veins of bodies. They give vitality and life to our souls.

The first lines translated by Sahag-Mesrob were the words of the Old Testament: "That men may know wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight. . ." Proverbs 1:2.

Only through careful and constant study can we bring back the Holy Bible from its nominal present state to its historical position of leadership and inspiration for our beloved nation.

THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN THE LIVES OF OUR FATHERS

Those who did not have the chance to read the writings and the lives of our fathers naturally will not know the value of the Bible in their lives.

Many of us have heard and probably read the prayerbook called "Nareg" which is written as the prayers of the Armenian faithful to God from the depth of the heart.

Our people do not know that Naregatsi, in his prayerbook, has more than a thousand quotations from the Old Testament in order to confess the Sonship and the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

"When I opened my mind's eyes in deep thought through the study of the 'Book', I saw the depth of the knowledge of the graces; I opened my heart in order to understand what seemed difficult to understand, to examine, to be informed and comprehend the depth of its knowledge which filled my frail mind with awe, and in order to take in mentally I was prepared to forget that knowledge which I had in the beginning."

KRIKOR NAREGATSI

"As a drunkard will be thirstier the more he drinks, likewise the one that penetrates into the mysteries of the Books will desire to learn more, because he knows that he cannot exhaust the fullness of the knowledge of the Books."

KRIKOR NAREGATSI

I find it very interesting and practical that our Illuminator Krikor Loosavorich according to the Historian Akatenkeghos, instructed the newly converted Armenian Christians for sixty-six days continuously with the instructions of the Holy Bible. From the beginning of his ministry, Krikor Loosavorich meant to say that the Holy Bible is the TEXTBOOK of the Christians from where he must study and learn all the Christian responsibilities, principles and truths. It is most amazing to realize that Krikor Loosavorich gave more Biblical instructions to our people in 66 days than is received by many people in 10 years.

Presently, the Holy Bible seems to be nailed on the altar. Thank God, once every Sunday we open it to read a passage to the public. Sometimes I am tempted to think

"what if we stop reading on Sundays also and put aside the Bible from the Altar?. . ." Usually we have to lose in order to find . . .

The following quotations show the deep love and unshaken trust and faith that our fathers had in the past towards the Holy Bible, which the wholeheartedly called "The Breadth of God" (Asdvadzashoonch).

"Vahram Bahlavouni fasted and meditated day and night as did John the Baptist, and was feeding his soul with the Word of the Holy Bible."

GIRAGOS KANKSAYETSI

"Nerses Shenorhali used to gather around him those Bible loving people and lived with them. He used to read the Word of the Holy Spirit (Bible) and talk always with the Holy Spirit."

SHENORHALI

"I, Anannia Shiragatsi, have completed the literature of the Armenian Church, and I am well aware of the Holy Bible, and used it to illuminate my mind daily with the words of the Psalms."

ANANNIA SHIRAGATSI

"[Prince Moushegh–the Son of SUMPAD, the Commander-in-Chief– IX century] since his childhood was well versed in God's Word. . ."

SHOULD WE STUDY THE OLD TESTAMENT? IS IT IMPORTANT?

So often people ask if the reading of the Old Testament is important, or if it is simply the history of the Jewish people. There are many important reasons to study the Old Testament. Hopefully the following can be an encouragement to read that portion of God's Word.

First of all, we read in the New Testament that "All scripture is inspired by God. . ." This statement refers not only to the New but also the Old Testament. It is very important as well as interesting to note that more than 3,800 times the following expressions are stated in the Old Testament: "God said," "God spoke." God is speaking to us through the Old Testament Books of Law, History, Wisdom, and Prophecy. Jesus Christ the Son of God, Himself quoted numerous times from the Old Testament thereby giving his stamp of approval and divine authority to the Old Testament. Through the Old Testament and all the events described in it, we see the completely pitiful condition of man and the need of a Savior, Jesus Christ (whose story is given in the New Testament).

Secondly, Jesus Christ as the absolute authority in this matter has given His Word saying: "I didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law" (The law of God is found in the Old Testament). Therefore it is very obvious that Jesus based his teachings upon the laws of God and the sayings of God's prophets, giving to them new life, true meaning and definition, but without ignoring or liquidating their existence and authority.

Thirdly, how can we understand the free gift and divine love of God as seen in the New Testament without understanding the holy standard (the law) of God which is found in the Old Testament? How can we understand and give meaning to our past, present and

the future without tying them to the Biblical prophecies? And how can we explain the heavenly Father's stubborn love towards the sinner in the sending of His most precious gift—Jesus, His only begotten son—if we do not understand mankind's hopeless situation without a Savior (as illustrated in the Old Testament)?

Lastly, in the Old Testament, there are prophecies concerning the second coming of Christ. This is one of the most important doctrines of the Armenian Apostolic Church (Also one of the least taught). Old Testament prophecies are being fulfilled as the world is being prepared for the second coming of Jesus Christ as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

THE RENEWAL AND THE CONSTRUCTIVE REFORMATION OF OUR CHURCH WILL COME MAINLY BY STUDYING THE HOLY BIBLE (THE BREADTH OF GOD-ASDVADZASHOUNCH)

Nowadays we hear a lot about the Renewal and the Reformation of our Church. In the past, this subject was not unfamiliar to our spirit-filled fathers. The question is this: What method can we use to accomplish renewal and reformation in the Church without taking away from its theology, principals and sacraments?

Let me tell you that in my mind the Renewal or Reformation of the Church doesn't mean to put the church on the surgery table and deform her. Not at all. But I believe strongly that the Church must come back as the Biblical Apostolic Church, reviving the forgotten teachings, truths, rules, and regulations of the Bible, and also to be equipped with new tools and ways in order to meet the needs of today's faithful, young and old; also to become relevant to our times and needs. Today what we have in our church is just the weakened image of the original Apostolic call in our parishes. Circumstances have changed and the church lifestyle is no longer based upon Biblical teachings, but rather our social and materialistic desires and goals.

The Renewal and the Constructive Reformation of our church can be realized only through the meaningful, careful and spiritfilled study of the Bible by her religious and lay members. Only then will the parishes experience the love, peace and understanding that the Bible offers. Then we will also experience the flourishing of the Armenian Apostolic Church as The Body of Christ and the mother of all Armenians.

Without the knowledge and guidance of the Bible, the church can have good and successful activities and amass lots of money in the banks, but she can never lead her members to salvation and to the citizenship of God's kingdom for which our Lord has paid a very HIGH PRICE upon the Cross.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLE STUDY

If we are convinced of what we said until now, we see clearly that Bible study is a must for us. It is a gift given from heaven. From it we learn how God dealt in the past with patriarchs, prophets, kings and the ordinary faithful. The Bible does not belong to this or that nation or group or church. It is the record of the story of God's love toward the sinner, and of the everlasting plan of salvation. In other words, all this knowledge comes from the study of the Bible. Only then we'll be able to correct our relationship towards God and our fellowmen.

Bible study is like a mirror where we see our true selves. How important is this experience. The created problems in the parishes and at homes could be solved more easily if only the faithful can see his or her own true image.

It is told that once a Chinese man bought a magnifying glass. He enjoyed studying many different things very much. One day he put it over the rice that he loves so much, and to his painful surprise he noticed moving things on his rice. In his anger he broke the magnifying glass instead of cleaning the rice.

It is the same with us. Instead of confessing our sins and being forgiven and cleansed, we try to destroy the Bible. . .

Thank God, the study of the Bible doesn't show us only our guilt and sins, but also shows us the way for forgiveness, peace, and joy in the glorious person of the risen Lord Jesus.

One day around midnight my telephone rang. It was the voice of a young adult that I had not seen for two years. He was one of my parishioners and used to come to church a few times a year. He passed through bad health and great family problems. He had been after pleasure and money.

On the telephone he told me that a few months ago he met a person who spoke to him about Jesus and also read a few verses from the Bible. After this first encounter a desire to read the Bible grew in him. Finally he bought a Bible and joined a non-Armenian Bible Study group.

After this enlightenment he continued and was convinced of two things: one, that he was a real sinner; he needed Jesus' help for forgiveness. And second, he wanted very much to come back to his family, wife and five children, and to gather them under the accepting, forgiving and saving love of Christ in God.

Before he ended his conversation, he said a little excitedly, "Der Hayr, why doesn't the Armenian Church teach us these things? Why do we not have Bible Study in our churches? How are we supposed to learn about our purpose in life, love, forgiveness and the true meaning of happiness?"

When we develop a love for God through the study of his Word, He develops in us a love for our nation. From time to time I hear the misconception that Christianity weakens one's patriotism as an Armenian and that the two cannot mix. How far from the truth! Certain people, even if they do not believe in God's existence, use God as a scapegoat and blame all our national misfortunes on Him! God loves Armenians and the Armenian Apostolic Church. He did not make a mistake when he created us as Armenians. Living among pagan and barbarian cultures, we shone as a brilliant light and example of God's people for many centuries.

Vartan the Brave, from whom every Armenian benefits to this day, could have saved his life and enjoyed many luxuries and benefits as a political leader; but it was as a Bible-believing, Christ-committed Christian that he returned to Armenia and fought against the enemy. Thank God for Vartan. If he as a Christian did not have the love for his country, there would be no Armenians left today. We would have been assimilated into pagan cultures and false religions a long time ago.

ONLY WITH THE BIBLE CAN WE HAVE BIBLE STUDY

We can organize many gatherings and parties but none of them will be a Bible Study if it doesn't fulfill certain requirements.

1. We must encourage the Bible Study participants to have their Bibles with them. I believe our new generation would like very much to have a Bible with them even on Sundays and follow the Bible readings during the Badarak and the sermon.

2. A chapter or selected passages should be read. The reading can be done by one person or by the whole group (each person reading a verse).

3. The reading should be discussed. It is fine to have a reader who will direct the study, but each person should also share his understanding of the reading and the group should discuss the verses to make the meaning clear.

If the groups are small, homes are the most pleasant places to have Bible Study.

THE BENEFITS OF BIBLE STUDY IN THE LIVES OF CHURCH MEMBERS TODAY

We can imagine the attitude of people concerning God and man when they study the Bible under the leadership of their pastors and appointed lay members of the church. They will learn to look to Jesus as to their Lord and Savior. Such a state will take time but also will produce the following fruits:

1. The church will have spiritually awakened and watchful members. They will be alert in listening to the sermon and understanding it and able to understand and follow the sacraments and the rituals of the church under the light of God's word. The church will have members alert in knowing sin and ready to confess them. The church will have members well equipped in defending the church's Biblical teachings against false teachings such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian Scientists.

2. The church will have faithful members. When the morning services begin there will be church members singing and praying with the pastor. Sunday worship will have meaning for them. Parish council members, choir members and Sunday school teachers will serve the Lord and parish joyfully. The pastor instead of having a clique around him, will have real faithful who will be the spiritual backbone of the church, the body of Christ.

3. The church will have humble members. The weakest participant of the Bible study in his heart will know what the will of God is for him. He will know that his pastor is neither his boss nor his policeman but in God's name, the Church's glad messenger of Him. And when a faithful knows all these, he cannot remain self-centered and conceited.

4. The Divine Liturgy will speak to Him. Today our sacraments, the Divine Liturgy, our rituals and traditions give the impression of being just motions, vestments, opera or singing rather than the means of deepening the faith of its members (who should be experiencing spiritual heights and changed lives for the better). This is so, because the Bible has ceased to shed light upon our worship. That's why once a parishioner said to

me: "what we need, Der Hayr, is the Badarak, the Divine Liturgy, not Jesus or the Bible." "My dear friend," I answered, "What is the Badarak without Jesus and His word?" ("Badarak" means "sacrifice-gift" and is about Christ's sacrificial gift to us!)

5. Through the study of the Bible, the Church member will find salvation. The most important of all objectives of the Bible study is to make salvation available– the free salvation provided in the Lord's great sacrifice upon the Cross. When the church has members with the saving knowledge of the Word, they will surely fill the heart of the pastor with joy, who one day facing his Lord will say: "Here I am and the children you gave me." And the "Norasdeghdzial" hymn will have meaning. In a refrain of this hymn, we sing "come all you who are saved and give praises with the angels to the risen Lord."

THE BIBLE STUDY AND THE PASTOR

The happiest pastor of all pastors will be the one who has spiritually enlightened members. And the most lasting and God-pleasing friendship that a pastor can have is with those who love the Lord and His Word with all their hearts.

The conscientious pastor always will be troubled when he cannot visit his families and share with them his ministry.

Bible study is one strong way to bring his members together in a comfortable and friendly atmosphere and read, discuss and pray together. This will bring the parishioner and the pastor close to each other in the Lord. What great blessings and signs and wonders could spring from such fellowship.

Bible studies could be held at homes in large parishes. The more that attend, the more satisfaction in the realm of visitations.

The home Bible study has three-fold fruits.

- A. The whole house will be visited.
- B. The home will be the gathering place of the church.
- C. Apostolic mission will be in force.

Jesus used to visit homes and perform miracles. Let us open our homes for Christ and His followers.

LET US INCREASE IN OUR CHURCHES, INSTEAD OF DECREASING, THE NUMBER OF THOSE WHO LOVE TO READ THE BIBLE AND LOVE TO HAVE BIBLE STUDIES.

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

II TIMOTHY 3:16,17

Paul, the Apostle, defines the Bible and in a very simple language explains reasons why we should study the Holy Bible. He numbers four major benefits from studying the Scriptures:

- A. The Bible teaches.
- B. The Bible reproofs.

C. The Bible corrects, and,

D. The Bible instructs in righteousness, in order to make us perfect and well equipped for every good work for His glory and the help of others.

We cannot be filled with the Divine knowledge and wisdom without studying the Bible, and also we cannot experience the presence of the Lord within us without the records of the gospels and the epistles. In other words, those who would like to be a church member without reading the Bible or without dealing with Christ, are deceiving themselves.

From the Armenian church history, we read that our second illuminator, Krikor Lousavorich, instructed the newly converted Armenian people with the knowledge of the gospels for 66 days. For him and those who followed his footsteps, the reading and the sharing of the Bible was a privilege and honor, as the Apostle would say, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel. . .it is the power of God by which men are saved. . ." (Romans 1:16).

Many Christ-loving and Christ-living faithful, Armenians or non-Armenians have eaten the Word as the bread of life and have quenched their spiritual hunger. Every man has a spiritual hunger. This must be satisfied one way or another. If this is not satisfied with Jesus Christ, then Satan will fill that void in man in a wrong way, with hatred, lust for money, drugs, alcohol, false religiosity, etc.

Read the writings of our church fathers and you will see how valuable the Scripture was for them. The Bible was so revered and loved that they used to hold it with a cloth. Still, we continue this custom in our churches. Our folks used to put the Bibles under the pillows of the sick family member as a healer. In our churches, every Sunday, we read from the Scriptures and receive from it our spiritual nurture.

"As the unforgettable one [Mesrob Mashdots] approached the royal city, they informed the king and the Holy Bishop. And they, followed by the entire assemblage of noble courtiers, a throng came outside the city and met the blessed one on the bank of River Rah, and after warm greetings amidst sounds of joy and the singing of hymns and doxologies, returned to the city. And the days passed in festive joy."

KORIUN

The event described in this quote refers to the return of Mesrob Mashdots with the Armenian alphabet with which he was to translate the Bible. The Armenian people were so overcome with joy and excitement that royalty and common people alike hurriedly went to the River Rah to escort Mesrob back to the city.

With all this in mind, I wonder how did Satan's cleverness and deceitfulness enter in some of our people's minds and warp them. They regard the Bible readers and the Bible study lovers as "protestants." Not only do they lose their hearts to the above-mentioned truths, but they also dare to persecute those people and make them feel unwanted. These people became sick in their hearts and leave their mother church to join those who love the Bible and the study of it.

Without hesitation, I regard such actions as wrong and sinful.

How I would like to see, even for one day, the saintly fathers of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Krikor Loosavorich, Nersess the Great, Sahag and Mesrob, and Vartan the Brave, visiting us and rekindling the forgotten love of the Holy Bible, the Asdvadzashoonch and confessing Christ as the Lord and Savior, and praising his Holy

name. In other words, evangelizing us once again for the sake and the love of the beloved Armenian souls.

IN CONCLUSION

The highest and the holiest sacred responsibility of the Armenian Apostolic Church is to put the Holy Bible in the hands of her sons and daughters for the realization of salvation. It is the most powerful weapon of the church and the flag of the church that Sahag and Mesrob, the great evangelists, missionaries and Apostles of their time offered to the people as the Bread from heaven. Only through the "Book of books" can we instill in the hearts of our brothers and sisters the love, peace and understanding which has been promised only to the faithful.

"The one who has the Bible, but does not use it, is like a lamp which cannot give light; an eye that is blind; a spring without water; a dried up tree which does not bear fruit nor give benefit to anyone."

FROM THE SERMONS OF H. MANTAGOONI

The above mentioned analogy, made by one of Sahag-Mesrob's junior disciples, can be applied to any nation, church, family and individual, who has God's word, the Holy Bible, but refuses to believe and use its instruction.