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## **NAREKAC'I : THE EXEGETE IN HIS EXEGESIS**

*I am a living book,  
written like the scroll in the vision of Ezekiel,  
inside and out (Ezek 2:9-10)  
— Prayer 39.2*

### **I. THE EXEGESIS OF THE ANCIENTS**

A cursory survey of the history of biblical interpretation, be it a look into the rabbinic treatment of a Hebrew passage or some consideration of the patristic handling of the Greek, can be quite rewarding when studying the work of a medieval exegete like Grigor Narekac'i (d. 1003).

#### *Allegorical and typological exegesis*

The exegesis of the ancients, either allegorical or typological, is well known, particularly in Hellenistic Judaism and in the New Testament, even more so in the latter's extended messianic interpretation of the Old Testament that sees all of God's dealings with Israel as pointing to the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> Patristic exegesis is equally well known, for it follows now the

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#### *Abbreviations*

CSCO = Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Leuven

MH = Matenagirk' Hayoc', Antelias, Lebanon

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version

OCA = Orientalia Christiana Analecta, Rome

1 The occasional nature of scriptural references in the New Testament is one of its most significant characteristics ; citations and allusions appear only as they relate to the issue at hand. There are, to be sure, certain Old Testament passages selected for Christological exegesis, as C.H. DODD has observed decades ago (*According to the Scriptures : The Sub-structure of New Testament Theology* [London 1952] ; for a critique, see D. JUEL, *Messianic Exegesis : Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* [Philadelphia 1988], p. 19–22). There is a consensus in scholarship since

allegorical, now the typological method of Hellenistic Judaism, the foremost representative of which is Philo of Alexandria, the model par-excellence for the Fathers who added to it the New Testament messianic interpretation, application, or appropriation of the “foreshadowing” Old Testament. In keeping with the theology of the New Testament, the Fathers went on to standardize this method and to see typological elements not just in certain passages of the Old Testament but in the whole, reconciling — in so far as possible — the entire Septuagint typologically with the New Testament. Not so well known, however, is yet another sort or aspect of patristic exegesis where the exegete places or finds himself in the biblical passage and proceeds to appropriate or apply it to himself. Before exploring the latter, somewhat existentialist method in Narekac'i's exegesis and considering its biblical grounds, a closer look at rabbinic and patristic approaches is necessary.

While not negating the literalness of the biblical text, Jewish exegetes of the Second Temple period emphasized its allegorical meaning. Rabbinic sages went on to interpret the biblical stories, from the opening chapter of Genesis onward, strictly in the light of the history of Israel. Deuteronomy 4:32–35 provided the hermeneutical principle:

For ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth : ask from one end of heaven to the other : has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speak out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying display of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord is God ; there is no other besides him (NRSV).

Guided by the mandate of these verses, the Rabbis interpreted the creation in Genesis as a commentary on God's love for humanity, a story that focuses on the creation of man, only to highlight the distinctive place of the Patriarchs and the election of Israel. In *Genesis Rabbah*, a rabbinic compilation from ca. AD 400, Adam is but a personification of Israel, just as the serpent is a personification of Babylon (Rome). In the opening

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then that sees the whole Old Testament as having its ultimate meaning and purpose for the writers of the New Testament in speaking of Christ and his people, based on certain identifiable principles such as typological / historical correspondence — even identity between Messiah and Israel. For a perceptive study, see S.A. SWANSON, “Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament? Why Are We Still Asking?”, *Trinity Journal* 17/1 (1996) 67–76.

paragraph of his introduction to this text, Jacob Neusner comments on how the sages read the book of Genesis :

Once we understand the method that tells the sages how to approach a verse or a story, we know how they derive meaning from the message of the Torah. So the proper route directs us first to the literary-critical question : exactly what does a sage see when he looks at a verse of Scripture? Only then shall we turn to questions of meaning, that is, sages' results in the explanation and amplification of a text. The fundamental method of sages is simple and familiar : they persistently see one thing in terms of another thing, one story in the light of another.<sup>2</sup>

Neusner concludes by observing : "Therefore a given story will bear a deeper message about what it means to be Israel... [the] point of method will be the sages' persistent search in Scripture for meaning for their own circumstance and for the condition of their people."<sup>3</sup>

The Fathers were familiar with rabbinic exegesis that read the Hebrew Scriptures allegorically as reflecting the history of Israel. However, the Fathers went on to read the same texts allegorically as reflecting "salvation history" in the light of Christ, beginning with the divine intent for the Incarnation. This is seen in all patristic exegesis, beyond the treatises devoted to that theme. Among Armenian exegetes the rule is well attested in Narekac'i's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, but certainly not limited to it. Nor does Narekac'i limit himself to the rule, but goes on to apply to himself the full implications of Christ's redemptive sacrifice ushered in by the Incarnation.

### *Personalized exegesis*

The biblical justification for "personalized" exegesis seems to derive from certain passages in St. Paul's letters, e.g., Rom 15:4, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (cf. 4:23-24) ; and 1 Cor 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (cf. 9:8-10). These, with other passages where St. Paul cites Scripture as presumably everywhere addressing the Church, pertain to the eschatological community of believers, the "saints" individually and collectively in their respective church assemblies (distinct from the metaphorical "body" of Christ, the "household" or

2 *Genesis Rabbah* (Brown Judaic Studies 108, Atlanta 1985), p. 1.

3 *Ibidem*.

“temple” of God). It is worth noticing that the Apostle does not say that the Scriptures were written “for our sake *also*,” as he does when describing Abraham’s justification by faith (Rom 4:23–24), but that the Scriptures were “written for our instruction.” As Scott Swanson observes, “Not, of course, to suggest that they thereby had no significance for the original hearers or readers, but that their primary purpose was for us. Why? Because we are those ‘upon whom the ends of the ages have come’ (1 Cor 10:11). Therefore, they address us not just in application, but in their true meaning and intent.”<sup>4</sup>

Wherefore Narekac’i could pray as follows in Prayer 54.3 :<sup>5</sup>

*But what does it avail me to be washed,  
if I am only to be soiled again?<sup>6</sup>  
And what use is partaking of the Eucharist,  
if I am to be damned to Hell?<sup>7</sup>  
Or why should I glory in Abraham,  
if I have strayed from his deeds,<sup>8</sup>  
I, the abominable son of an Amorite father  
and a Hittite or Canaanite mother,  
in the words of the Prophet, spoken clearly to me.<sup>9</sup>  
I am the disinherited offspring of the Ethiopian,  
not a member of Sarah’s household,<sup>10</sup>  
in the parabolic words of the seer, intended for me.<sup>11</sup>  
I am the brother of either Samaria or Gomorrah,<sup>12</sup>  
an infant neither washed nor rubbed with salt,  
aborted from the immature womb of Oholah and Oholibah,  
doubly condemned by the Prophet Ezekiel.<sup>13</sup>*

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4 SWANSON (op. cit. n. 1), p. 73 and n. 19, citing R.B. HAYS, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven 1989] : “All that God has ever done in the past converges toward the eschatological community, and all past words of Scripture find their sense rooted in the present graced time” (p. 170).

5 Cf. Prayer 64.3. Translation of the prayers is by T.J. SAMUELIAN, *Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart* (Erevan 2002<sup>2</sup>), with my unmarked revisions.

6 Possible allusion to 2 Pet 2:20–22.

7 Possible allusion to Heb 6:4–6.

8 John 8:39–40.

9 Ezek 16:3, 45 ; emphasis mine.

10 Gen 21:2 ; 1 Pet 3:6.

11 Amos 9:7 ; cf. Isa 51:2 ; emphasis mine.

12 Ezek 16:46 ; “Sodom” instead of “Gomorrah” (both MT and LXX).

Any consideration of exegetical tendencies in Narekac'i will necessarily begin with the biblical commentaries among his writings: his comparatively well known *Commentary on the Song of Songs*<sup>14</sup> and the less known *Commentary on Job 38–39*, the first of God's two discourses comprising the epilogue of Job.<sup>15</sup> However, before we analyze his exegetical tendencies in these commentaries and in his better known prayer book, we ought to consider briefly the more immediate exegetical tradition in which he stands.

### *Narekac'i's exegetical background*

Besides what he could have learned from his father Xosrov bishop of Anjewac'ik', a commentator in his own right,<sup>16</sup> as a learned monastic even in a newly-established monastery founded by his mother's cousin Anania, Narekac'i must have read several Philonic and patristic biblical commentaries in Armenian translation and possibly also in Greek and Syriac. Translation of patristic biblical commentaries continued as monasteries thrived and as the study of the Bible continued to be the core of curricula in monastic education. A good testimony to this rich heritage of biblical interpretation is provided by those commentaries which now survive only in Armenian translation, such as Philo's *Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus*, the pseudo-Philonic commentaries *On Samson* and *On Jonah*, the Ephremic commentaries *On the Acts of the Apostles* and *On the Epistles of Paul*,<sup>17</sup> Chrysostom's *Commentary on*

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13 Ezek 23:1–4 ; like the play on the Hebrew names, Narekac'i has a play on the immediately preceding words : *xakakut' ... xakut'ean*.

14 R.R. ERVINE (trans.), *The Blessing of Blessings : Gregory of Narek's Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Cistercian Studies Series 215, Kalamazoo 2007) ; Arm. text in *Matenagirk' Hayoc'* (Armenian Classical Authors), an ongoing series of the classical texts, hereinafter abbreviated *MH*, now in its 14th volume (vols. 11, 12, 15ff forthcoming), (Antelias 2003–) 10:760–883.

15 Arm. text in *MH* 10:885–910.

16 Xosrov is the author of two works : an *Explication of Church Orders* and a *Commentary on the Eucharistic Liturgy*, both published under the title *Xosrov Anjewac'eac' episkoposi meknut'iwn alot'ic' pataragin* (Commentary on the Prayers of the Divine Liturgy by Xosrov bishop of Anjewac'ik') (Venice 1869) ; S.P. COWE (trans.), *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy by Xosrov Anjewac'i*, (Armenian Church Classics, New York 1991).

17 As for the Armenian *Commentary on Genesis* attributed to Ephrem, E.G. MATHEWS, Jr., has shown beyond doubt that it is not an authentic work of the Syrian father and that it could not have been translated before the time of Narekac'i ; *The Armenian Commentary on Genesis Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian* (CSCO 572–573 / *Scriptores Armeniaci*, t. 23–24, Leuven 1998), esp. p. xlvi–li of the 2nd vol. See also IDEM, "Jacob of Sarug,

*Isaiah*, and Hesychius' *Commentary on Job*. Works by the Cappadocian Fathers were of special interest to Armenian exegetes for Christological reasons, and Narekac'i credits Gregory of Nazianzus, the Theologian, repeatedly in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. He was certainly familiar with the Syriac tradition of poetic homilies on biblical themes and was at home with Ephrem's penitential prayers that have found a place in the Armenian *Horologion* (the *Žamagirč'*).

To further appreciate the interpretive tradition in which Narekac'i stands, it would be helpful to review with equal brevity the biblical commentaries of Armenian authorship up to his time. The earliest of these are the commentaries traditionally attributed to the fifth-century historian Elišē, but which seem to belong in part to a certain Elišē Vardapet who thrived in the seventh century.<sup>18</sup> These include the *Commentary on Genesis* utilized by Vardan Vardapet Arewel'ci (d. 1271), among others, in his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*;<sup>19</sup> commentaries on Joshua and Judges;<sup>20</sup> homilies on events in the life of Christ, with a lengthy homily on the Passion;<sup>21</sup> as well as shorter homiletical commentaries on various biblical themes, including *scholia* or comments on the first of God's two discourses in the epilogue of Job (chs. 38–39), gleaned from Hesychius' *Commentary* on that book.<sup>22</sup> The earliest of the Armenian biblical commentaries with unquestionable authorship and date are those by the

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*Homily on Good Friday* and other Armenian Treasures : First Glances" (forthcoming, in a volume to be published by Gorgias Press).

- 18 *Srboj hōrn meroy Elišēi vardapeti matenagruč'iwunk'* (Writings of Our Holy Father Elišē Vardapet) (Venice 1859) ; also P. ANANIAN, *Elišē vardapeti erku antip ča'er* (Two Unpublished Discourses by Elišē Vardapet), *Bazmavep* 156 (1998) 186–195. On the current debate regarding authorship, see B.L. ZEKIYAN, "Quelques observations critiques sur le 'Corpus Elisaeorum'," in R.F. TAFT (ed.), *The Armenian Christian Tradition : Scholarly Symposium in Honor of the Visit to the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome, of His Holiness Karekin I, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians: December 12, 1996* (OCA 254, Rome 1997), p. 71–123 ; and R. PANE (ed. and trans.), *Eliseo l'Armeno : Commento a Giosuè e Giudici*, (I Italentì 2, Rome and Bologna 2009), p. 12–17.
- 19 For a reconstruction of this commentary on the basis of fragmentary evidence, see *Commentary on Genesis by Eghishe*, scholarly work by L. XAC'IKYAN, introduction and edition by H. KYOSEYAN, translation by M. PAPAŽIAN (Erevan 2004) (*MH* 1:769–929).
- 20 *Matenagruč'iwunk'* (Writings), p. 167–198 (*MH* 1:769–954) ; PANE, op. cit. n. 18.
- 21 *Matenagruč'iwunk'* (Writings), p. 240–354 (*MH* 1:981–1052) ; R.W. THOMSON (trans.), *A Homily on the Passion of Christ Attributed to Elishe* (Eastern Christian Texts in Translation 5, Leuven 2000).
- 22 *MH* 6:1006–1008. Hesychius' *Commentary on Job*, which survives in Armenian translation only, was too recent to be utilized by a mid-fifth-century author, and that from a translation. Cf. the nearly identical *scholia* attributed to Hamam Arewel'ci (discussed below).

eighth-century prolific author and translator Step'anos Siwnec'i (d. 735) : his commentaries on Genesis, Job, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Four Gospels are as noteworthy as his other commentaries.<sup>23</sup> As for his numerous translations, they include works by Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Nemesius, Cyril of Alexandria, George of Pisidia, and Pseudo-Dionysius. From the ninth century, the *Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* by Hamam Arewelc'i is well known,<sup>24</sup> less so his *scholia* on the first of God's two discourses in the epilogue of Job (chs. 38–39),<sup>25</sup> which have much in common with Eġšē's *scholia* on the same chapters. These nearly identical *scholia*, extracted from Hesychius' *Commentary on Job*, are important for our consideration of Narekac'i's *Commentary on Job 38–39*.

## II. NAREKAC'I AS EXEGETE

Generally speaking, Armenian biblical commentaries are derivative in nature ; their growth owes to earlier commentaries translated from Greek and Syriac as of the fifth century.<sup>26</sup> Whether as questions and answers, short comments following *lemmata* ("headwords"), or as detailed expositions, most commentaries are tantamount to word-studies within key passages of a given book : beginning with individual words or phrases of the respective verse and ending with their recurrence(s) elsewhere in the Bible, especially with a notion of "fulfillment" in the New Testa-

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- 23 *MH* 6:105–438 ; cf. "Meknut'iwn č'oric' awetaranč'ac'n" (Commentary on the Four Gospels), in G. HOVSEPYAN (Hovsep'ianc') and M. SARIBEKYAN (eds.), *Meknut'iwn č'oric' awetaranč'ac'n, Step'anos Siwnec'i. Meknut'iwn aġakac', Hamam Arewelc'i* (Commentary on the Four Gospels, Step'anos Siwnec'i ; Commentary on Proverbs, Hamam Arewelc'i), (Astvacašnč'akan meknut'yunner, Erevan 1994).
- 24 R.W. THOMSON (ed. and trans.), *Hamam : Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (Hebrew University Armenian Studies 5, Leuven 2005) ; for the Armenian text, see the preceding note (cf. *MH* 9:453–521).
- 25 Arm. text, of which there are two recensions, in *MH* 9:522–533. For a catalogue of ancient Armenian biblical commentaries, see S. *Grk'i hayeren meknut'yunneri matenagitut'yun* (Bibliology of the Armenian Commentaries on the Holy Bible), compiled by E. PETROSYAN and A. TER-STEP'ANYAN (Astvacašnč'agitakan Matenašar 2, [Erevan] 2002). See also my "Review" in *St. Nersess Theological Review* 8 (2003) 141–143.
- 26 For trends in the interpretive tradition, see M.Ē. SHIRINYAN, "Meknołakan žanri kazmavorumē Hayastanum" (Formation and Development of the Commentary Genre in Armenia), *Aštanak* 3 (2000) 36–64 ; R.W. THOMSON, "Is There an Armenian Tradition of Exegesis?" in F.[M.] YOUNG et al. (eds.), *Studia Patristica, 41 : Papers Presented at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2003* (Leuven 2006), p. 97–113 ; IDEM, "Homilies and Biblical Commentary in Classical Armenian Writers," in R.R. ERVINE (ed.), *Worship Traditions in Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East*, (AVANT : Treasures of the Armenian Christian Tradition 3, Crestwood 2006), p. 175–186.



ment. This kind of “associative” exegesis is often accomplished by skilful and lengthy digressions, pursuing a number of secondary and tertiary passages in the course of interpretation.

### *Commentary on the Song of Songs*

An example of this is found in Narekac'i's comment on Song 2:14, where the word “dove”, identified earlier with the “Spirit” (in the comment on 2:10), now draws attention to “purity” and an invocation of 1 Cor 10:12 ; the word “rock” leads to Christ invoked in 1 Cor 10:4 as “the rock” of the Exodus experience ; and the words “retaining wall” to the Torah, a commonplace in Jewish and Christian commentaries, and to references to Gal 5:4 ; Rom 10:4 ; and Matt 5:17, all pointing to the notion of fulfillment of the Law in Christ. Another example is found in the comment on Song 5:16, where the word “desirable” calls forth references to the “desire” of Zaccheus and Herod to see Jesus (Luke 19:1–10 and 23:8), and to the “desire” of the disciples to see in the future “one of the days of the Son of Man” (Luke 17:22).

The Song of Songs has been traditionally singled out by Christian writers as indicating the mystery of the Church,<sup>27</sup> and there is plenty of that “spiritual” interpretation in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* by Narekac'i ;<sup>28</sup> indeed, it characterizes most of his commentary. In a comment on 8:11 he acknowledges : “as is obvious, we have to do with an allegory — which, in fact, the whole book of the Song of Songs is.” He refers to Gregory of Nyssa's *Letters on the Song of Songs* several times, using them as his main source among other works, especially the *Oration*s of Gregory of Nazianzos (“the Theologian”).<sup>29</sup> Interspersed in the

27 See the selections by T. HALTON, *The Church* (Message of the Fathers of the Church 4, Wilmington 1985), p. 47–51, and especially R.A. NORRIS, Jr. (trans. and ed.), *The Song of Songs : Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (The Church's Bible, Grand Rapids 2003). Among Armenian sources, see *The Teaching of St Gregory*, 441 ; R.W. THOMSON (trans.), *The Teaching of St. Gregory* (rev. ed., AVANT : Treasures of the Armenian Christian Tradition 1 (New Rochelle 2001), p. 132 and notes.

28 ERVINE, op. cit. n. 14, p. 65–67. For a comprehensive study of Narekac'i's ecclesiology, see J.-P. MAHÉ, “L'ecclésiologie de saint Grégoire de Narek,” in J.-P. MAHÉ and B.L. ZEKIYAN (eds.), *Saint Grégoire de Narek, théologien et mystique* (OCA 275, Roma 2006), p. 205–227.

29 For a listing of parallels between Narekac'i's commentary and that of Gregory of Nyssa, see R.W. THOMSON, “Grigor of Narek's Commentary on the Song of Songs,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1983) 453–496 ; repr. in idem, *Studies in Armenian Literature and Christianity* (Collected Studies 451, Aldershot 1994), article 18. For parallels between Narekac'i's commentary and his prayer book, see IDEM, “Gregory of Narek and

common allegorical interpretation there are, nonetheless, a number of instances where an appreciable degree of originality exists : in Narekac'i's introduction of certain Armenian themes, in his underscoring the relevance of the canticles for a young ruler, and in placing himself in his exegesis.

In her remarkable study of this work by Narekac'i, Roberta Ervine observes that the Armenian tradition of *Song of Songs* interpretation is rare, thus making the work all the more interesting. The commentary contains a couple of Armenian themes while it dwells on a number of traditional *themata* identified by Ervine : the Incarnation, the qualities of Christ as Groom and those of human spiritual beauty — as also those of human love, the elusive vision of God, the possibility of losing what one has gained by the grace of God, humanity and the angels, the motherhood of God, and the significance of numbers. She rightly observes how “the whole *Commentary* pivots on the Incarnation,”<sup>30</sup> considering the salvific benefits conferred through it. The peculiarly Armenian themes are seen, as Ervine correctly points out, in the importance attached to the unique role of teachers in the church, the *vardapets*, and the significance of the example of St. Gregory the Illuminator. One may add that the commentator himself is a *vardapet* who is named after the Illuminator, and that his self-projection is discernible in the treatment of these themes (see comments on 2:5 ; 3:10 ; 5:2, 8, 13, 17 ; 7:6–7, 12–13).<sup>31</sup> Had he not been a well-recognized *vardapet* already in 977 he would not have been commissioned by the Artsrunid king of Anjewac'ik', Gourgēn,<sup>32</sup> to write the commentary. Consequently, the commentary, the earliest of Narekac'i's works, is replete with spiritual counsel to a presumably young ruler — notably in the comments on the last chapter of the book. Here the author employs the inclusive pronoun (“we” / “us”) in the hortatory advising, reaffirming once more his role as a spiritual teacher or a *vardapet* engaged in exegesis in the broader sense of the word (see comments especially on 8:4–5, 8, 11).

One further note on this interpretive or hermeneutical element in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* : commenting on Song 2:9b (“The bride gives a sign of the groom to the maidens : Behold, he stood behind our

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the *Song of Songs*,” in P. KIWLWMIAN (ed.), *Hask hayagitakan taregirk', nor šrjan, X tari, 2002–2006* (Antelias 2007), p. 35–49

30 ERVINE, op. cit. n. 14, p. 60.

31 For a synopsis of these themes, see *ibidem*, p. 55–70. Cf. Prayer 72.4.

32 Gurgēn reigned 968–990, then over a third of his domain 990–1003. He died in the same year as Narekac'i.

wall, rising to the window, looking through the lattice”), Narekac’i has this interpretation : “He [Solomon] calls the body which was from the Virgin, *wall*. He calls the prophets the *window*. [*Through the lattice*], that is through the *Law*.” In a similar interpretation found in Prayer 52.1, he has the following amplification :

*Lord, who are blessed in your holy essence...  
 who again delights in pouring forth at once and without limit  
 the fragrant streams of mercy from on high  
 in this new showering of grace  
 and opens wide the narrow window  
 through which the rays of knowledge glimmer, according to Solomon,  
 for him, and with him for me...<sup>33</sup>*

### Commentary on Job

As stated earlier, Narekac’i’s commentary on Job is limited to chs. 38–39, the first of God’s two discourses in the epilogue of the book. Surviving in but one manuscript with mutilated beginning,<sup>34</sup> the commentary shows familiarity with the *scholia* attributed to Elišē and Hamam and their authentic Hesychian exegetics : the enunciative form of exegesis, known also as glossarial commentary, with the shortest possible meanings given to biblical phrases and key words — like those found in marginal glosses (*paratheseis*). The numerous common elements in the respective texts leave no doubt about traditional interpretation for the most part, owing to Hesychius’ *Commentary on Job*. With the scholiasts Narekac’i underscores the Trinitarian and Christological elements perceived, especially those that have to do with the manifestation of divine love and redemption — the sequel to creation — through Christ’s incarnation, sacrifice, and high-priestly ministry (the latter drawn from the ecclesiology of the *scholia*). But Narekac’i departs from the tradition by bringing himself into the exegesis at the end. When commenting on Job 39:30b, “where there is a carcass, there he [the hawk] comes immediate-

33 See the perceptive annotation in A. and J.-P. MAHÉ, *Paroles à Dieu de Grégoire de Narek* (Leuven 2007), p. 242. For other references to the Song of Songs in the prayer book, especially in the lengthy Prayer 93, see THOMSON, “Gregory of Narek and the *Song of Songs*”, op. cit. n. 29, p. 35–49.

34 Venice 1030 (old no. 339). With some of its preliminaries intact, the commentary begins at 38:8. In Prayer 48, which for the most part dwells on Solomon’s sins, Narekac’i commends Solomon for his authoring the book of Job : “For the composition on the man of Uz, a very remarkable account, of prophetic telling, places Solomon justifiably in the ranks of God’s defenders” (7). This is in keeping with the traditional attribution of the biblical “Wisdom” writings to Solomon.

ly," he connects it at once with Matt 24:28, "where there is a carcass, there the eagles will gather." He goes on to identify the eagles with the rank and file of the angelic ascetics whose souls soar in heaven and who hunger for the bread of righteousness and thirst for the blood of the New Covenant, the ever-renewing sacrifice of the Lamb which takes away the sins of the world. He then lists thirty-three distinctions and advantages of Christ's high-priestly sacrifice (cf. Heb 9:23–28) and concludes with the thirty-third: "This continuous, eternally living, unconsumed by fire and ever-renewing sacrifice shall renew me also with the renewal of the Spirit [that descended] like flames [at Pentecost]" (231–266).<sup>35</sup> He must have been contemplating Isaiah 40:31, which he neither quotes nor alludes to ("they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint"). Through it all, Narekac'i has concluded his interpretation by associating himself longingly with the angelic ascetics now in heaven.

### *Book of Lamentation*

Narekac'i's exegesis is not limited to his commentaries on the Song of Songs and Job. That he viewed the penitential prayers in his *Book of Lamentations* hermeneutically, as "interpretations for the masses of different nations,"<sup>36</sup> is stated clearly in his introduction to Prayer 34, in poetic prose:

*Here is my right profession of faith,<sup>37</sup> the yearnings of my wretched breath to you who constituted all things by your Word, O God. What I have discoursed upon before, I set forth again, these written instructions and interpretations for the masses of different nations. I offer these earnest prayers of intercession, delineated with thanksgiving.*

He was, nonetheless, keenly aware that these things constituted by the Word of God are beyond comprehension. Yet his mystic grasp of them and his passing on the perceived mystical understanding to the masses constitute an "interpretation" of a sort.

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35 *MH* 12:906–908.

36 Cf. Prayer 39.1. On the use of Scripture in the *Matean Ołbergut'ean*, see MAHÉ, op. cit. n. 33, p. 15–22.

37 The prayers retained in prose, as in 34, 75, 92 and 93, are thought to be parts of an earlier confessional or apologetic work that Narekac'i wrote circa 987, during a period of doctrinal controversies. See S. POŁOSIAN, *Narekac'u hetk'erov* (In the Footsteps of Narekac'i), Tbilisi 1987, p. 31.

*The caring ways of the Creator surpass  
the understanding of angels and mortals.  
If I were to try ten thousand times,  
my words could not capture them,  
for his benevolent works are beyond comprehension  
and description (Prayer 44.3).*

Accordingly, as in the commentaries so also in the prayers we find his appropriation and application to himself the derived meaning from the words of Scripture, and that on a much larger scale than we find in the commentaries — thanks to the comparatively larger volume of the prayer book, his *magnum opus*. Here, the commonplace self-deprecation in biblical terms and imageries, an influence of St. Ephrem,<sup>38</sup> is but an aspect of this kind of interacting or dialectical interpretation. A good example is found in the second prayer, where Narekac'i compares himself with biblical cities that suffered destruction and lands that were devastated, and ultimately with Jerusalem's First and Second Temples given to ruin, among other analogies that evoke images of things brought down to the ground or in the ground.

*Am I  
a Sodom, to be punished likewise with destruction,<sup>39</sup>  
or the prosecutor of Nineveh, who was dumbfounded?<sup>40</sup>*

*Am I  
more cowardly and barbarous than the queen of the south,<sup>41</sup>  
worse than Canaan,<sup>42</sup>  
more stubborn than Amalek,<sup>43</sup>  
incurable as the city of idols,<sup>44</sup>  
a relic left behind from the rebellion of ancient Israel,<sup>45</sup>  
a token kept from the broken covenant of Judah,<sup>46</sup>  
more reproachable than Tyre,*

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38 See I. HAUSHERR, *Penthos. La doctrine de la componction dans l'Orient Chrétien* (OCA 132, Rome 1944).

39 Gen 19:1–29.

40 Alluding to Jonah ; Matt 12:41 ; cf. Luke 11:32.

41 Matt 12:42 ; cf. Luke 11:31.

42 Gen 9:25.

43 Exod 17:8–16.

44 Alluding to Babylon ; Jer 51:9.

45 Exod 32:1–4.

46 Jer 3:6–11.

*more shunned than Sidon,<sup>47</sup>  
 more immoral than Galilee,  
 more unpardonable than faithless Capernaum,  
 maligned like Korazin,  
 slandered like Bethsaida?<sup>48</sup>*

*Or am I  
 like immodest Ephraim as he grayed,  
 or a dove, whose gentleness seems due to  
 feeble-mindedness and not to inner calm,<sup>49</sup>  
 or a calamitous serpent among the lions' cubs,<sup>50</sup>  
 or the viper's lethal eggs,<sup>51</sup>  
 or the final blows inflicted upon Jerusalem?<sup>52</sup>*

*Or am I  
 in the words of our Lord  
 and the sayings of the seers,<sup>53</sup>  
 an abandoned tabernacle about to collapse,  
 the broken gate of a stronghold,  
 a tower of communication in utter ruin,  
 one who has given up his rightful inheritance,  
 forgotten the house built by God,  
 as Moses, David and Jeremiah predicted?<sup>54</sup>  
 My rational abode infected with leprosy,  
 afflicted with carping counsel aggravated by the Law,  
 smeared with ineffective clay,  
 incapable of finding any cure,  
 torn down once more by the builder's hand,  
 expelled as just punishment  
 by order of the Almighty, to an unholy place,  
 rejected, exiled, greatly shunned, nothing spared,<sup>55</sup>  
 having buried my gift in the ground of wickedness,*

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47 Joel 3:4.

48 Matt 11:20–24 ; cf. Luke 10:13–15.

49 Hos 7:9–11.

50 Isa 30:6.

51 Isa 14:29 ; 59:5.

52 2 Kgs 25:1–7 ; cf. Jer 39:1–7 ; 52:1–11.

53 Luke 21:20–24 (cf. Matt 24:15–22 ; Mark 13:14–20) ; Dan 9:26–27 (cf. Isa 38:12 and the references cited in the next note).

54 Deut 31:15–18 ; Ps 78:56–64 ; Jer 12:7–13.

55 Lev 14:33–45 ; cf. Deut 28:45–48, 53–63.

*like the one chastised in the Gospel  
by losing that which he was entrusted (Prayer 2.1).<sup>56</sup>*

Conceivably, the grounds for this lengthy analogy and others like it (7.2, 15.1, 17.3, 19.5, 20.6, etc.) derive from the wealth of biblical metaphors as in St. Paul's reminder to the Corinthians: "For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor 6:16);<sup>57</sup> or in St. Peter's words: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." (1 Pet 2:9–10).<sup>58</sup> Instances of appropriation and application of the text to himself as part of the interpretation — if not the interpretation itself — are quite common in the prayer book. In three prayers, at junctures of scriptural considerations, he raises the question of "interpretation" and proceeds to establish the meaning or significance of the respective text for "us": 50.1 (on Eccl 7:4), 70.2 (on Matt 14:30), and 93.13 (on Acts 11:26). The last instance, on being called "Christians," is worth quoting, for it underscores a sense of messianic fulfillment in those who bear the Messiah's name or come to be identified with him:

*O blessed and awesome universal help,<sup>59</sup> who is always beyond words and beyond scrutiny, who is constantly venerated through the Gospel of life as the new-born, anointed one from the city of David,<sup>60</sup> and constantly sought as in the question of the chief priest, "Are you the Christ, son of the blessed?"<sup>61</sup> and in the blessed proclamation by Peter, "You are the only Christ, the Son of the living God,"<sup>62</sup> and by your suspicious interrogators insisting, "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."<sup>63</sup> And because of your teachings, we believe you to be the Christ, teacher and Lord of all. And even before this, Herod openly asked for you by name, O Christ,<sup>64</sup> and you yourself answered, "How is it written that the anointed of God, the Son without beginning, the one David calls Lord, could be his son in time?"<sup>65</sup> And we understand from this as a fitting interpretation that the consummation of*

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56 Matt 25:14–30; cf. Luke 19:12–27.

57 Cf. 1 Cor 3:16–17; 2 Cor 6:19.

58 Cf. Jas 1:1.

59 Allusion to the Logos.

60 Luke 2:11.

61 Matt 26:63; cf. Mark 14:61.

62 Matt 16:16; cf. Mark 8:25; Luke 9:20.

63 John 10:24.

64 Matt 2:4.

65 Matt 22:41–46.

this mystic calling is realized in us, who have the honor of being called Christians (*Prayer 93.13*).<sup>66</sup>

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It is proper to conclude this article by going back to a paragraph by Narekac'i in his "Prologue" to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* :

*Should one then ask, 'How could he allegorize this using a bride and a groom? How is it possible to signify the mystery of God by means of physical desire, and to illustrate the limitless love of God by analogy with passionate love?' We ought first to bewail our licentious ways, we who are so far estranged from God's mysteries that the Holy Spirit, through Solomon, was constrained to relay the insupportable things to us by means of an animal desire. It is because of such realities that the blessed universal teacher John asserts that we ought to adopt such a saintly way of life that Scripture would become unnecessary — as was the case for Noah and Abraham and his sons and grandsons, and as it was for Job and Moses and the apostles, who instead of Scripture had Him dwelling in their hearts, and He taught them and wrote on the table of their hearts rather than in books.*<sup>67</sup>

This paragraph, inspired by one of John Chrysostom's *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, his comments on 3:2-3 : "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men...",<sup>68</sup> helps uncover the springboard for much of what passes on as exegetical interpretation in Narekac'i. The thought the paragraph encapsulates is similar to that derived from the quotation at the beginning of this article : "I am a living book, written like the scroll in the vision of Ezekiel, inside and out" (Ezek 2:9-10 ; Prayer 39.2), or from another of his prayers : "With Solomon the anointed and adopted of God, I sing with the mouth of a bride, to you heavenly bridegroom" (Prayer 93.11).

From the earliest of his writings to the last, Narekac'i demonstrates consistency in his exegesis of the Bible by adhering to the allegorical-mystical method of the Fathers, from the Alexandrines to the Cappadocians. He finds the mystery of the Christian dogma in every sentence of

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66 Acts 11:26 ; cf. 15:17 and Amos 9:12 ; also 2 Chr 7:14 and Rom 8:28-30.

67 Trans. ERVINE, op. cit. n. 14, p. 80-81.

68 *Hom. vi.* What is said about the biblical worthies in the quoted paragraph owes to Philo's notion of "the law of nature" (*nomos physeōs*) or "the unwritten law" (*nomos agraphos*) by which the Patriarchs lived, before the giving of the Law at Sinai. That the Apostles conducted themselves by the sayings of Jesus, before the canonical Gospels were written, is but an extension of the Philonic thought.



the biblical text and reads into texts of the Old Testament the intricacies of the New. The most significant and special aspect of his exegesis, however, is his self-installation in the space of notions accorded in the biblical text and his appropriation of the text by applying it to himself. This dialectical interpretation is not surprising on the part of someone so thoroughly immersed in Scripture and completely at home with it, to the point of identifying himself with the text and the author.